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### COMPLETE NOVELS

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# THE FAMILY JOURNAL

## LOVE DIVINE

By Hester Lane

### DR. GRACE'S VISITOR

IT was late evening and the quaint old High Street of the little Sussex town of Rexcombe was deserted save for a young man in a light overcoat who was standing outside a chemist's shop.

The shop was closed, like the others to both sides of it, and judging by the absence of a night bell for emergency prescriptions, the chemist did not live over the premises.

The young man hesitated a moment, shrugged and then turned towards the car he had left at the kerbside.

He was just opening the door when a policeman, coming out of a side turning, entered the High Street, and after looking up and down, noticed the young man and the car.

"Good evening, sir," he said in respectful tones. "Were you wanting the chemist?"

"Yes, constable, I was," nodded the young man. "I suppose it's too much to hope that there is another in the town still open?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," replied the policeman. "There are only two chemist's shops—this one and another on the other side of the level crossing in what we call New Town. They both close at six."

"Then what do people do who want urgent medicine made up?" asked the other.

"Usually they don't have to worry, sir," returned the constable. "Either Dr. Robinson or Dr. Grace would make up anything that was required urgent." He took in the young man's whole appearance with a well trained eye. "Hurt your hand, sir?" he added.

"Yes." The other lifted a hand, partly bound with a silk handkerchief through which showed a dull red stain. "It's nothing serious—I just thought I could get some iodine and a bandage from the chemist to—er—tidy it up."

"Then why not go along to the doctor, sir?" suggested the policeman. "You'll find Dr. Grace at the surgery any time after seven, and it's just five minutes past now."

"It seems hardly worth it," mused the other and added: "Where does the doctor live, constable? Perhaps I might go, after all."

"At the top end of the street, second on the left," said the policeman. "You see that building jutting out a little? That's the Nag's Head Hotel. The doctor's place is just round the corner. You can't mistake it—it's a small house with a green door. The doctor doesn't live there—only uses it as a surgery."

"Well, thank you very much, constable," said the young man gratefully. "I'll go and see what the doctor can do for me."

He got into his car and presently stopped it again in the turning past the hotel.

At the first house a green painted door stood ajar and on a brass plate at the side he saw the names of two doctors, with surgery hours underneath. The topmost name had been there a long time, for the letters had been worn smooth by years of constant polishing, but the lower name,

that of Dr. Grace, had obviously been added much more recently.

He pushed the door wider and entered a room with several chairs round the walls and a table in the centre upon which were neat piles of periodicals.

The room had one occupant, an elderly countryman who bade him a polite "Good evening".

"This is the surgery, isn't it?" Terence Maitland enquired, taking off his hat and revealing a broad, intelligent forehead, below which piercing blue-grey eyes seemed lighter than they really were because of the contrast to his deeply tanned skin.

"Aye, that it be, sorr," the countryman replied, in a slow drawl. "There's someone in with th' doctor now—then it's me. Reckon I won't keep ye long." His shrewd old eyes saw the improvised bandage on the young man's hand. "Hurt yersel, sorr?"

"Yes, but it's nothing much," said Terence. "I scraped it on an old flint wall."

"Flints be awful hard," said the other, shaking his head. "I've been a flint knapper all me life an' many's the cut I've had. Reckon they Stone Age men knew a thing or two when they made their tools and weapons out o' them."

The inner door opened and an elderly woman came out, giving the occupants of the room no more than a casual glance as she passed.

The old man got up and shuffled into the inner room, closing the door behind him.

Left alone, Terence stared up at the ceiling through half-closed eyes, wondering if anyone in the world had ever felt as tired as he did at that moment, and what the doctor would say if he told him *how* he had come to hurt his hand.

When his telephone had rung at half-past four that morning, he had known that he could not face another flying trip. He had been too highly keyed up for a long time now and this new assignment, following so closely on the heels of the last, had been one too many. In short, he had panicked.

Earlier that year, after five years in an aircraft carrier, he had accepted the offer of a special Admiralty posting to a Government Research and Experimental Airfield.

At the time it had seemed like passing through a closely guarded door into a new world, and during the past few months he had courted death in a dozen hideous and breath-taking ways.

But it hadn't mattered so long as ultimate success was achieved—nothing had mattered but the fact that he was doing work that was vital to his country's safety.

Aged thirty-two, Terence had never married. It had seemed to him that marriage was a distraction he could not afford, that it would interfere with his naval work.

Now that same work had, without warning, taken on the embodiment of a Terror to him.

That morning he had dressed with fingers that had trembled and getting into his car, had endeavoured to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the flying field.

Seated in the doctor's surgery he now wondered whether his absence had yet been reported to the police.

But first they might try to find him through his friends or relations.

For instance, they might send someone to Ringwood to interview Kitty, his married sister, with whom he had spent an occasional week-end during which he had tried to forget that there were such things as nuclear weapons and supersonic aircraft that flew faster than sound. In the peaceful atmosphere of his sister's home, he had found relaxation from the constant strain in playing games with her two young children.

The inner door opened suddenly and the old countryman came out, a bottle of medicine in one hand and his cap in the other.

Terence rose to enter the consulting-room.

"I told Dr. Grace you were here," said the old man, as he passed. "Good night, sorr."

"Oh, good night," said Terence absently.

He paused at the doorway, wondering if he were being wise. After all, the doctor would be bound to remember him when the newspapers came out with the story.

Then he shrugged. Anyway, what did it matter? What did anything matter now? The step he had taken that day had ended his career with as much certainty as the fact that the sun would rise the next morning.

There was a standard lamp in the room which cast a pool of light on the fair wavy head of a young woman seated at a large desk. She was in a white coat and was busy writing some particulars on a medical case card.

As she looked up Terence was aware of a faint sense of shock. Her eyes were a vivid blue, set beneath brows so fine that they were like threads of silk. To say that she was merely beautiful would have been making an understatement, for there was nothing of the usual text-book beauty about her features. But that she had character as well was plain for anyone to see.

"Good evening?" she said. "Please sit down."

"Er—good evening," said Terence a little embarrassed and not sure whether to address her as nurse or not. "I—er—came to see Dr. Grace. A policeman I met in the High Street told me the doctor would be here at this time."

The young woman nodded. Obviously she was used to what was about to follow.

"I am Dr. Grace," she said quietly.

"Oh, I see," said Terence. "I didn't know. I mean—"

"What has happened? I see you have damaged your hand," she said.

"Yes, I—I knocked it about on a flint wall. It's nothing much," he added hastily, afraid lest she might think he was making a fuss over nothing. "I was looking for a chemist to buy a bandage and some things when the policeman told me—"

"Let me have a look at it, please," She rose and came round to his side of her desk.

Terence fumbled with the blood-stained handkerchief and unwound it, revealing

an ugly wound extending from the knuckle of his little finger down the fleshy side of the palm.

"My, you have knocked it about," said Dr. Grace calmly, turning the hand to examine it more closely. "What were you trying to do—knock the wall over?"

Terence pulled a face for she had come very close to the mark.

Actually he had brought his clenched fist down on the wall, much as a man might bang on a table for emphasis, only in this case he had done it as an outlet for the despair that was consuming him.

"It was harder than I thought," he said apologetically.

Dr. Grace went over to a glass cabinet, next to which was a surgical table and sink.

"I shall have to clean the wound before it can be dressed," she said, selecting some instruments and turning on the steriliser.

She returned to the desk and picked up a fresh medical card.

"While those are getting ready I'll just take your particulars as you are not registered with me. Your full name, please."

It was on the tip of his tongue to give a false name, to call himself Smith or Jones or something, but the lie would not come. Quietly he said—

"Maitland—Terence Maitland."

"Commander Terence Maitland, D.S.O., isn't it?" enquired Dr. Grace, looking up with a little smile. "I thought I knew you when you came in, Commander, but I wasn't sure."

Terence gulped like a schoolboy confronted with evidence of some misdeed. Had the newspapers got hold of the story already? he wondered.

"I—er—well, yes," he said finally, stammering from sheer embarrassment.

"Didn't you know you were famous?" She smiled again. "My brother is in the Fleet Air Arm—you are one of his heroes!" she explained. "I was his guest in H.M.S. *Ajax* when she was at Davenport last year and you were pointed out to me after dinner."

"We didn't meet," he exclaimed, his features relaxing a little after the explanation. "I mean to say, I couldn't have forgotten you."

"No, we didn't meet," she smiled. "Apparently a mere sub-lieutenant's guests do not mix with the exalted throng which surrounds a Commander. You had just broken some air speed record, if I remember."

"Oh, it was nothing to make a fuss about." He screwed up his forehead in an effort at recollection. "But I don't remember a Sub-Lieutenant Grace on the *Ajax*."

"Sub-Lieutenant Robinson," she corrected him. "Grace isn't my real surname—only my first—I am merely called that to distinguish me from my father—Dr. Robinson. We are partners, you see."

"Oh, I remember young Robinson well," he said then. "He was training to be a pilot."

It suddenly struck him that this girl did not look a day older than twenty three. Yet if she was a qualified doctor she must be older. Twenty-six or seven, probably.

Then he thought that it was just as well he had not lied to her, for she would have obviously caught him out sooner or later.

With a jerk he pulled himself together, and listened to what she was saying.

"Yes," he said, when she explained that she was giving him something to dress his hand. "You are very kind, doctor. But it's nothing, as you can see."

"Well, you don't want it to become infected," she said, getting up and crossing to the steriliser. "Now just come over here and put your hand over the sink."

TEN minutes later Commander Terence Maitland was back again in front of the desk, his hand neatly bandaged.

The young doctor wrote out a label which she blotted and stuck on to a bottle of colourless liquid, before handing it to him.

"Dress your hand with this twice a day," she said. "You can get lint and bandages from a chemist on this prescription."

"Thank you," he said, slipping the bottle and slip of paper into his pocket. "Er—what about your fee, doctor?"

"As you are in the navy, I suppose I had better send the account to the Admiralty," she said. "But I don't think I shall bother in this case."

"Oh, but surely you must," he protested. "I mean, you have given me your time and skill—"

She waved aside his protest.

"Believe me, it is less trouble to treat you than to write out a form in triplicate for such a small item, Commander," she said, in a tone of quiet amusement. "Please forget about it." Then smilingly—"Are you staying in Rexcombe, by any chance?"

"Er—no," he answered, surprised by the sudden question. "I was just—er—passing through as you might say."

"That's a pity," she said. "Rexcombe is a lovely old town and has the merit of being right off the beaten track. A few days rest in a place like this can work wonders."

He thought she looked at him oddly as she said that and he coloured resentfully. It was bad enough to have succumbed to the panic which had already overcome him without being told that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown—and that from a chit of a girl.

"Do I look as if I am in need of a rest?" he asked almost abruptly.

Dr. Grace put her head a little on one side and looked at him appraisingly, the hint of a smile playing about the corners of her shapely mouth. It was plain that she understood the reason for his resentment and that it amused her.

"Well, you look tired and fine-drawn," she said, speaking with professional frankness. "We ordinary mortals can only guess at the kind of work you are doing, Commander, but from the little my brother has told me I can imagine that it is dangerous. That kind of thing going on too long can become a strain, you know. Anyway, why not have a chat with your medical officer when you get back? I think you will find that he agrees with me."

Terence nearly blurted out that he wasn't going back—that wild horses wouldn't drag him there, but he refrained just in time.

"I'll think about it, doctor," he said, with a shrug that was intended to be scornful but only succeeded in being hopeless. He opened the door. "Good night, doctor, and thank you!"

"Good night, Commander," she said, but did not look up from her desk.

Outside on the pavement, Terence paused a moment, drawing a deep breath. He felt confused, as if what had happened to him in the last ten minutes was like a nightmare. Then he strode to his car and paused in the act of getting into it.

Above his head the sign-board of the Nag's Head Hotel creaked a little in the evening breeze that eddied round the corner; and it suddenly dawned on him that he had not eaten all day and that he was hungry.

Pausing only long enough to check that his side-lights were on he put the bottle the doctor had given him into the dashboard locker and turned towards the hotel dining-room.

HIS car was still there when Dr. Grace came out of her surgery an hour later. She had discarded her white coat and now wore a grey costume and fashionable little hat. Her own car was parked in a side turning and as she walked there, her footfalls echoed on the pavement.

At that moment the policeman who had spoken to Terence earlier, approached the turning, touched his helmet as he saw her. "Good evening, doctor," he said respectfully.

"Oh, good evening, Constable Pemberton," Grace smiled. "How are you and your family keeping?"

"Well, thank you, doctor," he said, and nodded towards Terence's car.

"Did a young fellow come to you to get his damaged hand fixed? I sent him along."

"Yes," she nodded. "I think he had a shock when he saw me. You didn't warn him beforehand, I gather."

The policeman smiled.

"I know his type," he said. "If I had done so he wouldn't have come. Not to a lady doctor."

"Maybe you are right," she said, and added. "Do you know who he was, by the way?"

"Can't say as I do, doctor, though his face did seem familiar," said the constable.

"He's Commander Maitland—the Fleet Air Arm pilot who broke that world speed record not so long ago," Grace replied.

"Fancy that, now," said the policeman with due appreciation. "That's why his face was familiar! I've seen his pictures in the papers. Does he live in Rexcombe?"

"No, he was just passing through," said Grace. "Well, I must be getting back to dinner. Remember me to Mrs. Pemberton."

"That I will, doctor." The policeman opened the door of her car so that she could get in. "Best be careful how you go—it's a bit slippery at the lower end o' Sleepers Hill where they've been mending the road."

"Thank you," she said, and pressed the self-starter. "Good night," she added, as she drove off.

Ten minutes later, reaching her father's house on the outskirts of the town, she put away the car and entered by the side door.

In the hall an elderly maid informed her that Dr. Robinson, her father, had just come in and that the meal could be served whenever Dr. Grace wished.

"Then I think we'll have it right away, thank you, Mary," she murmured.

Going to the hallstand, she looked down at the messages on the pad. There were two calls, one to a farm some distance away, but neither were urgent.

Well, that was something, Grace reflected, she would have time to eat her meal in peace and relax for a moment or so afterwards.

As she waited for her father to come down she found herself wondering what had brought Terence Maitland to Rexcombe and how he had come to hurt his hand.

There was, she decided, something about him that she could not understand. The wound looked as if it had been caused by a pretty severe blow. What on earth could he have been doing to himself?

Over dinner she told her father about the encounter, and Dr. Robinson, a thick-set, ruddy-complexioned man about sixty, listened attentively.

"Well, what do you think was wrong with him, my dear?" he enquired, when she came to the end.

"I don't quite know," she confessed slowly, her blue eyes pensive. "But I'm sure there's something wrong. He looked so haunted."

"H'm," said her father, lighting a pipe.

"Any other reactions?"

"Quite a lot," she said. "I'm certain for one thing that he intended to give me a false name when I asked for his."

"That may be due to various reasons, my dear," her father demurred. "An obvious one being that he is engaged on some secret work for the Admiralty and is travelling under an assumed name."

Grace shook her head.

"In that case he would hardly have given me his real name—he would have stuck to his guns and called himself Smith or Jones or something."

"H'm!" Dr. Robinson stroked his chin.

"It's very strange, certainly, but nothing to make a mystery about." He looked across at his daughter, pride and affection in his glance. "But there's something else, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Grace. She hesitated a moment. "I formed the opinion that Commander Maitland is on the verge of a mental breakdown of some kind," she went on slowly. "I had to be extremely tactful, for I am quite certain in my own mind that if I had said the wrong thing when I was dressing his hand, he would have turned and bolted for the door."

"You mean he was in a very highly-nervous condition?"

"Absolutely tense," said Grace. "He gave me the impression that he was strained almost to the limit of human endurance and that it would take very little to push him right over the edge."

"Well, you may be right, my dear, but I fail to see what you can do," her father shrugged. "Short of reporting your observations to his commanding officer there is very little you can do. But you would have to be quite sure you were doing the right thing before taking even that step."

"Of course, he is not my patient," said Grace, "so I am silly to worry about him. All the same, I didn't like letting him go. I'm sure he injured his hand by striking something sharp with his fist, as a man might do who was in the depths of despair."

"Isn't that assuming rather a lot on so little evidence?" suggested her father doubtfully. "I mean to say, he might have been drinking."

"Oh, no, father, I would have smelled his breath," she said, shaking her head.

"Then the only thing I can suggest—yes, Mary, what is it?"

Dr. Robinson turned to the maid, who had come into the room rather hurriedly.

"It's a 'phone call from the hospital, doctor," she said. "There's been an accident on Sleepers Hill and they've taken two people there. They want to know if you can come immediately."

"Yes, tell them I'll be along in five minutes, Mary," Dr. Robinson replied rising. He turned to Grace. "I shall have to leave those other calls to you, my dear. I'll probably be kept at the hospital for some time."

"I'll see to them," she said, getting up in turn. "If you need me I shall be going to Mrs. Lestrade's first, so you could have a message telephoned there."

"Unless an emergency operation is called for it won't be necessary, I trust," he said, shrugging himself into his overcoat. "And to think I was looking forward to a peaceful evening in front of the fire! Ah, well."

Grace smiled.

"That's what comes of being a doctor," she said. "All the same, you love every minute of it, you know you do."

And that about summed it all up, Dr. Robinson thought, driving rapidly towards the little cottage hospital where the victims of the accident had been taken.

Both he and his attractive daughter loved their work and would not have con-

templated doing anything else, however glittering the rewards.

It had been this inherent devotion to duty which had kept him going when his wife had died. Now he was reaping his reward in the knowledge that the motherless girl left in his care had grown into a self-reliant, competent young woman imbued with the same lofty ideals as himself.

It had been a proud day indeed for him when Grace had qualified as a doctor and an even prouder one when she had said she wanted nothing better than to act as his assistant.

That had been two years ago, but she had already carved a niche for herself in the little country community which they both served.

She was liked by the patients—especially the younger ones—and respected by the doctors and nurses of the small cottage hospital.

On two occasions she had performed difficult and prolonged emergency operations when her father had been away, and the theatre sister, no mean judge, had been loud in her praise of the young doctor.

Dr. Robinson's thoughts reverted to the conversation that had been interrupted by the telephone message.

He knew his daughter far too well to imagine that she was jumping to conclusions with regard to the strange young man. It was obvious that she had seen and recognised symptoms of an impending breakdown, or something very like it.

However for the next four hours, Dr. Robinson was far too busy to think of anything but the two injured people who had been brought to the hospital.

A small saloon car had skidded into a lorry on the treacherous surface of Sleepers Hill, and a young man and his wife had been seriously injured.

So it was close on one in the morning when at last he drove his car into the garage and entered his house, cold and very weary.

Grace appeared on the stairs in a dressing-gown, having heard the garage doors closing.

"There's some coffee and sandwiches in the study, father," she said, helping him off with his coat. "There should be a good fire, too—I came down a little while ago and put some more coal on."

"You shouldn't have bothered, my dear," he said, with an affectionate smile. He followed her into the sitting-room and sank into an easy chair, spreading his hands to the cheerful blaze. "You have quite enough to do without waiting up for me."

"Oh, I didn't wait up," said Grace, lifting the coffee-pot from the hearth. "I had another call after you left and haven't been in long. Was it a bad accident?"

"Pretty bad," he said, with another sigh. "The young woman is suffering from broken ribs and has been badly cut about the face and hands—she seems to have been flung through the windscreens. The husband is worse—he has a depressed fracture of the skull. I had him X-rayed and the plates confirm my original diagnosis. I have arranged for an operation to-morrow. Dr. Hardcastle is coming over from Lynchmore to do it."

"Whose fault was it?"

"It will be hard to say, I imagine. Apparently the lorry was on its correct side but struck an uneven patch and got a little out of control. By the way," he added. "You'll be interested to know that one of the witnesses of the accident was your friend Commander Maitland."

"Really?" said Grace, handing him a cup of steaming coffee. "How did he happen to be there?"

"Apparently he was following behind the saloon car and saw the whole thing."

replied her father. "Constable Pemberton came in with the ambulance and waited to hear whether he could get a statement from either of the victims. It was he who told me that Maitland had left his name and address with the police and had later driven off in the direction of Portsmouth. That doesn't sound as if there was anything very seriously wrong with him, now, does it?" he added smilingly.

Grace pursed her lips a little obstinately.

"All the same I still think he was running away from something," she declared, her brows knitted. Then she laughed. "In any case, I don't suppose we shall ever know, so it's no use conjecturing. Besides, I want to ask you about little Tommy Lester. I think he should be brought in for observation. I don't like the way his temperature goes up each night."

Half an hour later Grace went back to her bedroom. It had been hers ever since she had been a child and she had never entered it without a queer little feeling of pleasure.

There had been few changes. The bow-fronted mahogany chest had stood between the window and the door as long as she could remember, like the copper kettle in the hearth. Never used, it remained there, a bright surface to catch the flickering light of a fire burning redly in a winter night.

In the mirror on the dressing-table she seemed to see the ghostly reflection of a long-legged schoolgirl, with thin wrists protruding from the blazer sleeves as she lifted her hands to her hair, trying the effect of having it up for the first time.

She thought; "Nothing has changed except ourselves. But now I don't feel safe here any longer."

There was a curious finality about the thought, as if to tell her that it was impossible ever to go back to recapture something that was lost.

A sense of hopelessness settled about her heart, like the hopelessness that had enveloped her when she had first known that she had loved Alastair Munro.

In that moment she forgot all she had been discussing with her father—forgot he was still downstairs—forgot everything, in fact, that made up her present, everyday life.

In imagination she went back over the years to the time in the hospital duty-room with Alastair, helping him take off his white operation gown, feeling once again the tense emotional reaction that always followed a difficult operation.

They had not spoken for some time, then he had turned to thank her, but the words had never left his lips.

Instead, as if moved by some irresistible force, they had come together, his arms closing around her in a fierce embrace.

But he had not kissed her. After a moment he had released her gently and moved away, turning his back on the room and looking out of the window at the lights on the river.

"I—I'm sorry," he had said at last. "I shouldn't have done that. But—but I love you so very much. Take that as my apology—if you can." He had sighed.

It had not been a time for pretence on her part.

"And I love you," she had said. In any other circumstances she might have gone to him, but she had remained still.

He had turned and smiled crookedly at her.

"I know, Grace," he had said. "I think I have known for quite a time. It has meant everything—working with you—doing our job together. But it won't do, my dear. We—we mustn't see each other again. I was mad to let this go so far."

She remembered, with bitter anguish, that she had made no attempt to see him. It would have been useless as well as wrong. Circumstances—destiny—whatever the forces were which controlled their lives, had thrown them together at a time when bitterness and disillusionment were killing all that was fine and manly in him. And all because—

Now with a sudden gesture of hopelessness she put out her arm and switched off the bedside light.

In a sudden access of self-pity she smiled bitterly to herself in the darkness. No one would ever know—least of all her father—how near she had come to a breakdown at that time. So it was probably a fellow feeling which had enabled her to recognise the threat of a similar breakdown lurking at the back of Terence Maitland's eyes. She had seen an expression in them which had reminded her of the one she had seen reflected in her own mirror on the night she had heard that Alastair Munro had left the hospital and gone out of her life—for good!

#### A HERO'S COMPENSATION

**G**RACE left the ivy-covered old cottage and, passing through the gate, reached her car. For some reason she could not quite understand, she felt more than ordinarily tired, even depressed.

The elderly cottager she had been visiting had been cheerful, even lively, and had protested that he was getting better and would soon be up and about.

But Grace had seen beyond that—the groping movement of a gnarled hand, the uncontrolled quiver of a lower lip, the sunken eyes—All the same she had congratulated him on looking so well—that was her job.

It was a fortnight since Terence Maitland had stood before her desk, his hand roughly bound with a handkerchief.

The young man involved in the car accident on Sleepers Hill had since died and an inquest was to be held.

It was one of the tragedies of life of which, as a doctor, Grace had seen many and she could not help thinking of the young wife, who was recovering, but whose happiness had been so cruelly shattered.

In some way the whole affair seemed to be linked with Terence Maitland, whose evidence, as a witness of the accident, would undoubtedly be required at the inquest.

She found herself wondering if she would see him again.

Derek, her brother, who had been home on week-end leave, had said that Commander Maitland was about the best test pilot in the navy.

"I don't know him personally," he had said. "But you should hear the chaps who do. He's never happier, it seems, than when he is throwing a plane about the sky, while crash landings are just part of the day's work to him."

"There's a story going the rounds that, quite recently, he had to test a prototype of a new supersonic fighter-bomber and that something went wrong," Derek had said. "He would have been perfectly justified in setting a course for the sea and then bailing out, but instead he calmly circled the airfield for an hour until his fuel was used up and then he landed the plane on one wheel! Pretty good going."

He had gone on to tell her of other breathtaking incidents of a similar nature.

Grace had gathered that Terence Maitland had a reputation for wanting to shun the social side of service life and "hadn't much time for girls".

But those things in themselves meant nothing, Grace decided. Even a man who "hadn't much time for girls" was quite capable of forming an attachment for one particular girl and not for the first time she wondered if there might not be an answer to her questions in that direction.

Not that it was any affair of hers, she reflected. All the same, she wondered.

**T**HE inquest took place in the local Town Hall a few days later.

Grace had taken morning surgery for her father, who had been called, and afterwards she stopped at the Town Hall to find out how long he was likely to be.

There were several matters requiring his attention and she had to decide what calls she was going to take during the afternoon. That again depended upon how soon her father would be free.

She drew up outside just as the Coroner's Court adjourned for lunch.

Constable Pemberton saw her and crossed to speak.

"Your father went off about five minutes ago, Dr. Grace," he said. "He's given his evidence and the Coroner said he wouldn't be wanted again. He asked me to tell you that he would be in for lunch at half past one."

"Thank you, Constable Pemberton," she said, with a friendly smile. "In that case I had better be getting along."

As she turned away, Grace saw a form she recognised coming towards her.

"Good morning, doctor! I was hoping I might see you. I wanted to thank you." Terence Maitland took off his hat and smiled.

Grace smiled back.

"Good morning, Commander! You have quite recovered, I trust?"

"I think so," he said, lifting his hand for inspection.

Grace noticed that the abrasion had healed perfectly, leaving only a small scar.

But she also noticed something else. In the fortnight that had elapsed since she had last seen him he had changed considerably.

Gone was the haunted expression from his eyes; gone the nervous stammer that told of nerves stretched to breaking point. He had evidently found a solution to his problems, for the grey eyes that smiled into her own were those of a man not only at peace with the world, but with himself.

"Can I give you a lift, Commander?" she asked, feeling strangely light-hearted. "You are staying in Rexcombe this time, I presume?"

"Yes," he answered. "At the Nag's Head. I'll accept your offer."

"Jump in, then." She smiled as she spoke and was met with an answering smile, as if, she thought, with a little quirk of amusement, they had known each other for ages.

"Tell me, Dr. Grace," he said, as they began to move. "Do you ever have time for moments off?"

"That depends," she said cautiously. "Theoretically I have a night off once a week—we have an arrangement whereby one of the other doctors takes the hospital calls and my father does any others that come in. But I never use it. Why?"

"Oh, I just wanted to talk to you," he said boldly. "Actually, if I hadn't been called to give evidence to-day I intended ringing you up from Portsmouth."

"My surgery hours are from seven to eight," she said.

Terence coloured, but seeing she was smiling, smiled also.

"I suppose I asked for that," he said. "But honestly I do want to talk to you—oh, are we here already?" For they had stopped in front of the hotel.

Grace kept the engine running and sat very still, her gloved hands on the wheel, her eyes apparently fixed on a petrol tanker going up the hill.

"I will leave the hospital soon after four this afternoon," she said. "Unless something very out of the way occurs I should be free until six." She turned to him. "Why not come to tea and then you can tell me what it is that is so important? Besides, I know my father will be delighted to meet you Commander Maitland."

"That's very kind of you," he said, getting out and standing with his hand on the door. "What time shall I make it?"

"Will four-thirty be convenient?"

"Perfectly," he said, with a slight bow. Grace let in the clutch.

"I shall expect you at four-thirty, then, Commander. Until then—good-bye."

"Good-bye, doctor."

He stood watching until her car was out of sight. Then, with a quietly indrawn breath, he turned and entered the hotel, an expression in his eyes that would have puzzled Grace had she seen it.

**H**E arrived punctually at four-thirty and left his car in the drive. The elderly maid took his hat and coat and ushered him into the drawing-room, where a fire burned redly on the open hearth.

There was a painting over the fireplace and Terence stepped closer to examine it. It was of a lovely woman in her middle thirties; the resemblance to Grace pointed clearly to the relationship.

There was the same broad, intelligent brow, the same gentian blue eyes, the warm, generous mouth. But there the resemblance ended.

For where Grace had character and personality the woman in the portrait had only a wistful charm, and he guessed that in all essentials other than looks, the daughter took after her father.

Terence was still gazing at the portrait when the door opened and Grace entered.

"I see you are looking at mother's portrait," she remarked, coming to a stand beside him.

"A lovely lady," he said sincerely.

He did not make the mistake of drawing comparisons with Grace, which, others might have done, and she appreciated this fact.

"Mother died when I was four, so I scarcely remember her," she said. "Derek and I were brought up by our old house-keeper."

"My own parents were lost at sea when I was nine," he said. "I often find myself envying those of my own age whose parents are still living. It must be rather nice to have someone at whose feet one can lay one's modest achievements, don't you think?"

"I certainly wouldn't call yours modest, Commander Maitland," she said smilingly. "But do sit down? Father will be in presently and we can have tea. Do smoke if you wish."

"Thank you."

He lowered himself into the chair she indicated and reached for the box of cigarettes she pushed across the table. Having lit one he placed the used match carefully in an ashtray with a deliberation that told Grace he was thinking carefully of his next words.

Then—

"I suppose you are wondering why I wanted to see you, Dr. Grace," he said looking up. "Oh! I daresay you thought it rather cheek on my part, but I hope you won't do so after I have told you the reason. I felt, in a way, that I owed it to you to tell you what I feel about something that happened a fortnight ago."

"Yes?" she asked quietly, her eyes fixed on him with an expression that gave him the encouragement he needed. "I gathered that it was something—well—rather important, Commander. Important to you, that is."

"You are quite right," he said, gazing into the fire. "You see, if it hadn't been for you I would have smashed—everything. My career—my hopes—in fact, I would have had nothing left. Not even—" he hesitated—"my self-respect."

Grace frowned.

"I find that rather hard to believe," she murmured. "How could you possibly lose your self-respect unless you had done something—well—discreditable, shall we say?"

Terence smiled, faintly cynical.

"But that is just what I did do," he said, tapping the ash off his cigarette. "I can't expect you to understand—after all why should you? But I wonder if you can imagine what it is like to wake up in a state of blue funk at four-thirty in the morning, knowing with absolute certainty, that you are incapable of facing what is in store for you?"

"Oh, I think I can." She met his eyes steadfastly. "I guessed, of course, that there was something wrong, and I wished I could have helped."

"You did help—more than you will ever know." He paused as if bracing himself. "When I came to your surgery that evening I had been driving about all day without any very clear conception of where I was going or what I would do when I got there. All that mattered—or seemed to matter—was to put as great a distance as possible between myself and the flying field.

"Yet, when I left your surgery," he went on, "it was as though something had happened to me and I knew that I had to go back. It meant facing the music, but I didn't mind even that. I was on my way to the flying field when I witnessed the accident, and when the same policeman who directed me to your place asked for my name and address, it seemed as if destiny or something, had taken a hand. I mean, I knew then that I would have to come here again."

"I see," nodded Grace. She rested an elbow on the arm of her chair and propped her chin in her hand. "I suppose this thing you shook off was some kind of flying test?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Particularly hush-hush and all that kind of thing."

"Was it more dangerous than others you have been doing?" she asked.

"Yes, in a way," he admitted. "But it wasn't the danger that worried me. It was more a sort of culmination, as if a lot of little things had been building up inside me for a long time, all waiting to burst. As a doctor you would understand that."

"I think I do." She regarded him steadily. "As my father would tell you, these things are cumulative, Commander. You can go on for so long and then—something snaps. Tell me, what happened when you finally got back to your base?"

He shrugged and laughed.

"It sounds too silly for words but the answer is—nothing! I wasn't even missed! I didn't know, you see, that owing to the sudden illness of an admiral, who was coming to see the test it had been postponed. My servant took the 'phone message at my quarters, and when he found that I had already gone out in my car, he assumed that I had somehow learned of the postponement from some other source!"

A faint smile played about the corner of Grace's mouth.

"It looks as if destiny did take a hand.

Commander," she said.

He drew a deep breath.

"All the same, it had no bearing on the real issue," he said. "However much I may try to gloss over it, the fact remains that I . . . panicked."

"I don't agree," she said. "You happened to have reached breaking-point, that is all, Commander. It happens to everybody at some time or another, in various ways, of course."

"But that's no excuse for running away," he said.

"Well, I won't argue with you." She smiled. "I still don't quite see what I had to do with your decision to go back."

"Don't you?" He looked searchingly at her. "Doesn't it strike you that a man who had done what I had done would feel very much of a worm when he saw a mere girl doing your kind of job? I mean to say, there must have been times when you could have panicked, though I'll wager you carried on."

"Perhaps our incentives are different," she suggested quietly.

"Perhaps they are," he agreed thoughtfully. "Basically, though, it makes no difference. Again, when you remember the reasons why we are working so hard to bring our air defences up to date, you might think that our incentives aren't so different, after all. However, all that apart," he added, "I knew, when I left you, that unless I did go back I would never hold up my head again."

"Don't you think you are being a little hard on yourself, Commander?" she said, almost sharply. "The very fact that you did go back shows that you have nothing to reproach yourself with? It probably took far more courage to do that than to test out an untried aircraft the next day."

He laid his cigarette in the ashtray and laced his fingers round one knee.

"I don't think it was so much a question of courage as of regaining my self-respect," he said. He smiled suddenly. "Do you know how I hurt my hand?"

"You never actually said. What happened?" she asked.

"I did it on the old sea wall about five miles from here," he said. "I had been sitting there for hours, it seemed, trying to think and then, suddenly, I banged it down . . . hard. That old countryman I talked to in your waiting-room was right—I discovered just how hard a flint wall can be."

She laughed.

"Yes. Our ancestors knew a thing or two when they made their weapons from flints. Anyway, I'm glad you had the sense to come and get it properly dressed."

"I can't claim any credit for that," he said, a gleam of amusement coming into his eyes. "A friendly policeman played the part of a guardian angel in re-shaping events though if you told him so he would probably be the most surprised man in Rexcombe."

Grace got up, half smiling to herself. "I doubt if you could think of anything that would surprise Constable Pemberton," she said, crossing to the fireplace and ringing the bell. "He has a very big understanding of human nature—he comes in contact with so much of it, you see. But I think I heard my father's car come up the drive, so we can have tea!"

She turned to him, something slightly baffling in her expression, and added. "Thank you for telling me what you have done, Commander. It was a great compliment and I appreciate it very much."

GRACE had been perfectly sincere when she had said that he had paid her a great compliment. Not many men would

have confessed to something which someone less gifted with understanding might well have regarded as a confession of weakness.

This fact created a bond between them that lifted him at once from the ruck of ordinary acquaintances and helped to foster a friendship which grew rapidly.

Quite often she would come away from the hospital or the surgery, tired after a long, hard day, to find him waiting for her beside his car.

Sometimes he would suggest leaving her car where it was and going for a drive "to blow away the cobwebs" or, if she still had calls to make, insist on taking her somewhere for a meal first, saying that she did not look after herself as she should.

"You'll wear yourself to a shadow if you don't watch out," he chided her smilingly, on one such occasion. "You can't go on burning the candle at both ends like this, you know. I thought you were supposed to have a night off now and then?"

"So I am," she replied, with a little sigh. "But a doctor's day is twenty-four hours long, and it isn't always possible to arrange for people to become ill at properly regulated intervals!"

He grinned at this, his eyes resting appreciatively on her face, noting the faint shadows under the blue eyes, the hint of weariness in their depths.

"The trouble is, you're too conscientious by far," he said. "Don't tell me! I know that half the people who telephone in the middle of the night do so without stopping to think what it means to someone who has probably just come in from another call."

"That just shows how little you know about it, Terry," she said. "I agree that very often one is called unnecessarily, but that's not the point. The majority of people who send for their doctor out of hours don't do so because they are inconsiderate but because they are frightened. Sudden illness at night can be a very frightening thing and though half the people who ring up don't realise it, it is reassurance they seek."

ATER, on his way back to Portsmouth, Terry hummed a little tune to himself, as his car sped along the road.

Since meeting Grace his entire outlook had changed and he was beginning to realise just what life could—he even dared hope would—mean for him.

Hitherto, except for that unexpected rebellion on the part of his over-strained nerves, he had lived only for his flying. Now, with the intuitive knowledge of a man in love for the first time, he knew that whatever success he might achieve in his chosen career, whatever heights he might attain, the rewards would be empty unless he had Grace to share them with him.

Sometimes he would be free for a whole week-end and at such times he would arrive in Rexcombe punctually at noon on a Saturday and put up at the Nag's Head.

Often he would be invited to supper at the doctor's house, and he and Grace would argue amiably over matters of mutual interest, from poetry to music, illustrating their points regarding the latter with records played on the radiogram.

Sometimes they would just sit and talk, with Dr. Robinson an interested listener, for Terence had a natural flair for description and amused them with humorous accounts of service life, or tales of long, lonely reconnaissance flights over the Malay jungle from the deck of an aircraft carrier.

Once Dr. Robinson asked him why he had taken up flying.

"I've never really thought much about it," Terence confessed, looking a trifle non-

plussed. "I wanted to go into the Navy ever since I was so high and my guardian, who was responsible for my education, raised no objection. I went to Davenport as a naval cadet when I was fourteen, and I suppose my interest in flying dates from then. I know I made up my mind that the Fleet Air Arm was the branch of the service I most desired to join so that as soon as I was old enough I applied for special training as a pilot."

"Have you ever regretted your decision?"

"Heavens, no!" Terry said, with an embarrassed laugh. "At least, not really." A momentary shadow crossed his features and Grace knew he was thinking of the time when he had driven blindly away from his quarters in a fruitless endeavour to escape the panic which, for the moment, had swamped his reason. "It's a pretty full and exciting life and now that I am attached to the Experimental Wing, no one could possibly complain that it's dull."

"Anything but dull," observed Dr. Robinson drily. "I can think of much less exciting ways of passing the time than in breaking the world's air-speed record for level flight."

"Oh, that!" Terence dismissed this earlier achievement with a shrug. "I've had many more exciting experiences than piloting a perfectly tuned jet fighter under ideal conditions."

"Such as?" enquired his host.

"Having my port engine blow up at thirty thousand feet, for one," he said. "I've baled out several times, but the earth never seemed as far away as it did on that occasion."

Grace shuddered.

"It sounds positively terrifying. I know I would simply die of fright," she said.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," Terence replied, shaking his head. "It's all a question of what you are used to. There's a certain amount of satisfaction to be gained from an incident of that kind as well as—well—other things. You're entirely on your own. There's no possibility of help from any source—and it's a case of you against nature."

"Oh, I know," She sounded impatient and wistful at the same time. "But it all seems so *pointless*. Speed for speed's sake. I mean! Must we be always risking men's lives and pouring out money like water just to be able to travel faster than someone else? When is it going to end?"

"You've got it all wrong, my dear Grace," he declared earnestly. "It's not just a question of speed, but of possessing the most efficient air weapon. If we had lagged behind in the past we would have lost the Battle of Britain in Nineteen-forty and the entire course of history would have been changed. If you believe, as I do, that the world will one day witness the final struggle between the forces of good and evil, would you have us throw away those things which may be all that will save civilisation?"

When he had gone, Dr. Robinson smoked for some time in silence.

Then, bending over, he knocked out his pipe on one of the bars of the grate.

"Grace, my dear, as long as England breeds men like Terence Maitland we need have no fear of the future," he said.

#### A DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

GRACE had been more than usually tired when she came in that evening, but despite this, she found that sleep eluded her.

In a way she could not fathom, something had happened to the quality of understanding which had been mainly responsible for the rapid growth of the friendship

between herself and Terry.

It was as if, suddenly and without warning, it had plumbed depths of which she had previously been unaware, so that, fantastic though the idea might be, she felt as if her secret was one no longer—as if, in fact, Terry had defined, first, that she was unhappy and secondly, the reason.

It was difficult to say when she had first noticed the change. In the beginning his approach had been almost diffident, his attitude being that of one who is grateful for such crumbs of friendship as she might care to bestow. But lately his manner had become almost protective, as if he sensed instinctively that she needed someone to lean on, and from there it was but a short step to wondering how it was all going to end.

For end it must . . . sometime. So far Terence had appeared to seek nothing but her friendship, seemingly content to know that she liked him and looked forward to his visits. But she did not delude herself. The time was not far distant when he would ask for more than just friendship—for something, in fact, that was no longer hers to give!

At the thought her heart ached. Not only had it become desperately important not to hurt him, but she admitted that if he went out of her life now he would leave a gap that no one else could ever fill.

"You can't have your cake and eat it."

From her schooldays came the echo of their old housekeeper's voice uttering these words. Grace could see her now in a black dress with touches of white at the collar and sleeves.

Suddenly the telephone began to ring and she put out a hand and switched on the bedside light.

IT was a hospital call and she did not get back to bed until four o'clock!

As she went about her duties in the days that followed, no one would have suspected that beneath the calm exterior she presented to the world Grace was a prey to emotions that threatened to gain ascendancy over her.

Character and training came to her aid as they had done before, however, so that the next time she found Terence waiting for her outside the hospital, she had herself well in hand.

"To-night," he said airily, after greeting her, "is your night off. I've got it written down in my diary, so you can't wriggle! That being the case, I am going to take you for a nice long drive out of reach of telephones, during which I won't expect you to talk. In short, my dear girl, you are going to relax!"

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind," she returned, vigorously shaking her head. "I've dozens of case cards to be written up as well as a long report for an insurance company. Besides, what do you think people are going to say if they see me driving away from here with a strange man?"

"Strange man, indeed!" he said with pretended indignation. "I'll have you know—"

A probationer-nurse came hurrying down the steps towards them.

"Excuse me, doctor," she said breathlessly, "but Sister Thomas sent me to see if you had gone. That appendix case in Ward Three has had a sudden relapse."

Grace threw Terence a look as if to say, "You see?" and turned to the girl.

"All right, nurse," she said. "Tell Sister Thomas I'll come back at once." She turned back to Terence. "It's no use your waiting, Terry. I may be a very long time."

It was, in fact, nearly an hour and a half later when she finally appeared, only to find the young man seated patiently in his car. He jumped out, but the remark he had been about to make froze on his lips when he saw her face.

"I thought I told you not to wait," she said a little severely, drawing on her gloves.

"Not at all," he replied, taking her arm and leading her round to the other side of the car. "What you actually said was it wouldn't be much use waiting, but I didn't agree." He opened the car door. "Come on, jump in! I know just what you need and I am going to see you get it."

"But—" She broke off and looked around in a puzzled manner, her brows knitted. "What has happened to my car?"

"Oh, I rang up the local garage and told them to send a man to drive it home for you—I said you wouldn't be needing it again this evening," he explained carefully. "I also sent a message to your maid saying that we were going to dine out and that you might not be in until late."

Grace looked at him in mingled exasperation and amusement.

"You certainly are the limit, Terry," she exclaimed. "For all you know I may have required my car badly. What on earth made you do such a thing?"

"I couldn't think of any other way of getting you to myself for an hour or so," he answered, with an impish grin. "Don't be cross, Grace. It is your night off, when all's said and done. If you hadn't stopped to argue earlier they would have sent for another doctor to deal with that appendix case."

"She died," Grace said, with a long drawn sigh of utter weariness. It was as much weariness of the spirit as of the body Terence thought, with innate sympathy and understanding.

To Grace a thing like that represented so much more than a life which had gone beyond the power to save it. It was a defeat that left her mentally unsettled and, for the moment, a prey to doubts and misgivings.

He drove carefully out of the hospital grounds and turned to the right, taking the road towards the coast.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "As a matter of fact I guessed that something had gone wrong when you were such a long time. You take these things pretty badly, don't you?"

"Of course I take them badly," she said impatiently. "So would you if you were in my place?"

"I daresay I would, but I wouldn't let them get me down," he said.

"You did once!" She regretted the words the moment they were uttered, for out of the corner of her eye she saw him flush. He drove on for a few minutes without speaking. Then—

"You are quite right to remind me of that," he said. "I might be tempted to get above myself if you didn't do so occasionally. I can only apologise for presuming to lecture you."

Impulsively she turned towards him, her eyes misting.

"That was beastly of me, Terry. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," he answered cheerfully. "No bones broken. But since plain speaking seems to be the order of the day I'm going to stick my neck out and tell you, quite frankly, that you are heading for a fall! Don't say I didn't warn you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, in a voice that shook a little. "I just happen to be tired, that's all."

"Tell that to the Marines," he said, with intentional flippancy. "However, we won't argue about it. It's too nice a night, for one thing, and for another I would certainly get the worst of it."

Grace made no reply and he was wise enough to leave it at that.

His love for her had grown deeper and more enduring with every day that passed, and because he loved her, he had respected

the barriers she had unconsciously erected against him.

At the same time, though he was without a clue as to the cause he had come to suspect that she was desperately unhappy about something so that he knew that he must tread warily lest he drive her to seek refuge in some fastness of the mind where he could not follow.

So he set to work to take her out of herself and make her forget that there were such things as hospitals and patients. And so well did he succeed that by the time they had finished dinner at an old-world inn, Grace was laughing at his remarks and some of the look of strain had gone from her eyes.

They left the inn and sought his car, chatting happily; and when she had got in, Terence laid a rug over her knees and got in beside her. Grace leaned back in the darkness, her eyes half closed thinking dreamily that it was rather nice to be fussed over for a change.

The inn was situated at a cross-roads on the outskirts of the county town, half way between Rexcombe and the sea. Terence turned the car on to the wide arterial road leading to the coast and pressed his foot down on the accelerator.

The powerful engine responded and the speedometer needle crept round the dial. It was a bright, moonlit night, with little or no traffic about and Grace relaxed in her seat, her eyes fixed on the wide swathe cut in the darkness by the headlamps, soothed in mind and spirit.

At length they came to a road junction and saw the lights of a town far below them. Terence drove straight on, however, slackening speed as the car breasted a long rise. Then he slowed down almost to walking pace and swung the car off the road on to the short, springy turf and drove carefully for a few yards more until they came to a level spot high on the top of a famous headland.

"There!" he remarked, in a tone of quiet satisfaction.

He switched off headlamps and engine, leaving only his side-lights burning.

Beyond the plateau the English Channel lay before them, looking like burnished platinum in the moonlight, with the lights of a passing steamer seen faintly in the distance.

To right and left the ground fell away steeply, so that they seemed to be isolated in a tiny world of their own high above the sea, with the sluggish waves breaking lazily on the rocks far below.

Grace drew a deep breath and sat up. She had removed her hat some time before and put up a hand to brush the hair from her temples.

"That was lovely, Terry," she murmured appreciatively. She gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

He laughed softly, his eyes slanting humorously down at her.

"Just what the doctor ordered!" he said chaffingly. "Now tell me I don't know what you want."

"The doctor didn't order it," she said, smilingly. "But she liked it very much, all the same. I felt as if I were flying."

"Wait till you do fly," he said. "One day I'll take you up and introduce you to a world you never dreamed existed—a world where you really are alone and, I think, very close to heaven." He smiled in an embarrassed fashion, as if made shy by the sudden revelation of his feelings.

"I should be afraid," she said.

"Afraid—you?" He shook his head. "I don't believe that. I don't believe there is anything in the world that can make you afraid. In any case, there's nothing to be afraid of."

He went on to tell her something about his work, giving her a word picture of what it was like to be at the controls of a high-speed, modern aircraft high above the clouds with only the thin, metallic voice of the Ground Controller in his headphones to remind him that another world existed.

"You make it all sound so easy," she said.

"That's just what it is," he replied. "I mean, these things are all relative, aren't they? If you were asked, you would probably say much the same thing about your work. When you performed your first operation you probably felt as I did when I took up my first jet fighter. But once you've done it, it's a piece of cake." He laughed. "What intrigues me is why you became a doctor."

She looked at him curiously.

"Why should that intrigue you?"

"Well,"—he hesitated, as if not sure how to put his thoughts into words—"it's different for a man."

"In what way is it different?" she challenged. "Or don't you think that a woman is capable of being a good doctor?"

"Not at all. But a man can afford to make his profession his chief preoccupation. For obvious reasons a woman can't."

"You mean—marriage?" she asked.

"What else?" He shrugged. "The way I look at it, the time must come when a woman like you will have to choose between her career and all that goes with marriage. Home and children—that sort of thing."

Grace smiled bitterly in the darkness.

"That applies to other things beside the medical profession," she said. "In any case, as far as I am concerned the question doesn't arise. I shall never marry."

He turned towards her. If he hesitated a second it was because he knew what vital issues hung on his next words.

Yet, driven onward by an overwhelming urge to put his fate to the test, he decided to risk everything on one throw.

"How can you possibly say a thing like that?" he protested. "What happens if you fall in love with someone?"

"That isn't very likely," she said, in tone of such utter finality that it was like a blow in the face.

He was not to be put off, however.

"Now you're talking nonsense," he said, almost brusquely. "Love isn't something you can write a prescription for—it is something that just happens and when it does it won't be denied. I know, you see, because I fell in love with you the night I came to the surgery to get my hand dressed—and I've loved you ever since!"

A quiver ran through her and she turned her head to look at him, wide-eyed.

"You—you love me?" she faltered, taken completely unawares, though his tone and choice of subject should have warned her. It merely went to show how completely self-centred one could become, she thought wildly.

"Didn't you know?" he asked gently, laying a lean brown hand on one of hers and smiling into her rather panic-stricken eyes. "I thought a girl always knew when a man was in love with her."

"I—I knew you liked me," she said slowly, a little break in her voice. "But I thought—I hoped—oh, Terry, what am I to say?"

He took her wrists, compelling her to look at him, his entire being moved by pity for the tears he saw trembling on her lashes.

"Grace, my darling," he said solemnly, "please listen to me. I'm not so conceited that I think for a moment that you feel towards me as I feel towards you. I only know that without you life won't be the same. I'm ready to do anything you want to make you happy—I'll wait just as long

as you like—if only you will give me a word of hope. Dearest—"

"Terry—oh, stop!" She wrenched herself free and covered her face with her hands. "You—you don't know what you are saying! Oh, why did this have to happen?"

"I told you long ago," he said, with smiling tenderness. "It was fate that we should meet. If I hadn't panicked that day I would never have fetched up in Rexcombe with a damaged hand or come to your surgery! Don't you see, darling, it was intended—right from the beginning?"

She bowed her head, struggling with a sense of bitter frustration almost too great to be borne. Terence watched, knowing that, whatever the battle she was fighting, he could not help her.

At length she looked up.

"I like and respect you more, I think, than any man I know," she said slowly, as if each word was an effort. "I can't begin to tell you what your friendship has meant to me, Terry. Not only that, but if—if it wasn't for something that happened a long time ago I would have been proud to hear you say what you have said to-night. As it is—" She made a little gesture of hopelessness and defeat.

"You mean . . . there is someone else?" he asked hoarsely, going white.

She nodded, her lips tight. Then—

"It—it is your right to know," she said, with a heavy sigh. "He—he was a surgeon at the hospital where I completed my training—we used to work together and sometimes I assisted him with operations. We became friends and then—"

She hesitated a fraction, then the words came out in a little rush, as if she were trying to rid her mind of a burden too great to be borne.

"I knew he was married, you see," she said. "But it was only gradually that I began to find out how desperately unhappy he was. He had married one of the nurses at the hospital where he had trained, shortly before going out to Kenya with a medical unit. When we met he had been back about eighteen months and during that time he had learnt what it was to be married to someone who didn't care a snap of the fingers for him."

It was a simple enough story, Terence reflected bitterly. One that had been told often before and would be told again as long as there were men whose ideals blinded them to the real character—or lack of it—behind a purely pretty face.

When everything was taken into consideration it was not surprising that what had started as an innocent friendship between a man and a girl, with the same interest in their work, should develop into something deeper. The trouble was, by the time they awoke to the realities of the situation, it was too late.

"We—we didn't know what was happening," she ended pathetically. "Then, one night, after a long operation that left us almost too tired to think—something snapped. I'm not trying to excuse myself—I should have been on my guard against anything of the kind, I suppose; but how could I when I didn't realise what was happening?"

She pushed back an errant lock of hair from her temples.

"I can't remember what was said—I don't think we did say very much to each other, as it happens. We both knew that it was the beginning and the end—that we mustn't see each other again. The following day I heard that Alastair had resigned his appointment as consultant at the hospital and as soon as I had completed my training I left as well and came to Rexcombe. It was the only refuge I knew."

Terence stared through the windscre

in front of him. He longed to comfort her, but he knew that a false move on his part would shatter the delicate fabric of her confidence in him. She had risked everything on his understanding and he must not fail her.

He spoke at last—

“And you never saw him again?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t help hearing about him, of course. A hospital is very like a naval base for rumour and gossip, I imagine.” Again she smiled in that wan, little-girl fashion. “I heard that he had sold his practise in the West End and had bought one somewhere in the Midlands. But that’s all.”

Again there was a short silence. Then Terence turned to her and took her hands.

“Listen,” he said slowly. “I love you. This—this other thing is something that happened—something you couldn’t help—but it belongs to the past. It must have been pretty tough on both of you, but you have the consolation of knowing that you did the right thing. The thing you mustn’t do is to live in the past. You’ve got your whole life before you—the best years of it—are you going to deny yourself the happiness that can be yours for the sake of—a memory?”

Grace bowed her head. The words she wanted to utter stifled in her throat and became pointless before the miracle of a love that surpassed all other emotions. She made a little gesture half of impatience, half of despair.

“But, Terry!” she whispered. “I—”

“I know what you are going to say,” he interrupted, cupping her face in his strong hands. “But it doesn’t cut any ice with me, sweetheart! Perhaps the way you feel for me is not the same as you felt for this other fellow—perhaps it never will be—but half a loaf is better than no bread, they say. I’m asking you to marry me, my darling—to be my wife and to let me, as far as is humanly possible, make up to you for all that might have been.”

“Oh, Terry! Do you really love me like that?” she murmured.

“There aren’t words to tell you how much I love you, sweet,” he answered solemnly. “All I ask is for a chance to prove it.”

He put his left arm around her shoulders, his fingers closed around her sleeve. She relaxed against him her eyes wide and dark as she stared through the windscreen at the moonlit sea.

“You make it very difficult to say ‘No’, Terry,” she whispered. “But, my dear, it wouldn’t be fair to you, apart from everything else.”

“I’m the best judge of that,” he said firmly. “Again I’m asking you to marry me, Grace. Will you?”

She struggled against a temptation greater than she had ever known. As Terry’s wife she would find a haven of refuge safer and more distant even than the one she had found in Rexcombe. But her fundamental honesty triumphed—he was too fine, too good to cheat as she would be cheating him if she married him for no better reason than that.

She stirred restlessly in his arms.

“I oughtn’t to let you hold me like this,” she said reproachfully.

“Why not? It’s—well—kind of comforting, isn’t it?” he enquired, smilingly.

“Very,” she said, with a deep sigh. Then she sighed again and sat up, turning wide, serious eyes upon his face. “Terry dear, please listen to me. I—I want you to know that I have come very near to saying ‘Yes’. If—if I don’t, it is because I need time—to think about it all. Can you be a little—patient?”

“With that to hang on to I will be as

patient as you like, my dearest,” he promised.

“All right, then. I—I will give you my answer next week,” she said, drawing a deep breath, in her eyes a new and unexpected softness that made Terence catch his breath.

Then, with a crooked little smile that was at the same time infinitely pathetic and courageous, she put up her hands and drew his head down, in the fleeting touch of her lips a promise that made his heart pound and seemed to set the world alight.

“Now take me back,” she said, in a voice only a little above a whisper. “It’s getting late and I have a hard day in front of me to-morrow. As it is,”—with a catchy little laugh—“I don’t suppose I shall sleep much!”

#### OUT OF THE PAST

GRACE was in the X-ray department at the hospital when the ambulance arrived. She was talking to the radiologist, in connection with the plates she was holding up for inspection, her smooth brow slightly furrowed.

When the house telephone rang she took no notice, leaving it to Miss Summers, the radiologist, to answer it. She went on examining the plates one by one and then, Miss Summers, a coolly competent young woman in a long white coat, turned towards her.

“It’s for you, doctor,” she said. “There has been an accident. Sleepers Hill again!”

“Oh dear!” Grace took the receiver. “Dr. Grace speaking. What is it?”

The sister in charge of casualty spoke—

“The ambulance has just brought in an accident case, doctor. A woman. I’m afraid it’s bad.”

“All right, sister, I’ll come over immediately,” Grace said. She put down the receiver and turned to Miss Summers. “I would like you to send those plates over to me some time, Miss Summers. We may have to have another X-ray.”

“Very good, doctor, I’ll see to it,” said the other. “I’ll get the portable apparatus ready in case you need it for this new case. Sister Rankin thought there were multiple injuries.”

“Thank you.”

Grace hurried across the quadrangle to the main building, where she was met by the sister in charge of the casualty department.

“I don’t think there is much hope, doctor,” she said, with professional bluntness. “I’ve telephoned Dr. Robinson and he is on his way. I hope that was right?”

“Quite right, sister. If it means an emergency operation he will have to do it. Do you know what happened?”

“Yes, the ambulance men told me. She is a Mrs. Munro and was on her way back with her husband from a holiday on the south coast. Apparently their car was in collision with a van which came out of the cross-roads at the bottom of Sleepers Hill. It turned over and she was pinned underneath.”

Grace shuddered. But a moment later she was herself again as she bent over the trolley on which the woman had been placed. Her examination was swift, but thorough, and at the end of five minutes she turned to the sister-in-charge.

“Give instructions to the theatre to be got ready for an emergency operation, please,” she instructed. “I shall also want an abdominal X-ray done at once. You said her husband was with her—is he here?”

“Yes, doctor. He’s in the waiting-room. He was slightly injured but refused to have any treatment until his wife had been examined. I told him you would let him

know the result as soon as you could.”

“He will have to give permission for the operation, so I had better see him at once,” said Grace. “Please tell me when my father arrives.”

She walked down the corridor, a slender, competent figure in her white coat, the ends of her stethoscope showing above the lip of one pocket.

She pushed open the cream painted door of the waiting-room, where a man was standing looking out of the window, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets as if to hide the fact that both fists were tightly clenched.

As Grace entered he turned.

“I—” he began, and then, as he recognised her: “Good heavens—Grace!”

In a swift, curiously detached way, as if her mind had become divided into two halves, Grace noticed that Alastair Munro was thinner than he had been and that there was a fine-drawn look about him, as if he had been living for too long on his nerves. There was an ugly bruise on his temple and the sleeve of his jacket was torn.

“They told me you were here,” she said, in a voice she didn’t recognise as her own. “I never guessed it would be you.”

Alastair laughed mirthlessly. Despite the reason for his presence neither could forget the circumstances of their last meeting.

It was Grace who rallied first.

“I’m sorry to tell you that your wife is very seriously injured, Alastair,” she said quietly, quelling the tremor in her voice. “We are preparing the theatre now for an emergency operation, but I don’t have to tell you that she may not—come through.”

“No,” he said bitterly, “you don’t have to tell me, Grace. I know she has a crushed pelvis—there is probably other damage as well. You are having an X-ray, of course?”

“They are doing it now,” she said. “My father, Dr. Robinson, will do the operation—I shall assist. Or, if you would prefer it, we can get a specialist down from London. That would take time, of course and I don’t think we have very much.”

“I know.” His face twitched. He hesitated for a moment, his brow knitted, as if he were trying to force his mind to work along familiar lines. Then he looked at her. “Can I help?”

“Better not, I think, Alastair.” She flushed slightly beneath his penetrating regard. “It isn’t just a question of medical etiquette. I think you have had a shock.”

He bit his lip almost savagely.

“Yes, worse luck.” He took a hand out of his pocket and spread the fingers, so that Grace could see how they were trembling. Then he laughed again, a short, angry laugh that held such a wealth of bitterness and despair that Grace felt her heart wrung with pity for him.

“I am going to tell them to bring you some tea,” she said. “Sister Rankin will get you to sign the authorisation form at the same time. You had better remain here—I will give instructions that you are not to be disturbed. If there is anything you want you have only to ring the bell there.”

She turned to go but he detained her with a gesture.

“Grace!”

“Yes, Alastair?”

He drew a deep breath, and stood looking at her as if he had either forgotten what he was going to say or was undecided whether to say it.

Then—

“You—you will do your best, won’t you?” he begged, his voice dropping.

“Of course,” she said, and turned away, unable to bear the sight of his suffering any longer.

A hour later she walked back down the polished corridor and entered the waiting-room. A tray containing a teapot with milk and sugar and a plate of biscuits stood on the table in the centre. Beside the man who sat in a wicker chair with his head in his hands was an empty cup.

He sprang up as Grace came into the room, his eyes searching her face with an appeal in them that she felt it was almost wrong to witness.

"Your wife will live," she said quietly smiling faintly at him, her face pale so that the dark shadows beneath her eyes were accentuated. "It will be some days before she can be moved—we have put her in plaster and she is in a private ward. I doubt if she will come out of the anaesthetic for two or three hours at least, but you will be able to see her then for a few minutes."

"Thank God!" he said brokenly and then he did a terrible thing.

As a doctor, Grace had seen men cry, either through pain or grief or when coming round after an operation. But this was unlike anything in her experience. These hoarse, gasping sobs that seemed to rack him like successive blows secretly alarmed her. She knew that, as she had pointed out, he was suffering from shock, but there was more than shock in such an abandonment of sorrow. She went to where he had flung himself in his chair, his face buried in his hands, and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Alastair—my dear," she whispered. "You mustn't! It—it's all over now. Look, let me get you something. You—"

"You don't understand!" He straightened himself up, shuddering like a man stricken with ague, and stared at the cream-washed wall before him with distraught eyes. "It was all my fault that it happened. I—we had been quarrelling—Helen had been staying with her people on the south coast and I had driven down to fetch her home again.

"It was the usual story—she had been spending money like water and—and complained that I kept her short. I wasn't paying any attention to what we were doing or where we were going—she was always frightened of going too fast and because I was angry—I started speeding. A van came out of the cross-roads and before I could avoid it, I had struck it head-on. If Helen had died I would have been her murderer."

"She isn't going to die," Grace said gently. "If—if you have any faith, then you must believe that God has given you both another chance, Alastair. Helen is going to need you—badly. She may never be really strong again, even though she recovers completely. But you know that even better than I do. It—it isn't given to all of us to work out our own salvation but—isn't that what you have to do?"

He drew a deep breath and stood up, thrusting his hands into his pockets and taking a turn about the little room. For a moment the silence was unbroken save for the distant murmur of traffic in the High Street and the chiming of the church clock.

Then he turned.

"You are quite right, of course," he said speaking with the calmness of someone from whom a crushing burden has been lifted. "As you say. Helen is going to need me now more than she has ever done. If she had really needed me in the past it is possible that—quite a lot of things—would not have happened." He sighed. "It's strange that the accident should have happened here and that it should be *you*—". He broke off, but Grace knew that he had been going to add, "Should be the one to point the way for me."

She met his eyes fearlessly.

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with, Alastair," she said quietly. "I know that you have never been disloyal to Helen in deed or thought. Now you can find happiness in showing her just what that means!"

He nodded.

"Yes," he said heavily, "but what about you, Grace? Are you happy?"

"Very happy, thank you, Alastair." She smiled at him. "I have my work and a lot of other things besides. Sometimes," she went on, "one takes the wrong path and you find that it doesn't lead—anywhere. And then, quite suddenly, you find the right one and—it isn't necessary any longer to look back."

He regarded her wonderingly.

"Have you found the right path, then, Grace?"

"Yes," she said, with a little catch of her breath. "My feet have been on it for a long time, only I didn't know." She held out her hand. "I—I won't see you again—I'm going away for a few days and by the time I return you will have been able to move Helen nearer home. So I'll say good-bye now—and good luck."

He held her hand for a moment, all that he might once have said rendered unimportant by the revelation in her eyes. Then, with a sudden awkward gesture he raised her fingers to his lips.

"Good-bye, Grace," he said gently. "Good-bye, my dear—and—good luck."

WHEN Dr. Robinson heard his daughter's request he raised his eyebrows but refrained from making the obvious comment.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't get away for a few days, my dear," he said. "You're entitled to a holiday, if ever anyone was! I can carry on here for a week, so you don't have to worry about anything. Where do you propose to go?"

"I thought I would like to go and stay with Aunt Clara in Cornwall," she said. "I feel horribly mean, running away like this and leaving all the work to you, but—"

"I understand, my dear," he interrupted, with a smile. "That operation this morning was rather an ordeal for you, wasn't it? You knew Dr. Munro, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was at St. John's when I was there. We often worked together. It was a shock to me when I went into the waiting-room and found him there."

"It must have been. When you have known someone as intimately as one gets to know one's colleagues in hospital, that kind of thing is bound to be a shock. She is lucky to be alive—Mrs. Munro, I mean. Still, unless something very much unforeseen occurs she ought to do all right." He smiled and patted her arm, his eyes twinkling. "What am I to tell our young friend when he comes round asking for you?"

"Who—Terry?" she enquired innocently.

"Who else?" he asked teasingly, and laughed when he saw her blush. "Or are you going to write to him to tell him that you won't be here?"

"I may do that," she said evasively. "In any case it doesn't matter. You and he can discuss politics to your heart's content if I'm not here. The chances are he won't even notice!"

"That," said her father, with a chuckle "is a base libel on an exalted member of the senior service! I've a good mind to tell him what you said."

Grace smiled.

"I don't mind if you do," she said.

A FEW days later Grace left her aunt's cottage and started out for a solitary walk.

The day had begun by being windy, with the rollers that ran into the little cove whipped into foam. Towards mid-afternoon, however, the wind dropped and the warm sun appeared through low, scudding clouds, lighting up the rocks and sandy foreshore so that they stood out against the background of sea and sky.

She walked quickly, a slender figure in a light dress. There was a place she had come to regard as her favourite spot not far from the cove, where the rocks extended in a jagged line into the sea, the ruins of an old watch tower standing with its feet in the water.

It was here that she would come when she wanted to be alone, to think about the implications of all that had happened to her, and of all that the future might hold. From the memory of the night Terence had asked her to marry him came the echo of his voice and as she remembered what he had said on that occasion she knew that she was standing at the cross-roads, in her slender hands the power to make or mar, not only her own life, but his as well. She remembered so well what he had put into words.

*The way I look at it the time must come when a woman like you will have to choose between her career and all that goes with marriage.*

That, she thought, with a reflective smile, was the choice that was facing her now. With the thought she turned as she heard someone approaching over the broken stones—to see Terence coming towards her, a look of eager expectation in his eyes. He waved his hand and grinned in a friendly fashion, taking off his hat.

"So this is where you have run away to, is it?" he said, in a tone of pleased surprise. "I must say you chose a spot about as far from Rexcombe as you could manage without actually walking off the island."

"How did you get here?" asked Grace, with a quirk of her lips.

"Drove," he said, with a shrug. "I could have flown—I know a chap who would have wangled me a trip to Fowey in a service plane but I thought the car might come in handy if we wanted to go places."

"You mean—you're staying here?" she gasped.

"That's the big idea," he admitted modestly. "After all, why should you be the only one to get a week off?"

She drew a deep breath and looked at him, the breeze lifting the curls at her temples, her eyes holding an expression that he could not define. She seemed to be laughing at him, yet he could not be sure.

"Do you think it very nice of you to follow me down here?" she asked coldly. "I came away to have a rest—not to be forced to remember everything that happened in Rexcombe."

"Such as your promise to answer a certain question the next time I came over?" he queried, with a lift of his eyebrows. "Is that why you ran away, Grace?"

"I didn't run away," she said, with a sudden flash of temper.

He laughed and took her hands.

"What a little spitfire you are," he said teasingly. "You obviously know that you look particularly charming when you are angry—that's why you get angry so often! Ah, vanity! Thy name is woman."

"Can't you be serious for five minutes?" she demanded, pulling her hands away.

"What is there to be serious about?" he enquired blandly. "Life is pretty grim as it is without our making it grimmer. Besides, I'm in a holiday mood. What more can anyone want than this? You and I and the sea, with nothing to disturb our

bliss. If little Alice gets a pain under her pinny, someone else will have to deal with it. You and I have more important things to discuss.

"You are a fool," she said, but blushing with sudden mirth.

He laughed into her eyes.

"There was a fool and he breathed a prayer——" he quoted softly, drawing her insensibly towards him. "Oh, Grace, my darling don't you know that I'm only fooling to cover up the fact that when I saw you I wanted to throw my hat in the air and sing?"

She smiled oddly at him.

"Do you still want to marry me, then?"

"Do you have to ask?" he countered smiling whimsically. "When I learnt that you had taken French leave—as far as I am concerned that is—I wheedled your address out of your father and called at the base on the way to fix up for a week's leave.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Your aunt very kindly directed me," he said, "She told me you would either have gone this way or be down at the cove. I tried the cove first, as being the nearest and then came in search of you. Now I want to know why you asked me that question."

"What question?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"The one you asked just now," he said sternly. "Come on—out with it."

Grace drew a deep breath.

"I just wondered," she said. "I suppose you do or you would not have bothered to come all this way for your answer."

"Why did you just wonder?" he persisted. "I warn you—in another minute I'm going to shake you—hard."

She looked up at him.

"Naturally I wanted to know," she said, with a little undercurrent of laughter in her voice. "I mean—it would have been frighteningly awkward if I had said yes and then found that you had changed your mind."

He uttered an exclamation and drew her into his arms, his head bent so that his lips were close to her own.

Then, with a curious air of deliberation he bent and kissed her.

Grace's heart leapt and the spell woven around them carried her away out of the past and into the shining future.

"Darling," he whispered. "Oh, my darling! I scarcely dared hope that you would say yes. Does—does this mean that you love me—after all?"

She could only nod, for she could not trust herself to speak.

At length, after a long interval, she stirred in his arms, drawing a deep breath.

"Oh, Terry darling," she whispered. "I'm so happy!"

"Gosh, so am I," he said, with a sudden grin. Then he kissed her again. "When are we going to be married?"

"Oh, not for ages and ages," she said teasingly, and laughed again when his face fell. "We've got lots of things to settle first. You haven't forgotten what you said about women doctors, have you?"

"I spoke out of my turn," he admitted. "As far as I am concerned you can go on with your work, my sweet. I mean—you can always throw it up later if you want to or it becomes necessary." His eyes twinkled. "I've no right to interfere with what you want to do."

She smiled and put her hand in his.

"You needn't worry, dearest," she said. "I—I've thought about it a lot and I realise that you are right. I—no one can really serve two masters—and that is what I would be trying to do. I talked it over with daddy the night I left and he made a suggestion which I think is a very sensible one. He asked why I didn't go in for research if I felt keen enough."

"Yes," he said. "I suppose that would be the answer. But there's something else, isn't there? From my point of view it's a dead letter, but you told me——"

"I know," she interrupted him, her sweet face serious. "But something happened that made me realise I had been crying for the moon, Terry. I know now that Alastair never loved me. He never did. He might have thought so for a time, perhaps, but it was no more than that. And—I think I stopped loving him one morning last week, in the waiting-room at Rexcombe Hospital."

He stared at her, puzzled. "In the waiting-room at—I don't get it. What on earth are you talking about?"

So Grace told him about the accident and finding Alastair in the waiting-room.

"I think I realised then, that I had only been in love with love," she said. "I can't explain it—it was just seeing him standing there. I realised as well that it was his wife he loved—he said that if she had died he would have been her murderer. And so," she added quietly, "I was set free."

He caught her shoulders.

"Grace! Is that true?" he demanded. Fearlessly she met his eyes.

"Yes, Terry, quite true," she said. She put up her hands and clasped his wrists. "Don't you understand? I—I knew, then, that I was in love—with someone else."

He gathered her into his arms once more.

"And is that somebody a man who loves you with all he has of mind and spirit?"

"Yes," she murmured. "I—I think he does." She turned her head aside for a moment, as if to hide the sudden trembling of her lips. Then she tossed it back and smiled up at him, her eyes like stars. "Oh, Terry darling, hold me tight," she begged. "I—I have learned the difference between loving and just being in love! I think I knew it when you said that half a loaf was better than no bread—I knew, then, that I couldn't cheat you. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I backed a hunch that night and again when I asked your father for your address. And it's come off."

"And it doesn't make any difference about Alastair?"

"How could it?" he asked calmly. "After all nothing can touch us now. Now that we know we belong to one another—for this life and the next!"

She was silent for a moment.

"We must ask Constable Pemberton to the wedding. After all, it was he who sent you to me. Won't he be thrilled?"

"He may be thrilled, but according to you he won't be surprised," Terence chuckled. "As a matter of fact he gave me a knowing look the last time I saw him, bless his big feet! I never thought, when I left my quarters that day that I was going to run into Cupid in the guise of a village policeman. Oh, Grace, my darling, I wonder if you know what you saved me from?"

"I didn't save you," she said softly. "You saved yourself. There are many forms of courage, my dearest—and it took all of yours to make you go back." She looked anxiously at him. "You—you will take care of yourself—for my sake, won't you?"

With his answer Grace knew that she had come into her own and that all that had gone before was but a preparation for it. They stood together for a few minutes wrapped in a magical silence and it was as if earth and sky were blended to make a shimmering wonder of their divine love.

Then, still without speaking, they turned and walked hand in hand back to the cove back to where light and warmth awaited them, and a new life—together.

THE END

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## WHEN HEARTS FORGIVE

By Michael Haven

She held out the ticket to be clipped and passed through, joining a number of people on the platform, all evidently waiting for the same train.

Near her stood a pale-looking girl wearing a rather shabby green coat and clasping a cheap handbag. She was pretty in a pathetic way, and wore rather a lot of lipstick. But it was the expression in her eyes that chiefly caught Anne's attention; it was as if she were bathed in some kind of inner radiance that was not of this world.

Anne turned away, feeling slightly ashamed, as if she had been caught spying.

All the same she almost wished she had the courage to go up to the girl and ask for whom she was waiting, though she knew, deep down, that her real reason was because she wanted to talk to someone who could be trusted to understand.

For, she suspected, they were probably two of a kind. Quite a number of Army National Service men were coming in on this particular train, after nearly two years abroad, and amongst them was Bill, her husband!

Anne had seen a thin gold wedding ring on the other girl's hand and guessed that she, too, was waiting for the man she loved. For what else could account for that look on her face?

And as she waited, the years seemed to roll back and it was once more the time when Anne had crossed half England to spend Bill's last forty-eight hours leave with him.

Never, as long as she lived, would Anne forget that terrible cross-country journey, nearly two years ago, the long-drawn out, heartbreaking delays at the various

HOMECOMING.

ANNE HASSALL wriggled her way through the crowd around the ticket barrier and asked the inspector if this was the platform where the next train from Liverpool would come in. He looked up at the station clock and nodded.

"Due any time now, miss. Running about four minutes late," he said.

"Thank you." Ann turned and hesitated.

Bill had suggested waiting for him outside the barrier as there was sure to be a crowd. But on impulse she took a penny out of her purse and inserted it in the machine which issued platform tickets. One of the few things that had not risen in price, she thought.

junctions where she had to catch other trains.

Finally the last train had pulled into the station where Bill had been waiting for her, his face drawn and white.

She had clung to him, sobbing wearily.

"I thought I'd never get here, dearest. I missed the connection at Thornhill Junction and they said I wouldn't get the train at Barton. But I did. Oh, Bill darling, it's been such ages . . ."

"Darling!" he had said gently, smiling down at her tenderly. "Come along. Is this your only luggage?" He had picked up her small case. "Not that you'd want any more. Forty-eight hours! Can they spare it," he had added bitterly.

She had followed him out of the station into the darkness as meekly as a child, the calm efficiency which had made her Mr. Jerome's private secretary seeming to have completely deserted her.

All she could think of, all that mattered, was that she was with Bill and that he had taken charge of the situation. It had been an effort to concentrate upon what he was saying—something about Lammerton not being much of a place—only one hotel and nothing very special at that—

"It doesn't matter, darling, so long as we can be together," she had said.

She had thought she was famished, for she had not eaten for the last six hours, yet she had scarcely touched the little meal that had been placed before her. The dingy wall paper of the hotel dining room had been a depressing shade of brown, the waiter old and grumpy, as if life was too much for him.

She had felt better when they were out in the fresh air again.

"My draft was not due to leave for another three weeks at least, Anne," Bill had explained, as they had walked round the little North Country town.

"But evidently something happened to change their plans and we were all suddenly warned to be ready for embarkation in forty-eight hours. I knew I hadn't a hope of getting to London and back in time to do more than turn round, that's why I telephoned."

"It was best for me to come to you, dearest," she had said, slipping her arm through his and smiling wistfully into the darkness. "I rang Mr. Jerome straight away and he fetched me in his car at seven this morning and drove me to King's Cross."

By then they had entered a small park which, like everything else in the place, had seemed damp and gloomy. But they had not cared about their surroundings.

Under some trees Bill had put his hand on her shoulders, a curious expression in his blue-grey eyes.

"You're very lovely, Anne darling," he had said softly. "And I've got to go out of your life for nearly two years! Two years is a long time and I couldn't blame you if you got tired of waiting! But you won't, will you, darling?"

She had looked up at him in the dim light of a park lamp, her own eyes wide and serious.

"Of course not, sweetheart," she had said, her voice threatening to break. "It's going to be as hard for me as it is for you. But you will never be out of my thoughts, I'll try and wait patiently for you to come back, dearest."

Now she caught her breath at the memory. It seemed that Bill had been wiser than she. He had seemed to sense what loneliness was going to mean to a girl whose married life had consisted of only ten days honeymooning at a South Coast resort, and then forty-eight hours in a dreary, north-country town while he waited for the ship to get ready to sail.

During the time he had been away her love for Bill had burned as brightly as ever, and she had lived for his letters, often no more than a pencilled scrawl written hurriedly from some outpost in the humid Malayan jungle.

True, there had been times when her loneliness, feeding upon itself, had been responsible for some vague, tantalising attraction of which she herself had scarcely been aware. Yet in each case it had been born of something—a turn of the head, a remembered gesture—that had brought Bill poignantly to mind.

But that was not so in the case of Lance Bretton!

Even now, waiting on the long arrival platform for her husband's train, Anne could not decide what it was that had first attracted her to Lance.

Suave, well-mannered and worldly, a good ten years older, he had a way with him that few girls could resist.

He had been a fighter pilot in the latter stages of the war and was now a prominent member of a local flying club.

Anne had first met him when she had been spending a week-end with Margaret Rawlinson, a married friend. She had gone with Margaret and Tom Rawlinson, to a dance and social given by the flying club. That had been about a year after Bill had gone abroad.

When Lance discovered that she had never flown, he had offered to take her up in his fast, two-seater monoplane, and that first trip had been a prelude to many others.

Afterwards he had got into the habit of telephoning her at her office and not until it was almost too late had Anne realised the dangerous direction in which she had been drifting.

Not that it mattered any more now, she told herself, for she had ended the affair abruptly when she had discovered the kind of man he really was.

All the same there were times when the shadowy figure and pleading voice of Lance Bretton dominated her thoughts, mocking her efforts to forget.

With a shudder she recalled the last time she had met him at the flying club.

They had taken off for what he had called "a flip round" but after flying for nearly an hour, he had put the nose of the little aircraft down and had landed on a wide stretch of grassy parkland fronting a wide estuary, with the red roof of a bungalow showing through the trees.

Not even when he had told her that he owned the bungalow had she realised his intentions. It had merely seemed in keeping with his character.

But when, over a rink, he had explained that they were not likely to be disturbed, only then had she discovered the true Lance Bretton beneath that polished exterior, learned the depths to which he was prepared to sink to satisfy his egotism.

Just then there was a stir amongst the people around her on the platform and she looked towards the far end and saw a train coming in.

Quelling a disposition to tremble, she braced herself for the moment that would mean that life had begun again for her and Bill.

Slowly, majestically, the huge engine hissed passed her the driver leaning out of the cab window.

Then doors began opening and there was a sudden rush in which she was carried forward a few steps.

Next moment she saw Bill getting out a few carriages farther along and in a flash all else was wiped from her mind save the miracle of his presence a few yards away.

Then she was in his arms, tears streaming down her cheeks, her face pressed close

against the rough material of his battle-dress.

"Anne! Oh, Anne darling!"

"Bill! At last! Oh, darling."

It was silly, of course. They had so much to say to one another, yet all they could do was to smile sheepishly at one another and repeat the same things over and over again.

But at last Bill picked up his kitbag and took her arm.

"Let's get out of here," he said masterfully. "I want to find a place where I can look at you. Can we get a taxi?"

"Yes," she murmured happily, walking with him to the barrier. "They aren't difficult to get nowadays."

"Good. And where are we going to?"

She laughed up at him.

"Ah, that's a surprise."

"H'm!" he said, in a tone of mock anxiety. "Not the Ritz-Carlton, by any chance?"

"Better than that, Bill," she said.

She laughed, for it seemed that the world had suddenly become filled with light and colour.

Yet she was quick to notice that there was something different about him, a hint of reserve she had never seen before.

For a moment, as they got into the taxi, she wondered if violence and terror had done something to him, so that his sense of values were no longer the same. Maybe it had robbed him of desire, leaving him preoccupied and impersonal, as it had with others. Yet, somehow, she couldn't quite believe that of Bill.

She gave an address to the taxi driver, and more as a cover for her thoughts than for anything else, opened her bag and took out her powder compact.

Bill sank back in his seat and looked appreciatively at her.

"You look good enough to eat, darling," he said, an adoring light in his eyes.

Anne's heart warmed. This was more like the old Bill who had wooed and won her two years ago.

"You look pretty good yourself, soldier," she murmured, with a teasing smile. "I imagined you would come back as thin as a rake and that I'd have to work overtime fattening you up."

He smiled and took her hand.

"Malaya's not a bad country," he said reflectively. "In fact, I wouldn't mind settling out there. There are plenty of opportunities for people with enterprise—not like this country! One can live in quite a different way, of course. I think you'd like it, you know, darling."

Anne glanced at him quickly. Before he had been called up Bill had been a junior car salesman, working for a firm of distributors and exporters with big offices and showrooms in the West End of London.

His job had been kept open for him, she knew, so that they had no anxiety on that account, so to hear him talking of settling in a distant part of the world in a country that was torn by a terrorist's war, was rather surprising.

"I thought you loved England, Bill," she said.

"So I do. But there are other places," he said.

He left it at that for the moment, gazing out of the window at the familiar sight of London streets, the pavements still wet from a recent shower.

On the way from Liverpool he had thought of nothing but the coming reunion with Anne, visualising every remembered line of her features, her eager, sensitive face, the little half-smile which hovered continuously about her vivid mouth.

He had felt curiously shy and awkward when he had stepped out on the platform, but it was a shyness born of the loneliness

of the past two years rather than any form of embarrassment. Now all that mattered was that they were together again, the long period of separation over, the future theirs to make or to mar as they willed.

Anne said quietly:

"How long have you got, Bill?"

"Three weeks," he replied, half absently. "I won't have to go back, though. The Accounts people will send my pay and gratuity and so long as I return my kit before the end of the time, everything will be in order. Gosh," he laughed, "it's going to feel odd getting back into civvies again."

She glanced at him wonderingly.

"I believe you're half sorry you are leaving the army," she said.

"In a way, I am," he admitted, staring in front of him, his eyes narrowed as if he were indulging in some secret vision. "If it weren't for you I might have volunteered to stay on. There's something about army life—oh, I can't explain. Going back to selling cars is going to be a bit of a let down, that's all. I mean, it's going to seem rather tame."

Anne did not say anything. She felt she needed time. This was a new aspect and one she had not been prepared to cope with.

Besides all that Bill had seen of sorrow and death; besides the excitement of pitting his wits against a ruthless enemy, the humdrum existence of selling cars would seem rather tame.

The taxi stopped outside a block of buildings evidently new. There was a forecourt, with an imposing entrance, and rows of windows, every third one having a small balcony.

Bill looked up, a whimsical expression of wonder in his eyes, and rubbed his chin. He had a good chin, strong and firm.

"This, I presume, is where you live, Anne darling?" he enquired humorously, when he had paid the taxi driver. "A bit different from that room in a hostel for young ladies, isn't it?"

"It's where we live, Bill," she corrected him. "Of rather, where we are going to live."

The sharpness of her tone betrayed a touch of nervous irritability that was new to him.

He glanced at her, one eyebrow cocked, then picked up his kitbag.

"All right, my darling," he said. "Lead on!"

Entering the flat on the second floor, he glanced about uncertainly. He couldn't tell her that he felt he had no right there, that his heavy army boots and battledress were out of place amongst the dainty furniture.

Anne pulled off her hat and flung it, with her bag and gloves, on to a settee, running her fingers through her hair to loosen it.

"I wrote and told you that when Aunt Kate died she left me some money," she explained carefully. "These flats were being built then, so I put down my name for one of them and paid a year's rent in advance. I used the rest of the legacy to buy the furniture. Do you like it, Bill?"

He nodded, feeling that it was useless to try to explain just how he *did* feel.

He had often visualised his homecoming, the first reunion moments, but his dreams had not encompassed anything quite like this.

Anne seemed so nervous, so anxious to please, that he just hadn't the heart to tell her that he would have preferred to provide their home himself, that he had planned for something quite different.

He followed her into the bedroom, with

its chintz curtains, twin beds and bedside lamp.

"My word." His glance took in the polished walnut bed-heads, his feet sinking into the deep pile of the carpet and he looked down at his army boots. "I guess the sooner I get these heavy things off, the better. I mean to say, it would be a pity to spoil the carpet."

"Oh, don't be silly, Bill." Again there was that trace of irritability in Anne's voice and he noticed it.

"Sorry, old thing," he muttered. "But you must admit all this is rather a change from what I've been used to in Malaya."

"Aren't you pleased?"

"Of course I'm pleased, Anne. But it's going to take a bit of getting used to, that's all."

She opened the door of the wardrobe.

"Your things are in here," she said. "I had your suits sent to the dry cleaners. Your shirts and socks are in the top drawer of the tallboy."

"Everything neat and in order. Thank you, my dear."

Suddenly he walked to the window and stood looking out.

"Quite a place, isn't it? Convenient to the Underground as well, I see." He turned and nodded towards another door. "What's through there?"

"The bathroom, a kitchenette and a small guest room," replied Anne, flushing at his tone.

"Guest room?" he said frowningly.

Her colour deepened.

"I thought I might as well do the thing properly while I was about it," she said defensively. "You never know—we might want to have someone to stay with us now and then."

"Oh, quite," he said dryly. He drew a deep breath. "Speaking of kitchenettes—"

"I'll put the kettle on, Bill," she said hurriedly. "You'd like tea, of course. I bought some cakes on my way back from the office to-day. Then we can talk." She hesitated. "Would you like to change first?"

He shrugged.

"Yes, I might as well." He nodded towards his kitbag. "I've got a demob suit in there but it's sure to be creased. I'll use one of the others in the wardrobe—if they still fit."

Anne laughed, but anyone discerning enough to notice would have seen that the laughter did not reach her eyes.

She looked at her young husband, seeking for something that seemed no longer to exist, but he was busy with his kitbag.

All at once they were no longer the two lovers who had held hands on a deserted park bench in a north country town, with the shadow of parting hanging over them. They were like strangers, two entirely different people with secret thoughts and desires they must keep from each other.

"Hurry up and change, Bill," she forced herself to enthuse. "Then we can tell each other all our news."

And with that she went out, closing the kitchen door behind her.

Bill stood where she had left him, staring resentfully at his bulging kitbag. Then, with a heavy sigh he bent once more and fumbled with the knots.

"THIS," said Bill a little later, as he passed his cup over, "is the first decent cup of tea I've had for two years, Anne. You would take first prize as a tea-maker anywhere."

"How prosaic that sounds," she winced, picking up the milk jug.

"Sorry," he said. "Should I have asked for nectar?"

She glanced covertly at him and then retreated behind the act of refilling his cup.

His mood was different since he had arrived at the flat. He looked different, too. He had shaved, his sun-tanned skin had a freshly scrubbed look, and he was smart in a blue suit with a faint white stripe in it.

Watching, as he sipped his tea, it seemed to Anne that their love had become something apart, something they had vainly kept alive, like some nebulous and half-forgotten dream.

Except for that one passionate embrace at the station Bill had made no attempt to kiss her or take her in his arms.

Seated there in the spring dusk, aware of his nearness in a peculiarly disturbing way, she wondered, rather desperately, if they had not been cunningly betrayed, bewitched by an emotion that had no reality except in the imagination of their hearts.

He broke a long silence:

"Oh, I've got you a present, Anne. It's nothing much but—well—it seemed to be yours as soon as I saw it."

He rose and went into the bedroom, returning a moment later with a flat, leatherette case which he handed to her.

Anne took it and pressed the catch, uttering a little cry of surprised delight when she saw a jade pendant lying on a velvet bed.

"Oh Bill!" she breathed, taking it up by its thin gold chain. "How beautiful." She jumped up and kissed him impulsively, then sat down again and held the pendant to her throat. "Thank you ever so much, darling! You couldn't have brought me anything better. It's just what I've always wanted."

"Good," he said a little awkwardly, lighting a cigarette. "There are a couple of silk dress lengths in there as well, that I picked up in Singapore. Shall I put that on for you?"

"Please, Bill!"

At the touch of his fingers on her neck she trembled slightly, but he merely made sure the fastening was secure before going back to his chair.

Anne stood up and looked at herself in a gilt-framed mirror.

"It's perfect," she said softly. "I love it already!"

She turned, her face glowing.

"And I've got you a present, too, Bill. Nothing half so exciting, I'm afraid. But I didn't know what to get you—you've got a cigarette case and a watch and—well—it was frightfully difficult. In the end I thought you might like these." She handed him a flat package she had pulled from under the settee.

For a moment there was a little silence. Then he looked up from the two nylon shirts he had unwrapped.

"Nylon, eh?" he remarked. "These must have set you back quite a bit, my dearest!"

Anne laughed tremulously.

"There's method in my madness," she said, with an attempt at lightness. "They wear for ever and don't have to be ironed."

He raised his eyebrows in the whimsical way she knew.

"I see! So it's all part of a deep laid plot to evade your housewife duties! But I shall be scared to wear them—they're far too posh!"

"Don't be silly. Everyone wears them nowadays. Lance Bretton has half a dozen—"

"Who the heck is Lance Bretton?"

"Just someone I know," Anne answered, going red as she tried to cover up her slip. "I met him last year. I mentioned him in one of my letters, didn't I?" She shrugged.

"He's just a casual acquaintance."

"H'm. Do people usually discuss their wardrobes with casual acquaintances?" He

laid the shirts down and picked up his cigarette.

Anne began gathering up the tea things. "Don't be so early-Victorian, darling. Someone—I think it was Maureen Walgrave—was talking about nylon shirts at the club one day and Margaret Rawlinson said she had just bought Tom some and wondered if they were all they were cracked up to be. Lance said he had worn them for ages. Naturally, I was interested and—well—that's all there is to it."

"Of course," said Bill, in a non-committal tone of voice. "You mean the flying club at Loxbourne, I suppose. You go there quite a lot, don't you?"

"I used to," she evaded, without looking up. "Margaret and Tom are both members and it was something to do."

"Oh, quite," he said. Then with an abrupt change of subject, he added: "What are we doing to-night? You've got something laid on, I presume?"

Was there a slightly sarcastic tone in his voice? Anne wondered. Her heart gave a sudden jerk. Yes, something had happened to them, something queer and unpredictable. He had only been back a bare two hours and here they were actually like two polite strangers to each other.

For a moment she hesitated. Then—

"Nothing is laid on, of course, Bill. I want to do just what you want to do, naturally. Michael and Dolly did say that if you felt like it they would be glad to see you, but we can go some other time if you prefer it."

"No time like the present," he said, with a heartiness that she suspected was put on for her benefit. "I shall be glad to see old Michael again—and Dolly, too. How are they doing? Coining money as usual?"

Anne did not answer for a moment. Then she picked up the loaded tray.

"Michael isn't doing very well," she said quietly. "If it hadn't been for his share of Aunt Kate's legacy they would have had to sell their house. As it is, I don't know what is going to happen."

Bill stared. This was news to him. When he had left England Anne's brother had been building up a substantial practice as a veterinary surgeon and lived with Dolly, his wife, in a pleasant house in Streatham.

"Why, what's happened?" he enquired. "I thought he was—"

"I know," Anne frowned. "But Michael's illness last year left him with a patch on one lung and he can't do an awful lot of work. He has managed to keep the remnants of his practice together, but even that is too much for him. Dolly is terribly worried."

"You never told me in your letters," Bill said, genuinely concerned. "I knew Michael had been ill, of course—pneumonia wasn't it?—but I thought he had recovered."

"No, he asked me not to tell anyone," she said. "He didn't want it to get about that he wasn't as strong as he might be. You know how it is."

Her lips quivered and she turned away. Bill stared after her for a moment, then—

"I'm sorry, darling," he said, more gently now. "But there must be something we can do, surely? Obviously, your brother should not remain in London if his lungs are affected. Has he thought of going to some other climate—Rhodesia, for instance? It's pretty dry there, so I believe?"

"We've talked about it, but Michael feels he can't take the plunge," said Anne. "It would require a lot of capital to start all over again in a strange place, you see. I offered him my share of the legacy but he refused even to consider it. I think, if the truth were known, that he doesn't feel up to making a decision."

"I see. Well, the best thing I can think

of at the moment is to have a talk to Michael about it," said Bill, with determined cheerfulness. "After all, there are more ways of killing a cat than by choking it with cream!" It was an unfortunate remark, as he realised a moment later, but he turned it aside by adding: "What time do they expect us?"

"I told Dolly that if you felt like going we would be in time for supper," she said.

"Splendid," he replied, lighting another cigarette. He glanced at his watch. "That just gives me time to finish unpacking while you tidy up. Shall I switch off the electric fire? We won't need it until we come back."

"Please do, dear," she answered, and carrying the tray, went out into the kitchenette.

IN spite of the blow that fate had so cruelly dealt them, there was an air of quiet happiness about Dolly Lancaster's home that immediately made itself felt upon entering.

Michael was a slenderly built man with clever, aquiline features, about five years older than Anne. His wife was short and plump, with a highly developed sense of fun.

She welcomed Bill with a loving kiss and a hug that nearly threw him off his balance.

"Bill!" she cried. "How lovely to see you again after all this time!" Then, as she noticed his attire, her face fell. "But why haven't you come in uniform? I wanted to feast my eyes on all your dangling medals!"

"The medals, I regret to say, like Flying Saucers, don't exist," Bill said, pulling a face. "Besides, I'm a mere civilian now."

"Medals or no medals, we're glad to see you, old chap," said Michael Lancaster, shaking hands warmly. He led the way into the cosily furnished sitting-room. "And how do you think Anne is looking?" he went on, getting out a bottle of sherry and some glasses. "Up to expectations?"

"What a question to ask!" cried Dolly, before Bill could reply. "It only calls for one reply, truthful or otherwise. But come along, Anne, and take off your things. Michael can look after Bill for a few minutes. We'll have supper presently and then we can settle down for a chat."

"By which Dolly means she wants you to entertain her with a lot of harrowing stories about the fighting in Malaya," laughed Michael.

When the two young wives had gone, Michael carefully poured out the sherry and put a glass in front of Bill.

"Good health," he said, lifting his own glass and drinking. "Glad to be back?" he added, replacing the glass on the table.

"Very, Michael," said Bill, with emphasis. "Not that the army's a bad show, taking it all round. I'm glad to have had the experience, though it's no job for a married man—unless he's a regular."

"I agree. Still, it's behind you now and you can start planning for the future. How did you like the flat?"

"It's quite a place," said Bill, his expression giving nothing away. "Naturally, I didn't expect anything so palatial. If I had thought about it at all I imagined that we would have a couple of rooms somewhere until such time as I could afford something better. Still, if it makes Anne happy, that's all that matters."

Michael gave him an enquiring glance but said nothing. Instead, he turned and fetched a box of cigarettes.

Bill took one, and when both cigarettes were going he exhaled and looked directly at his brother-in-law.

"Anne tells me that things aren't so hot with you, Michael. I'm sorry to hear that."

Michael shrugged.

"It's just one of those things, old chaps," he said. "I had pneumonia—I got a thorough drenching one winter night going out to a case—and it's left me with a patch on one lung. As long as I don't overdo things it will be all right, though."

"But will it? In a place like England, I mean?"

"That's on the lap of the gods," Michael shrugged. He carefully knocked the ash off his cigarette. "It's tough on Dolly, of course."

Bill thought he understood the situation perfectly.

Anne and her brother were orphans, having been brought up in the country by a widowed aunt—Aunt Kate who had left them each a legacy.

Michael had always wanted to be a doctor, but funds would not run to it so he had become a veterinary surgeon instead. But for that, Bill and Anne might never have met.

Bill had been in London on his first forty-eight hour leave from the Army and had taken the opportunity of calling on friends who had lived in Streatham.

On his way to the bus stop he had seen a small terrier run over by a car and had been the first to reach the pathetic little bundle in the roadway.

Someone had said that there was a vet in the next street and Bill had carried the shivering animal there and had waited while Michael had set the broken foreleg.

He had been on the point of going when Anne and Dolly had come in from a shopping expedition.

Michael had explained what had happened, and Dolly had asked Bill to stay to tea.

Because he and Anne were both going the same way, Bill had seen her back to the bachelor flat she shared with a girl who worked in the same office, and from that chance meeting had come others when he had got leave.

At each meeting they came to know each other a little better, to enjoy being in each other's company even more.

Bill had learned that she was the personal secretary to a man high up in the shipping world. Anne had learnt about Bill's frustrated college career and how his hopes of a university degree had been dashed to pieces by the sudden death of his father following a financial crisis in which he had lost everything.

After that, when he had heard he was going abroad, they had got married...

Michael's voice recalled him to the present.

"What are your plans, Bill?" he asked. "I take it your old job is still open if you want it?"

"Yes, it is," said Bill slowly, as if still deep in thought. "I wanted to leave myself free, though, so I haven't drawn half pay or anything like that. I'll go along and see them all on Monday and find out how the land lies, but I'm not at all sure I want to go back to cars. Besides, there's Anne."

"Yes, of course," said Michael.

"You see," Bill went on, painfully circumspect, "I have no intention of allowing my wife to keep on with her job. I mean to say, that's not my idea of marriage."

"Oh, do tell us what your idea of marriage is, Bill," cried Dolly, entering with Anne at that moment. "I'd simply adore to hear it! Men have such weird notions!"

Bill gave her a friendly grin.

"To my way of thinking," he said, "the Stone Age men who laid their brides out with a club had the right ideas! As I see it the trouble with the world to-day is that women have far too much to say in the running of things! They ought to stay in the home a bit more."

BACK at the flat, Anne took the latch-key out of her bag and inserted it in the lock. Bill, his hands in his pockets, watched her, then pushed the door open for her to pass through.

He said nothing, however, but his expression must have given him away, for when she took off her coat in the lounge and flung it across the back of the settee, Anne looked anxiously at him.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked, a troubled look in her eyes. "Have I done anything wrong?"

"No!" He lit a cigarette. "But I was just wondering what would happen if I came home and you weren't here to let me in. Do I get hold of the caretaker or something?"

Anne flushed crimson.

"Oh, Bill, I'm sorry," she murmured contritely. "That was thoughtless of me. The spare keys are in the sideboard drawer—I intended to give you one before we went out, but I forgot." She went to the drawer and opened it, returning with a Yale key.

"Thanks." He took it, tossed it up in the air, and catching it again slipped it into his pocket. "There's something else you've forgotten, my dear," he added quietly. "You haven't told me yet what rent we are paying for this place, or the rates."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't think—I mean—we have had so much else to talk about." She hesitated a moment, then added slowly: "It—it's two hundred a year, including rates."

"What! Nearly four pounds a week!" He frowned. "It's quite enough. A pal of mine in the regiment got a place through a building society and the mortgage instalments were far less than that. A bungalow somewhere on the south coast I think it was. Three bedrooms, lounge, kitchen and bathroom as well as a garden. He didn't have to put down as a deposit much more than you paid for the first year's rent for this place."

"Yes, I know, darling," Anne said. "But who wants to live in a bungalow, miles out in the blue, when you can get a flat like this? Besides, I have to be near the office."

"Oh?" He carefully studied his fingernails. "You mean, you want to keep on with your job?"

"Of course," Bill, she cried, looking at him in a surprised fashion. "For the time being, at any rate. I can manage beautifully and the extra money will be useful."

"Think so?" He drew a deep breath and walked to the window, staring out. The irony of the situation was not lost to him and that fact alone saved him from emotional defeat. "Well, I suppose there are two sides to every question and we can talk about it some other time. At the moment I've other things on my mind. Look at those lights."

Anne came to stand at his side, her sweet face wistful.

"Yes, Bill, the lights of London," she murmured.

He laughed and laid a hand on one of hers.

"When I was in the jungle I used to dream about them and wondered if I would ever see them again. Now I can hardly believe I'm really here and that they're just out there, so near I feel I could touch them."

She lifted her face and he put his arm about her, kissing her lightly. There was a breathless pause and slowly Anne put her hands on his arms and leaned back a little, looking up at him.

Deep in her eyes was a question to which there could be only one answer. For a moment Bill stood smiling down at her.

and then she felt herself drawn into his embrace, felt the tenseness of his body against her own. Her eyes closed as his kisses fell first upon her lips and then her throat.

"Darling," she whispered, giving him kiss for kiss. "Oh, Bill darling, it's been such a long, long time . . ."

He drew in his breath and spoke softly, his lips close to her hair.

"It's been long for me, too, my sweet," he murmured. "But the waiting time is over now and this—is where we begin to live."

#### THE RIFT WIDENS.

THE radiogram at the far end of the club-room began playing another dance tune as Bill led Margaret Rawlinson out on to the floor. It was the usual Saturday night dance at the Loxbourne Flying Club and there was a good sprinkling of members and their guests in the restaurant.

Tom Rawlinson, an engineer at a nearby aeroplane construction company, moved his chair nearer to the table and took out his cigarette case.

"Would you like to dance or shall we just talk, Anne?" he enquired.

Anne laughed.

"Knowing you, Tom, I can answer that," she said, with a gleam of amusement in her eyes. "I don't suppose this place would ever see you if it weren't for Margaret!"

"Well, she's keen on dancing, bless her, and it's pretty dull here otherwise," Tom said indulgently.

A thick-set, florid man of thirty-six, with few social accomplishments, it had been a matter of surprise to his colleagues when lovely Margaret Lewis had married him.

But Anne knew that he worshipped his young wife and that Margaret was deeply in love with her clever husband. Anne also knew that the sharp eyes of love can generally discern qualities in a person that are hidden from the rest of the world.

She and Bill had come to Loxbourne in order to spend the week-end at the Rawlinson's lovely house on the river. The invitation was a long standing one, but this was the first time they had been able to manage it, despite the fact that Bill had been back home for nearly three months.

Tom and Margaret had dined with them in London on two separate occasions, when Tom had had to come up on business and Margaret had gone into raptures over their flat.

"I think it awfully clever of Anne to have done all this, don't you, Bill?" she had said, appealing to him, and she had rattled on without giving him time to answer. Just as well, perhaps, Anne had thought at the time.

For, where Bill was concerned, she was beginning to realise that in taking the flat and furnishing it out of her own money she had made a grave mistake.

Bill was proud and in doing what she had done, she had not made sufficient allowance for his pride.

He had said very little, but his very lack of enthusiasm had told her, in various little ways, that he resented being given no opportunity of planning and providing the home that was to be theirs together.

She remembered, with a sudden pricking of her eyelids, how he had insisted on repaying the money she had paid out for the lease and when she had expostulated, how he had said briefly that it was his responsibility to find the rent, not hers.

"How's Bill making out, Anne?" Tom Rawlinson's voice cut through her

thoughts. She blinked rapidly and forced a smile as she turned to answer.

"Oh, all right, thank you, Tom," she murmured. "He's been doing quite well, as a matter of fact. It isn't nearly so difficult to get deliveries now, so, of course, it is much easier to sell cars."

"I suppose so. It's rather remarkable, when you take everything into consideration, how soon the old country has got back to normal after the war," Tom said thoughtfully. "It isn't so long ago that rationing was abolished and yet there seems to be no shortage of goods. Of course, chaps like Bill may look at it differently—they probably think we're too complacent."

"Why like Bill especially?" Anne asked. "He was too young to be in the war."

"True, but he's seen service abroad and he's bound to have a different slant on things," Tom said. "He's seen how the other half of the world lives, so to speak."

Anne tapped the ash of her cigarette into a glass ashtray, her expression thoughtful.

She wondered if Tom, with his curiously penetrating insight, had guessed that everything was not as it should be between Bill and herself. Not that it mattered. Others had seen, so why not Tom?

For a long time now she had deluded herself into thinking that the pitiful attempts she had made to conceal the rift that was slowly but surely widening between her and Bill had succeeded. Now she knew that neither Michael nor Dolly had been deceived.

Leaning back in her seat, she glanced to where Bill was dancing with Margaret. They were laughing together at some joke or other, and anyone not knowing the truth would have said he hadn't a care in the world.

But it just showed how little one could judge by appearances!

Anne, who had believed that love could surmount all obstacles, overcome any difficulty, knew differently now.

If the trouble had been nothing but reaction on Bill's part, or if it had had its roots in nothing more than purely injured pride, then all might have been well. But there was something else, something that struck deep at the very foundations of their relationship, and she did not know what that something was!

"You know that you can count on Margaret or me to do anything we can to help—if you ever need help, Anne," said Tom, frowning into space and speaking with such deliberate casualness that she knew the words had been rehearsed. "I mean to say, we're friends and all that kind of thing."

She smiled gratefully at him, a slender, attractive figure in a blue evening frock, Bill's jade pendant at her shapely throat.

"That's very sweet of you, Tom, but we're getting along fine, thank you," she said bravely. "Bill's job is quite a good one—mine, too."

"Well, you never know," he remarked, looking towards the far end of the room as the dance came to an end. "Things crop up when you least expect them to and it's as well to know which way to turn. To be quite frank with you, I was wondering if Bill would be interested in changing his job?"

She looked up at him sharply.

"I don't know whether he would be or not, Tom. What had you in mind?"

"Nothing in particular, Anne," he said. "Only we can do with men like Bill in the aircraft industry and if he liked, I could put in a word for him. There might be a bigger future in it than selling motor-cars."

"I see," Anne nodded thoughtfully. "It's awfully good of you to think of it, Tom, and I am very grateful. But I'm sure Bill wouldn't even consider such a thing."

"Oh, and why not?" Tom looked surprised.

She made a little gesture, half a shrug.

"Bill would immediately suspect that you had tried to make a job for him and that would be sufficient grounds for turning it down," she said bluntly.

"Well, you know best, my dear girl. All the same, I think that husband of yours is worthy of something better than peddling motor cars, even if he is making good money at it at the moment. However, keep it in mind."

"I will, Tom," Anne murmured.

The others came up, Margaret glowing and Prattling happily to Bill about her latest craze—gliding.

"You ought to come out to the gliding club sometimes, Bill," she was saying. "You don't know what flying is until you've been up in a glider."

"Thanks," he said drily, with a grin at Tom. "But as it happens, I had all the gliding experience I ever want in Malaya, my dear girl. Didn't I ever write and say I was attached to the Glider Regiment?"

"Oh, you fraud," cried Margaret crest-fallen. "You've let me tell you all about gliding and you never said a word. I call that downright mean."

"I call it very chivalrous of him, my dear," said Tom, getting up and drawing back his wife's chair. "Incidentally, what about another drink, everybody?"

He signalled a waiter and gave an order. Bill took out his case and offered cigarettes all round. They were isolated in a little whirlpool of sound, the hubbub almost drowning the hum of a distant aircraft passing overhead.

"Twin-engined jet," said Tom professionally, more to himself than to anyone else. "I heard a twin-engined Mercury land on the runway a little while ago. I wonder whose it was?"

Anne had been listening to something that Bill was saying, so that she had noticed nothing at all. She did not even look up when someone approached their table and only did so when Lance Bretton's voice brought a wave of colour flooding to her cheeks.

"Oh, hullo, Lance," said Tom genially. He knew nothing of what had happened that night when Anne had allowed herself to be trapped into visiting Lance's week-end bungalow; Anne hadn't told anyone about the incident and Lance was not likely to do so. "Was that your Mercury I heard come in a short time ago?"

"It was," said Lance, smiling at Margaret and Anne. "I've been over to Dublin on business and flew back this evening. A nice flight, but dull." He unwound the white silk scarf at his throat and glanced enquiringly at Bill.

Tom waved an introductory hand.

"Meet Bill Hassall, Anne's husband," he said. "Bill, this is Lance Bretton."

"How do you do?" said Bill politely. He glanced from the other to Anne, then back again. "You and Anne know each other, I gather?"

"Lord, yes," said Lance, with an exaggerated sigh. "Actually, you owe me a debt of gratitude, my dear fellow. If it hadn't been for me Anne would have died of boredom during your—er—enforced absence. Isn't that so, my dear Anne?"

Anne gave him a level glance without speaking and there followed a moment of embarrassed silence.

Then she stubbed her cigarette hastily into an ashtray as the music started again, and rising to her feet, turned to Bill.

"Let's dance this one, dear," she said. "It's my favourite tango."

He rose instantly, a grim little smile hovering about his tight mouth.

As he put his arm around her and they started to dance, he said:

"Well, it's nice to know you weren't bored while I was away."

THE evening was spoilt as far as Anne was concerned, but worse was to follow. She knew that Bill was annoyed by the way Lance had spoken. At the time she had flushed at the tone of the latter's voice, which had implied that he could have said much more had he wished.

Possibly Bill was jealous. Some husbands flared up at the least hint of another's interest in their wives, however innocent the wife might be.

Perhaps Bill was one of them, though she would never have thought so. After all, she reasoned, if you loved someone, you trusted them.

The evening wore on. She danced twice more with Bill, and once again with Tom.

Lance, who disappeared to the bar from time to time, kept coming back to their table, but so far she had managed to avoid dancing with him.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was close on midnight and was glad. Very soon they would be free to go and then she could put things right with Bill.

Not that she was sure that she could. After all, if she started to tell him about Lance she would have to tell him everything. Bill was far too discerning for her to hope to hold anything back.

And it wasn't the kind of story that she wanted to tell him—not really. She had already had it out with herself and had decided that she had no right to destroy his peace of mind merely because she wished to unburden her own conscience.

Not that she had done anything to be ashamed of. True, she had allowed herself to drift along for a time, without thinking where the current was taking her, but she had seen the rocks before it was too late. Now—

"Last dance, everybody!" announced a voice.

It was a Paul Jones, and when the music stopped Anne found herself face to face with Lance Bretton.

Before she knew quite what had happened his arms went around her and the music started again.

"My word, but you're lovelier than ever, Anne darling," he whispered in her ear. "Marriage seems to agree with you! Bill's a lucky chap—I do hope he appreciates his good fortune."

"I suppose it amuses you to talk like that," she said coldly. "Frankly, I find it rather cheap."

He laughed mockingly.

"You know, Anne, I really believe that you imagine you are in love with that precious husband of yours. How touching!"

She flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"I don't imagine I'm in love with him—I am," she said, a note of defiance in her voice. "In any case, I don't wish to discuss the matter with you—or with anyone else. If I had known you were going to be here to-night I certainly would never have come."

He grinned at this admission of weakness, or what he took for weakness. In another moment the music would stop again and he had to be quick.

"Let it pass," he said. "The point is, when am I going to see you again, my dear girl?"

"Never, I hope," she said, in a hard little voice.

"Never! Oh, come, Anne darling," he said in a wheedling voice. "What about having supper with me some time? I could ring you at your office and—"

"Are you mad?" she said angrily.

"If you are thinking of your husband—

he needn't know," he observed slyly. "In any case—"

The music ended and she slipped from his arms.

She was breathing rather quickly when Bill claimed her, and there was a hunted look in her eyes.

Bill glanced curiously down at her but said nothing and a little later she went with Margaret to get their coats.

As she passed the bar on the way out she saw Lance having a drink. He smiled and waved, but she turned her head.

THEY drove back to the Rawlinson's house almost in silence.

Margaret yawned as she got into the car, announcing that she was "dead on her feet", whereupon Tom grinned unsympathetically and said it served her right.

To Anne, it was obvious that Bill was brooding over what had happened, so that she was glad to escape to the privacy of their bedroom.

Bill remained downstairs with Tom for a last drink and it was another ten minutes before he knocked and came in.

By that time Anne had taken off her dance frock and was seated at the dressing table in her slip, brushing her hair.

As he entered she turned and smiled.

"Hullo, darling," she began, then stopped, a little quiver of apprehension going through her.

Bill hadn't smiled back; instead his eyes were hot and angry looking. He wasted no time on preliminaries.

"So you hardly knew that bounder Bretton?" he observed sarcastically. "According to you he was just one of the club members—someone you met casually. Oh, no, you never went out with him."

Anne coloured crimson.

"I never said I didn't go out with him, Bill," she said shakily. "I—I met him about a year ago and—oh, Bill darling, please don't look at me like that! It isn't easy to explain—"

"I bet it isn't." He laughed bitterly. "Perhaps you'll tell me what your boy friend meant by the very peculiar remark he made when he came to our table? I may be a fool but I'm not blind. Or did you think I didn't see the way he looked at you?"

"Really Bill, I can't help it if Lance looked at me in a way you don't like," Anne replied defensively. "He's like that—he thinks that every girl he meets is willing to flirt with him. And please don't call him my boy friend, Bill."

"Don't try to fob me off," he said, almost brutally. "No man behaves as he did tonight without encouragement."

"You don't understand—"

"I most certainly don't," he cut in shortly. "But I'm beginning to see daylight, though. Gosh, I thought, when I met you, that I'd found the one girl a man could trust. How wrong I was!" He thrust out a hand and grasped her shoulder. "Now stop fencing and tell me the truth! What was Lance Bretton to you?"

"Nothing," she sobbed. "Nothing at all. I—Bill! Please—you're hurting me."

He dropped his hand and walked to the window, taking out a cigarette case.

When he had lit a cigarette he turned towards her.

"Listen, Anne," he said his voice under control. "I know Bretton's type. The world is full of skunks like him who think it's clever to steal another man's wife. They pose as cynical, blasé men of the world and the little nitwits they pick on fall for them like ninepins." He shrugged. "Actually I gave you credit for more intelligence, but it seems you're just like the rest of them."

A surge of anger went through Anne. Yet she could not wholly condemn him for saying this.

In the beginning she had let the opportunity of being completely frank pass, now it was impossible to tell him what had happened without giving him cause to think she had done so only to save her face. That is, if he even believed her.

Her head lowered, she struggled for words. Everything depended upon what she said next.

She loved Bill with an aching intensity that she had never thought possible. If she failed to convince him it would be the end of everything for both of them.

She lifted her head.

"When you say that you are not paying me much of a compliment, are you, Bill?" she asked slowly. "If you are going to start doubting me just because someone makes a stupid remark it doesn't say much for your trust in me, does it?"

He stared sombrely at her for a moment.

Then—

"Let's get this straight," he said sullenly. He pitched his barely smoked cigarette out of the window. "How often have you been out with this fellow Bretton?"

Anne then drew a quick breath.

"Not often, Bill, I used to come down here for week-ends with Tom and Margaret and generally we went to the club. Lance was often there—he has his own private 'plane—and he offered to take me up. I saw no harm in that as I've always wanted to fly."

"That all?"

"Yes, Bill."

There was a tense little silence. Then he drew a deep breath and stepped towards her. Taking her by the shoulders he looked deep into her eyes as if searching for the truth that was hidden there.

Possibly what he saw reassured him, for when he spoke again his tone was almost gentle.

"Was he in love with you, Anne?"

She had always prided herself on speaking the truth, whatever happened. But to tell Bill the truth in the present circumstances would be to sharpen his suspicions.

"I don't think Lance is capable of being in love with anyone," she said.

"I see. Yet I've no doubt he tried—"

"Oh, Bill, please!" she broke in. "This isn't getting us anywhere, dearest. Either you trust me or you don't. If you don't—well—there's nothing I can say."

He said almost angrily:

"Of course I trust you. But I've got to be sure—well, that you love me as much as I love you, Anne."

"I do, Bill! More, sometimes, I think."

He put his hands to her cheeks and held her face between his palms.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "I didn't mean to put on a jealous-husband act. But seeing that blighter look at you as if he owned you made me see red. I ought to have known better than to doubt you, though. Can you forgive me?"

She nodded mutely, her eyes filling with tears. Oh, she could forgive him. That part was easy. For she loved him and mercifully, she understood. But she knew, deep down in her heart, that she would never forgive herself.

#### TESTING TIME.

WITH Bill's reaffirmed belief in her, it seemed to Anne that the barrier that had risen between them had been suddenly and completely knocked down. Within a few days they were brought closer together in mind and spirit than they had ever been before.

Another thing helped. Michael's cough was no better and Anne shared her sister-in-law's anxiety on his behalf.

Thus, when a college friend of his, who had emigrated to Rhodesia and had set up in practice there, wrote suggesting that Michael should join him as a partner, both girls, supported by Bill, urged him to accept.

There followed a hectic period during which the house in Streatham was put up for sale, and arrangements made to have the furniture sold by auction.

There were forms to be filled in, passports to be obtained, a legal deed of partnership to be drawn up, and a great deal more besides.

Anne helped Dolly with what the latter laughingly described as "the donkey work", but at last it was all done and the young couple moved to the small hotel where they were to stay until their boat sailed for South Africa.

"I'm not taking much," Dolly had confided to Anne, when they had stood in the half dismantled sitting room, long lists in their hands. "Geoff Soames says we can get furniture out there much more cheaply than here and that it won't pay us to bring anything bulky. I'm taking my lovely sideboard and Michael's desk, but apart from his instruments, that's about all."

"Why don't you sell the sideboard? You can buy yourself something more useful with the money," Anne had suggested.

"But that was your wedding present to us. I wouldn't part with it for worlds. Besides, it will be a link with home," Dolly had added wistfully.

Anne had given her a hug.

"You hate going, don't you?" she had said sympathetically.

Dolly had hesitated, a far-away look in her eyes.

"No, not really, I suppose," she had answered at last. "I hate leaving you and Bill—Rhodesia seems such a long way away. But if it's going to mean that Michael will get better I would go to Kamchatka, wherever that may be. I only wish—with a little sigh—"that I could feel that you and Bill were really happy!"

"Whatever makes you think we aren't?" had said Anne, with pardonable curiosity. "Bill and I are perfectly happy, thank you."

"Well, if you say so I suppose you must be, only sometimes I—well, I've wondered," Dolly had murmured.

Anne had laughed and turned the remark off with a half jesting reply, but she had returned to her flat with a troubled expression in her eyes.

She let herself in and found that Bill was out. He had telephoned earlier to say that he had a client to see after business hours and might be late.

When at last she heard his key in the front door Anne took off her pinafore and went to meet him, a little smile of welcome on her lips. He looked tired and dispirited, she noticed, with a rush of feeling, and the thoughts which she had been turning over in her mind became hardened into resolve.

But she waited until they had finished supper and she had washed up.

Then, taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, she looked up and said:

"It seems strange to think that in three weeks time Michael and Dolly will be on their ways to the other side of the world."

"Yes." Bill clasped his hands round one knee and leaned back in his chair. The radio programme to which they had been listening was nearing its end, and the muted strains of a symphony concert seemed merely a background to their thoughts. "I suppose we shall miss them horribly. Still, I'm glad for Michael's sake that they are going."

Anne nodded and laid down her knitting.

"You wish you were going, too, don't you, Bill?" she asked suddenly. Then, as

he turned to protest, she added smilingly, "It's all right, darling. I—I understand. It's been like that ever since you came home. If—if I didn't love you as much as I do I mightn't have noticed things, but—I have."

"Just what are you getting at, my dear girl?" he demanded a little testily.

He suddenly found himself out of his depth, for since that dramatic little quarrel in the bedroom at Tom Rawlinson's house, he had tried to become reconciled to a situation that he was finding it increasingly hard to bear.

Never, he knew, would he be able to forget the look of frightened perplexity he had seen in Anne's eyes when he had seized her by the shoulder that night and demanded the truth about Lance Bretton.

Now he was in the mood to be suspicious of everything, including his own motives for anything he did, and certainly hers.

Anne folded her hands in her lap.

"Do you remember saying that Malaya was a country where a man had opportunities, Bill?" she asked. "I suppose that is true of any country that isn't over populated, like Rhodesia and Australia. Well, I've been thinking a lot about it lately, and I've come to the conclusion that I've been rather selfish."

"You mean—you'd be prepared to leave England and settle abroad?" he asked.

"Yes, Bill," she said frankly. "There was a time when I wouldn't have thought about such a thing, now it's different. I know you feel unsettled and restless and I think I know why. So, if you want to go back to Malaya—or anywhere else—I'll go with you."

He gave a shrug.

"And is the fact that I appear to be restless your only reason for saying that you'll go with me to another country, Anne?" he enquired a little sarcastically. "If so, I consider it very generous of you, but the offer is declined—with thanks."

His sarcasm hurt and the rich colour flooded Anne's cheeks.

"If you are afraid that I would be making a sacrifice, there is no need to be, Bill," she said steadily. "Now that Michael and Dolly are leaving England there isn't anything to hold me here. After all,"—bravely—"what does it matter where we go so long as we are together?"

"That applies to England as well as to other countries," he replied, getting up and hunting round for his cigarettes. He found the packet on top of the bookcase and taking one, pulled out his lighter. "Please don't think I am ungrateful, but there are a lot of factors to be taken into consideration before one can decide on a matter of such importance.

"It's different where Michael is concerned," he went on. "He has a profession and is going to a ready-made job. Also, he has the necessary capital, thanks to the sale of his house. I,"—he continued bitterly—"have none of these. Neither capital nor qualifications. I don't know what things are like in Rhodesia, but it wouldn't surprise me to find that motor car salesmen—in fact, salesmen of any kind—are a drug on the market. And selling things is about all I'm good for."

"I see," she said showing her disappointment. "Then, you won't consider it, Bill?"

"It isn't a question of 'won't', my dear girl. It just isn't a practical proposition. We would have a job to scrape up the fares, apart from anything we might require to live on while I'm looking for another job."

"I've still got that money you gave me back for the rent of the flat," she told him. "We could sell the lease, too. And the furniture."

"In other words, make use of the money your aunt left you?" He laughed. "Thanks very much my dear but in matters like this I prefer to stand on my own feet. Call me old-fashioned, if you like, but I've still got some pride left."

Anne rose to her feet and stood looking at him, her eyes slowly filling with tears.

"I don't know what has happened to us," she said forlornly. "But sometimes you frighten me, Bill. I never thought such a thing could happen but now, sometimes, I began to wonder if you still love me."

"Of course I still love you," he said shortly.

"Do you, Bill?" She laughed drearily and turned away. "In that case, it ought to be possible to discuss something that affects us both without it nearly always ending like this. After all, if two people really do love one another, there ought never to be any reason for quarrelling."

He bit his lip, and had to admit that he hadn't been fair.

Somehow a false note had been struck the day he had entered the flat for the first time and the discord had persisted ever since.

Was it because he was burdened with memories of what he had seen and endured in Malaya? Had he allowed his judgment to be warped so that he could no longer see everyday things clearly?

In memory he went back to that monsoon night when he had waited, with other soldiers, in the tightly packed gliders for the take off—such a night as that when he had seen his best friend killed and another glider crash into the side of a mountain. That was WAR—

He crushed his cigarette out and crossed to where Anne was standing.

"I'm sorry, darling," he apologised, taking her in his arms. "I've behaved like a brute to you at times, I know, but the truth is, I'm worried stiff. I don't seem to be getting anywhere with things as they are and I suppose it's all been getting under my skin. Try to understand."

"Oh, but I do try, Bill dear," she said gravely. "That's why I made the suggestion." She looked pleadingly up at him. "Promise me that you'll at least think it over? And please, please don't throw that wretched little bit of money in my face. What I have is yours and you should know, by now, that I am proud to help!"

SINCE the night Lance Bretton had walked into the flying club Anne had heard nothing more of him and she wondered uneasily what he was waiting for. She was under no illusions about his character, and knew that she had not seen the last of him. Yet, she asked herself what could he do?

She had the answer to that question a few nights later, when she was alone in the flat. The telephone rang and picking it up she heard Lance Bretton's voice.

"Is that you, Anne?" he asked, in his tone that note of mockery she had come to dread. "How are you? I thought you might want cheering up. Feeling lonely?"

She caught her underlip between her teeth.

"I don't know what you mean," she said coldly. "But in any case it doesn't matter. I don't want to talk to you." She prepared to replace the receiver.

"I wouldn't ring off, if I were you," he said hastily. "You see, my sweet, I want to talk to you. In fact, we have quite a lot to discuss, one way and another. Shall I come to the flat or would you prefer to meet me somewhere else?"

"Oh, don't be absurd," she returned scornfully. "I have no intention of allowing you to come here or of meeting you any-

where. Please take that as final, Lance."

"That's what *you* think," he replied, with a chuckle. "But I hope to persuade you to change your mind. I know you are alone this evening. A little bird told me that your devoted husband is attending the annual dinner of the Motor Traders' Association at the Hotel Magnificent and will not be home until midnight. If you are sensible and don't waste unnecessary time I will guarantee to get you back to the flat before he arrives."

"The little bird being Margaret Rawlinson, I suppose?" she said guessing.

Again he chuckled.

"Correct," he said. "As it happened I was down at her place when you phoned Margaret yesterday and heard part of your conversation. They say that opportunity only knocks once, so I decided to get in touch with you."

"Well, you've wasted a call," Anne said cuttingly. "I have nothing to say to you, Lance, and there is nothing you can say to me that I would possibly want to hear."

"Don't be too sure of that my girl," he said confidently. "I don't have to be a thought reader to know that your husband is likely to take a pretty dim view of a certain letter you once wrote to me. And I'm equally sure you wouldn't like him to be given the opportunity of reading it?"

"A—a letter?" Anne sounded puzzled, as well she might. "What letter?"

"One you wrote to me on a certain occasion not so very long ago and forgot to date," he answered smoothly. "It referred to a week-end, if you remember?"

"Oh!" Enlightenment dawned on her. "You mean the note I wrote when you offered—"

"To run you down to Bognor to see a girl friend of yours who had been ill—exactly," he ended. "Fortunately—or unfortunately from your point of view—it merely recapitulates the arrangements we had made for meeting and adds, quite gratuitously, that you had to be back in time to get to work on Monday morning. Anyone reading it would be quite justified in thinking—well—what somebody will think."

Anne's eyes narrowed.

"What a cad you are, Lance," she said, breathing hard, "I didn't know that anyone—not even you—could stoop so low."

"Hard words, my dear Anne, but as the old saying goes, they break no bones." He laughed. "Well, what is it to be? Are you going to be a good little girl?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that I'll give you the letter in return for the pleasure of your company this delightful evening. That's fair enough, I think? I know just the place where we can get a nice little supper and afterwards—" He paused suggestively.

Anne thought swiftly, but her confused mind refused to make an orderly pattern.

Although she would not show it, his threat had thrown her into a panic. She remembered the note now—he had offered to drive her to Bognor to see one of the office staff who was recuperating there after an illness.

He had made the excuse that he was spending the week-end with friends in Hove, and it had been arranged that he was to call for her and drive her back to town early on Monday morning.

Actually, she hadn't gone—something had cropped up which prevented her and up to now she had completely forgotten the note she had written to him, naturally thinking he had destroyed it.

But would Bill believe that? Had she done as she had originally intended—spent the week-end with her girl friend at the hotel where she was staying—it would have been different. All she would have

to do in that case would be to produce the girl in question and get her to substantiate her story and, if Bill still refused to believe her, there would be the hotel register to prove the truth of what she was saying. But as it was, it boiled down to her bare word against the written evidence of the note in Lance Bretton's possession.

With a swift intake of breath she made up her mind.

"Where are you speaking from?" she asked coldly.

"Not far away," he answered. "I can be at your flat in under ten minutes."

"Very well, then, I'll meet you downstairs," she said, and without giving him time to say anything more, put down the receiver.

Trembling all over she went into the bedroom and dabbed powder on her cheeks. Then she put on a light coat and finally went to Bill's tallboy where she took something out and put it in her handbag.

Lance Bretton's sports car glided to a stop at the kerb as she emerged from the block.

He leaned over and opened the door for her to get in.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, as they started off.

"To a place I know just off the Great West Road," he answered. "It has the merits of being reasonably close to town and yet discreet. Don't worry, it is quite respectable," he added with a grin.

Anne stared resolutely before her through the windscreens.

"I don't know what satisfaction you get out of behaving like a stage villain," she said contemptuously. "Why can't you find some other girl to amuse yourself with instead of pestering me like this? There are plenty about, goodness knows."

"Because I don't happen to want any other girl, my dear Anne," he replied blandly. "I want you."

She gave him a withering stare.

"It doesn't matter to you if you smash my life, I suppose? Or does the prospect add to your pleasure?"

"Now you are being a foolish little girl," he said. "Who said anything about smashing your life? What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve about, you know. So why dramatise a perfectly ordinary situation? This kind of thing goes on every night somewhere in London. Someone has to look after the lonely wives."

"It must be nice to have your kind of mind," she said biting. "It keeps you above such petty considerations as love and honour. You don't even know what those things mean, do you?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." His bland assurance was infuriating. "I have had my moments, you know. As a matter of fact this is one of them."

She made no reply to that; might as well try to argue moral considerations with a man-eating tiger, she thought bitterly.

She had known what she was letting herself in for when she had made up her mind to come, but she was gambling upon her ability to look after herself. Nothing worth while could be gained without an effort and in allowing herself to be trapped into going out with him, she had taken what strategists called a calculated risk. Well, if she could get that letter from him, it would be worth it. But if she didn't—

They drove for some miles along the Great West Road and then Lance turned off, following a secondary road which the distant gleam of water told Anne led to the River Thames. Through the trees she could see a row of houseboats moored along the opposite bank and, to the right, a bridge.

He stopped the car and switched off the headlamps, leaving the side-lights burning.

Getting out, he opened the door for her. "But I thought you said—" she began, but checked the protest she was about to make. It didn't matter. Whatever she said couldn't make any difference.

"I said the place I was bringing you to was just off the Great West Road and so it is," he said, closing the car door with a muffled bang. "This is it. You didn't know that I had one of these, amongst other things, did you?"

He pointed to a large, roomy looking houseboat moored close to the bank, with a gangplank leading up to it at one end. There was a light burning at the end of the gangplank and a striped awning could be seen stretched on metal frames over the flat roof.

"I bought it a few months ago," he went on casually. "I find it more comfortable and a great deal more private than a flat in town. As you have seen, it doesn't take long to get here by car, so what could be better?"

She made no reply. She was thinking that he had planned it all very carefully. There were no other houseboats near, except those moored on the opposite side of the river, and none showing lights. A little shiver passed through her.

"You're cold," he said. "That's being close to the river. One gets quite a chilly little breeze blowing off the water at times. Very pleasant in the summer but this is nearly autumn. You'll find it much warmer inside."

She followed him up the gangplank and into the saloon. It was furnished in good taste, with a thick carpet on the boards and a radiogram in one corner. There was an anthracite stove glowing at one end, so that the whole place was delightfully warm.

"Make yourself comfortable while I mix a drink," Lance invited, waving his hand to where a wide divan was heaped with cushions against one side of the room. He grinned. "I hope you like my little *pied-a-terre*. I've taken a great deal of pains with it. A woman from the village comes in each day to do the chores and fill the stove, but I usually dine in town. Breakfast isn't very much of a problem and I generally keep a stock of things I can draw upon if I want something in the way of supper. All quite self-contained, in fact."

Anne said nothing, but remained where she had stopped, in the centre of the floor, her hands in the pockets of her coat. He was talking for effect, she knew, and her contempt increased accordingly.

Presently he returned from the cocktail cabinet with the glasses in his hand.

"Here you are, my dear," he said, handing her one. He raised his own. "Happy days!"

Anne looked at him for a moment, then quite coolly and deliberately she flung the contents of her glass into his face.

He staggered back, momentarily blinded, a hand going to his eyes.

"Why—you little vixen!" he exclaimed, his glass falling from his fingers to roll noiselessly across the carpet.

Wiping the liquid from his face he started forward, his features convulsed with anger.

Then he stopped short, an expression of stark incredulity crossing his features.

Anne stood before him with an automatic pistol pointed directly at him!

Outwardly, she was pale but resolute, and only the swift rise and fall of her breast betrayed the hammering of her heart.

"Stay where you are—this is loaded," she said, in a voice she strove to keep steady. "You didn't think I was just going to walk tamely into the trap you had so carefully prepared, did you?"

"Don't be such a little fool, Anne," he said stepping back a pace. "Those things go off at a touch and—"

"I know," she said. "Bill showed me how to use it when he brought it back from Malaya. I've fired it once or twice in Richmond Park."

"I see," he remarked, through clenched teeth. "All the same, I don't quite understand what you hope to gain by all this, my dear girl. It's stalemate, if you like, but it doesn't get you any farther."

"I want my letter," she said coldly.

He began to laugh.

"Now, isn't that amusing?" he said a little more sure of himself. "All I have to do is to produce your letter and then drive you back to town. Simple, isn't it?"

"Simple or not, I want my letter," she reiterated, with some of the unreasoning obstinacy of a child. "You needn't worry about driving me back. I can find my own way."

"And what if I refuse?"

Anne bit her lip. It was as he had said—stalemate. She had taken the weapon from Bill's talboy more as a means of protecting herself, if it should become necessary, than for any other reason.

When she had flung the contents of her glass into his face she had done so without thinking, responding solely to the promptings of an impulse that had become too strong for her. Now, it seemed, she was in no better position than at the beginning.

She opened her lips to speak, to plead with him, but it was too late.

He sprang forward, knocked aside her arm and gripped her wrist before she could realise what was happening.

Powerless in his grip, she uttered a little sobbing moan as he forced her down on the divan, his distorted features seeming to swim in a red mist before her eyes.

"Lance—please—oh, let me go!"

She hadn't known that she cried out. Whether he heard or not she would never know. Someone in the place was sobbing brokenly and with a shock she realised she was hearing the echo of her own voice.

In the end he flung her from him and lurched towards the cocktail cabinet, where he poured himself out a stiff drink.

"You asked for that and you got it," he said venomously, as he finished the drink. "Now, perhaps, you'll listen to reason—"

He had given her a chance and she took it blindly. Her blouse torn, her hair a disordered tangle of curls, she darted towards the door, her bag and gloves forgotten.

Lance Bretton dropped his glass and ran after her but she was halfway down the gangplank before he reached the sun deck.

"Anne! You little fool. Come back!" he called, racing after her.

But fear lent her wings and she ran as she had never run in her life, filled with only one thought—escape!

His parked car loomed up in front of her, the sidelights still burning. It faced upstream, towards the road which ran alongside the towpath.

Anne flung open the door and almost threw herself into the driving seat, switching on the ignition and starter. The engine came to life and it was the work of a moment to de-clutch and engage bottom gear.

As she let the clutch in with a jerk and rammed her foot down on the accelerator, Lance seized the handle of the door.

"Anne—you fool—"

The rest was drowned by the roar of the engine as the car leapt forward.

Anne had a momentary impression of his face, white and distorted, and then it was gone, his baffled shout seeming to go on and on in her brain.

## OUT OF THE SHADOWS.

ONE evening, a month later, Ann stopped in the street and looked up at the flat windows high up in the building on the other side.

It had been a tiring day at the office, and she felt more than usually depressed. Winter seemed to have come early, too; a thin drizzle of sleet had been falling all afternoon, making everything damp and cold.

She stood there for quite five minutes trying to summon up courage to cross the road and enter the building.

Each day it was the same, each day a little worse than the one before.

She would have given up the lease and closed the flat, as Tom Rawlinson had advised her to do, but for one thing—the faint hope that Bill would relent and come back!

If he did, her tired brain reasoned, he would expect to find her there, so she must wait, expectant, starting up at every footfall in the corridor outside the door, vacant chair beside the fireplace mocking her with the futility of existence.

Yet, for a time at least, the flat had been what she had hoped and dreamed it would be. But for so short a time. She hadn't reckoned with the fierce pride of a man who was humiliated by what he chose to regard as her bounty, or the fierce, corroding jealousy which could undermine his faith in her. Well, she knew now, and if Fate gave her another chance, she would not make the same mistakes as she had made in the beginning.

Another chance! What a hope?

With a sigh she put her key in the door and let herself in. The place felt cold and she switched on the lights and the electric fire.

They had talked once of having a heater put in, but they had left it until such time as it was necessary. Meanwhile, the shadow of Lance Bretton had fallen across their lives and now Bill had left her—for ever!

Anne put a kettle on the gas-ring and took off her outdoor things. Why to-night more than any other night she could not have said, but her memories had never seemed more vivid, the past more closely linked with the present.

A month ago she had abandoned Lance's car not far from the roundabout near the Chiswick bus terminus. There had been a bus just leaving and she had run to catch it.

Only when she had looked up to find the conductor standing by her seat had she realised that she hadn't any money with her—that she had left her handbag at the houseboat.

"How far do you want to go?" he had asked, when she had stammered some excuse.

She had told him a stop nearest to her flat and he had given her a ticket.

"I'll have to take your name and address, miss," he had said.

She had given it to him, uneasily aware of the curious stares of the other passengers.

It was not until she had prevailed upon the caretaker to open her flat with the master key and seen herself in her mirror, that she had realised how her blouse was torn and what a wreck she had looked.

She had changed hurriedly, applying lipstick with fingers that had trembled. The clock had been striking eleven when she had got in and Bill would be back at any moment from his business dinner.

What she was going to tell him she had no idea. Any more than she had the least idea as to what Lance might do. Doubtless the police would find his car and return it to him—she wasn't worried about that.

She had gone into the sitting room intending to make herself some tea when

sor etching had struck her as strange.

Then she had seen a latchkey and a note on the table.

Each bitter word of it still burnt into her brain.

*"I left the dinner early and came back us after you had gone out."* Bill had written. *"I asked the caretaker if he had seen you or whether you had left a message and he told me you had gone off with someone in a red sports car. I didn't need to know whose car that was."*

*"I'm taking nothing but my personal possessions and what I need in the way of clothes—you can do what you like with the rest. No doubt the nylon shirts will fit your friend Bretton. All I wish is that I had never met you or known what it was to have loved you."*

**"BILL."**

She had telephoned his office first thing next morning, only to be told that he was not there. She had had the same reply each time she rang during the day and in the end, in desperation, she had put her pride in her pocket and gone round to enquire.

One of Bill's colleagues had told her he had left.

"He came in this morning to hand over his assignments and said that he wasn't coming back, Mrs. Hassall," the young man had said sympathetically. "I didn't know what had happened, of course, but I never dreamt—I mean—that is to say—"

His voice had trailed off in embarrassed confusion.

"It's quite all right, thank you, Mr. Jenkins," Anne had managed to say.

She had walked blindly out and gone and telephoned Tom Rawlinson.

He and Margaret had come up to town and done all they could, but to no avail. As far as their enquires revealed, Bill had vanished into thin air.

To Tom and Margaret she had been frankness itself and when she had come to the end of her story Tom had got up, his face grim.

"Next time you get in a jam, come to me," he had said. "You might as well try to pick stinging nettles without gloves on as get the better of a cad like Lance Bretton. It's a great pity you didn't tell Bill the whole story while you were about it, but it's no use crying over spilt milk. Anyhow, I'll see that Bretton gives up that letter he has been dangling over your head."

With that he had gone out, leaving Margaret to comfort Anne as best she might.

It was quite late when Tom had returned, an expression of grim satisfaction in his eyes. He had dropped the letter into her lap.

"I was going to advise you to burn that, but on second thoughts I think I would keep it, if I were you, Anne," he had said. "You may want to show it to Bill one of these days. If you get the chance to do so, it would be best. Then he will be able to see for himself what you were up against."

He had also brought back her handbag, with her money and the key of the flat.

"I don't know how to thank you, Tom," she had faltered. "How did you—I mean—"

"I threatened to horsewhip him—publicly—if he didn't hand over your property," Tom had said simply. "He knew I meant business and so he didn't make any bones about it. I think he realised that he had overplayed his hand—after all, the law has a very ugly name for the kind of game he tried to play and I think he was frightened. He said, by the way, that he had dropped your pistol in the river, so

he couldn't do anything about that."

"If it doesn't matter," she had said. "Did you have much difficulty in finding him?"

"Oh, no. I merely rang up his office and found out where he was likely to be," Tom had said, shrugging. "Now forget about it—you won't be worried by the scoundrel again, neither do I think he is likely to show up at the flying club in the future. Not as long as Margaret and I are members there, at least. We'll see to that."

Despite her protests they had carried her off for the week-end, leaving word with the caretaker where she could be reached if necessary. Subsequently Tom had caused inquiries to be made at all the shipping and airline offices, but there was no trace of Bill anywhere.

Anne had written to Michael and Dolly to tell them, concealing nothing and not seeking to excuse herself in any way.

Michael had written by return.

He had condemned Bill for what he called "his extraordinary behaviour" and had expressed his disappointment in no uncertain terms.

*"The least he could have done was to give you the chance to explain,"* he had concluded. *"Even the meanest felon is given the right to defend himself in a court of law, which is more than he had given to you. If you think I can do any good, please let me know and I will come back by the first available aircraft. On the other hand, why not close up the flat and come out here to Dolly and me?"*

She had written back, a halting explanation and a defence of Bill's attitude, though it had not sounded very convincing.

Now she made herself some tea and carried it into the sitting room, where she sat for an hour crouched over the electric fire.

It was dark outside, and she half rose to draw the curtains, only to sink back on the settee again, thinking: "What does it matter? It's all the same whether they are drawn or not." The truth was, she admitted, drawing the curtains made the room seem more cosy, somehow, as it used to be when she and Bill were there together.

After a time she got up and went to stand at the window. The buildings opposite were formless against the night, pierced here and there by a lighted window. From the street below came the rumble of a bus.

With a sigh she let the curtain fall into place.

She ought to get something to eat but she had no appetite, she admitted. But life had to go on, especially now, and wasting time in vain regrets didn't help. She had failed Bill as greatly as he had failed her and her punishment must be severe. Just as his was no doubt equally severe. If only she had been completely honest with him!

If only—

The sound of the doorbell brought her round, a hand going to her breast.

Stories she had read of midnight marauders came crowding into her mind, and then she pulled herself together.

It was barely eight o'clock, not midnight, and whoever had rung the bell no doubt had a perfectly good reason for doing so. It was in all probability one of her neighbours wanting to borrow something. Miss Robertson, from across the way, perhaps, or that nice young couple in the flat above.

She opened the door of the sitting room and went into the hall, switching on the light. Opening the front door, she fell back a pace, staring with eyes that had suddenly become wide and dark, her lips

moving soundlessly as she tried to speak.

It was Bill. For a moment there was no sound to be heard save that of the noise of the traffic filtering up the lift shaft. Then he put out a hand.

"Anne!" he murmured.

"Bill!" She swayed and went white. He held out his arms and Anne felt them close around her.

"Oh, Bill, Bill darling," she whispered brokenly. "I—I've prayed for this. So often! Is—is it true? You—you've come back?"

He came in and closed the door and half led, half carried her into the sitting room.

"Yes, Anne, I've come back," he said quietly. "I had to, you see, because I love you so. It doesn't matter any more what you were to Bretton—what happened between you—I only know that I can't live without you. Can you forgive me, my dearest?"

She laughed shakily and put up a hand to touch his face.

"It was my fault. I wasn't honest with you. I should have been, because there isn't anything—there never was anything—between Lance and me. Only—I was afraid."

"My poor darling," he said.

"I've been so terribly unhappy, Bill," she went on, after a pause. "You see, I thought—if you could go off like that—you couldn't possibly love me any more. But, deep down, I knew you really did."

"I don't blame you," he said. "My only excuse is that I saw red. It's my awful temper, I suppose. Only, it seemed then that you had taken advantage of the fact that I wouldn't be here to meet the fellow. But I know now I was wrong—that there is no love without trust. Can you really forgive me?"

She drew a deep breath.

"There is nothing to forgive, Bill. Nothing matters now that you have come back. Later, if you want, we can talk about it. I—I want to tell you everything. But now we have other things to talk about." She sighed and smiled. "I'm afraid there isn't much for supper. I've got some eggs and bacon, though."

"They'll do," he said, with one of his old grins. "Proper housewife, aren't you? Don't you even want to know where I have been?"

"Of course I do," she said, with a laugh. "But you must be hungry. I suppose you've been travelling all day."

"You must be psychic," he said. "I've come all the way from Glasgow. My ship got in this morning."

"Glasgow? Your ship?" she echoed in amazement.

"Yes," he said. "I shipped as a steward on board a freighter that was short of hands and made a trip to Cyprus and back. It gave me time to think, Anne, and—well—when we docked I knew what I had to do. I couldn't get here quickly enough."

"You poor darling," she said. "Was it very terrible?"

"It was an experience, certainly," he said, looking down at his work roughened hands. "But it isn't one I would care to repeat. However, it's behind me and—well—if you don't think too badly of me I'd rather like to start again."

"Yes," she said, an introspective look in her eyes. "I want that too, Bill . . ."

**T**WO hours later she sat on the rug at his feet, gazing into the glowing heart of the electric fire. She had told him everything, right from the very beginning, and she knew that he understood.

And now a little silence had fallen, but it was a silence born, not of embarrassment, but of intimacy. It was as if they had indeed begun again, this time, as Bill had

observed quietly, with a clean slate.

"I was a stiff-necked fool," he had confessed. "I resented your getting the flat—I felt that I was nothing but a hanger-on and then when Bretton appeared on the scene—well, you can guess. It was the same about your job. I hated your having to keep it on, but I realised that we were going to have to do without a lot of things that I couldn't provide, so I had to swallow my pride. And—that hurt."

Now she looked up.

"About my job, Bill. You were saying—"

"Forget it, sweetheart," he broke in. "If you want to keep on with it, that's your affair. I'm not going to criticise any more."

"It isn't that," she said demurely. "I—

I've given it up, Bill. At least,"—stumbling a little—"I've given a month's notice. It will be up in three weeks time. You see—I had no choice."

He looked at her, puzzled. And then, as he put it afterwards, the penny dropped.

"Anne!" he exclaimed. "You mean—"

She nodded, flushing, and Bill's heart gave a sudden leap.

"My sweet," he murmured huskily, kneeling down and drawing her into his arms as gently as if she were some fragile piece of porcelain. "Oh, Anne darling, how can I say what is in my heart?"

Anne felt a little thrill run through her.

"I know, dearest," she murmured. "I knew that if you loved me as I love you,

you would come back. And you have done. Now,"—a dimple came to nestle in her cheeks and her eyes danced—"if you want your son to be born in Rhodesia we mustn't lose any time."

He bent his head and kissed her.

"England or Rhodesia—what does it matter, my love?" he asked tenderly. He smiled into her eyes. "All this—all that has happened has been a clearing away of things that don't count any more. Now, it is only the future that counts—ours and our child's. Oh, Anne, Anne darling, tell me you love me."

And with her head on his breast, Anne told him in ways that he could not fail to understand.

THE END.

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## CLOUDED HAPPINESS

By Valerie Vincent

### ON APPROVAL.

MUST you really go home this week-end, darling?" Anne asked on a note of disappointment.

Nigel looked down at her as they stood for a moment in the soft darkness outside the door of her home.

"Afraid so, sweetheart," he said. "It's an absolute 'must' this time. I have a very important job to do."

"But I did so want you to come with me to hear Rubinstein—and you said you would, didn't you, Nigel?"

"I know I did, darling," he admitted. "And I most certainly would have done. But now that I've managed to change my holiday arrangements to match yours, things have altered, you know."

Nigel tightened his arms about her and forced her to look at him.

"Yes, very much altered, Anne dear," he added softly. "And even Mr. Rubinstein pales into insignificance compared with what I want to do this week-end."

"What on earth do you mean, Nigel?" she asked, smiling in spite of herself.

"Us, darling," he said.

"Us?" she repeated.

"Yes, you and I, my love. I'm going to tell mother we're engaged."

Anne caught her breath, and fear, like a white hot knife, pierced her heart.

"Oh, Nigel!" she murmured. "Do you—do you think that's wise? Supposing she—objects? After all, I'm not—"

"The Duchess of Lambeth North?" he laughed, stooping and kissing away her objections. "Well, nor am I the duke!" Then, on a quieter, more serious note—after all, darling, my mother has a right to know, and I'm going to tell her."

"And if—and if she says no, Nigel?"

"She can't, and she won't, sweetheart. I really think you have the wrong idea about my mother, Anne. It's true that we live in a house called the Hall, and all that, but actually we don't count for very much. It just happens that my father had money, or made it, and since his death, mother has ruled the place, and perhaps, become a bit rigid in her ideas about this and that.

"But she's awfully sweet, really, and I know she'll love you on sight, darling," Nigel went on, with a confidence that restored a little of Anne's shaken morale. "And since I went into industry myself, rather than one or other of the professions, she's conditioned herself to expect anything from me! In fact," he added laughingly. "I don't think mother would turn a hair,

now, if I turned up one day in cloth cap and shirt-sleeves and smothered in oil from head to foot!"

"Yes, Nigel, but marrying, and you her only son—"

"Nonsense, darling," he broke in. "In any case, I'm over age and can please myself, can't I? Do you think for a moment that I would allow even my mother to come between you and me, Anne? Between you and—me?" he emphasized, with a determination that made Anne's throat ache with love for him.

She had known, of course, that Nigel would have to tell his mother sooner or later about her, but always Anne had tended to delay the necessity for it—ever since she had grasped the fact that Nigel came of a county family and that his home was called "Rashleigh Hall," in the village of Rashleigh in Kent.

"You do know that, darling, don't you?" Nigel said, when she remained silent.

"Yes, of—of course, Nigel," she stammered. "But, oh, darling, I—I can't help but be a little afraid. You see, it must be all so utterly different—I mean, your home and mine, and—and your people and mine."

Nigel laughed.

"Oh no, you're wrong, sweetheart," he said. "There's no difference at all—not really. Anyway, there's only mother and me—that's what I'm getting at. I want you to come down and spend your holiday with us—that's why I've been moving heaven and earth to get mine when you had yours. So we're going down there together. You'll love Rashleigh. It's a real picture village, darling. There are woods and a river and a boat—all the things you like, in fact!"

"Oh, Nigel, it sounds wonderful, and I'd love to do as you suggest. But—"

"There are no 'buts', darling!" he broke in again. "Everything is completely under control, and I'm at the wheel. I'm going down to tell mother that we're engaged, and she'll write and ask you to come. Then we'll have the loveliest holiday we've ever had in our lives—with nothing to do all day except roam the countryside and float down the river when we're tired of walking. There now—doesn't that appeal to you, my dear?"

"It sounds wonderful," Anne said again. "But, Nigel dear, I'm desperately afraid. Suppose—well, suppose your mother does not think I am good enough for you?"

Nigel laughed, and kissed her.

"Darling," he said, "if your people think

I'm good enough for you, you need be in no doubt whatever about what mine are likely to think of you! They'll see you as I see you, love you as I love you, and want you as I want you. Not that it matters two straws what they think," Nigel added, with the recklessness of youth in love. "It's what you and I think that counts, my dear Anne—and we know what we think, don't we?"

Anne sighed.

"I know what I do think, at all events, Nigel dear," she murmured.

He nodded, and went on—

"You're awfully sweet, darling. The moment I saw you—the moment I stepped into that drawing office—my heart recognized you and called out to you."

"And mine answered, Nigel," she told him, a smile lighting up her face.

A short silence followed, each reliving that day of their first meeting when Nigel had stepped into the tracing room of Digby Ltd., Marine Engineers, where Anne was in charge of the female staff of the drawing office. Nigel had joined the firm that day, as Second-in-Command of the Design Department, and Mr. Garrow, the chief draughtsman, was showing him round the office.

"This is Miss Rigdon," he had said smilingly, as he introduced him to Anne. "Miss Rigdon is in charge of the tracing room. Miss Rigdon, this is Mr. Mandeville who is joining us from Steam Turbines Limited."

"How do you do, Miss Rigdon?" Nigel said, smiling at her in his charming fashion.

That was the beginning for both of them as it turned out. For if Nigel had lost his heart to Anne, in that self-same moment Anne had lost her heart to him.

Although that had been six months ago, Anne, found it almost impossible to remember a time when Nigel had not been beside her. They went everywhere together, and quite early on, Anne had taken him to her home and introduced him to her father and sister, who were now very fond of him, and Nigel of them.

Although Anne's father and sister had realised right from the first that he was educated beyond their standard, it had nevertheless come as something of a shock to them to discover that the young man's real home was not in the block of rather expensive flats where he was living at the moment, but at Rashleigh Hall in Kent.

The information had slipped out quite casually when Anne's sister, Mary, had asked if he would be going away for

Christmas, as she had something she wanted to send him.

"Unfortunately—yes," Nigel had answered. "Mother always gives a party at Christmas, and she would be greatly disappointed if I were not there."

He had then written out the address for her, and after glancing at it, Mary had asked if it were a hotel.

"Well, no, Mary," he had answered lightly. "It is my home."

After he had gone that night, her father had given voice to the fear that had leapt to his mind when Mary had shown him the address on the slip of paper.

"Anne, dear," he had remarked, a little anxiously. "I'm rather afraid Mr. Mandeville is—well, a bit too far above our station, you know. I'd no idea that his people lived in such a swell place in Kent. You—you understand what I mean, don't you?"

Anne did understand. It had come as an equal surprise to her, but she managed to conceal the fact.

"Oh, don't be silly, dad," she had laughed. "Nigel's not like that, you know. He's not a snob."

"No, I quite agree, my dear," her father had said. Nigel himself isn't, but what about his people, Anne? I wonder what his mother would have to say if she knew that he was coming to this house and taking you out and about the way he's doing?"

"But surely there's no harm in that, dad!" Anne had countered. "We may not be well-off, but there's nothing wrong with us, is there?"

Her father shrugged.

"All the same, my dear," he said, "you know what the world is, don't you? People of high social standing don't like their sons marrying out of their class, do they?"

Anne knew that all too well, but she refused to think of it in the weeks and months that followed. That was a bridge she would cross when the time came, she told herself.

And now that time had come.

Nigel did not go in with her that night, as he had his packing to do and he was leaving for Tunbridge Wells early on the following day, it being his Saturday off.

"Hullo, Anne! Nigel gone?" her father asked when she entered the kitchen alone.

Anne nodded.

"Yes, father, he is going home early to-morrow for the week-end," she replied, with forced lightness.

Her father eyed her closely as she took off her coat and hat.

"Nothing wrong, is there?" he asked, struck by something in her expression. "I mean, you two haven't quarrelled, I hope."

"Good heavens, no, dad!" she explained laughingly. "The day Nigel and I quarrel isn't written in the calendar yet!" she paused, then added—"As a matter of fact, Nigel is going home to tell his mother about me. He—he wants me to spend my holiday at Rashleigh Hall."

"Is—is that so?" her father remarked thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose it had to come, sooner or later, my dear. I expect you'll find everything all right when you get there. Anne."

"But Mrs. Mandeville may not want me to go there," Anne murmured.

"Oh yes, I think she will—if only to see what you're like, my dear, and you've certainly no cause to worry on that score," her father told her smilingly. "Nigel's mother would have to go a long way before she found a prettier or better girl than my Anne!" he added proudly.

Anne laughed.

"Oh, but you're prejudiced, daddy dear," she said. "Now tell me—what would you

like for supper, darling? That's much more important than paying compliments to your daughter, you know. After all, it's only an oblique way of paying them to yourself, isn't it, dad?"

Tom Rigdon chuckled. He did not exactly understand what Anne meant by that but he loved hearing what he called her "clever talk". Her mother had talked the same way, and it was her mother's brains and looks that Anne had inherited—which was probably why he was so very fond and proud of her.

And she had made the most of her brains had Anne. There could be no doubt about that, he told himself. She had attended the Polytechnic, studied hard and had been determined to get on. Even now, at twenty-three, she was earning over nine pounds a week—more than he earned himself. But the dear girl was worth every penny of it—and she would go higher yet.

"When are you expecting to hear from Nigel's mother, Anne?" he asked, when they had finished supper and he was helping her to wash-up.

"I don't know, dad," she replied. "But it will have to be quite soon if I'm to go down there for my holidays, for they start the week after next."

"Well, yes, that's what I was thinking, Anne," he said. "Tell me—will you be all right for clothes? I mean—"

He paused, awkwardly, but Anne knew what was in his mind.

"Yes, I think so, dad," she said. "I have two evening gowns, if they dress for dinner. In any case, no doubt Nigel will have told his mother all about us, and I see no point in pretending to be other than we are."

"No, that's right, my dear," her father said approvingly. "Just be yourself, and you'll find that everything will be all right. After all, Mrs. Mandeville won't be expecting you to arrive in sables and mink, of course!"

"I hope not, at any rate, dad," Anne returned laughingly. "All the same," she added as she put the plates in the rack to drain, "I do hope Nigel's mother is not too grand!"

That was the thought she took upstairs to her room that night, and which remained with her until eventually she fell asleep. It even invaded her dreams, for once Anne awoke from a nightmare horror of finding herself attending a palace function in an old pair of slacks which she wore for the housework!

But she need not have worried, for although Nigel's mother was still able to live at Rashleigh Hall, and still able to maintain something of the gracious style of earlier days, what with death duties and taxation she was finding things none too easy financially. Indeed, she frequently spoke of selling the Hall and buying a much smaller house—which was really all she needed now that her daughters were married and had places of their own.

In fact, had it not been for the lingering dream that one day Nigel might make money—or marry money—and wish to settle down again in the old home, the likelihood was that his mother would have sold Rashleigh Hall long ago.

Instead, however Mrs. Mandeville had contented herself by cutting down the outdoor and indoor staff. Where once two gardeners had looked after the twelve acres of lawns and gardens and paddock that surrounded the Hall, there was now only one gardener. The chauffeur who drove the twelve-year-old Daimler was also the odd-jobs man about the house. While instead of four maids, there were now only two, and a woman who came in daily from the village.

The result of it all was a slight but none

the less perceptible deterioration in the property as a whole—a fact that was more obvious to Nigel, seeing it only at intervals when he came down for a week-end, than to his mother who saw it every day. And on this particular week-end he noticed it more critically than usual, since he wanted everything to be at its best when Anne came down.

It had been his intention to tell his mother about Anne as soon as he arrived, but Nigel had found her lying down with one of her headaches and therefore decided to postpone his news until a more propitious occasion. Instead, he went in search of Griffin, the chauffeur, to ask him how the punt was looking these days.

Griffin—a tall, thin, rather mournful-looking man—said that he had not been down to the river for several weeks, but that the last time he had been down there he had noticed that both the boat-house and the punt were looking a little dilapidated.

"But what can you expect, Mr. Nigel?" he asked. "Since you went to live in London nobody ever uses the boat or the punt."

"Anyway, Griffin, get the car out, and let's go down there and have a look round," Nigel said.

The upshot of it all was that the punt was hauled out of the water, mounted on a trailer, towed back to the garage for cleaning and re-varnishing, and Griffin was sent to Tunbridge Wells to obtain the necessary varnish.

"If we start on the job this evening, we'll have her finished by to-morrow afternoon," Nigel suggested hopefully. "Then, next week, you can paint the boathouse, Griffin. I'm coming down here for my holidays and hope to spend a good deal of time on the river."

It was not until after dinner that Nigel had a chance to break his important news to his mother. Over coffee in the drawing-room, she had been retailing for his benefit the gossip of the district—of the people round about, most of whom Nigel had known all his life.

He watched her thoughtfully as she sat talking to him, giving an occasional glance towards the long windows through which the gardens were still visible in the evening haze. He found himself wondering if Anne would see his mother as he saw her, rather than with the eyes of a stranger.

Ought he, first of all, to explain to Anne that, because his mother was very tall and straight, most people considered her to be a dominant personality, whereas, actually, she was one of the sweetest women who ever lived? or ought he leave Anne to form her own opinion?

He was still pondering this, when his mother remarked—

"By the way, Nigel dear, a week or so ago I heard from Fran."

"Oh?" Nigel muttered. "And what is she doing in these days?"

His mother shot him a curious glance. There had been a time when she had thought that Nigel and Frances Wentworth would make a match of it, and she had never quite understood why they had not. She felt quite sure that Nigel had been interested in the girl, and that Fran—as everyone called her—had been equally interested in him.

Somehow, however, the affair had fallen through, and after the tragic death of the girl's father and mother in a motoring accident, Fran had closed the house and gone to live with an aunt in Scotland.

"I really don't know what she's doing, Nigel," his mother replied. "Nothing, I suppose, since she doesn't have to. As you know, Fran was quite well-off, after everything had been cleared up. She

mentioned in her letter that she was thinking of selling Hightrees, as she couldn't bear the thought of ever living there again."

"A pity," Nigel said, in a casual tone. "It's an awfully nice place, isn't it, mother? Still, if she doesn't want to live there again, I suppose there's no point in keeping it up. Fran never tried to let the place, did she?"

"No, Nigel, the dear girl can't bear the thought of that, apparently. In any case, she could not possibly live alone in a great place like that."

"Well, no. I suppose not," Nigel agreed. "I wonder Fran doesn't get married."

His mother eyed him closely. Was Nigel still in love with Fran? she wondered. Had they quarrelled, and both been too proud to make it up? It would have been such a splendid match, and she had always been so very fond of Fran.

"I—I've often thought that perhaps the dear girl has had a—well, a disappointment of some kind," she remarked.

"Maybe," Nigel muttered, thinking of something—and somebody—entirely different.

Then he took the plunge.

"By the way, mother," he said, leaning forward in his chair, "there's something I want to talk to you about. Something very important—to me, at any rate."

Mrs. Mandeville caught her breath.

"You—you mean Fran, dear?" she asked. He looked at her blankly.

"Fran?" he echoed. "Good heavens, no, mother!" he exclaimed. "Whatever put that idea in your mind? All the same, you're on the right track, darling. The fact is—I'm engaged!"

"Engaged?" she gasped. "To whom, may I ask? Do I happen to know the girl?"

Nigel shook his head.

"No, you don't know her, mother," he said. "She works in the same place as I do."

"You—you mean in the factory?" stammered Mrs. Mandeville.

"Yes, mother, in a factory," he said, and suddenly his tone became dogged. "She's in charge of the tracing room at Digby's. Her name is Anne—Anne Rigdon. We—we are very much in love, and—well, I want to marry her!"

Mrs. Mandeville sat for a moment or two as though stunned by the shock of his announcement. Then—

"But I—but I don't understand, Nigel dear," she stammered. "This is so unlike you. Why haven't you told me about all this before? Who—who is the girl? And who and what are her people?"

"I've told you who she is, mother—her name is Anne Rigdon, and she lives in Lambeth."

"L-Lambeth!" shrilled Mrs. Mandeville in a horror-stricken tone.

"Yes, mother, Lambeth North," confirmed Nigel. "And as for her people, well, her mother is dead and she lives with her father and younger sister, Mary, in a small house in Cornford Street, S.E."

"S.E.," his mother repeated helplessly.

"That's right," Nigel nodded. "Mary has just started work in a shop, and her father is a clerk in the London docks."

Mrs. Mandeville half-started to echo the words "clerk in the London docks" but something in her son's eyes pulled her up short. She knew that look all too well—his father had had it before him—and it had always been, for her, a danger signal.

Nigel had evidently been on the defensive so far, but now, she realised that he was ready to go into the attack, and she remained silent for a moment or two, trying hard to regain her self-control in face of this overwhelming disaster.

His mother had been bitterly disappointed

when Nigel had announced his intention of entering industry rather than one or other or the recognised professions to which his birth and upbringing entitled him. She had never yet managed to reconcile herself to that choice, but that he should be actually contemplating marrying into industry—that, to her, seemed the last straw!

"Well, my dear," she said at last "I'm not pretending that all this has not come as a bolt from the blue. But you're old enough to know your own mind and to choose for yourself. What I regret most of all is that you should not have thought fit to allow me the opportunity of meeting the girl before you became actually engaged to her."

"Yes—well, that's what I'm anxious to talk to you about, mother," Nigel said. "I want you to meet Anne and get to know her, because I'm quite sure that you'll love her just as much as I do. In fact, you couldn't help falling in love with her, mother dear, as she's so awfully sweet!"

"How old is she, may I ask?"

"Twenty-three, mother."

"Is she pretty?"

"I think she's absolutely lovely, mother!" Nigel answered. "And I'm quite sure you will agree with me when she comes here and you see her for yourself."

"Comes down here?" Mrs. Mandeville repeated.

"Yes, darling," Nigel enthused. "I want you to write and ask Anne down for the holidays. I've managed to get mine to coincide with hers, and I thought it would be a great idea if we came down and spent a fortnight together here. We shan't put you to any trouble—well, nothing to speak of, as we shall be out most of the time. Anne's a great walker and loves the country."

"But Nigel dear, do you think that will be altogether wise?" his mother asked. "I mean, bringing the girl down here to stay before I have even met her? And before she knows—well, the kind of life we live here? She—she may feel quite out of place with us, darling."

"Well, it'll certainly be a change for her, of course!" Nigel said, with a cheerful smile. "But Anne will take that in her stride. Besides, darling, it will be like having one of the girls back home again, won't it? For that's what Anne will be—another daughter for you!"

His mother looked at him dubiously, but she could see that it was useless protesting any further. Plainly Nigel was infatuated with this girl, she told herself, and the best thing she could do at the moment was to fall in with his wishes.

To do otherwise, would only be to precipitate the very thing she was anxious to avoid, for back of Mrs. Mandeville's mind the thought was forming that if Nigel saw the girl against his own background, he would probably come to his senses. It would almost certainly cause him to take a more realistic view of what she was sure could only be a disastrous *mesalliance*. After all, an eagle did not mate with a sparrow!

"Very well, Nigel dear, if that is what you want," she gave in, as pleasantly as she could. "I will write to your friend next week and ask her down for her holiday."

"Thanks very much, darling, I knew you would," Nigel said jumping up and giving his mother an affectionate kiss. "I told Anne I had the sweetest mother in the world. But you'll have to write soon, dear. To-morrow would be a good idea, then Anne would get the letter by Monday, and that will give her plenty of time to complete her arrangements."

"Very well, in that case, I'll write to-morrow," conceded Mrs. Mandeville. "And I suppose I had better let her have Judy's

room," she added. "I think that's the pleasantest with its morning view over the lawns and gardens."

"Oh yes, Anne will love that room, mother," Nigel said enthusiastically, suddenly remembering the acres of roofs and chimneys which was all the view obtainable from any bedroom window in Cornford Street. Judy was his elder sister, and before her marriage had loved that room better than any other in the whole house. "And mother, you'll write Anne a nice letter, won't you dear?" Nigel added smilingly.

"Of course, I will, my dear boy," she answered. "How else do you think I would write to my only son's fiancee?" she asked, with gentle reproach.

### THE ACID TEST

THE letter was lying on the mat in the tiny hall of Number 27, Cornford Street, when Anne came down to put the kettle on for tea at half-past seven the following Monday morning.

For a moment she stood staring at it, aware that her heart was beating uncomfortably fast with an emotion that was evenly balanced between hope and apprehension—hope that all might be well, fear that it might not be.

Even when she had picked it up, and knew from the postmark that it was indeed from Nigel's mother, Anne still delayed opening the letter until she had filled the kettle and set it on the stove.

Then, nervously, she picked up a knife and slit open the thick envelope.

Inside was a folded sheet of notepaper which bore the engrossed address "Rashleigh Hall, Rashleigh, Tunbridge Wells", a telephone number, and on the other side a small facsimile of the crest which Nigel wore engraved on his signet ring.

"My dear Miss Rigden," she read, "my son has told me the news of his engagement to you and I am sure you will realise how eagerly I am looking forward to meeting you. Nigel tells me that he would like you to come down here for your holidays in a few days' time, and if you can possibly manage to do so, I shall be very pleased indeed."

"No doubt you and Nigel will make all the necessary arrangements between yourselves, but if you will kindly let me know the time of your arrival at Tunbridge, I will send the car to meet you."

"Again assuring you of the very great pleasure it will afford me to have you both here for as long as you can possibly stay. Yours very sincerely,

LAVINIA MANDEVILLE."

Anne read through the angular handwriting several times, and only set the letter down when the whistling kettle reminded her of her duties. She made tea, set out three cups and saucers, poured in the milk, then turned to read the letter again.

She was still staring at it when her father appeared in the doorway. He was in his shirtsleeves, and hurriedly fastening his collar.

"Now my dear, get a move on!" he urged jocularly. "No time to read love letters at this hour of the morning, you know."

Anne gave a gay little laugh.

"I'm not, and it isn't dad," she said. "It—it's a letter from Mrs. Mandeville!"

"Well, well, that's quick work, my dear," he said laughingly. "Is everything all right?"

Anne nodded, and handed the letter to her father to read.

"M'm!" he muttered, when he had glanced through it. "Well, that's all right."

my dear. A very nice letter indeed, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, if—if Mrs. Mandeville means what she says!" Anne answered hesitantly.

"But of course the lady means it!" her father exclaimed. "Why shouldn't she mean it, Anne? If she'd objected to having you down there she wouldn't have written at all, would she? Come, come, my dear, don't be so suspicious. What are you afraid of? After all, if she wants Nigel to marry well, then he is marrying well, for he'll be marrying one of the best and sweetest girls in all London!"

Anne smiled at his enthusiasm, but said no more as she set about preparing breakfast. Her father left the house first, then Mary, and lastly herself—she generally managed the washing-up before leaving for the office. In any event, Anne reminded herself, she would be seeing Nigel that evening when he would tell her everything that had happened.

Actually, however, he came into her office shortly after she arrived, and the way his eyes lit up when he saw her, was sufficient to reassure her that all was well.

"Hello, darling!" he said, in a low voice. "It's lovely to see you again—I seem to have been away a whole year. I expect you got mother's letter this morning, didn't you?"

Anne nodded.

"Oh, Nigel, do you think your mother really means it?" she asked.

"Of course, she means it, darling," he said, touching her hand surreptitiously as it lay below the level of her drawing-board. "Mother was delighted when I told her about it all. What time shall I come round for you to-night, my love?" he whispered.

"As soon as you're ready, Nigel dear," she whispered back. "I shall be waiting."

He nodded his understanding, touched her hand again, and then hurriedly left the office.

THAT evening, Nigel told Anne the story of what happened during his week-end at home—with a few reservations. He hated keeping back the little he did, but could not bring himself even to hint that at first, at any rate, his mother had not been exactly pleased when he broke the news to her.

"My mother is simply longing to meet you, darling," he said, "and she's going to put you in my sister's former room. It was mother's own idea. You see, she thought that after London you would like the charming view across the lawns and gardens when you got up in the morning."

"How very thoughtful of your mother!" Anne murmured. She paused, then added—"Did you—did you tell her where we live, Nigel, and that we're not—well, you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I told her everything, Anne dear," he said. "And mother didn't turn a hair, once she'd got over her natural surprise that I had become engaged to you. As to all the rest of it, darling, there'll have been no girl grander than you who have stepped through the doorway of Rashleigh Hall since the day the roof was put on!"

"Oh, Nigel, what a dreadful flatterer you are!" she said, with gentle reproach. "But you will have to tell me how to go on and so forth. You see, I—I've never stayed in a grand home like yours, and I do so want to meet with your mother's approval in every way."

Nigel gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry yourself, sweetheart," he said softly. "Mother will approve of you all right—in fact, she'll fall in love with

you at sight. As for the rest, Anne, it doesn't matter two straws. All you have to be is your own sweet self, the rest will follow automatically."

Anne sighed. She was not so sure of that. She had no difficulty in putting herself in Mrs. Mandeville's shoes and seeing the position from the older woman's point of view. She knew that often enough it was the smaller things of life that irritated more than the big things. Not, of course, that she did not know how to comport herself—it was simply that she had never before stayed in a large country house.

She continued to press Nigel with questions, and by the time he left her that night, Anne had gained a comprehensive picture of the day to day life at Rashleigh Hall.

"But none of it matters a hoot!" he had told her laughingly, as he kissed her and wished her good night. "The pattern of our lives, my dear Anne, is already woven, and it will fit into any background, anywhere. So long as I have you, I have the whole world!"

Anne clung to him happily. It was wonderful to love as she loved, and to be loved so whole-heartedly in return. It did not often happen like that, she told herself. Nearly always one loved more deeply than the other—always there was a gap between.

But between Nigel and herself there was no gap—there never had been right from the beginning. It seemed that through endless ages they had been intended for each other, had been drawing closer to each other until at last—in that moment of destiny in the tracing office of Digby Ltd., they had met and on the instant recognised each other.

"You're mine!" Nigel's heart had whispered to her. And without a second's hesitation her heart had whispered back: "Yes, I know. And you are mine, my darling Nigel!"

THE following fortnight passed in a whirl for Anne. She bought herself a new suit—a bluey-brown tweed, which threw up the blue of her eyes and brought out the sheen of her chocolate-coloured hair. And she bought a cute little hat to match, with a gay feather stuck at the side; also, a pair of light brogues for walking. There was a simple white cotton frock, too, with red belt and red piping for when they went on the river; and white buckskin shoes to match.

"Gosh, Anne!" her father exclaimed, grinning at her when she took her purchases home and showed them off. "They'll think the Queen of Sheba's arriving when they see you in those smart things!"

"Oh, but I shan't wear them all at once, dad," Anne laughingly informed him. "You must have tweeds for the country, you know."

"Tweeds for the country!" echoed Mary, with a mock grimace. "My word, we're in Society at last, dad!" Then, raising her voice, she declaimed—"For her visit to the country the Lady Anne Rigden wore tweeds, and looked charming. Her sister, Mary, as is well known is at present selling half-crown stockings at a fashionable emporium in Brixton!"

"And from which at any moment she is expecting to get the sack!" her father put in laughingly. "Come, girls," he added, "now let's have tea, for the love of Allah!"

Tom Rigden had served in India in the first World War, and "for the love of Allah" was still his favourite plea. They trooped out of the sitting-room to the kitchen and were just sitting down to tea when there was a knock on the back door, and Nigel entered.

"Made it!" he announced triumphantly,

after pausing to kiss Anne and her sister. "I was afraid you'd have finished tea. I've been to get our railway tickets, darling," he added, smiling at Anne.

"First class, I hope, Sir Nigel!" Mary put in jestingly.

"No—third, my dear!" Nigel returned with a boyish grin.

They laughed at anything—or nothing. They were a happy family, and it was a constant source of surprise to Tom Rigden to find how easily and completely Nigel had fitted himself into their homely life. But on this particular afternoon, as she looked at him across the tea-table, Anne could not help wondering just what his mother would think if she could see them all now in the kitchen of Number 27, Cornford Street.

Next morning, Anne was up betimes, and by mid-day had packed her two suitcases, tidied the house and left everything in readiness for Mary to take over while she herself was away on her holiday. Anne had decided to wear her new tweed suit for the journey, and as she was taking a final look at herself in the wardrobe mirror while waiting for Nigel to arrive with the taxi, her father put his head round the door.

"Everything okay, my dear?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I think so, dad," she said, turning round for his inspection. "Well, and do I look all right?" she asked.

He nodded, and stooping, gave her an affectionate kiss.

"Your old dad thinks you're the finest girl that ever stepped, my dear Anne," he said. "You're not nervous about what's before you are you?"

"Well, no, not too much, dad," she answered, with a wavering smile.

"It—it's always a difficult job, at first, meeting your in-laws," her father went on. "But you've no need to be too nervous, Anne. If his mother's anything like Nigel, everything's going to pass off all right. And let me tell you this, my dear—if I'm lucky to be getting a man like Nigel for my son-in-law, his mother's even more lucky in getting you for a daughter-in-law—and don't you forget it! I hope Mrs. Mandeville won't forget it, either."

"I—I never shall forget, dad dear," Anne said. "I know I shall never need a trumpeter while you're around. All the same, dad, you make me very proud, because—"

She broke off abruptly as a ring sounded on the front door. It was Nigel.

A few minutes later the young couple drove off, with Anne's father's last words ringing in their ears.

"Look after her, Nigel," he had said. "Always remember that Anne is very precious to me."

"Have no fear, dad—for Anne will be equally precious to me!" Nigel had called back.

He then reached for her hand.

"Just how precious, my love," he whispered ardently, "it's going to take me all my life to show you!"

They had a gay journey travelling to Tunbridge Wells, for Nigel was on the top of his form—he was, in fact, as he admitted, as excited as a schoolboy. It had been the dream of his life to see Anne in his old home—and at last they were on their way to Rashleigh Hall.

At Tunbridge they were met by the chauffeur who came hurrying along the platform the moment he caught sight of Nigel.

Nigel gave him a cordial greeting.

"Hello, Griffin!" he cried gaily. "Here we are. Anne, this is Griffin, my mother's chauffeur, he went on. "And this is Miss Rigdon, my fiancee, Griffin," he added,

proudly.

For a split second Anne hesitated, not quite sure what would be expected of her. Then she held out her hand and smiled.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Griffin," she said shyly.

"Good afternoon, Miss Rigdon," he responded smilingly. "I hope you'll like it down here."

"Oh yes, Miss Rigdon is going to love it," Nigel said. "Have you managed to finish everything at the boat-house, Griffin?"

The chauffeur nodded.

"Yes, everything is ready for you, Mr. Nigel," he answered.

Nigel took Anne's arm and led her along the platform towards the exit.

"Good chap is Griffin," he said, as the chauffeur walked on ahead of them with their luggage. "I think you'll like him, darling."

Anne felt sure she would. She was prepared to like anyone and anything at that moment.

They made a striking pair as they walked along—Nigel, tall and slim and good-looking; and Anne, with the top of her head level with his shoulder in her neat tweed suit and brogues and smartly-feathered hat, stepping briskly beside him.

"Behold the family chariot, darling!" announced Nigel, a broad grin on his face when they reached the old Daimler standing in the station yard.

He opened the door for her and helped her in, while Griffin was stowing the baggage in the back. Griffin then climbed in, took his seat at the wheel—and they were off.

"How far is it to Rashleigh?" Anne asked, as they drove along.

"Six miles to the village, and another mile to the Hall," Nigel replied, surreptitiously possessing himself of her hand behind Griffin's stolid back. "And we shall just be in time for tea. We'll try to get that over quickly, darling, and then I'll have time to take you round a bit before it gets dark."

"Oh yes, I'd like that," Anne murmured.

To begin with, at any rate, she did not want to be left alone too much with Nigel's mother. She needed time to get used to her new surroundings, and to gain confidence in herself.

Soon they were speeding along through delightful country lanes, and Nigel was keeping up a constant stream of talk and comment upon almost everything they passed, determined, as she well knew, to keep her thoughts from dwelling upon the coming meeting with his mother.

"Hullo! Now we're nearing Rashleigh village, darling," he said.

It was, as Nigel had told her, a "picture village"—just a street of quaint little houses and shops, with here and there a beautifully preserved specimen of sixteenth century timbered work. At the far end was a church of much earlier date, mellowed with age and standing serene and quiet in its sacred acre—guardian still of all those who lay sleeping their last sleep within its yew-tree'd shade.

"We'll take a stroll back here later on," Nigel said, as they left the village behind and set out on the last mile of the drive, Anne's heart began to flutter again when he added, pointing—"That's the Hall over there through the trees there, darling. Do you see it?"

Anne did, and her heart sank still further. She could not see much of the house, but what she could see was rather alarming to her. It seemed to be a big square Georgian house with a porticoed entrance standing in a park and surrounded by great trees.

"Oh dear!" she murmured involuntarily,

when Nigel's fingers tightened about her own.

"You're coming home, Anne," he whispered—"your own home, sweetheart, it will be yours one day. You know that, don't you, darling?"

Anne nodded shyly. Impossible as it sounded, she supposed that one day it would be so, though it was none the less difficult to imagine such a thing, and none the less frightening to think of it.

Suddenly the car swung in between huge stone gateposts, upon the top of each was the same heraldic device that was engraved on Mrs. Mandeville's notepaper. A long road ran through the trees and parkland up to the Hall, and now to Anne's apprehensive eyes, the house seemed bigger than ever.

"Ah, there's mother waiting to greet us!" she was aware of Nigel saying, and suddenly Anne caught sight of a tall woman standing at the top of the steps leading to the porticoed entrance.

Next thing she knew was that Nigel had helped her out of the car, and with her hand in his, he was leading her up the wide steps to the front door.

"Well, here we are, darling!" he said, with a gay laugh, and then shook hands with his mother and kissed her on each cheek. Then—"This is Anne, mother dear," he added, with boyish delight.

Anne flushed as Mrs. Mandeville took a good look at her.

"I am pleased to meet you, my dear," she said smilingly, "and I hope you will enjoy yourself during your stay here." She paused, then added. "Now if you will please come with me, I'll show you your room, Anne, and then we will have tea."

#### THE WORM AT THE ROOT.

**A**NNE followed her hostess up the wide staircase, and along a corridor to a room at the end.

"I've given you the room that was my eldest daughter's before she married," Mrs. Mandeville said, as she opened the door. "I hope you will like it, my dear."

"Yes, I'm sure I shall, Mrs. Mandeville," Anne murmured as she followed her in.

Anne gave a gasp of wonderment as she gazed at the delicate primrose walls, the black oak furniture, the green curtains and the green eiderdown on the bed to match. The carpet was a paler shade of green, and a great mass of scarlet gladioli flamed warmly in a polished brass container on the chest of drawers.

"Oh, what a perfectly lovely room!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

Mrs. Mandeville smiled.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Mandeville, it's quite the loveliest room I've ever seen," Anne replied. "I—I've never seen such a lovely room before except on the cinema screen."

"I'm glad you like it," Mrs. Mandeville said. "I want you to be happy while you're here with us, my dear. My daughter's preference for the room was, she always said, because of the glorious view from the windows. But I'm afraid, Anne, you will have to leave that for the moment, or we shall have Nigel calling out for tea. The maid will bring up your baggage and unpack for you. Tea will be ready in a few moments. I expect you will be able to find your own way downstairs, won't you?" she added smilingly, as she turned to leave.

Anne nodded.

"Thank you very much for your kind invitation, Mrs. Mandeville," she said shyly.

"Not at all, my dear. As Nigel's fiancee, I am only too delighted to have you here, and I hope you will be happy during your

stay with us."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Mandeville, I'm quite sure I shall," Anne returned, with a grateful smile.

Alone, Anne took another good look round about her. As Nigel had told her, the room overlooked the lawns and gardens and commanded a wonderful view. And when she ventured to open a door at the far end of the room and found it to be a luxuriously appointed bathroom, she gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Really, I feel like a film star," she murmured to herself, as she gazed at the gleaming chromium and porcelain of the shower bath and spray fittings and compared it with the dingy little bathroom at Number 27, Cornford Street.

By the time she walked slowly down the stairs, her heart was filled to overflowing with gratitude and love. She found Nigel waiting for her in the hall.

"Why, darling, what's the matter?" he asked, a little anxiously when he saw the shining look in her eyes.

"Oh, Nigel," she murmured, "I—I love you so very much."

"Do you, sweetheart?" he said, slipping his arm round her slender waist. "And now, I think we had better go into the drawing-room and have tea."

"Yes, of course. oh, Nigel, everything here is so—so very different from anything I've ever even dreamt of," Anne whispered.

"Except me darling!" he told her laughingly. "I'm the same—I always am the same, aren't I?"

Anne smiled up at him, and nodded her agreement.

Tea was served on a trolley. It was a new experience to Anne to take tea sitting in armchairs. Mrs. Mandeville asked her the usual polite questions regarding her work at the office and the health of her family, but at no time did Anne feel that Nigel's mother was really interested in the answers she received.

On the other hand, Anne reflected, her hostess was evidently doing her best to be kind and pleasant in the circumstances. After all, she reminded herself, it was only natural that a mother in Mrs. Mandeville's position would have preferred to see her son marrying a girl of his own class.

Presently, Mrs. Mandeville mentioned that she had met someone named "Dane" who had told her that Reggie and Pam were flying to New York to see their daughter, Sally.

"Apparently, Sally is engaged to a man in copper out there," Mrs. Mandeville went on to explain. "He's a multi-millionaire, so Dane says."

Nigel laughed.

"That will please Reggie, at any rate," he commented drily. "At long last he might be able to undertake the rebuilding he's been talking about for the past twenty years."

"Yes, of course," his mother agreed. "Incidentally, Nigel, you will be interested to learn that Dane scraped through his Finals last week. An act of sheer self-defence, as Dane called it, on the part of the examiners. Sarah's boy got through, too."

"What—Ray?" Nigel exclaimed laughingly.

His mother nodded.

"But we can talk about all this later on, my dear," she went on. "All this family business can be of no interest to Anne, of course. "Now what are you two proposing to do before dinner, may I ask?"

Nigel having explained that they had planned to walk across the fields to the village, his mother suggested that they had better start immediately after tea. But Anne could not help wondering if that bit of intimate social gossip had not been deliberately introduced into the conver-

sation to emphasize the gulf that lay between Nigel and his family and friends on the one side, and "this girl from the office" on the other!

The thought cast a shadow over her happiness, and later on, as they strolled across the fields in the evening glow, Anne felt that she had to mention it.

"You know, Nigel dear," she said, "I don't wish to be a damper on either you or your mother when you want to talk of people and things that are outside my knowledge. In fact, I'd much rather you did and forget about me for the time being."

Nigel laughed.

"Now what's this bee you've got in your bonnet, darling?" he asked smiling down at her. "You will have an opportunity to meet all these people later on, of course."

"Yes, Nigel, but you have known them all your life, haven't you? You have all been friends together, known each other's families and homes. I—I rather think that is what your mother will miss in me, as I'm outside it all," Anne added.

Nigel realised that she was genuinely troubled by the thought.

"But, Anne dear," he said, "that is something that happens in ninety-nine out of every hundred marriages, you know. Although you do not know our neighbours and friends round here at the moment, you will after you have lived here a few months. In fact, I expect you will have met quite a number of them before the end of our holiday."

"Yes, Nigel, but will they be prepared to admit me to their circle?" Anne asked. "That's the point. You see, it had never occurred to me that everything would be so utterly different. For example, I hadn't pictured that the room your mother has given me would be—well, so grand. I feel rather like a film-star, if you know what I mean. It's a bit frightening to find myself in such luxurious surroundings."

Nigel nodded. He could quite understand that, but he had hoped Anne would take it all in her stride.

"Well, yes, of course, darling," he said. "But I'm the same, aren't I? And you're the same. So why worry that dear little head of yours about frills and furbelows that are of no importance whatever?" he added lightly.

Anne sighed.

"With you, Nigel, I could be happy anywhere—in a cottage or palace," she said. "But I am now beginning to realise that it isn't quite as simple as all that. It is not only you and I who are concerned—as it seemed to be in London. I've suddenly realised that there are others."

"You mean—my mother, darling?"

"I mean your whole background, Nigel."

"But soon it will be your background, too, my dear Anne," he said.

"If they will accept me—yes, Nigel," she agreed. "But will the others? That's the question."

"Of course they'll accept you, darling," he told her laughingly. "Why on earth shouldn't they? In any case, Anne, what does it matter? We shan't have to live here, you know. Mother would have sold the place years ago but for the fact that she thought I should want to take it over when I married. But we can live anywhere we like, of course, and start from scratch."

They had come to a halt beside a stile, and Anne looked back to where the Hall was still visible through the trees.

"But you wouldn't like to lose that lovely home of yours, would you, Nigel?" she said softly, nodding towards the house.

He shrugged.

"Naturally, I am very fond of the old place since it has always been my home,"

he said. "But if Rashleigh Hall stood between you and me, darling, I'd sell it to-morrow. Oh no, nothing in the world could count for one moment with me when my love for you was weighed in the balance."

The note of deep sincerity in his voice, went straight to Anne's heart.

"Oh, Nigel dear," she murmured, with a wavering smile, let's not talk of it any more. Now let's talk about ourselves, shall we?"

"Yes, of course we will, darling," he answered, smiling down at her.

Later upstairs in her room, Anne found that the maid had not only unpacked for her, but was standing by in readiness to help her dress.

"I've put your bath on, Miss," she announced, smiling at Anne, "and if you'll please tell me which gown you would like to wear, I'll get it out for you."

She was a youngish, rather pretty girl, with the healthy complexion of the country.

Anne smiled back at her, and decided that it was no use trying to pretend.

"Thank you very much," she said, "but you need not wait. I'm quite used to dressing myself."

"Very well, Miss," the girl said, and after a last look round, she took her departure.

The bath, in such sumptuous surroundings, was a revelation and Anne lingered in it happily. Mrs. Mandeville had seemed more human this evening, and much pleasanter in her manner.

"Evidently, the old lady has thawed out a bit," Anne told herself. "I hope she is going to take a liking to me now."

Anne was feeling more like her usual self when, presently, she went down to dinner. She was wearing her black velvet evening frock, simply but fashionably cut, and with silver trimmings and shoes to match.

It was the dress Nigel liked best, and his eyes lit up as he stood at the foot of the stairs watching her descend.

"I'm glad you're wearing that dress tonight, darling," he said, taking her hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze. "In my mind's eye," he went on, with a boyish grin, "I've always pictured you descending these stairs in that black and silver dress—and now here you are, my love! Did you find everything all right in your room?"

"Yes, thanks, Nigel dear," she answered, giving him a critical survey. "You are looking wonderfully spick-and-span, too, you know," she added, with a gay laugh.

He stooped and kissed her.

"Am I, my adorable Anne?" he whispered.

"Flatterer!" she said.

A fire had been lit in the large dining-room for the evenings were still chilly. Beside it, on a small table, was a tray of glasses and bottles.

"Cocktail, darling?" Nigel asked, when his mother entered.

Mrs. Mandeville nodded, and Nigel proceeded to mix the special drink she always favoured.

Meanwhile, the hostess was giving Anne an appraising glance.

"You are looking very sweet, my dear," she remarked, smiling. "Black suits you, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, I think so, Mrs. Mandeville," Anne murmured shyly.

Over dinner, Nigel made a casual remark about the labour trouble prevailing at the docks, and Mrs. Mandeville sighed.

"I'm afraid such matters are beyond me, Nigel," she said. "Do you ever have trouble with the men in your workshops?"

"Not in my particular department, mater," he answered. "My men belong to the good old middle class, you see, and the middle class never strikes. I don't know

whether it's because they lack the nerve or the necessary organisation—anyway, they stick to their job."

"But Nigel, what about the strike at the works a couple of years ago?" Anne put in.

"You mean—you were on strike, too?" Mrs. Mandeville asked.

Anne shook her head.

"No, Mrs. Mandeville," she answered, "I'm in the drawing office department, you see."

"Anne is in charge of the tracing department, mother" Nigel explained. "She holds a very important position in the firm. Don't you remember me telling you about it? As a matter of fact, Anne and I create the machines that do the work," he added proudly.

Mrs. Mandeville gave an impatient shrug.

"But plenty of other men could have done that, Nigel," she said. "As I have told you over and over again, you should have gone in for law or medicine or science."

"Oh no, nothing of the kind, mother dear," Nigel laughingly protested. "A man should use his talents to the best advantage, and to do that he chooses the branch best suited to those talents. Mine happen to lie in the development of automatic machinery, so into engineering I went. The same applies to Anne—and we've both got somewhere, haven't we, darling?" he added, smiling at Anne."

They took coffee in the drawing-room, and again Anne found herself wondering just why Nigel's mother had started the discussion. Had the topic arisen quite casually and been pursued with the intention of demonstrating once again how wide was the gap between Nigel's world and her own?

Presently, Nigel asked her to play something for them, and at a nod from his mother Anne rose and crossed the room to the grand piano. Music was one of her dearest accomplishments, and for a time she played whatever came into her head. But when she slid into opening bars of Brahms's "Cradle Song", Nigel sprang to his feet and went over to sing it with her.

Mrs. Mandeville frowned. The girl was pretty enough and quite presentable—but it was all wrong, she reflected sadly. It was this stupid whim of Nigel's stepping out of his class to work in a factory that was the basic mistake. He had lost touch with his own people and become obsessed with the romantic idea "that orchids grew on dust heaps."

But, she told herself hopefully, everything would be all right when Fran came. Having Fran in the house would soon open Nigel's eyes to his blind folly. In the factory where he worked he had, perhaps, gradually lost the yard-stick of his class by which, instinctively, he would measure the woman he desired to marry.

And Fran would be able to supply that yardstick and open Nigel's eyes . . .

FRANCES WENTWORTH arrived at Rashleigh Hall on the following Thursday afternoon, at the end of, what, for Anne, had been the happiest week of her life.

The weather had been glorious, and day after day she and Nigel had roamed the woods and the narrow country lanes, lunching in country inns on bread and cheese, and returning to the Hall tired, but ecstatically happy, in time for dinner. Sometimes, however, they came back earlier and spent the afternoon punting on the river.

On the day that Fran Wenworth paid Mrs. Mandeville a visit, they had been out all the morning, lunched at a village inn, and on returning home they saw an expensive-looking two-seater sports car standing

at the front door.

"Visitors, apparently!" Nigel muttered glumly. "I hope they don't stay long, whoever they are."

When Nigel opened the door, they saw Mrs. Mandeville standing in the hall talking to an elegantly dressed girl with platinum blonde hair.

"Hullo, Nigel darling!" the girl cried, with a gay little laugh, and almost before he realised what was happening, she had thrown her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Why, Fran, what in the world brings you here?" he asked, staring at her in amazement.

"Well, that smart little car of mine outside—actually," she answered glibly. "But really I came down here to try to decide what to do with my house. I've just been talking to your mother about it. So—so you have become engaged, have you?" she added, with a cynical smile.

Nigel nodded, and turned to Anne, who had been standing in the background helplessly looking on.

"Anne dear," he said, "this is an old friend of ours, Miss Frances Wentworth. Fran—this is Anne Rigdon, my fiancee."

For the first time, Anne was able to have a clear view of the girl. That she was strikingly beautiful no one could deny. Anne was thinking, as she gazed at her platinum blonde hair.

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Rigdon," she said effusively, as she took Anne's hand. "I do hope you won't be jealous because Nigel and I are such old and intimate friends. In fact," Fran added laughingly, "Nigel has always maintained that he picked me up when I fell out of my cradle one day—though, of course, I wouldn't know anything about that!"

Nigel grinned.

"Yes I actually did do it, all the same, Fran," he said. "And rather a fat little lump you were too, as I remember it."

"Then either your memory or your tact is sadly deficient, darling," Fran chided him mockingly. "Mother always told me that I was the most beautiful thing ever born."

"Oh yes, your mother naturally would say that," Nigel told her laughingly.

"Now then, you two!" Mrs. Mandeville interposed, with mock severity. "Please don't start quarrelling the moment you meet again. As Fran has told you, Nigel, she has come down about the house. She has received an offer of £15,000 for 'Hightrees', but can't make up her mind whether to sell the old place or not. So, until she can come to a decision about it, I have asked her to stay here with me."

"Always providing I am not in the way, my dear Mrs. Mandeville," Fran said smilingly. "Of course, I had no idea you were down here, Nigel, much less that your fiancee was with you. But your mother tells me you are both out most of the day, so perhaps—"

"Oh, that's all right, my dear girl," Nigel broke in. "In any case, Anne and I have only another week of our holiday left. Then it's back to work for us, isn't it, darling?" he added, smiling at Anne and hoping to draw her into the conversation.

"Oh, so you are a worker, too, are you, Miss Rigdon?" Fran asked.

Anne nodded.

"She works in Nigel's factory," Mrs. Mandeville put in, with a malicious smile.

"Really? But how frightfully grim," Fran paused, then added—"I say, Nigel, you simply must come for a drive in my new car. I only took delivery of her a week ago and she's a real beauty. I had her up to ninety-two coming down from Scotland and you wouldn't have known you were moving save for the speedometer needle."

"Ninety-two!" Nigel exclaimed. "Well, I've always said you'd break your neck, Fran, one of these fine days, and now it looks as if you were all set to do it, my dear girl."

"Oh no, nothing of the kind, darling!" she returned laughing. "I'm just about the safest thing on wheels that ever happened. But please don't let me detain you and your fiancee, Nigel," she added, "since you are both on holiday."

"Were you thinking of going out again, Nigel?" his mother asked.

"Yes darling, we are going on the river," he replied. "We only came in to change. Of course we had no idea that Fran would be here."

"But we needn't go, Nigel—we could postpone it until to-morrow, couldn't we?" Anne remarked, feeling that it would be polite on her part to suggest it.

"Oh no," Fran protested. "Please do whatever you had planned to do. I'll run you down to the river in my car, if you like?" she added, as an afterthought.

"Yes, that's an idea," Nigel said. "What do you say Anne? Are you prepared to risk your neck in that monster we saw outside?"

"Well, yes, of course," Anne murmured, with a forced smile.

"Very well, then off you go, both of you and make yourselves look pretty!" Fran said jestingly. "I shall be ready when you're ready."

"Righto!" Nigel said, and taking Anne's hand, they hurried towards the staircase. "Odd thing Fran turning up like that without letting us know she was coming," he muttered, as they climbed the stairs.

"I expect Miss Wentworth thought she would find your mother alone," Anne suggested. "Besides, Nigel, she's an old friend of the family, isn't she?"

"Yes, that is so. Though it's a bit of a nuisance that she should turn up again while we're here. I hope you don't mind, darling."

"No, of course not," Anne replied.

But she did mind, all the same. She went to her room and slipped on her white frock and shoes, then had a quick look at herself in the mirror.

Fran was sitting waiting in her car when Anne and Nigel went downstairs.

"In you get," she said, with a gay laugh. "I'm afraid Miss Rigdon will have to sit on your knee, Nigel, unless you can make yourself smaller than you used to do in my old M.G. I never knew a man with such sprawling legs as Nigel has got," she added, as Anne followed him in. "No matter how he sits they're always in the way."

"But they have their uses, my dear girl," Nigel retorted, as Anne perched herself on his knees with his arm round her waist to hold her secure. "All aboard, Fran, so let her go!" he cried.

There was a roar from the exhaust and they were off.

"Still using the same old punt, darling?" Fran asked, as she swung the car into the lane and opened her out.

"Poshed up a bit—yes," Nigel replied. "Griffin and I spent a whole week-end on it, plugging and scraping and varnishing it inside and out—you wouldn't know it now, Fran."

"I'll bet I would," she returned laughingly. "I've spent far too many hours in that old tub ever to be deceived by a coat of varnish, my dear boy. I suppose he makes you do the poling, Anne?"

"Oh no, I don't know how," Anne said.

"Lucky you!" grimaced Fran. "If I had a pound for every mile that lazy fellow has made me punt him, I'd be a rich woman."

"A gross libel!" Nigel snapped. "Fran liked to show off her skill, Anne, that's the

real truth of the matter. Anyway, I thought you actually were a rich woman, Fran?"

"Did you?" she retorted, easing the car through a gateway and slowing down across the field which led to the boat-house. Then—"Heavens!" she exclaimed, as they came in sight of it. "Well, now I know you're in love, Nigel—you've actually painted the boat-house, too!"

"I didn't. Griffin painted it," Nigel said. "But I varnished the punt. What do you think of it?"

Fran pulled up the car and they all tumbled out.

"Well, well, well!" Fran muttered, staring at the punt. "The old tub as ever was, looking quite respectable at last. *'The hours I spent with thee, dear heart'*," she sang dramatically. "You and I will come out on our own one afternoon, Miss Rigdon," she went on, "and I'll pole you down as far as the weir. It's a long time since I had any decent exercise."

"Why not come with us now?" Anne suggested jokingly.

Fran shook her platinum head.

"And earn the black looks of Nigel for spoiling his *tete-a-tete*?" she laughed. "Heaven forbid, my dear, though I appreciate your self-sacrifice in inviting me. Now off you go, and don't be too late back"—and with a wave of her hand, she turned and walked to her car.

They stood watching her drive away, then got into the punt.

"Oh, isn't she lovely, Nigel," murmured Anne.

"Who—Fran?" he asked, as he started to arrange the cushions for Anne. "Not half as lovely as you, darling," he added, bending to kiss the top of her head.

Anne smiled to herself.

"Did—did Miss Wentworth really pole you around, as she said?" she asked.

"Oh yes, Fran used to be passionately fond of the art."

"You were pretty good friends, I imagine?"

"Well, yes, that is so," Nigel said. "You see, her brother—Bill Wentworth—was at school with me and we kids were always in one another's homes. Bill's out in Canada now. Fran's father and mother were killed in a road crash some years ago, and she is now on her own."

"Is she really rich?" Anne asked.

"So mother says. But I don't know much about her personal affairs."

"How old is she, Nigel?"

"About your age, darling."

"I wonder why she has never married, Nigel?"

"Waiting for Mr. Right, I suppose," he grinned. "Unless she doesn't want to be married."

Then followed a short pause as Nigel poled the punt upstream. Then—

"Miss Wentworth is evidently very fond of you, isn't she, Nigel?"

He grinned.

"Oh, that's Fran's way," he said. "She's what used to be called a 'Bright Young Thing'—all froth and high spirits but little else. Spoilt, that's Fran's trouble. Too much money and nothing to do but get rid of it. I'm sorry for her—in a way. It must be dreadful to have nothing to do other than find a way of filling in time."

Anne thought so too, and the conversation dropped. But it recurred to her again that evening when, during and after dinner, Fran seemed to monopolize the conversation and the whole of Nigel's attention. It was reminiscences of things they had done together—days on the river, point-to-point meets they had ridden in, the races they had attended, the parties and junkettings all over the county.

And when Fran's own memories ran

short, Mrs. Mandeville was always at hand to remind her of some other occasion when she and Nigel had been involved in something that was either amusing or plain silly, until it was impossible for Anne to avoid the impression that the two had been much closer friends than Nigel had cared to admit.

Not that it mattered, of course, Anne told herself. But she could not help wishing that Fran Wentworth had not come to Rashleigh Hall while they were there, for she was a disturbing factor with her gleaming platinum blonde hair, her high spirits and her money. It seemed to Anne that the girl had everything, and it did not improve matters to have to sit back and realise what a favourite she was with Nigel's mother.

For the first time since she had arrived at Rashleigh Hall, Anne did not sleep well that night. She was disturbed in her mind, and her dreams were troubled. And when she went downstairs in the morning, expecting to find Nigel waiting for her—as usual—to take her for a walk round the gardens before breakfast, she found much to her surprise, only his mother standing in the hall.

Mrs. Mandeville greeted her with a smile. "Good morning, Anne," she said.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mandeville," Anne returned smiling. "Isn't Nigel up yet?"

"Oh yes, he's up and out," Mrs. Mandeville replied. "I hope they won't be late for breakfast, Nigel has gone out with Fran, trying that new car of hers."

"Oh," Anne murmured, and crossed to the window and pretended to be looking out for them down the drive.

"They've probably gone as far as High-  
trees," Mrs. Mandeville remarked, after a short silence. "I know Fran would like Nigel's opinion with regard to selling the house."

"Yes, of course," Anne said.

"You see, my dear, Fran and Nigel have been close friends for so many years. In fact, at one time—"

Mrs. Mandeville paused, and gestured with her hands.

Plainly she had second thoughts and intended to say no more, Anne told herself, but what she had in mind was only too obvious—"At one time," she had been going to say, "they were in love with each other!"

And suddenly, like a shaft of blinding light shining through the darkness, Anne knew more than that. The knowledge came to her with such force that she knew it for truth. It explained everything—the sudden appearance of the girl herself, the carefully directed conversation at dinner the previous night, and now this sudden early morning disappearance.

Yes, obviously the whole thing had been engineered from start to finish. Mrs. Mandeville had known that Fran was coming—she had most probably asked her to come, Anne told herself.

And the girl had readily agreed. She had come at once, and started in from the moment of her arrival to alienate Nigel from herself. Everything Mrs. Mandeville had said, everything she had done, Anne could now see had been directed towards that one end.

Now they were out together before breakfast, and Nigel's mother had taken yet one more opportunity to drive home to her the deep regard in which the young couple held each other.

"Ah! Here they come!" Mrs. Mandeville exclaimed, snapping the thread of Anne's thoughts and bringing up her head with a jerk.

Anne saw the car coming swiftly up the drive, with Nigel at the wheel and Fran

seated beside him. Both of them were bareheaded, their hair flying in the wind and laughing happily.

When the car pulled up at the door, Fran deliberately grabbed Nigel by his hair and shook his head playfully as though in retaliation for something he had just said or done.

Then, jumping out of the car, she ran swiftly into the house with Nigel chasing her.

"Oh, save me, Mrs. Mandeville!" she cried laughingly. "He's going to pull my hair."

"Little wretch—I'll do more than that!" Nigel warned, as he came pelting in after her. Then he caught sight of Anne, and laughed. "Hullo, darling?" he said breathlessly. "Sorry I've kept you waiting. I intended to be back before you came down, but that wretched Fran didn't tell me she was short of petrol and I've had to unfasten the spare tin and fill up for her."

Then, placing his hands on Anne's shoulders, he bent forward and kissed her.

"Nigel Mandeville, you'll never go to heaven!" Fran cried laughingly. "The real truth is this, Miss Riddon—that wretched fiance of yours wanted to give my car a try out. He said he would only run round the drive and back, but when we got to the gates, off he went down the road, and actually threatened to ditch me if I interfered with the man at the wheel."

"And, of course, he emptied the tank and then blamed me because I hadn't told him I had nearly ran out of petrol."

Fran laughed again, and went on—

"Really, Miss Riddon, you'll be marrying a tyrant when you marry that man! He hasn't changed a scrap since he used to threaten to throw me out of the punt if I didn't work harder. It isn't a wife your son needs, Mrs. Mandeville—it's a slave!" she added, smiling at Nigel's mother.

"I can't think now why I didn't throw you out of the punt, you—you little vixen!" Nigel said, grinning at her while he straightened his hair. "You aren't properly civilised yet, you know!"

Mrs. Mandeville smiled.

"Really," she said, "listening to you two puts the clock back a dozen years. As long as I can remember you have been arguing and fighting. Now please come along, Anne dear," she added. "Let's go in to breakfast and leave them to fight it out if they wish to do so."

"Not me!" cried Fran. "I've had enough of that young man for one day, and I'm hungry as a hunter!"

"Never knew you when you weren't!" Nigel retorted, grinning at her. "Whenever I used to meet you in the village you were always going into or coming out of old Miss Fletcher's cake shop!"

"That's another gross libel," Fran shot back at him. "I expect I was on an errand for mother at the time."

"And I don't!" said Nigel. "All the same," he added, as they went in to breakfast, "you're a nice kid, Fran, and it's awfully kind of you to lend me your car for the day, as I want to take Anne for a run to the sea."

Fran shrugged.

"Well, for the pinnacle of cheek that takes some beating," she said, smiling at Anne. "The young man maligns me, libels me, tells lies about me, and then calmly wants to borrow my beautiful new car for the day? Oh, Nigel darling, you're the absolute limit!"

#### To LOVE, THE VICTORY.

AT FTERWARDS, on looking back, Anne always considered that morning to have been the turning point in her dreams of happiness.

Until then, she had never mentioned the possibility of anything ever coming between herself and Nigel. That he loved her and thought of her as she loved and thought of him, she had never doubted. That they might not be able to marry because of the difference in their positions—yes, she had considered that possibility, but never that he might cease to love her.

Not that she actually knew it for truth now, she told herself again and again in the days that immediately followed. The trouble was that the events of that morning had planted the first seeds of doubt in her mind, so that without fully knowing it, she found herself attaching tremendous significance to many trivial things which she would never even have noticed.

And chief among them was the fact that never once, in speaking of Fran, had Nigel admitted—or even hinted at the fact—that at one time he had been in love with her. Either he had ignored the opening she had often offered him, or had affected not to notice it.

All of which only went to convince Anne that he was afraid and did not wish to tell her. And for that, in her view, there could only be one reason—he still was in love with the girl.

Not that she blamed him—she loved him far too much ever to be able to blame him for anything. On the contrary, she found plenty of grounds upon which to excuse him, the most obvious of which was the immense social gulf which separated Fran Wentworth from herself.

That was something Anne saw quite clearly, and could appreciate, in spite of the deep hurt of it. Fran had everything, while she had nothing. It would be impossible to blame any man for falling in love with Frances Wentworth yet, as Anne had to admit to herself, there was no perceptible difference in Nigel's attitude towards her. He was a little quieter, perhaps, a little more thoughtful.

But she put that down to the fact that he had been brought to his crossroads, just as she had been brought to hers. The reappearance of Fran in his life had brought him face to face with an impossible situation, and he—like Fran herself—was trying to take its measure and reach a decision.

Watching him sometimes, Anne knew a desperate urge to ask him for the truth. She wanted him to know that, in no circumstances, would she blame him for loving this other girl, or make the slightest attempt to hold him to his engagement. She loved him far too deeply for that, and all she wanted was his happiness.

But Anne was afraid—afraid that out of loyalty to her Nigel would deny it and insist upon honouring his promise to marry her. It would be the hardest thing she had ever done to give him up now, but she realised that it would be far better for her do that than risk marrying him knowing that in his secret heart he loved another girl.

So, as the remaining days of her holiday wasted away, Anne waited—and watched. And moving about the house like a presiding genius Mrs. Mandeville also waited and watched. She had no animosity against Anne; on the contrary, she rather liked the girl—but it would be a disaster to allow Nigel to marry her.

Her son and heir had a duty to his family and his friends, and with this factory girl out of the way, nothing was more certain than that Nigel would ask Fran to marry him. He had loved her in the past, and freed of this present entanglement he would love her again.

And Fran would accept him, Mrs. Mandeville felt quite sure of that. Then the dear boy would leave the factory and return once again to the fold. For Fran

would soon wean him away from his beloved machinery and such nonsense, and then they could live together at the Hall and be happy.

"By the way, Nigel dear," she announced at dinner one evening. "I was over at the Selwyns place this afternoon, and Jessie was complaining that, with the boys away, the horses are getting too fat for lack of exercise. I advised her to send three of them over here to-morrow morning and said that my young people would soon run some of the corn out of them and get the horses in proper trim again. So Jessie promised to send three mounts round to you soon after nine o'clock. Then you can all go off for a ride, can't you?"

"Oh, how splendid!" cried Fran. "I know, Nigel—we'll ride over the Weald to the Locklands place, shall we? I wanted to see Pam, and we'll invite ourselves to lunch and trot back during the afternoon. How's that? I can lend you riding kit, Miss Rigdon, if you haven't brought one with you," she raced on. "I'm simply longing to mount a horse again, and I must see Pam while I'm down here or she'll never forgive me. You'll love the Locklands, Miss Rigdon. They're charming people. Pam and I were at school together."

Anne gave a wan little smile.

"I'm sorry, Miss Wentworth, I do not ride," she murmured. "But that needn't prevent you and Nigel from going, of course. In any case, I was going to suggest staying in to-morrow morning, as I have quite a number of letters to write."

"Oh, no, Anne dear," Nigel said, "we're not going without you. Blow the letters, anyway—we're on holiday, aren't we?"

Mrs. Mandeville sighed.

"But the horses, Nigel?" she said. "It never occurred to me that you might not ride, Anne with Nigel so devoted to horses."

"Yes, mother, but please remember that Anne is not a country girl," Nigel said.

"You and Miss Wentworth had better go, Nigel," she smiled as bravely as she could. "And I'll stay here and write my letters," Anne urged, feeling very embarrassed.

"Yes, I think that would be best," agreed Mrs. Mandeville. "So you and Fran ride over to the Locklands, Nigel dear, and Anne and I will spend a quiet time here together."

Nigel hesitated a moment. Then—

"Are you quite sure you don't mind, Anne dear?" he asked. "I'm not at all happy in my mind about it, you know."

"Of course I don't mind, Nigel," she said, with forced lightness. "It would be a pity having the horses brought here all in vain, wouldn't it? And I shall have plenty to do to occupy my time while you are away."

But still Nigel seemed not to be entirely satisfied and for a moment or two his eyes probed hers for truth.

"There—there's nothing wrong, is there, darling?" he asked.

"Wrong?" she echoed, determined at all costs not to betray herself. "What on earth do you mean, Nigel? Of course there's nothing wrong. Why should there be?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered slowly. "But once or twice, this last day or two, I've thought you seemed a bit—well, withdrawn, if you know what I mean, Anne?"

"Nonsense, Nigel!" she said laughingly. "You're imagining things, I suppose. I'm feeling tired, that's all."

"And you're still my own sweet Anne, aren't you?"

"I shall always be that, Nigel dear," she told him, with a quiet solemnity that he was destined to remember for many a

long day.

"Then that's all right," he said, his eyes lighting up. "That's all that matters to me, darling," he added, and stooped to kiss her.

With sudden abandon, Anne threw her arms round his neck.

"Good night, Nigel darling!" she whispered. "You—you will be very careful to-morrow, won't you?"

"Yes, of course I will, my love" he promised, smiling into her blue eyes. "But there's nothing dangerous in horse-riding, you know. Late on, you'll be riding yourself, too—it's one of the first things I intend to teach you."

After kissing her again, Anne turned and ran lightly up the stairs to her room. But she did not at once begin to undress. Instead, she sat on the chair at her mirror and fell to wondering why she had not taken the opportunity to ask him straight out if he were in love with Fran Wentworth.

But all the time she knew she was afraid—afraid that he might answer "yes". Afraid, too, that he might answer "no"—because then she would not know what to believe. For having once pledged himself to her, Nigel would, no doubt, go through with it, regardless of the consequences.

And much as she loved him, Anne did not want him on those terms. If the break came at all it would have to come from her. But how could she make the break without letting him know her fear? she asked herself sadly.

It was close on midnight when at last she composed herself for sleep. Nevertheless, she was up early the following morning—although the others were up and about before her. When she went downstairs, she found Nigel and Fran in the morning-room, both dressed in riding clothes.

Nigel, looking very handsome in his hacking jacket, breeches and high leather riding boots, gave her an affectionate kiss.

Then Fran, looking incredibly attractive and boyish in her short jacket and immaculate jodhpurs, wished her a cheery good morning. So the girl was going to be with Nigel all the morning. Anne reflected sadly, riding by his side, her face flushed with excitement, her eyes shining . . .

The pain at Anne's heart grew and grew all through breakfast, and right up to the moment when they all went out to have a look at the horses. The brief inspection over, and having made their choice, Nigel assisted Fran into her saddle. The horse was fresh, and reared as he took her weight. Then Nigel sprang into his saddle, and with a gay wave, they trotted off towards the gate.

"They were an unbeatable pair at all the county horse-shows a few years back," Mrs. Mandeville remarked proudly, as she and Anne returned slowly to the house. "They were always in great demand at the local gymkhana. It's rather a pity you have so few of the ordinary country-girl's accomplishments, isn't it, Anne?" she added. "I think it is such a help and pleasure to a man when his wife shares his hobbies and sports and interests. Such a great stabilising influence, too."

The carefully barbed shaft went home, but Anne made no reply. In that moment she understood why Mrs. Mandeville had asked for the horses to be sent. Nigel's mother must have known that she did not ride, and had availed herself of yet one more opportunity of demonstrating to her the unbridgeable gulf that lay between herself and the man she loved.

It was then, quite suddenly, that Anne saw how—if she had to make the break—it could best be done without giving her real reason. It would be quite simple to say that, after her short stay at Rash-

leigh Hall, she had been forced to realise her own inadequacy to fit in with such grand surroundings; that she had not been born to his kind of life and knew now that she could never be happy in living it.

Therefore, she would ask him to release her from her promise to marry him, and he would then be free to turn to his old love!

Back in the house again, Mrs. Mandeville asked Anne if she really did wish to write letters, or was there anything else she would like to do.

"I don't suppose for a moment that the Locklands will let Fran and Nigel start back until late to-day," she went on. "It has been such a long time since Nigel went over there, and longer still since he and Fran used so often to ride there together."

"In any case, Mrs. Mandeville, I expect they'll be back for tea," Anne murmured.

"I very much doubt it, my dear," she said. "Neither of them ever had much idea of time when they were out together; but it's a thing they never had to bother about."

Anne knew a wild desire to scream. The woman was so terribly obvious in her intentions—she was always bracketing those two together.

"But Nigel has a better idea of time now," she could not resist the temptation to say. "You see people who work in a factory have to."

Mrs. Mandeville sighed.

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "Nigel was never intended for that kind of thing, and I don't believe he would ever have gone in for wretched industrial business if Fran had not gone away."

"I—I see," Anne said. "And now, if you will excuse me, Mrs. Mandeville, I think I had better get on with the letters I have to write."

"Yes, please do, my dear. Just do as you like, of course. You will find everything you need in the library."

Anne thanked her and walked away. She could stand no more of it. The woman's determination to be rid of her was too evident to be ignored. The whole situation had become completely impossible, and the sooner she was out of it the better it would be for all concerned, Anne told herself.

In the library, she sat down and considered for a minute or two and then wrote to her father. She told him straight out that she was very unhappy and wanted to come home, and asked him to write to her by return and say that he wished her to come back at once. She promised to tell him all about it when she got home.

She then wrote to Mary, telling her that things had not turned out at all as she had expected, and that dad and she must put their heads together to devise a good excuse for calling her back home.

This done, she sealed and addressed the letters, and as there was plenty of time before lunch, she walked into the village and dropped them in the pillar-box.

After lunch, when they were sitting over coffee in the drawing-room, Mrs. Mandeville suddenly suggested that some of the family photographs might interest her guest. Anne knew at once exactly what to expect.

The photographs showed Nigel as a baby, as a boy at school, and finally as a young man. There came a stream of others showing him with Fran—Nigel and Fran in the punt, Nigel and Fran in a car, Nigel and Fran with their horses after winning the So-and-so Stakes. Nigel and Fran doing this, Nigel and Fran in Switzerland and so on.

"I always enjoy looking at old photographs, don't you, dear?" Mrs. Mandeville remarked, when at last she came to the end of her treasures.

Anne nodded.

"Yes, they—they're very interesting and instructive, aren't they?" she said. "And now I think I'll go for a walk, Mrs. Mandeville, if you don't mind," she added, rising and crossing to the window. "It's rather a pity to spend such a lovely afternoon indoors, isn't it?"

Her hostess nodded her agreement.

"Please just do as you like, my dear," she said. "You have come to enjoy yourself, haven't you?"

ANNE sauntered into the wood where she had frequently gone with Nigel before the arrival of the new guest. And here, sitting on a fallen tree with only the twittering of the birds to break the heavy silence, her thoughts wandered back upon her lost happiness.

The more she pondered it, the more incredible it all seemed. Only a week ago, had anyone had told her that she would be sitting in there alone while Nigel was away spending most of the day with another girl, she would have laughed the idea to scorn. And if anyone had told her that he would be in love with another girl, she would have thought that person stark crazy.

Yet it had happened, and she had to face up to the fact. The dream was over, the past already lay in ashes. Nothing was left to her now but to go forward—alone.

She did not blame Nigel for what had happened. It was not his fault that the old, half-forgotten love had flared into an all-conquering flame in his heart again. No one could control such things, of course. Love came in its own time and in its own way, and there was nothing one could do about it. However, better a thousand times awakening had come now, rather than after they were married, she told herself sadly.

Nevertheless, it was a very hard blow to bear, and when presently, she became aware of the lengthening shadows, Anne sprang to her feet with an exclamation of dismay. It was with a strangely empty feeling in her heart that she set out to return to the house. She supposed they would have returned by now, and must therefore prepare herself for the ordeal of meeting them.

"If only I could slip away without seeing them!" she thought desperately, as she walked slowly back. If only her home in Cornford Street had been on the telephone so that she might have got in touch with her father and sister quickly! They could have phoned her by this time and she might even have been on her way home by now.

Home! She thought of it with all the urgency of a wounded animal fighting off pain until it could lie down in the shelter of its own lair. At home she would be safe. At home she could lie in her own room, and need face none save those who truly loved her.

As she drew nearer the house, coming in through the paddock and the gardens, she saw Mrs. Mandeville standing in the gravel drive gazing towards the gates. She turned sharply as she heard the sound of Anne's approaching footsteps.

"Oh, so it's you, Anne?" she said, on a note of relief. "I was getting quite worried about you. I thought you must have lost your way back when you did not return for tea."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Mandeville. I—I walked farther than I had thought," Anne stammered mendaciously. "Are the others back?"

"No, they're not and I think it's very naughty of them," Mrs. Mandeville answered. "Although I did not expect them back until after tea, I certainly did think they would deem it advisable to return before darkness set in," she added, a note of anxiety in her voice.

"But they will be able to ride in the dark, won't they?" Anne murmured.

Mrs. Mandeville laughed.

"My dear child, Fran and Nigel would ride through the plagues of Egypt if they felt like it!" she said. "But come along in—you must be simply starving unless you had something to eat while you were out?"

Anne hesitated a moment, and then said that she had tea at a wayside cafe, and together they went into the house.

"I think I would like to have a bath, Mrs. Mandeville," she added, wishing to be alone.

"Yes, please do, my dear," Mrs. Mandeville said. "The others will be back by then, no doubt—that is, unless they have completely forgotten us and have decided to spend the night there."

"Spend the night there!" Anne repeated dully to herself as she went upstairs. Oh no, Nigel would certainly not do that. No matter what pressure the Locklands might bring to bear upon him, he would not let her down like that.

She closed her bedroom door and went over to the window. The twilight was deepening to darkness now, and as she looked out across the lawns and gardens to the wide sweep of countryside stretching to the far horizon, the world seemed strangely hushed and still. So much so, that as she stood there, all unbidden to her memory came the opening lines of Gray's immortal "Elegy"—

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea;  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

"And—to me!" she whispered sadly, as she leaned her aching brow against the cool glass of the window. Her world was certainly turning to darkness now. Its light extinguished. Without Nigel, there seemed nothing left to live for.

How long she remained standing there she never knew. Suddenly she became aware of voices in the hall, and told herself that the riders must have returned at last. Reluctantly she opened the bedroom door and walked along the corridor to the staircase, then stopped and listened intently.

A man was speaking, rapidly and urgently, but it was not Nigel's voice. Then came a high-pitched, hysterical voice which she recognised for Fran's.

Evidently something serious must have happened, Anne told herself, and Nigel had not returned! Forgetting everything else, she rushed down the stairs. Anne gave a horrified gasp as she saw two men in the hall bending over the stricken figure of Nigel's mother who had collapsed in a chair. One of the men was holding a glass of water to her lips.

"Oh, what—what has happened?" Anne cried in alarm.

One of the men turned and looked at her. He was an elderly man, with iron grey hair and a grave face.

"Has—has something happened to—to Nigel?" she gasped breathlessly.

The man nodded.

"Are you Miss Anne Rigdon?" he asked.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Nigel has told me all about you," he said. "I'm Jim Lockland." He paused,

then added—"I'm very sorry to have to tell you that there has been a serious accident and Nigel has been taken to hospital."

Anne's heart seemed to stop beating.

"You—you mean he's—" she began.

"I'm afraid his face is rather badly injured." Jim Lockland went on, when her voice faltered. "Nigel and Fran were riding back home through the woods in the dark, and, unfortunately, an overhanging bough caught Nigel in the face."

"His—his face!" Anne stammered, and gripped the back of a nearby chair while she fought off the giddiness that assailed her.

"I'll get you a glass of water, Miss Rigdon," she heard Jim Lockland saying, but she waved the offer aside.

"No, I—I'm all right, thank you," she hastened to assure him. "Was there no internal injury?" she forced herself to ask.

"The doctors don't seem to think so," he replied.

"Oh, thank Heaven for that!" Anne breathed fervently.

"Yes, on the whole, Miss Rigdon, I suppose we must regard it as a lucky escape for the dear boy," Jim Lockland remarked thoughtfully. "But I'm afraid Nigel will be rather badly disfigured for some time."

Anne drew a deep breath. Some of the colour was now returning to her cheeks.

"Oh, but that is of only secondary importance, Mr. Lockland," she said.

"Is it?" shrilled Fran, who had overheard the remark as she came hurrying downstairs from her room. "You—you don't know what you're talking about—you haven't seen him. Well, I have, and I shall never forget the awful sight. It—it will haunt me for the rest of my life," she added, hysterically, and covered her face with her hands.

Anne frowned. In the excitement of the moment, she had completely forgotten Nigel's mother and hurried to her side. She had now partially recovered from the sudden shock of the news and was sitting up in her chair, but her face was still deathly pale.

Anne knelt beside her, and murmured words of comfort to her.

"Please try not to worry unduly, my dear Mrs. Mandeville," she pleaded. "I feel sure Nigel will soon be all right again. It—it could have been so much more serious, couldn't it?"

"What worse fate could have happened to Nigel than to have his face smashed to pulp and be disfigured for life?" Fran burst out, in the same hysterical fashion, and then—hurried across the hall and went upstairs again.

Anne sighed in despair.

"Shall I—shall I go and see if she is all right Mrs. Mandeville?" she asked.

Mrs. Mandeville shook her head firmly.

"No, my dear," she said. "You and I have more urgent and important things to think of now." She then turned to Jim Lockland and added—"In the absence of my son, Mr. Lockland, it becomes my proud privilege to present to you his fiancee—Miss Anne Rigdon!"

Tears sprang to Anne's eyes, and a lump came to her throat as she realised the significance of what Nigel's mother had said. She thought of Nigel lying in hospital badly injured, of her own desperate unhappiness during the past few days, and of the despairing letters she had posted home that day.

WHEN, later on that night, Nigel's mother and Anne were sitting in the drawing-room, after putting through a last call to the hospital, Mrs. Mandeville took Anne's hand and stroked it gently.

"I—I have a confession to make to you, my dear—and an apology," she began, in a quavering voice.

"Oh no, please, Mrs. Mandeville," Anne said quickly. "I would rather you did nothing of the kind. I—I quite understand and sympathise with your feelings about—about everything. You were, of course, thinking only of Nigel's happiness, and please believe me when I say that is all I have ever thought of myself."

A short silence followed. Then—

"Very well, my dear," Mrs. Mandeville said softly. "But from now on we will think of Nigel's happiness together, shall we, Anne? A few hours ago, but for God's mercy, my dear son might have completely lost his sight. And by the same mercy, my eyes have been opened to the truth. I realise now that I have done you a gross injustice, my dear Anne, and I will do my best to make full amends for it in the years to come! . . . ."

IT was three days before they were allowed to see Nigel and much had happened in the meantime.

Fran Wentworth had taken a hurried departure—Mrs. Mandeville had refused to see her—and Anne had received the expected letter from her father requesting her to return home at once.

Anne had sent him a telegram explaining what had happened. Also, she had telephoned the news of Nigel's accident to the firm, and had asked for a few extra days leave, which had been readily granted.

The chauffeur drove them to the hospital, and the sister in charge gave them a smiling greeting.

"Ten minutes only to-day," she said. "And there must be very little conversation as it will be very difficult for the patient to talk with his head and face so heavily bandaged. 'Are you 'Anne', may I ask?' the sister added, smiling at Anne. And when Anne nodded: 'Oh, well, I am quite sure 'the patient will be very pleased to see you, for we all know about 'Anne'!'" she added with a knowing smile.

The sister suggested that it might be advisable for them to see the patient separately.

"You go in first, dear," Mrs. Mandeville urged, in a wavering voice.

She then sank into a chair in the waiting-room, and the sister took Anne along a corridor to a private ward. She opened the door and stood aside for her to enter.

Anne steadied herself for the ordeal. Tiptoeing to the bed, she saw a mass of bandages on the pillow, and for a split second her nerve failed. Then she saw a hand—Nigel's hand—resting on the cover-

let, and next moment she was on her knees and pressing it to her lips.

"Darling—oh Nigel darling!" she whispered. "It is me—Anne!"

"My darling Anne," came in a muffled tone through the bandages. "Come nearer, so that I can see you, my love. Oh, how I've waited and longed for this precious moment! I—I'm afraid I'm not very presentable, darling."

"As if we cared about that, my dearest!" she murmured. "At any rate, you can see me with one eye, can't you, darling?" she added tenderly, as she caught sight of his left eye peeping at her from between the layers of bandaging.

"Yes, of course I can, sweetheart," came the muffled reply.

For a long moment he lay silently watching her. Then the eye closed, and when he opened it again, Anne noticed that it was suspiciously bright.

"Darling," he said hoarsely, "I—I'm almost afraid to ask you this, but I have to know, Anne, and I want you to know, too. I—I fear I shall look an awful sight when they take these bandages off, and I want you to know that—that if you are too shocked—well, I should quite understand if you changed your mind!"

"Oh, Nigel—as if I could do such a thing!" she said, with gentle reproach. "I—I love you more than ever, notwithstanding everything, and shall continue to do so always and forever, my darling. And—and as soon as ever you are able to be up and about again I want you to make me your wife!"

He did not speak. His hands felt for and tightened about hers, and from his one good eye a tear broke loose and was lost among the bandages.

It was then that he caught a glimpse of his mother standing on the other side of his bed.

"Mother!" he murmured faintly.

"Oh my dear Nigel!" she whispered, her lips trembling with compassion as she looked down upon him. "My poor darling!"

"Your rich darling, mother!" he muttered. "I can never be poor, not as long as I have Anne and you!"

"That's right, Nigel dear," his mother said fervently. "Anne is going to stay with me, and I'm never going to let her go—never again, Nigel."

He gave a contented sigh. A few moments later, there came a gentle tap on the door and the sister appeared.

"I'm afraid your time is up," she said smilingly. "We must not tire the patient too much with this first visit."

Anne nodded understandingly. She took Nigel's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"I love you—both of you," Nigel whispered.

"We love you, too, darling." Anne whispered back. "Both of us—for always."

They smiled and waved to him from the door, and the sister accompanied them along the corridor.

"You must not be too distressed, either of you," she said, in her kindly fashion. "Our surgeons are confident that there will be nothing much wrong with the patient by the time they have finished with him. Fortunately, there is no other injury, so that you have a lot to be thankful for."

"Yes, and we are thankful—very thankful indeed, sister," murmured Mrs. Mandeville, with a wavering smile.

As they drove back to Rashleigh Hall, Mrs. Mandeville took Anne's hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"At this moment, dear, I think I must be the happiest woman in all the world!" she murmured. "Happy for Nigel that he has won your love; happy for you that you have his, and happy for myself that I have you both with me. And I—and I really don't deserve it, my dearest Anne," she went on, "for I've been doing my best to spoil the most beautiful thing that has ever come into my life, and—"

"Oh, no-no, dear Mrs. Mandeville," Anne broke in smilingly. "All that is all over and done with, isn't it? After all, it was but a cloud in the sky—and it has now disappeared for ever. Nigel will soon be himself again, and he loves you. I love you, too. By the way," Anne added, a little hesitatingly, "I noticed that Nigel made no reference to—Fran."

"No, of course not, my dear," Mrs. Mandeville said. "Nigel never cared two straws about the girl. He never did think of Fran save as a sort of younger sister. It—it was I who tried to make you think that, because I have always hoped that one day he might—"

"Yes, I—I quite understand," Anne broke in, when Mrs. Mandeville's voice faltered. "Naturally, you tried to do what you thought would make for Nigel's happiness."

Mrs. Mandeville sighed.

"How very generous you are, my dear!" she murmured brokenly.

Anne smiled.

"Yes, and very happy, my dear Mrs. Mandeville," she said softly.

She had known sadness, known heart-break, but the years ahead would be all the richer for the experience, Anne told herself. Having known the agony of losing, she would hold, as even more precious still, the love she thought she had lost for ever!

THE END.

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## FAITHFUL TO LOVE

By Joan Telscombe

### WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

"AND when do you expect this paragon of virtue to arrive, my dear Christine?" asked Phillip Conway, his long fingers busily peeling an apple with a fruit knife.

At the hint of amused sarcasm in her brother's voice Christine Jessop smiled.

Dusk was beginning to gather in the spacious garden where they sat, making pools of shadows under the trees on the far side of the lawn.

Phillip was, as usual, in the invalid chair in which he spent nearly all his days, a heavy rug over his knees, his pipe and book

on a nearby table, together with a small, portable radio set.

Married and a year older than her brother, Christine was fair as he was dark, with charmingly irregular features and a sensitive mouth.

Extremely fond of her brother, the tragedy which had darkened his young life had cast its shadow over Christine as well. Yet her delightful sense of fun was never very long absent and showed itself now in the amused expression which crept into her eyes.

"I expect her to be on the train which arrives at Little Beddington at seven-fifteen," she replied, without looking up from her knitting. "I shall take the car

to meet her, of course. Margaret will be safely in bed by that time, and in any case Nanna will be here. I won't be gone long."

"Presumably you said all that for my benefit," Phillip remarked, laying the fruit knife carefully beside his plate. "Though why you should imagine I mind being left alone I have no idea. You know, I am beginning to think you have engaged this girl solely in order to give yourself more time to fuss over me."

"I don't fuss," said Christine placidly. "But you men are all alike! You think you are so self-sufficient that you hate the very thought of being dependent upon some-

one else."

"Not at all. But no one likes to feel that he is a nuisance."

"If you feel like that, then I am to blame," said Christine quietly. "I am quite sure that I have never—"

"I know. Of course you haven't," he interrupted hastily. "But you can't run away from facts, however much you may wish to do so. I'm a burden to you and everybody else, myself included."

"Now you are just being sorry for yourself," said Christine, knowing from past experience what line to adopt. "It doesn't do any good and besides, you've got a very great deal to be thankful for. When you fell into that crater you might have been killed, you know!"

"It would have solved a great many problems if I had been," he replied, a little bitterly. "As it was—" He shrugged, and popped a slice of the apple into his mouth. Then, after eating in silence for a while: "What do you know about this girl you've engaged?"

His sister looked up and stopped knitting.

"I know that she comes of a respectable family," she said, "that she was a probationer nurse at a big London hospital and nearly died last year when she caught bad dose of pneumonia, after which she had to give up nursing. She is twenty-two and her name is Jessica Grant."

"H'm!" said Phillip, cutting another slice of apple. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?" Christine asked.

"Not by long chalks," he said, shaking his head. "If David were here I am quite sure he wouldn't approve of your engaging someone out of the blue like this as a governess for your daughter."

Christine laughed.

"David would have more faith in my judgment," she said, her eyes twinkling. "He hasn't a nasty, suspicious legal mind like you."

Phillip grinned, the sudden change of expression giving him an attractive, almost boyish appearance.

"Having dealt with human nature in the raw I have naturally developed a suspicious mind," he said. "After all, what you have told me about this girl doesn't take you very far, does it? You know her age and qualifications, and presumably her references are in order. But what of the girl herself? She may be flighty, with what are commonly known as boy-friends lurking in the background. Or she may be some mercenary little minx with an eye to the main chance. And yet, not knowing, you propose to entrust her with Margaret's welfare!"

Christine laughed outright.

"I don't think she'll prove to be either one or the other, Phillip," she said. "When I interviewed her at the agency in London she struck me as being a quiet, sensible sort of girl with a natural refinement that spoke of a good background. Both her parents are dead, I understand, and she has no living relatives. Her only brother was killed during the war."

"Naturally those considerations were recommendation enough for you, Phillip said, with heavy sarcasm. "Helping lame dogs over stiles seems to be almost an obsession with you, Christine. I wonder you haven't been disillusioned long ago, or haven't you allowed yourself to be?"

His sister smiled, but said nothing. The rather sardonic humour which frequently marked his conversation was, to her, only evidence of the bitterness her brother concealed from the world.

To see him now, to understand the fine-drawn look of suffering on his dark, handsome features, it was hard to believe that only a year ago he had stood near

the top of his profession as a barrister; that climbing a mountain or sailing a yacht had been mere pastimes to him.

Phillip loved mountains, and had always maintained that to see one was to be filled with the urge to get to the top of it.

He had been—and still was—a member of the Alpine Club, and had spent all his holiday time in the Peak District, where some of the toughest rock climbing in the world was to be had.

A year ago he had been asked to join a party on a climbing expedition in North Africa, where a recently mapped range of mountains offered new ground for the enthusiast. That had been his last climb.

Christine had been in Malta at the time and by using all the influence at her command, had managed to reach the French frontier hospital where her brother had been carried after the accident that had left him a cripple—possibly for life.

David Jessop, her husband, was a naval officer, stationed in Malta. At the time of the accident to her brother, Christine had been about to return to Beddington Manor, in Sussex, in order that Margaret, their only child, should have an English upbringing. So she had brought Phillip home as well—on a stretcher.

After two major operations, and nearly three months in a London hospital, he had been left to face the knowledge that he might never walk again, and that—if a miracle happened—recovery would be painfully slow.

It had fallen to Christine to break the news to him, and she would never forget the stricken look which had come into his eyes when at last he had understood what she was trying to tell him.

For a long time after that he had scarcely spoken, and it had seemed to her that for a while he had lost all incentive to live.

Later, however, his natural courage had re-asserted itself, so that while it could not be said that he meekly accepted the cruel blow that life had dealt him, he became resigned to it and raised no objection when Christine had proposed that he make his home at Beddington Manor, the gracious old country house that they had seen advertised in a famous London newspaper, and had bought.

Fortunately she and Phillip had always been very close, and often her thoughts would go back to the gloomy old house in Northumberland where they had been born and where their lives had been ruled over by a father with very old-fashioned ideas as to how children should be brought up, and how a wife should behave to her husband.

Their mother had been meekly submissive to him, her spirit broken long years before, so that Christine always thought of her mother's death as a merciful escape from tyranny.

Thereafter they had been brought up by their father and often Christine would look back on the times when Phillip sat up far into the night studying the law books he had borrowed from the solicitor to whom he had been articled.

Sometimes she had got out of bed when her father was asleep and gone down to the kitchen to make her brother cocoa. Sitting in front of a dying fire, holding cups in their hands, they had planned their future.

It certainly had not turned out as they had planned.

Christine had wanted to take a domestic science degree, but her father had bluntly refused to provide the money for her training.

Later she had met David at a neighbour's Christmas party and they had fallen in love. Even though she had been nineteen, Christine had not dared to tell her father

that she had formed an attachment for anyone, neither had she been able to ask David back to the old house. It had looked as if she would have to wait until she was twenty-one before telling him.

But as events had turned out her father had died suddenly during a great snow-storm in which he had been caught.

The two children had shared his property. Phillip had gone to London to continue his studies, becoming a barrister three years later. Then Christine and David had married, and a year later Margaret had been born.

All had gone well—until Phillip's accident. Then, in many ways, their future had to be planned again.

CHRISTINE took the car and met the seven-fifteen train from Horsham. When it arrived—ten minutes late—there were an unusual number of passengers.

As she walked along the line of carriages she remembered that there had been a cattle fair in Horsham, which probably accounted for it.

Jessica Grant alighted from the last coach. As Christine came up she turned, a slightly nervous smile on her lips. "She's very lovely," Christine thought, without a trace of envy.

And it was certainly true that the younger girl would cause many a male head to turn admiring glances in her direction. She had glossy brown hair, cut fashionably short, dark eyes and a slim, upright figure that was set off by a fawn-coloured costume and skirt and attractive little hat.

"Good evening, Miss Grant," Christine greeted her, holding out her hand. "I hope you haven't had too tiring a journey. These cross-country trains are never very fast."

Jessica smiled.

"It wasn't a bad journey, thank you, Mrs. Jessop," she murmured. "We were crowded for quite a way—I think there was a cattle fair on somewhere or other, to judge by the talk that went on around me. I enjoyed the countryside, though. It's lovely."

"You said you liked the country, I remember," Christine answered. She glanced at the girl's two small suitcases on the platform. "Is your trunk in the guard's van?"

"Yes. One of the porters has gone to get it," said the other.

"Oh, good," said Christine. "We can manage these, then. Come along, Miss Grant. The car is just outside."

A few minutes later Christine drove the car out of the little town and entered a long, straight road flanked by beech trees.

"I do hope you are going to like it here," she said, signalling an overtaking lorry to pass. "Little Beddington is hardly more than a village, but it is very quaint and has lots of attractions. This is said to be one of the loveliest parts of Sussex, you know. We are right on the edge of Ashdown Forest, and some of the villages go back to Norman times." She smiled at the girl. "Beddington Manor is very old, like so many of the houses round about, and parts of it were built soon after the battle of Hastings. But of course it has all been rebuilt and brought up to date."

"It sounds lovely," smiled the newcomer.

"I find it nice—but then, I'm prejudiced," laughed Christine. "Some people might find it rather lonely—the nearest house is half a mile away. If you follow the road which passes the gate you come to a tiny hamlet tucked away in the folds of the hills where one can buy sweets and stamps and things of that kind."

"How very delightful. It makes me think of home."

"Your home was in the Lake District, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I was brought up on a farm near Ambleside," said Jessica.

"What made you decide to go in for nursing?" Christine asked.

Jessica hesitated, a far-away look in her eyes.

"I'm not sure I can answer that," she murmured, at length. "My father died when I was eleven and mother had to sell the farm. She died a year later and I went to live with my aunt in Scotland. When I left school I had to think about earning my living and working in an office or behind a counter did not appeal to me. I think, probably, I felt that if I became a nurse I would be doing somethin' useful."

"I can understand that," said Christine. "I somehow can't imagine you cooped up in an office!" She laughed gently. "At any rate, you will be doing something useful by taking Margaret under your wing! As I explained before, my husband is a naval officer and is still serving in the Middle East. Margaret is reaching the age when she needs a governess, for I am afraid that between us we have rather spoilt her. There is nothing but a village school near us, and she isn't yet old enough to go to boarding school. So you will have to fill the gap."

"I hope I can succeed. I'll do my best, you may be sure of that, Mrs. Jessop," said the other.

"I am sure, my dear. I flatter myself that I am a good judge of character, and as soon as we met I felt quite certain that you were just the right person to look after Margaret.

"We are quite a small household," Christine continued. "My husband's old nurse has been looking after Margaret up to now, and we have a maid who comes in each day. Then there is my brother, Phillip Conway, and his valet, Benson. My brother is an invalid and must have someone to look after him, you see. Fortunately, Benson is devoted to him, and takes a great deal of worry and responsibility off my shoulders."

She went on to tell Jessica about the climbing accident and her brother's profession, for it was necessary that the girl should know enough to enable her to fit into the household. For only by a thorough understanding of the situation would she be able to make the necessary allowances.

"It was a very great tragedy," Christine concluded. "Phillip was doing very well at the time it all happened, and big things were predicted for him. Now, all he gets is a little research work from some of his solicitor friends—barely enough to keep his mind occupied."

"What a terrible thing," said Jessica sympathetically. "Is there no hope of Mr. Conway making a recovery?"

"So little that it will be something in the nature of a miracle if he does," replied Christine. "His doctor is a very good man and insists that it is only a matter of time before Phillip walks again. But whether he says that merely to bolster up my brother's courage, I cannot say. There is another thing—"

Here she hesitated a moment, torn between expediency and loyalty to her brother. Then she decided that Jessica Grant was the type of person it was safe to tell.

"Phillip was engaged to a girl he met in Switzerland the year previously, but when she heard the extent of his injuries she broke it off. Naturally, Phillip became rather—well, embittered and cynical, so I am afraid you will have to make allowances."

"She must have been completely heartless," said Jessica, a note of indignation in her voice.

"I suppose from some points of view

she was," said Christine, with a little smile of tolerance. "But she was the only daughter of wealthy parents and had been rather spoiled, so perhaps it was only to be expected. The truth is, of course, she wasn't really in love with Phillip, so it never occurred to her that she was letting him down in the worst possible way."

Jessica said nothing. She had been thinking a great deal about the new environment she was entering, wondering how everything would turn out and what her young charge would be like. It was going to complicate matters quite a lot if she had to contend with an embittered invalid who had a poor opinion of women in general because one of them had let him down.

Presently they turned in through a pair of big iron gates opening on to a short, gravelled drive, with a long grey stone old house in the background.

Mellowed by the years, Beddington Manor looked what it was, serene and friendly and permanent, its two rows of windows twinkling in the last rays of the setting sun.

"How lovely!" Jessica exclaimed involuntarily.

Christine smiled.

"It's a delightful old house, full of quaint nooks and crannies, and we love it," she said. "It's the first permanent home I've had. Up to now I have been following my husband half-way round the world, living in married quarters. Now that he is taking on a shore job at the Admiralty in London we can begin to settle down. And what better place to do it than this?"

"It's perfect," sighed Jessica.

It was perfect, she reflected a little later, when she stood at the window of the room that had been got ready for her.

Before her stretched the Sussex Weald in all its purple glory, the trees silhouetted against the sky, each a thousand tangled shape of leaves and branches in the gathering darkness.

Away to the right the Norman spire of the parish church broke the skyline; to the left the downs lifted their gentle contours before sweeping downwards again to the English Channel.

The room was large, with a beamed ceiling and wide, old-fashioned stone fireplace. There was a heavy grey carpet and the furniture, of well-polished oak, was in keeping—an easy chair, a writing table, and a low book-case.

A bowl of flowers stood on the writing table and it was obvious that a great deal of care and consideration had gone to making the room one in which a young woman would feel at home.

Soon after arriving she had been taken to the small room next to the nursery to peep at Margaret—a chubby, rosy-cheeked little girl of five who was sound asleep, with a Teddy-bear clasped tightly in her arms.

She had also met Nanna, a tall, gaunt Scotswoman who, Jessica gathered, had known Commander David Jessop, D.S.O., since a baby, and who spoke to her employer with the respectful familiarity of an old and trusted retainer.

She had not yet met Phillip Conway.

Well, she thought, with a little half smile, he had nothing to fear from her! After her solitary excursion into the field of romance the less she had to do with men the better.

But the trouble was, she had to admit, one didn't get over that kind of thing in a hurry. Even now, after nearly a year, she could not think of Derek Carson without a sharp little pang that reminded her of the fleeting happiness she had found in his arms.

Aged twenty-six, Derek had been assist-

ant house-surgeon at St. Giles, the London hospital where she had worked.

Gay, reckless and handsome, he had been immensely popular with everyone, and Jessica had not been at the hospital very long before he had singled her out from the others.

Owning a small car, he had taken her out for long drives into the country, or to dine and dance at places which a mere nurse would not ordinarily have dreamed of visiting. Not that it mattered to her where they went, for she was so deeply in love with him that half the time she was completely unaware of her surroundings.

Had she listened to the hints that were let drop by her fellow nurses she would have known that it could not last. It had not!

Yet, for a time at least, she had been certain that Derek had really loved her. And she had begun to build her future around the dream that one day she would be his wife.

Then, quite suddenly, he had passed out of her life.

Apparently an opportunity had come his way in the shape of a Colonial appointment as Principal Medical Officer of Health in a West African protectorate, with good pay and prospects.

He had said nothing to Jessica about it while the negotiations had been in progress, but one night, when he had brought her back to the nurses' home, after a dance, he had casually broken the news that he was leaving St. Giles at the end of that week. She had been stunned and dazed, unable to believe it.

Her pride in the dust, she had written to him at the address he had given her, but the letters had gone unanswered. Even now her cheeks burned at the recollection of what she had said in those letters—how she had begged him to return and she would forgive him everything.

Soon after he had gone she had gone to bed with a severe attack of bronchial pneumonia.

For some weeks she had been very ill indeed, and when she had been on the road to recovery the hospital doctor had spoken frankly about her future.

"You've become too fine drawn altogether, Miss Grant," he had said bluntly. "Being a nurse takes everything out of a person, and it isn't your fault if you can't make the grade. Frankly, if you take my advice you'll think seriously about going on with it as your career. There are other things you can do that won't take it out of you quite so much. Just think it over."

Jessica had smiled bitterly to herself at the time. It had been her first experience of the effects of an emotional crisis on one's physical well-being, but it had given her plenty to think about.

Evidently the doctor had put in a report about her, for a few days later no less a person than matron herself had come to her bedside. She had been kind, very kind, but the sum and substance of what matron had said had put an end to her hopes of becoming a qualified nurse.

Long after the other had gone Jessica had lain with her face pressed into the pillow, a prey to a bitterness and humiliation too great to be contained.

As the days had turned to weeks, the weeks to months, she had resolutely tried to put Derek out of her mind. But all too plainly she had been forced to acknowledge that Derek had never really loved her; that he had been amusing himself, his vanity flattered by a young girl's infatuation. Only then had she seen him in his true colours—a cad!

There had followed a period during which she had spent three months with her aunt

in Scotland, taking long walks up the Tweed Valley or sitting on the ramparts of an old castle in the warm spring sunshine, so that she had gradually got back her strength.

Later, she had returned to London and put her name down on an agency's books for work as a children's governess.

But work of the kind she sought was not easily come by, although there were thousands of other jobs available.

For a while she took a daily job as a children's nurse and just as she was beginning to despair of getting a more permanent post the agency put her in touch with Christine, who wanted a governess for her young daughter.

Now, with a sigh, she turned away from the window and started to unpack.

She had prayed hard that she might get the job and it seemed that her prayers had been answered. It was up to her to make good, to justify her new employer's choice, and dwelling on the past—and Derek—was not likely to help. From this moment she must start her life anew!

TWO months had passed since Jessica had arrived at Beddington Manor. Two months that had slipped by so quickly that it was difficult to realise that she had been there all that time.

By now it was nice to know that she had made a big personal success; even Nanna admitting that she knew as much about handling a small child as the old lady herself.

Margaret adored her new governess, so that Jessica found her task of moulding the child's character a comparatively easy one.

For her age, the little girl was quick and intelligent and absorbed her simple lessons with no difficulty at all.

On their daily walks over the downs she proved to be a delightful companion, eager to show her beloved Miss Grant the hidden places where sweet-smelling herbs and wild flowers grew in profusion.

Christine made no secret of the fact that she was pleased with all that Jessica did. She could be firm without being brusque, and Margaret soon learned that her "No" meant precisely that, and that no amount of wheedling would alter a decision.

"You must admit that my faith in Miss Grant has been more than justified, Phillip," Christine said to her brother one day, as she joined him on the terrace. "Margaret simply adores her and her ways and knowledge improve every day!"

Phillip shrugged, his glance roving to where Margaret and Jessica were playing bat and ball at the other side of the lawn. Christine's Cairn terrier, Nipper, raced from one to the other in a state of wild excitement in an endeavour to intercept the ball.

"Better touch wood when you say a thing like that," he replied, half humorously. "After all, she has only been here—two months, isn't it?"

Christine picked up her knitting from the chair at his side.

"What an old meanie you are," she said teasingly. "Don't you ever credit anyone with ordinary virtues?"

"When I am quite certain they possess them—yes," he answered. "As it happens, just before you appeared I was wondering what induced a girl like Miss Grant to take on the job of governess in a place like this. Judged from almost any standpoint it is a blind alley job—you must admit that, my dear."

"I don't admit anything of the kind," said his sister warmly. "A career isn't as essential to a woman as it is to a man. Not a life-time career, at least."

"You mean she'll eventually marry?" he

suggested.

"Of course. Some young man is going to be lucky one of these days," she said in a low voice. "And I am selfish enough to hope that she won't meet him until Margaret is old enough to go to boarding school."

"H'm!" said Phillip musingly. "Nevertheless, it still strikes me as curious that a girl who is admittedly pretty, and apparently very capable, should be content to bury herself alive in a place like Little Beddington, population barely one thousand."

Christine looked at him in surprise.

"What's the matter with Little Beddington?" she asked.

"From your point of view, nothing," he said. "But from the point of view of a girl like Miss Grant I should say there was a great deal. As far as I can see she has little or no opportunity of meeting companions of her own age, so that she never gets out or goes anywhere. Added to that, the people she *does* meet are your friends and for that very reason are unlikely to become hers. So that she is virtually cut off from social life of any kind. On the face of it it seems to me most unlikely that she will ever meet anyone qualified to fulfil the role you outlined a short time back—a husband."

Christine started a new row of knitting, glancing at the pattern on her knee, a gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"Perhaps there is someone already," she suggested, with a secretive little smile.

"Has she indicated as much?" he asked sharply.

"Gracious, no!" Christine answered brightly. "But you never know, do you?"

"True," he said, with a tight, sardonic smile. "But in that case I should have expected there to be at least some slight indication of the position. I mean to say, you have told me yourself that the only letters she receives are from some aged relative in Scotland! Even the most laggard lover would write occasionally, I imagine, wherever he happened to be."

THE game ended and Jessica followed little Margaret through the trees to the ornamental fish-pond behind the yew hedge at the side of the house. It was one of the child's pleasures to feed the goldfish, which she was allowed to do just before tea.

Jessica got the packet of fish food from the little summer house, where it was kept on a shelf, and handed it over, afterwards seating herself on the coping while Margaret scattered the crumbs on the placid surface of the water.

It was very quiet and sunny by the pool, and Jessica relaxed, allowing the peace and beauty to permeate her entire being.

Seated there, it was easy to imagine that there could be no other life than that which went its serene way at Little Beddington.

But was it so serene beneath the surface? Could serenity and Phillip Conway's bitterness exist together? she wondered.

What about her own brooding memories, for instance?

It seemed that there was no peace anywhere, no matter how much one tried to find it.

Even Christine was not at peace, surrounded though she was by all this loveliness. In unguarded moments a look of something hidden would come into her eyes and Jessica would know that her employer was thinking of her sailor husband, wondering what he was doing and whether he was safe, counting the hours until he came home from abroad—for good.

From the house a grandfather clock chimed the hour. Jessica heard it thinly on

the slight breeze.

Glancing at her watch she saw that it was five o'clock and rose to her feet.

"Tea time, Margaret," she called. "We mustn't keep mummy waiting."

"Coming, Miss Grant!" Margaret ran towards her, cheeks flushed with excitement, the terrier bounding beside her. "Down, Nipper! Naughty boy!"

She thrust a hot little hand into Jessica's.

"Can Teddy come to tea to-day, Miss Grant?" she asked pleadingly. She turned her R's into W's, so that it sounded like Gwant. "He's ever so clean, 'cos I've washed him."

Jessica frowned down at her.

"I hope he behaves better than he did last time he came to tea," she said. "We don't want Uncle Phillip's cup knocked over again, do we?"

"It wasn't Teddy's fault—honest it wasn't," said the little girl earnestly. "He jiggled his arm and that's how the tea was spilt. Poor Teddy was scalded."

"Well, you must see that he sits still, dear," smiled Jessica. "We don't want Uncle Phillip to be cross, do we?"

A few days ago, at tea, Margaret had flung her Teddy into the air on the pretext that it was dancing. It had landed on the edge of Phillip's cup, spilling some of the contents.

Tea at the Manor was always a pleasant interlude in the daily routine.

While the weather had been warm they had had it on the terrace, but with the shortening of the days they came indoors.

She took Margaret upstairs to wash her hands and when they came down again, the little girl was clutching her Teddy, at the sight of which a slightly whimsical expression came on Phillip's face.

"You're not going to let that ragamuffin knock my tea over again, I hope, young lady," he said, addressing the child in tones of mock severity.

Margaret drew herself up and tried to look dignified.

"Teddy is not a wagamuffin, Uncle Phillip," she reproved him. Then, as Nanna brought in the tea trolley, she clapped her hands and uttered a squeal of delight. "Ooh! Cream buns! Goody!"

Phillip met Jessica's eyes and smiled. She smiled back and then turned to attend to Margaret.

There had been nothing in the little exchange of smiles, yet it left her with a warm glow about the heart, as if they shared something that belonged to no one else. It was really the first time they had seemed so friendly.

After tea, Christine took Margaret off, leaving Jessica with Phillip.

As the door closed, Jessica half rose as if to follow, but Phillip put out a detaining hand.

"Must you go?" he asked. "Can't you stop and talk for a while?"

Jessica hesitated. As a member of the household she had got to know him, she supposed, as well as she ever would, for she suspected that there was a part of Phillip Conway's mind that he kept hidden from the outside world.

Up to now their contact had been nearly always formal, their conversation like that of polite strangers on a journey who found themselves thrown in each other's company.

Music, art and drama had provided the main topics, and even these had been limited to discussing the merits or otherwise of a broadcast play or a concert to which they had listened.

"I mustn't stop long as I have tons to do." She smiled a little uncertainly. "What do you wish to talk about?"

"You," Phillip said, so promptly that he could not help laughing. "After all,

we really have a good deal in common, when you come to think of it. We like the same kind of music and read the same kind of books, amongst other things, and—" he paused and looked at her in a curiously speculative fashion.—"I suspect that you are lonely, too!"

Jessica raised her eyebrows.

"Whatever makes you think that, Mr. Conway?" she asked, a slight hint of colour coming into her cheeks.

"Oh, quite a lot of things," he answered quietly. "You are young and, I have no doubt, possess a full measure of that capacity for enjoyment which is the prerogative of youth! Yet here you are, cooped up like a squirrel in a cage when you should be savouring life to the full."

For a moment her eyes met his shrewd, discerning gaze, then she dropped them.

"Strange as it may seem, I have no desire to savour life to the full, as you put it, Mr. Conway. I am quite happy here, and have no wish to change my lot for anything else."

Phillip laughed.

"Meaning that you hope I won't become embarrassingly curious?" He laughed, and reached for his pipe. "Don't worry, I won't. But you can't prevent me from wondering why someone like you is content to take a situation which virtually cuts you off from the outside world as this does. Little Beddington has its points, I agree. It is an admirable funk-hole, for one thing, but I hardly imagine you were in search of one when you came here."

Jessica flushed.

"Is that why you live here?" she evaded.

To her surprise, he did not appear to resent the question which she instantly regretted.

Instead, he grinned.

"Of course it is," he replied. "Didn't you know? Here I can be myself without any need to pretend. I can be sorry for myself or not, according to my mood, and no one but you and Christine will be any the wiser. All my friends think of me as a noble, long-suffering creature possessed of the kind of fatalistic resignation they consider appropriate. Only those who have to deal with me every day know the truth about me."

"And what is the truth about you?" she asked, wondering where this was leading.

"That I am the reverse of either long suffering or resigned, and that I am frequently very sorry for myself," he said a little bitterly.

"I don't think that is the truth," Jessica said quietly. "Anyone in your position is bound to feel well, bitter—you wouldn't be human if you didn't. That is a very different thing from self pity."

He leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"You're really very crafty, you know," he said. "The idea was to talk about you, and now here we are talking about me instead! I refuse to be side-tracked, however, so now we will begin again. I want to know everything about you, from the day of your birth."

Jessica burst out laughing.

"I say, that's a tall order," she said demurely. "In any case, there isn't anything to tell. My life has been very, very ordinary."

"No life is that," he said shaking his head. "It's true that we don't all live like story-book characters and get cast away on deserted islands or do brave deeds, but we all have our moments! For instance, what made you take up nursing as a career? You were born on a farm, weren't you?"

"It had to be sold when father died," she began. "Later on, I went to live with an aunt near Berwick-on-Tweed. When I left school I had to do something and nursing appealed to me. That's all." Her tone

was more wistful than she realised and his eyes narrowed.

"You haven't had a particularly easy time of it, have you?" he said gently.

"Oh, I don't know." She shrugged. "I have a great deal to be thankful for, one way and another. We were quite happy as children—"

"We? You were not an only child, then?" he queried.

Jessica shook her head.

"No. I had a brother ten years older. He was killed during the last few days of the war—in Germany."

From the past came the memory of her father's face as he had stared down at the War Office telegram, the way he had swayed a little. She seemed to hear again her mother's voice, sharpened by fear—

"Jack! What is it?"

Her father had not spoken immediately, but when he had raised his eyes and looked at them, it was as if he had been half blinded.

"It's our Jim," he had said. "He's been killed—"

Jessica had then understood the love of a father for his son. He had lost heart in everything and had died six months later.

Soon after he had been laid to rest, her mother had gone to join him, leaving Jessica to face the world—alone except for an aunt.

Somehow, without quite knowing why, she found herself telling all this to Phillip. He listened intently, puffing away at his pipe.

"I know Berwick-on-Tweed slightly," he said. "I stayed there once for a few days with a friend who came into some property along the river. I suppose you've been to Holy Island?"

He sounded curiously abrupt and Jessica wondered if she had been boring him.

She spoke rather shortly, therefore.

"I went there once. A boy I knew took me out in his motor boat."

"That must have been interesting. But then, the whole of that coast is interesting. I used to be rather keen on yachting and liked nothing better than pottering about in a ten tonner I once owned." He looked keenly at her. "Can you sail a boat?"

"No." She shook her head. "I never really had the opportunity to learn."

"No, I don't suppose you had. It's good fun, though. Still, there were other things. How did you like nursing?"

"Very much. I was sorry I had to give it up," she said in an unguarded moment.

"Did you have to?"

"Yes." She coloured. He was not to know that he was on dangerous ground. "I had pneumonia and the doctor said I wasn't strong enough to carry on. He said you needed the strength of a horse and nerves of steel to be a good nurse, so judged by those standards I wasn't one, apparently." She smiled a little wistfully.

"Tough luck. It's not funny when you find that something you are keen on is beyond your reach." He gazed into the fire. "And so you came here," he went on after a moment. "Well, you could do worse, I suppose. All the same, it seems to me that you've walked into a blind alley job. I mean, there's no future in this kind of work unless, of course, you are in the fortunate position of not having to worry about the future."

He looked quizzically at her and there was a subtle hint of mockery in his tone.

"Don't you think it is more pleasant to live for the moment than to spend one's time worrying about the future?" she asked.

He nodded and laughed.

"More pleasant, perhaps, but hardly

wise. Of course, it is different for a woman, I know."

She looked straight at him.

"Oh? Why is it different?"

"Surely that's obvious? To the average woman, whatever job she undertakes is merely a marking time place until she meets someone she wants to marry. Ambition plays no part in her career."

"You may be right," she shrugged.

"But as far as I am concerned I took up nursing because I wished to make it my career. I had ambitions about becoming a successful nurse, I certainly had no idea of marking time, as you put it." She put a hand to her lips and yawned delicately. "Anyway, I must go now, Mr. Conway. Even a blind alley job has its duties!"

He waited until she had nearly reached the door, then spoke.

"Jessica, wait a moment. There's something I want to ask you," he said.

She turned, an expression of surprise coming into her eyes. Christine called her Jessica, but until now all the others had called her Miss Grant. This was the first time Phillip had used her first name.

"Yes, Mr. Conway?" she enquired.

"I want to be friends," he said unexpectedly. "Real friends, I mean. In the past I never seemed to have had the time to devote to anything but my work and hobbies—climbing and sailing. Sometimes I think I have missed rather a lot. It is only when something happens to make one realise that success isn't the only thing in life that these other things become important."

If he had been other than the man he was Jessica might have been tempted to ask about the girl to whom he had become engaged, but instead she took refuge in evasion.

"Aren't we all prone to be rather self-centred?" she said.

"That's evading the question," he replied, with a quirk of humour.

She laughed.

"Well, you must admit it is rather a difficult one," she murmured. "Friendship isn't something that can be docketed and labelled in neat little rows." She hesitated a moment, then added: "What is your idea of a friend, Mr. Conway?"

Phillip stared down at the fire, his expression deeply thoughtful.

"I'm not sure if I can put it into words," he said at length, his usual cynical tone absent from his voice. "But I think a real friend is someone who will stand by you whether you are right or wrong, who is loyal without question and, above all, is someone in front of whom you have no need to pretend because he—or she—knows you for just what you are."

Jessica smiled.

"I doubt if anyone so perfect exists in this world," she said. "I'm quite sure I could never hope to come up to that standard!"

"You do yourself an injustice," he said smilingly. "More than that, I know—don't ask me how!—that when things become too much for me I could come to you and just be quiet . . ."

His voice seemed to crack suddenly and he turned away.

The emotion that surged up in Jessica then was the most poignant she had ever experienced, and for a moment she was unable to speak.

For it was the first time that he had ever betrayed the agony of frustration that tormented all his waking moments and, had she but known it, his dreams as well.

"If—if that is all—I mean—I would be pleased and proud to help," she said, a

catch in her voice. "I—I only wish I could do more."

"I wouldn't want more," he said quietly. He put out a hand. "Please come here, Jessica!"

Wondering, she went a little closer.

He took her hand and held it for a moment, a curious, half bitter smile touching his lips.

"You have healing hands, you know," he said musingly. "Small and capable—like their owner." He released her abruptly and leaned back in his chair, looking at her intently. Then: "Do you believe in destiny?"

She shrugged, and smiled a little uncertainly.

"To be quite honest, I'm not sure what I believe in," she murmured frankly. "Sometimes I think I do, and at others—well, things that happen just don't seem to make sense."

"I do," he said. "I believe, with Shakespeare, that 'there is a divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will.' I believe, for instance, that for some reason we don't know, you were sent here to Little Beddington! Oh, I suppose you'll dismiss that as a sick man's ravings, but I'm convinced it's true."

She had stared at him, her eyes growing wider and more troubled.

If Christine had not told her how madly he had been in love with Coralie Winter—the girl who had jilted him—she might easily have misunderstood; as it was, she fought against the spell that seemed to be designed to sap her powers of reasoning.

"I don't think it is a sick man's ravings—you are the last person to indulge in that kind of thing," she said slowly. "But it is assuming a little too much to conclude that my illness last winter was merely a means to some obscure end!"

"Perhaps it isn't so obscure," he said quietly. "After all, there is—"

They were interrupted by the sudden opening of the door. Christine came into the room. She glanced curiously at them, but there was nothing in her manner to indicate that she found anything unusual in the situation.

"So there you are!" she said brightly. She turned to her brother. "Oh, Phillip, you simply must make an effort to come and see my roses to-morrow! There are four perfect blooms on that *Etoile d'Holland* you gave me last year."

"I shall be delighted to do so, my dear," he replied, smiling at her enthusiasm. "By the way, I must plead guilty to keeping Jessica from her duties—I very nearly had to use force to do so, but I assured her that you wouldn't mind. We've been having quite a discussion."

"I'm glad," Christine glanced at Jessica with a hint of amusement in her blue eyes. "I only hope the topic was an interesting one."

"It was," said Phillip calmly. "It concerned the one subject that is guaranteed to interest those concerned to the exclusion of all else."

"Oh?" enquired Christine, moving over to the radio and switching on the six o'clock news. "And what was that?"

"Ourselves," he grinned.

#### THE WAY OF REDEMPTION

**A**N unseen orchestra was playing the third movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony when Jessica came downstairs from the room where Margaret was sound asleep.

In the hall she paused a moment, torn by an odd feeling of indecision. She knew that Phillip and Christine were listening to

the radio, and for a moment she was tempted to go into the drawing-room and join them.

But after a moment she turned away and went into the little cloakroom behind the stairs where she kept her tweed coat.

She would not be missed if she went outside for a while, she reflected; for a sudden urge for solitude had seized her.

Outside, it was a brilliant night, with a pale moon riding high in a cloudless sky. Summer was waning into autumn and there was a nip in the air which brought the promise of winter on its breath.

Taking the path which led past the stables to the stream which ran beyond it, Jessica shivered, but not with cold.

It was barely six weeks since that afternoon in the drawing-room when Phillip had asked for her friendship, but already the tempo had quickened, so that, much sooner than she had anticipated or could have foreseen, she had been brought to the verge of a decision that, whichever way she chose, would affect her entire future.

With a deep sigh she thrust her hands into the pockets of her coat and walked slowly to where a little stone bridge crossed a stream.

It was a favourite spot, close enough to the house to be within call, yet almost entirely remote in other ways.

It was here that she had come often of late to grapple with the problem which burdened her thoughts and brought the shadows to her eyes. So much so that only that morning Christine had bluntly asked if she were unhappy about something!

If only she knew what to do! In church she had knelt and asked for guidance, but the ghosts of the past had intruded even upon her prayers, so that she had come away perplexed and unrefreshed.

In one of the books Phillip had lent her the writer had used the phrase "the inescapable logic of facts", and at the time she had thought how true it was.

For facts, pleasant or otherwise, had to be faced and she could no longer blind herself to the knowledge that Phillip Conway had fallen in love with her!

What he thought about it all she had no idea, for there had been nothing in his manner to give her a clue. Situated as he was, he might possibly consider that he had no right to ask a girl to tie herself for life to someone whom only a miracle would restore to health.

Looking back over the past few weeks, Jessica wondered that she could have been so completely unaware of what was happening. The black moods that used to descend upon Phillip were almost a thing of the past, and he appeared to have regained his old zest for life.

Of course, both Christine and his doctor were delighted. The latter had told Christine that if Phillip continued to make such good progress it might be possible that he would be strong enough to undergo a major operation in the spring.

"What would that mean exactly, doctor?" Christine had asked. "Would Phillip recover completely if the operation was a success?"

"That, my dear lady, is on the laps of the gods," Dr. Rawlinson had answered gravely. "So much depends upon factors we cannot control. At the best we could hope for what, for want of a better term, we can call a partial recovery. In that case your brother would be able to walk again, though anything in the nature of strenuous exercise would be out of the question."

Christine had told Jessica what the doctor had said, and had asked what she thought about it all.

Jessica had hesitated a moment before

replying, remembering some of the spinal cases she had helped to prepare for the operating theatre when she had been a probationer.

"There is always a risk involved in an operation of that kind," she had said.

"You mean Phillip might die?" Christine had asked.

"Not—not necessarily." Again Jessica had hesitated, unwilling to dash Christine's hopes. "But if—if it wasn't a success he might become—completely paralysed."

Christine had drawn a deep breath.

"That is what I feared," she had said. "I think it is because there is such a possibility that Dr. Rawlinson has hesitated to recommend an operation up to now. He seems very hopeful, though. He said that Phillip had picked up tremendously in the past few weeks."

If only she did not feel so responsible, thought Jessica miserably. All she need do in that case would be to make an excuse to leave, to remove herself from the temptation to take refuge in a marriage that would mean living a lie for the rest of her life.

But if she did that she would never know peace of mind again. Phillip needed her—needed her as a man dying of thirst needs water. Had she the right to strike the cup from his lips?

She wondered a trifle bitterly if he ever compared her with the girl who had let him down. Did he think of her at all, and were his feelings born of nothing more substantial than frustration and loneliness?

"The way of redemption is long and beset with thorns—"

Startled, she looked around. It was as if in some kind of a waking dream, she had heard a voice extolling the calm, eternal wisdom of the spirit.

It seemed to carry in its message the answer to all the questions that had tortured her through days and sleepless nights, to point the way through the maze of indecision in which she wandered.

The way of redemption! Her lips shaped themselves in a little wry smile. How long was a lifetime? Long enough to cleanse the slate, perhaps—provided she did not fall by the wayside.

With a sigh she turned back towards the house. It was growing cold and a little chill breeze rustled the dying leaves of the big copper beech at the foot of the slope. She paused for a moment to look at it, its graceful shape silhouetted against the night sky.

English trees were so enduring. They symbolised something away and beyond the power of human minds to grasp and she thought of the words of the famous song, "Trees", she had heard on the radio a few nights ago—

*"Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree."*

She raised her face and looked up at the stars.

"Please, God," she said from her heart, "I want to do the right thing. You know that. But I can't decide—alone. Please help me!"

For a moment it seemed that nothing around her moved or stirred.

Then slowly the leaves rustled again in the breeze and a little distance away she heard the soft flurry of a nightjar as it flew into the darkness.

With bowed head, feeling as if she were being impelled by forces outside herself, she walked slowly back to the house.

"Hullo," said Phillip's voice, when she reached the top of the terrace steps. "I wondered where you'd got to! I suppose you didn't feel in the mood to listen to the radio."

She started violently, unaware of his presence until he spoke. Turning her head she saw him seated in the invalid chair, his features hidden by the darkness.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't see you!"

"I'm sorry I startled you," he said, and though she could not make out his features, knew that he was smiling. "As a matter of fact, you seemed so deep in thought I hesitated to warn you I was here. I suppose if I offered you the proverbial penny, you would say that untold gold wouldn't be enough."

"Quite the reverse," she answered, assuming a lightness of tone to match his own. "I would merely say that they were not even worth the proverbial penny!" She paused a moment, then added slowly—"But ought you to be sitting out here so late, Phillip?"

"Now, now, don't fuss, there's a dear girl," he said patiently. "It's bad enough when Christine does it."

"You really are the most ungracious man I know," Jessica said, half amused.

He laughed.

"But according to you, you don't know many men," he said teasingly. "If you must know, Christine went off to write letters, and I rang for Benson to wheel me out here," he added. "It was stuffy indoors and this seemed as good a place as any for a talk."

She leaned against the ornamental balustrade, looking away from him towards the far side of the garden.

"Are you always so certain of what other people are going to do?" she asked.

"I'm not sufficiently interested to put it to the test," he remarked airily. "I generally know what *you* are going to do, though, my dear Jessica—and say. You can be singularly transp:rent at times, you know!"

"Really?" she said sarcastically. "From that I gather you knew I had gone for a walk and intended to come back this way! How very clever of you!"

"Not clever at all. I know you are worrying about something, and when you came downstairs but did not come into the drawing-room, the obvious conclusion was that you had gone out. As this is the easiest way to gain access to the house the rest was easy."

Jessica looked slightly scornful.

"That comes of being a barrister, I presume?"

"Not at all." He chuckled. "Where you are concerned I am naturally observant. That's why it isn't any good trying to tell me that you haven't anything on your mind, because I just won't believe you. First of all, though, I want to know why you have been avoiding me these last few days."

All at once the atmosphere seemed to become charged with emotion. Jessica stiffened instinctively and attempted to dissemble.

"I certainly haven't been doing anything of the kind, Phillip," she said, with a hint of impatience in her tone. "I happen to have been unusually busy, that's all. Apart from other things, I have been helping Christine with the arrangements for the carriage fete."

"That isn't the reason why you have rather pointedly made the most feeble excuses to get out of being alone with me," he said calmly. "Then: 'Have I offended you in any way, Jessica?'"

"Of course not," she answered, her throat tightening. "You expect too much, that's all. I have my job to do and—"

"Just a minute!" he said.

He shot out a hand and grasped her wrist, holding her as if afraid she would go and leave him alone.

"You may have a job to do, as you say my dear girl, but I don't see what difference that makes. I thought we had become friends—or was I mistaken?"

She would have evaded his grasp if she could have done so without struggling, but as if he sensed her intention his grip tightened and he looked up at her with eyes she dared not meet.

"Listen, Jessica," he said gently. "You asked me once to define what I meant by friendship. Well, I think now as I did then and I want to help. Won't you let me?"

She stared piteously at him, her temples throbbing. It was only by an effort that she repressed the hysterical urge to break into wild laughter that shook her. It was the supreme irony that he should be the one to seek her confidence in a matter that concerned himself.

Phillip's voice seemed to come from far off.

"Jessica! Jessica dearest, won't you tell me what is wrong? There's something, I know—something that is making you terribly unhappy. Even a blind man could see that and—I'm not blind. Don't you understand? I've no right to say this to you—I'm a cripple, without hope or future—but I love you. After all, there's no harm in your knowing, particularly if it will make things easier for you. Does—does that make any difference?"

He ended on a note that was almost humble, and Jessica felt more deeply moved than she cared to admit.

Breaking free she put her hands to her face, her quivering shoulders bowed under a burden almost too great to be borne.

"Please don't, Phillip," she begged, her voice tremulous. "I—it's all so hopeless. I never intended this to happen, and now that it has—" She made an empty gesture.

"I know it is hopeless," he said quietly, the resignation in his voice lending a force to his words that nothing else could have done. "But even if it is hopeless, I claim the right of any man who loves a woman to protect her—if he can. If—it isn't a lot to ask, Jessica."

She drew a shuddering breath and taking her hands away from her face, turned to look at him, an expression of wonderment in her tear-lined eyes.

"I—I didn't mean it was hopeless for the reason you evidently do, Phillip," she said heavily fighting off a feeling of tiredness which crept upwards from her limbs to her heart. "Your being an invalid has nothing to do with it. If it were only that I—I would marry you to-morrow if you wanted me to. As it is—I can't."

He leaned forward, his eyes lighting up.

"You would have to love someone very much indeed to face what that would mean," he said.

She smiled wearily.

"I'm sorry, Phillip. I like and respect you very much indeed, but I—I don't love you—in that way. I only meant that—that if I did your being an invalid wouldn't make any difference. I—I'm sorry, but I can't help feeling as I do."

He nodded and leaned back.

"That's no reason for running away, which is what you are doing," he said gently. "Also, it has nothing to do with the unhappiness I have seen in your eyes recently. At least, that's what I believe."

Jessica sank down on the stone wall of the terrace, her hands locked in her lap. She could not tell him about Derek—of her own incredible folly in squandering her love on a man who was so utterly worthless. Phillip would despise her for her weakness, if for nothing else, or worse still—pity her!

Yet, now that it had come to it, she knew she could not marry him with a lie on her

lips.

"Listen, Jessica darling," he said tenderly, his voice breaking in on her thoughts. "I don't pretend to know what is wrong, but I'm quite sure of one thing—there's nothing so big or so terrible that two people who have faith in each other can't face it together. My sole reason for telling you that I love you was so that you could understand why I want to help. It is the least I can do to repay you for a friendship and understanding that has come to mean more to me than anything else in the world."

He paused, but Jessica did not answer. She was withdrawn, remote, her face pale in the moonlight, so that he was not even sure that she had heard.

At length, she looked up.

"You say you love me and I believe you, Phillip," she said, in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "But what about the girl you were in love with before your accident? You must have loved her, too!"

"Coralie? I suppose Christine told you?" He hesitated a moment, then laughed in an embarrassed fashion. "I suppose I was in love with her at the time. Or, at least, I thought I was. She was young and very lovely and we seemed to share the same interests. Now I know that in actual fact we hadn't a single thing in common and when my accident happened I had been trying to get things straightened out in my mind.

"Fortunately or unfortunately—depends upon which way you look at it—I didn't have to make up my mind. Apparently Coralie had been thinking along the same lines, for when I arrived back in England there was a letter waiting from her, asking me to release her. To be quite fair to her, I don't think she had actually heard of the accident at the time she wrote it, but I can't be sure. At any rate, I give her the benefit of the doubt in that."

Jessica sighed.

"I thought that was why you were so bitter," she said.

"Was I bitter?" He smiled crookedly. "I suppose I was. It isn't easy to resign oneself to being dependent upon others for the rest of one's life. But since I met you all that is changed. You have shown me the road back to a full life even if I am a cripple and it is your faith and courage that has sustained me when things became unbearable. Now, perhaps you will understand what the last few months have meant to me."

She stared in front of her, a prey to doubt and indecision. It had been inevitable that with his character he would come in time to accept his lot, so that she took no credit for what had happened.

Yet Phillip believed that it was she who had given him heart to re-shape his life, to make something useful of what was left. The long, intimate discussions under the beech tree, when they had sat through the long summer afternoons while Margaret had played with the dog, had borne fruit.

But once again her problem rose to confront her; dare she take away the inspiration that had given him the courage to rise above his disability?

As she asked herself the question she knew the answer. Truth is like a lighted lamp in that it cannot be hidden in the darkness—because it carries its own light!

She turned her head towards him, her face pale and strained in the moonlight.

"I think I do know what—what our friendship has meant to you, Phillip," she said unsteadily. "It has meant a lot to me as well. I think I have known, too, that you love me." She smiled crookedly. "They say that a woman always knows, but whether that is true or not I can't say. I think I would be—very proud—to become—your wife, only—" She broke off

helplessly.

Phillip touched her hand.

"You—you mean you would marry me, knowing I may be confined to an invalid chair for the rest of my life?"

She made a little dissenting gesture.

"I told you, that wouldn't make any difference, Phillip."

"It would be bound to make a difference," he said, almost roughly. "You are young, with all your life before you. I would be an unmitigated scoundrel to accept such a sacrifice at your hands. It would be unfair to both of us."

"I don't agree," she said, with a faint sigh. "But that isn't important. Some girls would consider it a privilege to stand at the side of the man they loved—to help him overcome his—his difficulties. I would. At the same time I want to be fair to you. You see"—she hesitated groping for the right words—"if you knew everything you would probably despise me, yet—" Her voice faltered and broke.

He shook his head and smiled, and had she been able to see their expression, there was infinite tenderness and compassion in his eyes.

"I couldn't despise you if I tried, my dearest," he said. "When you really love someone as I love you, one grows in some special kind of way—in understanding and other things. I told you once that Little Beddington was a funk-hole, a place where one could escape from all the disappointments and frustrations of the past. Well, I think it was for you, too. But whatever your secret trouble may be, it can't possibly affect us."

She looked wonderingly at him.

"Do you really believe that, Phillip?"

"Of course, dearest. So you see,"—with a whimsical smile—"there isn't the slightest need to go on making a burnt offering of yourself."

"But—suppose I told you that I had been very foolish, Phillip—that there had been someone once who—"

He silenced her with a gesture.

"I, too, have been foolish in the past," he said quietly. "But cause and effect are curious things—sometimes they seem completely unrelated. Yet, if I hadn't met Coralie I might never have known the difference between love and infatuation. I might never have gone to North Africa and met with an accident. One can go on conjecturing in that way until one's head reels."

"The fact remains, as I said to you long ago," he went on "there is a divinity that shapes our ends and, if we are wise, we accept it. We are both lonely people, Jessica darling, and both of us came to Little Beddington for the same reason—to escape from life. That being the case, if you really mean what you said just now, don't you think it might be a good idea if we faced it—together?"

For a fraction of a second Jessica hesitated. If she married Phillip, she would be able to help him and she would at the same time find in his arms a refuge from the harrowing memories which haunted her. There remained one thing to be said, however.

"I meant exactly what I said, Phillip," she murmured at length, her voice tremulous. "But if I became your wife I would want to give you everything. I mean—" Her colour flamed and she broke off in confusion.

Phillip gave a whimsical little laugh.

"I read once, somewhere, that marriage is the perfection of friendship," he said. "Believe me, my darling, no matter how long and difficult the road may prove, I shall regret nothing so long as you are by my side. Neither shall I ask from you

more than you are prepared to give." His voice dropped a little with the last sentence.

Very slowly Jessica turned her head and looked at him, the tears glistening on her lashes. She felt as if she had been buffeted by some violent storm and had suddenly found herself in some sheltered haven where the elements could no longer lash her.

"Very well, Phillip," she said, fighting back a hysterical desire to laugh and cry at the same time, "if you really want me to marry you—if you are sure that what I have to offer is enough, then—I will."

Her heart smote her when she saw the way his face lighted up. The look in his eyes almost made her draw back and tell him that she was not quite sure—that she was afraid of cheating him lest he discover the fraud.

But it was too late. As he raised her hand to his lips, too deeply moved to speak, Jessica knew that she could not retrace a single step, and from her bruised and aching heart there went up a silent prayer that she would be worthy of the love which encompassed her, so that in the fullness of time she would make Phillip happy and in so doing, find happiness herself.

#### HIDDEN FIRES.

PHILLIP was seated alone on the terrace when the doctor's car came up the drive. Christine and Jessica had gone shopping, so that what transpired at the interview was unknown to them.

"Well, old fellow, and how's things?" Dr. Rawlinson enquired, taking the chair Phillip indicated. "Still doing your exercises?"

He took out his pipe and began to fill it, his shrewd grey eyes taking in the hollows at Phillip's temples, the marks of pain and suffering at the corners of his eyes and mouth. He was a broad-shouldered, burly person with a ruddy complexion and a hearty manner and looked more like a prosperous farmer than the extremely clever doctor he was.

Phillip merely shrugged.

"It doesn't hurt quite so much, doctor," he replied ironically. "But that's only to be expected, isn't it?"

Dr. Rawlinson met his eyes, knowing perfectly well what his patient meant.

"You can't expect miracles, you know," he said reprovingly. "You are lucky to be alive at all after the fall you had. But I didn't call to talk platitudes. I want to prepare you for another examination."

"Oh?" Phillip raised his eyebrows. "Who are you going to produce out of the bag this time, doctor?"

"A very great man," said the doctor impressively. "No less a person than Professor Julian Strudwick. I have pulled all the strings it is possible to pull and at last succeeded in getting him to say he will examine you. Unfortunately, he can't spare the time to come to Little Beddington, so it means a journey to Town. You won't mind that, though, will you?"

Phillip laughed.

"If the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain," he said flippantly. Then he half turned in his chair, something very like agony in his eyes. "Doctor Rawlinson! I want you to tell me the truth," he added. "You don't really believe there is any chance of my ever getting better, do you?"

"Oh, what makes you think that?" the doctor evaded, taking a long time to light his pipe and avoiding Phillip's eyes as he did so.

Phillip laughed mirthlessly.

"Call it intuition, if you like, doctor," he said, with a return of his flippant manner. "After all, it's over a year since my accident, and the operation that followed, and I am not one jot better. I'm worse, if anything. Added to that, this latest find of yours will make the fifth time I have been seen by various eminent specialists, each one of whom has spoken vaguely of a possible operation one day. I've come to the conclusion that 'one day' is like to-morrow—it never comes."

Dr. Rawlinson puffed out a great cloud of blue smoke, his eyes narrowed.

"Now, you listen to me, my dear chap," he said, almost sternly. "When you fell and hurt your back you damaged one of the lower vertebra. Well, that particular portion of your anatomy is pressing upon the spinal cord which, fortunately, escaped injury. In some cases nothing whatever can be done—in others, a major operation of a particularly delicate nature can remedy matters to a very great extent, but there is always a serious risk involved."

"I won't go into technical details," he went on quietly. It will be sufficient to say that if the broken vertebra can be reset you would make what virtually amounts to a complete recovery, except for having to avoid strenuous exercise of any kind. On the other hand, as I have said, the operation is an extremely delicate one, attended by a very real risk of permanently damaging the spinal cord itself.

"Owing to the very prolonged nature of the operation it is essential for you to be in a fit state to go through with it if, as I think will prove to be the case, you decide that you want to. Up to now you haven't been strong enough—it is only in the last two or three months that you have picked up sufficiently for me to advise it."

"That is why I am pinning my hopes on Professor Strudwick. He is probably the cleverest spinal man in Europe and we are very fortunate in having got him interested in your case. He isn't a consultant in the ordinary way, you see—he is more concerned with research."

"Thank you for being so frank, doctor," Phillip murmured, when the other ended with another vigorous puff at his pipe. "There is only one thing I would like to ask—what, precisely, is the nature of the risk you mentioned? Do you mean I might die under the operation?"

Dr. Rawlinson hesitated. Then—

"No, I don't," he said bluntly. "If that was all that was involved I know that you, at least, wouldn't regard it as a risk. No, my dear chap, I am afraid it isn't quite as simple as all that. The risk is that your last state may be worse than your first—you may become completely paralysed from the waist downwards, without hope of recovery."

LONG after the doctor had gone Phillip sat staring in front of him, his fingers beating a noiseless tattoo on the rug covering his knees.

He was grateful for the frankness with which the doctor had answered his questions. Knowing the full extent of the risk involved made it easier to decide, he reflected. For now he had not only himself to consider, but Jessica as well.

Had it not been for her he would long ago have abandoned himself to frustration and despair, he knew. But when she was with him, talking of the things that interested them both, planning their future—whatever it might hold—then it was as if his accident had never happened.

For, unlike the majority of people, she was far-sighted enough to realise that the kindly conspiracy to bolster up his belief in his ultimate recovery more often than

not defeated its own object.

For Philip was anything but a fool and he had no illusions about the extent of his injuries. He could relax with her, therefore, and be himself, taking pleasure in watching the play of light in her hair, content merely to feel that she was near him.

Christine had been delighted when she had heard that he and Jessica were engaged.

Like Jessica herself, she made light of the fact that he was an invalid, and pooh-poohed any suggestion that he was accepting a sacrifice he had no right to accept from a young girl.

"That's ridiculous, Phillip," she had said, when he had spoken about it. "If Jessica cares for you, that's all that matters. I haven't any patience with people who are so high-souled and self-righteous that they think it necessary to turn their backs on what life can hold for them. If you behaved like that, how do you imagine Jessica would feel? She would have every right to think that either you didn't credit her with loving you enough, or that you thought so little of her character that you had no faith in her."

He had smiled at her vehemence. On the face of it, all that she had said was true, but then Christine did not know everything. She did not know that Jessica had been completely honest with him, and had told him quite frankly that she did not love him in the way that a girl should love the man whose wife she was to become.

Yet, deep down within him there was a faith that kept him sane even through the long hours of darkness, when he lay awake, staring up at the ceiling, a prey to an agony of mind and body that left him weak and exhausted the following day.

Benson, his man, nursed him with the devotion of a nurse and it was fortunate that he and Jessica got on so well together. Without Benson he would have been utterly dependent upon others for those things the valet did without question, so that he was saved the ultimate humiliation that would come with the pity in their eyes.

It was a curious thing, he reflected, that people who were normally thoughtful and intelligent should never, apparently, stop to think of all that his helplessness involved. By far the worst feature of it all, from his point of view, was not the pain, neither was it the knowledge that he might be an invalid for life, but the fact that he was dependent upon his valet for those small services that the average person performs for himself.

He remembered, with sudden bitter anguish, his frustration and bitterness the first time Benson had knelt down to put on his shoes. . . .

A soft footfall on the terrace aroused him from his brooding thoughts. He looked round and saw Jessica smiling down at him, the colour whipped up in her cheeks by the wind.

It was an autumn day, with the sun shining from a sky of cloudless blue, and where he was seated, out of the wind, it was relatively warm.

Jessica wore a three-quarter length freize coat with deep patch pockets, and a small, close-fitting hat that allowed her curls to escape in charming confusion. As he looked up at her, Phillip thought he had never seen anyone so lovely.

"Hullo, darling," he said smilingly. "Back already? I didn't hear the car."

"Christine drove straight into the garage and we came across the lawn," she said. "Have you been very lonely, dear?"

"By no means," he answered. "Dr. Rawlinson dropped in on his way back to the village. He wants me to go up to Town one day next week for another examina-

one

He saw the momentary look of fear which came into her eyes and rebuked himself for his clumsiness. But the next moment she was smiling again.

"That sounds very hopeful, Phillip," she murmured. "Dr. Rawlinson said that he wouldn't ask you to go through all that again until there was a chance that they could operate. Did he say anything about that?"

She seated herself on the low wall and folded her hands in her lap, as she had done on that memorable night when she had promised to marry him.

Phillip shrugged, smiling in a curiously tight-lipped fashion.

"He said quite a lot," he answered drily. "Apparently he has got a Professor Strudwick interested in my case, and tells me that he is the cleverest spinal man in Europe, whatever that may mean. It seems that the great man isn't above operating when there is a reasonable chance of success, so I am to be prodded and poked and censured all over again to find out what's what."

"Oh!" Jessica went pale and then flushed, and he saw that her hands were trembling. "Oh, Phillip, that's wonderful. Professor Strudwick is famous. If he thinks you can be cured, then you will be."

"You've heard of him, then?" he asked, in a tone of amusement.

"Heard of him? Oh, but everybody has heard of him, I should think. He came to St. Giles's while I was there and operated in a little boy who had fallen from a water tower. Everybody thought it was hopeless, but after he had examined the patient he said he would operate, and he did. Two months later the boy walked out of the hospital holding his mother's hand!"

"H'm!" he said, with one of his rare grins. "Let's hope he runs true to form in my case! I can imagine nothing I would like more than to walk out of some hospital holding your hand, my dear Jessica!"

Tears sprang into Jessica's eyes at his tone. It contained a mixture of mockery and disbelief, as if he were resolutely refusing to buoy himself up with hope lest the subsequent disappointment prove too much to bear. She spoke quickly, impulsively, leaning forward a little and resting a hand on one of his.

"Phillip, dear, please don't look like that. It is going to be all right, I know it is! Tell me, when did Dr. Rawlinson say you were to go to London?"

"I am to be examined on Friday next week," he answered, a trifle puzzled by her manner. "That means I shall have to go into hospital some time on the Thursday, I imagine."

"And to-day is Tuesday," she murmured, half-closing her eyes as she did a swift calculation. "That gives us nearly ten days! Phillip! Why can't we be married right away so that I can go up with you and be near when you are in hospital? You—you would like that, wouldn't you?"

"Like it?" His face flushed and he drew in his breath sharply.

Jessica knew precisely the thought that had flashed into his mind. Brief though their honeymoon would be, it might be all that they would ever have.

For a moment temptation shook him. But only for a moment.

"There are lots of reasons why we can't, my dear," he said calmly. "One is that I doubt very much if I could get a special licence in time and the second is, I don't think it would be wise. After all, we don't even know whether Strudwick will operate or what, if he does, the outcome will be."

"Does that matter?" she asked courageously, her eyes never leaving his face. "As for the licence, surely you have friends

in London who can arrange it for you, Phillip?"

"Special licences are issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury, my dear," he answered, with a forced laugh. "I have no doubt that if suitable representations were made to the right quarters something could be done, but—"

"Please, Phillip!" she interrupted. "It is the first thing I have ever asked you."

"Darling girl, you don't realise what you are asking," he replied patiently. "You've been a nurse—you know something of the risk involved in an operation of this kind. Do you think I am going to take a chance on having you tied to someone who may become completely paralysed if things go wrong?"

She came and knelt beside him and held both his hands, her eyes shining softly in her upturned face.

"Phillip darling," she whispered. "Don't you know—yet—that those things don't matter? Do you remember that thing you read to me the other night by William Blake? I don't remember how it goes, but he said something about holding eternity in an hour. What does it matter what happens, now or in the future, so long as we belong to one another?"

He put his hands to her cheeks, feeling their fire, and looked long and earnestly into their eyes.

"Jessica, my love," he said brokenly. "Does it really mean as much to you as all that?"

Breathlessly she nodded and put up her hands, clasping his thin wrists.

"Yes, Phillip, it means all that to me and more," she answered. She looked away from him and her eyes grew softer still. "I've learned so much since the night you told me you loved me," she went on after a moment. "I know now that what I thought was love was no more than a romantic dream. Only this is real."

For answer he bent his head and kissed her. Then—

"You had better wheel me to the telephone, my darling. If we are to get that special licence I must get on to Beresford right away. He will get things moving as no one else can."

Jessica rose to her feet, a look in her eyes that betrayed nothing of the tumult that raged in her heart.

That night on the terrace, when Phillip had revealed his love for her, she had let the opportunity of being completely frank with him pass by. Now it was too late, but it was within her power to make amends.

He must never know about Derek. No one should ever know. The whole thing would be a secret locked in her own breast. She would give Phillip the love for which he craved, make him happy in the only way that was open to her so that he might never suspect that she was immolating herself upon the altar of his need. He needed all his faith and courage to go through the ordeal that confronted him and if, in complete self-surrender she could fortify his strength, then she would not hold back.

PHILLIP and Jessica were married the following Saturday.

The ceremony took place in Beddington Parish Church and was attended by Alastair Beresford, a barrister friend of Phillip's, also Christine and Margaret. After the ceremony they returned to the Manor for the wedding breakfast, and later left for Lulworth Cove in a hired car driven by Benson.

Before they left Alastair Beresford drew Jessica aside.

"I needn't tell you how happy this has made me, Jessica," he said. "Phillip and

I have been close friends since the time we were at college together, and but for this tragic accident we would have been sharing quarters in Town at this moment. He is one of the finest men I know, and it was a great grief to me when he had to give up his work. Now we can all look forward to his triumphal return, and when that day comes, I shall know to whom most of the credit is due."

"Thank you, Mr. Beresford," Jessica had said, blushing. "But in spite of the nice things you have said, you must give the major credit to Phillip himself. He never lost faith, you see."

"Well, we won't argue about it," he had said, smiling down at her. "You will be in London next week, of course, in order to be near Phillip while he is in hospital. Don't forget to telephone me when you get there. If there is anything I can do you have only to say. And now, good-bye and good luck. I don't need to wish you happiness. I can see that it is yours already!"

Phillip was strangely silent during the long drive, so that Jessica was free to indulge in her thoughts.

Christine had fallen in with their plans as soon as she knew what was proposed, and had told Jessica that she was sure that she was doing the right thing.

"When he comes out of hospital Phillip will have to go away somewhere in order to convalesce, and naturally you would want to go with him," she had said. "I think it is very sensible of you to suggest getting married right away, Jessica. I'm very glad, too, for both your sakes. It's a great pity you won't have more than four days' honeymoon, though. It really isn't long enough."

"We must be thankful for small mercies, as Nanna would say," Jessica had said. She had walked to the window and stood looking out for a moment over the pleasant garden. "I feel rather mean for leaving you in the lurch like this, though. Christine. Only—I mean—"

"My dear!" Impulsively Christine had jumped up and come to where Jessica had stood. "You don't really think I mind do you? I happen to be rather fond of Phillip, so that on those grounds alone I would be glad that you and he are going to be married. I'm glad for your sake as well, though. I'm just thrilled to death with the whole thing!"

Jessica had smiled a little sadly.

"It's funny, the way everything has turned out," she had murmured. "I don't suppose you thought, when you engaged me to look after Margaret, that you were introducing your future sister-in-law into your house!"

"Quite true, I didn't," Christine had admitted, with a merry laugh, "but I don't mind confessing now, though, that you hadn't been here long before I began to hope I had!"

They had fallen silent for a little while. Then Jessica had turned to Christine.

"You believe that Phillip will come through the operation all right, don't you?" she had asked.

And Christine had given her a hug.

"If faith and prayer count for anything he will," she had answered stoutly.

THE four days spent at Lulworth Cove passed all too quickly for Jessica, though privately she thought they did not pass quickly enough for Phillip.

Man-like, he wanted to get the period of waiting over; even the short time that had elapsed since Dr. Rawlinson's visit had fretted his nerves.

On the last evening they sat in their private sitting-room, her hand in Phillip's,

while the dusk stole in at the windows.

Phillip turned his head and looked at her, smiling gently.

"Afraid, darling?"

Mutely she nodded. Nothing but complete honesty would serve them now, she knew.

Phillip's smile deepened and his eyes were tender.

"You once told me that there was nothing to fear if one had sufficient faith," he said quietly. "Don't be afraid, my love. Somehow I know it is going to be all right this time. Don't ask me how. It's just a feeling I have. Believe that?"

"Yes, dearest," she answered.

"Then that's all right," he said. "But as this is our last night here there is something I want to tell you, only I don't seem able to find the words." He sighed. "I want to tell you what the last four days have meant to me—the way you—oh, dearest, it's no good. I just can't say what is in my heart."

"There's no need, Phillip darling," she whispered. "I know."

They drove to London the following day, and Benson dropped Jessica at the hotel where she was to stay while Phillip was in hospital before going on to deliver the hired car back to its owners. They had left Phillip at the hospital, where arrangements had been made for his reception, and on the way to the hotel passed St. Giles, its lighted windows shining in the dusk.

Christine arrived later that evening, having travelled up from Little Bedington by train. In answer to Jessica's enquiries she said she had left Margaret with Nanna and had decided to come by the evening train rather than to wait for the one she had originally intended travelling by.

"Knowing that you would have left Phillip at the hospital, I thought you might be feeling blue, so I decided to come up this evening," she explained. "How is the dear boy?"

"He seemed quite well when we got here," Jessica answered. "I was a little worried in case the journey took it out of him, but he stood it very well."

"When is the examination to take place?" Christine asked.

"At eleven. Dr. Rawlinson is coming up and he said he would tell us what the specialist said as soon as he possibly could. We are to wait here from noon onwards."

"I see. And when can we go to see Phillip?"

"In the afternoon sometime. It isn't visiting day, but as he is in a private room, Dr. Rawlinson said he would try to arrange it for us."

"Well, we can't do anything but possess our souls in patience, in that case," said Christine, with a sigh. She glanced curiously at Jessica. "You're looking pale, and no wonder! All this waiting is enough to get on anyone's nerves!" She got up, glancing at the watch on her wrist. "What about dinner? I suppose we had better go down. After all"—with a little forced laugh—"it won't do Phillip any good if we starve to death."

JESSICA slept little that night, and rose in the morning tired and unrefreshed.

After breakfast, which she scarcely tasted, she got up and announced abruptly that she was going out.

Christine, who knew what it was to wait, did not offer to accompany her. Instead, she made the excuse that she wanted to write to David, who was due home soon from Malta.

A little later Jessica went out into the street, and after a momentary hesitation turned to the left.

She came at last to a tall building occupying a whole block and realised, with a

start, that she had walked all the way to St. Giles.

For a few minutes she stood gazing at the scene of her heartbreak and disillusionment. By picking out the windows on the third floor and following them along, she identified the ward in which she had lain ill, her heart breaking within her.

People who talked about burying the past couldn't have very much to bury, she reflected bitterly. If they had, they wouldn't have quite so much to say about it.

She turned away and a man getting out of a car drawn up at the kerb close at hand uttered an exclamation.

At the sound of his voice Jessica turned, the colour draining from her cheeks. The past had come to life with a vengeance, for she found herself looking into Derek Carson's eyes.

"Jessica," he exclaimed, taking off his hat with a flourish. "Fancy meeting you here!"

She looked at him for a moment without answering, the colour coming slowly back into her cheeks.

"I didn't know you had returned to England, Derek," she said at last, forcing her stiff lips to move. "Have you been back long?"

"About three months," he said carelessly. "To be frank, I couldn't stick it on the West Coast. Much too dull for a chap like me. So I resigned and came home again." He gestured towards the hospital. "I'm senior house-surgeon there now," he went on. "They had a vacancy and I got the job. Much better than being in practice these days. That's too much like hard work." He laughed. "But tell me about yourself, Jessica! What are you doing, and where do you live?"

"I'm not doing anything at the present moment, Derek," she said. "As it happens, I am spending a few days in London with—with my husband. He—"

"You mean you're married?" he ejaculated, giving her no time to finish. Then he grinned widely. "That's a joke! I thought—"

"Really, I'm not interested in what you thought, Derek," Jessica answered him.

"I'm sorry, Derek, but you must excuse me," she went on. "I have to be back at my hotel by noon, and it is quite a way from here."

"Oh, come, my dear girl, you can spare a few minutes to talk to an old friend, surely?" he pleaded. "I'll run you back, if it comes to that."

"No, Derek," she said quietly, "I have forgotten nothing. Neither the time we went about together or the way you treated me afterwards. My only regret is that I was such a self-deluding little idiot as to believe in you."

With that she turned and hurried away.

The memory of Phillip's words came to her from the welter of confused memories

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will—"

It had been destiny which had guided her footsteps to St. Giles that morning; destiny which had brought Derek Carson back to England so that she would encounter him at the very moment that was ripe for comparisons—when Phillip was lying on an operating table under the white, shadowless lamps, the specialist's clever fingers probing each nerve and muscle of his wasted back; and it had been destiny which had torn the scales from her eyes with one brutal, decisive stroke. . . .

IT was a morning nearly a year later when Jessica stepped out on to the terrace

of the Swiss mountain hotel where she and Phillip were staying, and paused to admire the wide vista of snow and timber, with the roofs of the distant chalets showing up amongst the trees.

The door behind her opened and Phillip came out. As she watched him walk towards her, balancing by the aid of two sticks, she experienced once again that strange sensation of living through a dream which had gripped her during the days leading up to and following on Phillip's operation.

She would never forget waiting in the bare anteroom at the hospital with Christine. Or the sickening sensation that had nearly caused her to faint when the door had opened and Dr. Rawlinson had come in.

From that distance of time she could hear his voice as it imparted the knowledge that the operation had been a success, his sudden: "Here, hold up, my dear! You don't want to faint!"

"Well, darling?" Phillip came to a stop beside her, resting on his sticks and smiling down into her eyes. He was less thin and there was a becoming tan on his skin, taking the place of the pallor that had dwelt there so long.

"Well?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"I was wondering what we were going to do to-day," he said.

"What would you like to do?"

"Why, I think it would be fun to take a car and go for a drive," he suggested. "I've had a letter from Alastair Beresford I would rather like to talk over with you."

"All right. I'll fetch my coat," she said. "Shall you telephone for a car or shall I?"

"I'll see to it," he promised. He stood watching until, with a wave of the hand, her slender form disappeared through the open doorway.

A little later they sat on a rocky outcrop not far from the road looking across the valley. Phillip handed Jessica Alastair's letter to read and waited until she had scanned its contents before speaking.

"As you see, he suggests that I go back into chambers with him as soon as I'm ready," he said. "I wouldn't attempt to do any court work for another year at least—Doctor Rawlinson would have a fit if I did!—but I can start reading briefs. It means going back to England fairly soon and looking around for somewhere to

live, though."

"Oh, Phillip!" she murmured.

"And what precisely does that mean, my love?" he enquired, laughing at her. "Possibly I am not experienced enough to fathom the nuances of feminine expression, so I am forced to ask whether I am to take it as registering dismay or pleasure."

She burst out laughing.

"Guess!" she said teasingly.

"I think I can." He took her in his arms and held her very close.

"Gosh!" he said. "We've been married a year and I'm still in love with you! Is that a record?"

"Idiot!" She drew away from him, blushing. "The driver will see you."

He laughed.

"In the language that is so prevalent to-day, I couldn't care less, my sweet. If you aren't careful I shall kiss you in front of him with a loud trumpeting noise. Oh, lord, isn't life good?" He stretched his arms and flung back his head, drawing in deep breaths of the pure mountain air. Then he turned to her. "Oh, Jessica darling, I wonder if you will ever know what you have done for me? But for you I would never have hung on to my faith."

"Of course you would," she averred stoutly. "I've done nothing, Phillip."

"You gave me an incentive to fight, to live, my darling," he said quietly. "Without that I could never have won through. Christine knows it—so does Doctor Rawlinson. You've been the lodestar which pulled me out of the valley of the shadow." He caught her slim shoulders and kissed her again. "Happy?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Very!"

"No more bogies?"

"Not one, dearest." She hesitated a moment, but this time she did not let the opportunity pass by. "They were all blown away the morning you had to be examined by Professor Strudwick, and I realised, quite suddenly, that they weren't bogies at all!"

"Uhuh?" He looked enquiringly at her. "Something happened?"

"Yes." Quietly and factually, omitting nothing and seeking neither to excuse herself or to blame Derek, she told him of her broken romance, of the heartbreak and disillusionment that had followed, and of the folly that had brought it about.

"I'm glad you told me, dearest," he said

gently. "I guessed it was something like that, of course. I mean, it could hardly have been anything else. But that's the end of it. You never loved him—you made a mistake, as thousands have made mistakes before you."

"Don't you mind, Phillip?" she asked wonderingly.

"Why should I mind?" he countered. "It can't affect us. We belong to each other and as you yourself once said, nothing else matters. Besides, who am I to sit in judgement on you? What about Coralie?"

"You didn't make a fool of yourself over her."

"Neither did you over this fellow Carson," he answered. "Now let's forget it and talk about the future, our future, Jessica darling."

"Wait!" She held herself off from him, her eyes tender, her mouth poignant. "Don't you want to know how it is I can be so sure that I was never in love with Derek?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"It never occurred to me to question you, my dearest," he said. "Naturally, you would be sure. I mean, your feelings must have undergone a change for you to say that—oh, hang it all, I'm getting all mixed up."

She laughed tenderly.

"Darling, for a barrister you do flounder sometimes," she said teasingly, her eyes dancing. "But I do know what you mean—and you are quite wrong. The reason I knew I didn't love Derek—that I never had loved him—was because I loved you. I knew it when I saw him standing there, leering at me and if I hadn't been so busy pitying myself I would have known it long before that."

He looked at her with an expression that brought a lump into her throat.

"Jessica! Jessica darling, is that true?"

"Yes, of course it is true, Phillip," she said, blushing.

"Darling," he said, and gathered her into his arms once more. And as his lips came down to find her own, Jessica knew that the armour of their love would protect them from hurt for all their days to come.

THE END.

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## A BEAUTIFUL MEMORY

By Derek Temple

HER NATIVE LAND.

JANE CARLTON locked and strapped the last suitcase, glanced round the cabin to make sure she had left nothing out, then went up on deck to join her husband.

After the buffeting of the gale in the Atlantic the previous day, the sheltered waters of Spithead were strangely calm, and as the Isle of Wight slid past Jane could hear the excited comments of those lining the rails of the promenade deck.

"That's Nelson's famous ship, the *Victory*, over there."

"Oh, mummy! Look at that paddle-steamer?"

"To Ryde Pier, darling. The steamer runs between Portsmouth and the island over there."

"I shall be glad to get ashore, won't you?" said another. "Ship-board life is all very well but after a fortnight it begins to

pall. Look, there's Southampton Water—we'll soon be on our way to London now!"

Jane found her husband where he had said he would be. He turned to smile as she came up.

"Hullo, dearest," he said affectionately.

Smiling, she slipped her hand under his arm.

As George Carlton's fingers closed over hers the slight feeling of apprehension which had gripped her.

Up to now, everything that had happened—her father's sudden death, her marriage to George, even the long voyage to England—had possessed a dream-like quality. Now that the journey was over it all became very real.

"I can hardly believe that I am really on board a ship and that in a very short time I shall land in England, George," she murmured.

"Oh, to be in England now that April's here!" quoted George laughingly. "Feeling

excited, darling?"

Jane nodded. Small and dark, she had wavy brown hair, and grey eyes with flecks of hazel in them.

There was generally a smile hovering around the corners of her wide, generous mouth so that people always felt happy to be in her presence. This morning, however, there was a hint of seriousness in her eyes and her smile was just a little tremulous.

"Do you know, dearest, this is something I've dreamed about all my life," she said, looking up at him. "Daddy always promised he would bring me to England one day, but, somehow, he never got round to it." She sighed. "Poor darling, he would have found it an awful bore, I know. He was so happy on his ranch and simply could not understand anyone wanting to leave it."

"You'll find it all very strange here at first, my dear," said George quietly. "Eng-

land isn't the Argentine, Jane. Everything is different and as you go on, you are bound to find that the things you considered important back there aren't any more."

"I know," she nodded. "I shall just have to learn to adjust myself, that's all. Still, nothing can take away the fact that I'll be able to go to a symphony concert instead of listening to it on a record! You don't know what plans I've made, darling. Sadlers Wells—the Old Vic—oh, *everything!*"

He patted her hand.

"There are other things besides ballet and symphony concerts, you know," he said, half banteringly.

"Of course," she nodded. "And I shall do my best to fit in, George. I only hope I measure up."

"You needn't worry about that, my love," he assured her. "Mother will simply adore you—and Kit."

Jane said nothing. She had never given him a hint about the mental reservations that always assailed her when he mentioned his mother.

She had no real reason for thinking that, as his wife, she would be anything but welcomed at Branksome Towers where, she gathered, Mrs. Eleanor Carlton, lived more or less in an atmosphere of regal state.

Yet the almost coldly formal letter she had received from his mother, following the one George had written to say that he was going to be married, had been like a slap in the face to Jane.

For a time they stood at the rail without speaking, watching the town grow bigger as the liner, moving at half speed, nosed its way along Southampton Water.

A tug came out to meet them and lines were thrown; then another hooked on at the stern as the engine-room telegraphs was rung for "Dead Slow".

So this was England, she thought, for Jane remembered nothing of the country in which she had been born twenty-three years ago. Just after that her parents had sailed for South America where her first childish recollections were of the white-washed ranch house on a slope overlooking a purple plain.

As a schoolgirl she had been reserved and shy, living only for the holidays when she could return to the ranch, to ride with her father, or go with him for long walks into the hills which formed a rampart at the back of the valley.

They had been wonderful days. Days of perpetual summer with long, lazy afternoons in a hammock with a book.

To the *gauchos* and *peones*—the cattle-men—she had been the *Senorita*, and they had vied with one another to bring her presents.

One such present was in her trunk in the ship's hold—a gaily decorated saddle that Pedro, the head man, had made for her as a birthday present.

A tender little smile curved Jane's lips as she thought of the sensation she might cause if she used that saddle in England.

She had learnt to drive a car as soon as she was old enough and how to handle a gun. The Spanish language came to her lips as frequently and as fluently as did English.

On leaving junior school the question of her future education had come up for discussion. Her mother had wanted her to go to a finishing school in England, but both Jane and her father had set their minds against the idea.

As Jane had pointed out, she had no relations in England—her mother's sole surviving brother having been killed during the war—so that she would have nowhere to go during the holidays.

In the ordinary course of events the

seventeen-years-old girl would have had a "season" in the capital, visiting and being visited, going to the Opera and to dances.

But her mother had been taken suddenly ill and had died a few weeks afterwards.

Thereafter Jane had adjusted herself to the new order of things without a thought that she might be making a sacrifice.

As the months went by father and daughter became closer to each other than they had ever been.

But with his wife's death he had seemed to age suddenly, and Jane had seen that his heart was no longer in his work. He had often talked of giving up, but had never taken steps towards disposing of the ranch.

Then shortly before Jane's twenty-third birthday, he had suddenly announced that he had received an offer for the property and proposed paying a visit to San Paolo to discuss the matter with his English solicitor.

He had taken Jane with him as a matter of course and they had stayed a month.

It was during this time that she had met George Carlton, who was on a visit to the country as a member of a trade mission sent out from England to negotiate with the Argentine Government.

Looking back afterwards, Jane knew that she had been attracted from the first by the virile, good-looking young Englishman, whose clear-cut features and well-brushed hair had been in such startling contrast to the other men out there.

George, on the other hand, had sensed something friendly about her, so that he had found a receptive audience when he had spoken of his home in the New Forest. He had loved to talk of the hills and the ponies, of the wide view of the English Channel in the distance, until Jane had felt a longing to see the land of her birth.

The fifteenth century old house, in which he had been born, was imbued with romance to him and when he had spoken of it his voice had changed and his eyes had become curiously introspective.

He had told her that he was the eldest of two sons, that his brother, who was a Squadron-Leader in the R.A.F., had married a girl he had met while serving. Their names were Phillip and Kit and, according to George, they were ideally happy.

A few days before she and her father had been due to go back George had asked her to marry him.

They had been in the sitting room of her father's hotel where he had called to take her out.

As she had stood in the centre of the floor, pulling on her gloves, Jane had mentioned that she would be leaving at the end of the week.

Suddenly George had caught her in his arms.

"Then—then what are we wasting time for, Jane?" he had demanded excitedly.

"Wasting time?" she had repeated, looking up at him in surprise. "What do you mean, George?"

"Well, we're in love, aren't we?" he had blurted out. "Oh, Jane darling, don't tell me I've been living in a fool's paradise all this last month! You—you do care, don't you?"

"But, George—" The rich colour had mounted to her temples and then she had smiled at him with quivering lips. "No, you haven't been living in a fool's paradise, dearest," she had continued. "I think I have loved you from the first."

His kiss had changed the whole shape of the future for them both.

"Look,"—he had pulled her towards him. "I'm due back in England in three weeks' time. Do you think I would be mad if I said I wanted you to come back with me—as my wife?"

She had leaned against him, her mind in a whirl.

"Oh, George, I can't leave daddy like that," she had told him firmly. "If he really does sell the ranch we shall both be coming home, but if not, we shall have to think of something else. The first thing is to tell him our news."

Fate had taken the decision out of their hands within a few hours of those words. Her father had died suddenly in his sleep that night.

NOW a slight bump told Jane that the liner had made fast to the landing stage. George turned to her with a smile.

"Come, darling," he said, taking her arm. "Time we got moving. Breakfast on B deck this morning—in Number two saloon. By that time they will have got the luggage ashore and the various officials will be ready to examine passports. We ought to be clear in an hour."

She smiled up at him and put her hand down to touch the ground.

"I can't help feeling that there ought to be a band here to greet me," she said laughingly. "Am I really standing on English soil, George?"

"You are, my love, for the first time for nearly twenty-three years," he answered. "Come on, let's find our cases over at the customs shed." He glanced round the wharf. "Strange! I expected to see Kit before now. I wonder what's happened to her?"

"Perhaps she's waiting until we have gone through the customs," suggested Jane.

She, too, had been wondering why her sister-in-law had not put in an appearance, after sending a message to say that she would be meeting them at Southampton.

Her non-appearance made Jane feel more apprehensive than ever.

"I wish—" she began, but got no further. A tall, striking looking girl with auburn hair and a well made-up complexion came through the crowd towards them.

She was wearing tweeds and a close fitting hat and carried a shoulder bag and gauntlet type gloves. Looking at her, Jane thought enviously that she might have been poured into her clothes so perfectly did they fit.

"So there you are, George! I must have missed you on deck and gave it up as a bad job in the end."

Smiling, George put down the case he was carrying and turned to the speaker.

"Why, Kit!" he exclaimed, taking both her hands. "How nice to see you! I was wondering what had happened! Jane darling, this is Kit. I hope you are going to be good friends."

Kit's eyes danced as she took Jane's hand and bent to kiss her.

"So you are Jane!" she said smilingly. "I would have known you from your photograph anywhere. Welcome to England, my dear! I hope it comes up to expectations."

"What I have seen of it does," said Jane shyly, and added: "It—it's very kind of you to come to meet us."

"My dear! I've been all agog ever since George's first news came." Kit gave her an odd, half quizzical glance. "You have no idea how thrilled I was to hear that he had actually fallen in love at long last! The entire family had given him up, you know—we really began to think he was a confirmed bachelor. Besides, I'm terribly sorry for you—I know what an ordeal it is meeting one's in-laws for the first time. I've been through it, you see!"

"Yes, I suppose it is a bit of an ordeal," Jane confessed. She had taken an instant liking to the other girl, whose sophisticated air did not detract from her natural charm. "But if they are all as nice as you I won't have anything to worry about."

"That's sweet of you, my dear," bowed Kit, "but you may change your mind after a bit. According to some people I'm not at all a nice person to know. Knowing dear old George as I do, I can quite imagine that he pictured us all as such paragons of virtue that you probably wondered what you had been let in for! But don't believe it—most of us are just people with very ordinary shortcomings.

Though uttered half in jest, the remark was one that was not without significance to a girl meeting her husband's relatives for the first time, and as they drove out of Southampton a little later, with Kit at the wheel of the shooting brake,

JANE never quite remembered all the events of the next few days.

Branksome Towers almost took her breath away when she saw it. For one thing, she had not imagined that it was so large, for another it was her first real sight of an old Elizabethan manor standing in its own enclosed grounds.

"It's been in the family for over four hundred years," George had explained, when he had taken her round. "A Carlton served with Drake on the *Golden Hind* and another ancestor defended it against Cromwell. Nowadays we couldn't possibly afford to keep it up if it were not for my grandfather's enterprise. He started a ship-building yard on Southampton Water years ago and it has grown into something considerable. I am on the board of directors, which is one of the reasons why I was asked to join the trade mission to the Argentine."

He had paused in front of an oil painting of a stern faced, middle-aged man in the dress of the last century and had grinned.

"There's the old chap. I feel he ought to have a special place amongst the family portraits, for if it hadn't been for him we might not have met!"

Jane had not quite known what she was going to see, but it had not been anything like this. Her biggest surprise had been George's mother. Her welcome of her daughter-in-law had been coldly formal.

If Jane had entertained any idea that she would be the mistress of her husband's home—for he was the heir—she was to be quickly disillusioned. It apparently had never entered his mother's head that she should gracefully step down from her position and give way to her son's wife.

And oddly, neither did George seem to expect it.

Jane took some time to find her feet. But she pleased George by telling him that she had fallen in love with the old house.

She missed him terribly at her side when he drove off each day to the ship-building offices, or when he was away attending to other family business.

But she was glad he was so popular with everyone. Wherever they went he was greeted on all sides by people of every class and there was no one who did not show pleasure at seeing him again.

They had spent a week in London soon after they had arrived and Jane had gone everywhere; to Sadlers Wells, to shows and concerts, famous churches and museums.

Afterwards they had driven back to Branksome taking their time and stopping for the night at a picturesque old inn, not far from Salisbury.

After dinner they had gone for a walk to where an ancient packhorse bridge crossed a stream.

Standing there, with Jane at his side, George had experienced a sudden rush of feeling that had found vent in words.

"I can hardly believe that you have really chosen me, my dearest," he had said impulsively. "I live in a perpetual fear that I might wake up and find that I've dreamt all

this. You won't ever grow tired of me, will you, Jane darling?"

She had smiled up at him, her lips tremulous.

"It's really true and I *am* here," she had said softly, her eyes shining. "I want you to know that—that whatever happens I shall always love you, George."

He had taken her in his arms.

They had returned to the inn, and if George had failed to realise that Jane was less happy than he had hoped, he was scarcely to blame, perhaps.

As long as he could remember his mother—Aunt Eleanor, as Kit called her—had ruled Branksome Towers and all who dwelt beneath its hospitable roof.

Though his father had died several years earlier, it had never occurred to George that anything in the nature of a change was called for. The household was beautifully ordered; the domestic machinery ran on oiled wheels.

Had it not been for Kit, Jane would have found her position a difficult one indeed. The two girls had become friends—"Allies". Kit had said laughingly—and Jane soon found that she could talk freely to her attractive sister-in-law.

"You know, my dear, that husband of yours wants his ideas bucking up," said Kit one day. "He seems to forget that this is *his* house and that he is the head of the family—not Aunt Eleanor." She shrugged. "Of course it's different for me—Phil is the second son in any case, so I've no claim."

Jane tried to explain that she could not very well assert herself when George saw no need for her to do so.

Mrs. Eleanor Carlton was, apparently, unlike either of her sons who, it seemed, took after their father.

Tall, with a forbidding, regal air, she had steely blue eyes and a beautifully waved head of iron grey hair.

She took a great interest in all that went on around her and served on innumerable village committees.

Not, Kit mentioned flippantly, because she was interested in doing good works, but because she enjoyed telling others what to do!

"You ought to dig your toes in a bit more, Jane," Kit went on. "As far as I am concerned it doesn't matter, as I have said. Phil will be home again in a few months and then we shall probably go to live somewhere near where he happens to be serving. It will mean lodgings or taking a furnished house, no doubt, but at least I shall be able to do as I like, in my own place."

"It's very difficult," Jane sighed. "I couldn't possibly take over and run Branksome Towers as Aunt Eleanor does. I don't know anything about managing a big household like this one, oh, and heaps of other things. Actually I ought to be very grateful for the way she has carried on."

"Grateful, my foot!" said Kit slangily.

"The trouble with dear Aunt Eleanor is that she is in an almost impregnable position and knows it. As one of the trustees of the estate she can make things decidedly awkward for the two boys if she wanted to and she has queenied it here so long that it simply never enters her mind that anyone else has any rights. Added to which—" her lip curled scornfully as she snipped off the end of a too-long stem—"she doesn't suffer daughters-in-law gladly."

"I know she disapproves of *me*," said Jane a little wistfully.

"Oh, you're not important enough for that," said Kit sarcastically, starting on another vase. "It's just that she doesn't approve on principle of either Phil or George taking a wife."

She turned as a shadow darkened the opening of the french windows and then

a welcoming light came into her eyes as a tall, good looking man entered the room.

In a swift registration of impressions Jane saw that he was about thirty-three, with a deeply-tanned complexion and dark brown hair that was tinged with grey at the temples.

"Mark!" Kit exclaimed eagerly. "Goodness gracious! Where *did* you spring from? I thought you were in Tibet or somewhere odd."

"Not Tibet—Thailand," he replied, with a smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I only got back last night, but I thought I'd stroll over and see how things were. How's everybody, my dear Kit?"

"Fine, thank you, Mark," Kit replied. "Phil is away at the moment on one of those goodwill missions the R.A.F. seem to delight in staging—he won't be back for some weeks."

"Showing the flag, eh? Well, it's a good thing, I imagine," he said. He turned smilingly to Jane. "I needn't ask if you are Jane, I suppose?" he went on, holding out his hand. "I heard the good news when I was abroad, so I trust you'll overlook the fact that I am a little late with my good wishes."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Kit exclaimed, making a gesture. "Jane, this is Mark Templeton. He's a neighbour of ours who spends half his time exploring jungles on the other side of the world."

"How do you do," Jane said shyly, taking his hand. "I've heard a lot about you from George."

"I hope it was to my credit, Jane," he said, smiling down at her. "I'm going to call you Jane, if I may. I hate formality."

"You two ought to get together sometime," said Kit. "Jane has lived nearly all her life in the Argentine. You know the country well, don't you, Mark?"

"Yes, I've been there," he answered. He glanced questioningly at Jane. "What part did you live in?"

"My father had a ranch in the Puerto Valley, about fifty miles north at San Paolo," she told him.

"San Paolo?" he mused. "I called there once on my way home from Chile. We flew over the Andes and touched down at San Paolo. A very charming city, I thought. You must find all this,"—he gestured towards the rolling downs—"a very great change?"

"It is indeed," smiled Jane. "But I have always wanted to see England and sometimes I can hardly believe that I am here."

"Jane's father died just before she and George were married," said Kit, forestalling the question she saw hovering on Mark's lips. "George stayed on while Jane's affairs were being settled."

"I'm so sorry," Mark turned to Jane. "I can imagine how you must feel the wrench despite the change of scene. Britain is very lovely, but it can't quite take the place of one's own home. At least, not at first. I can only say that I hope you will find great happiness here."

"Thank you," murmured Jane shyly. "I am sure I will."

When George arrived he insisted upon Mark staying for lunch, at which meal Mrs. Carlton was her most gracious self.

Later, Jane went with George to the stables where one of the brood mares had given birth to a foal and spent an ecstatic half hour fondling the little creature and talking to the head groom.

She would have been amused to have heard the remark the latter made to one of the stable lads when she and George had gone.

"The young mistress is a thoroughbred, an' no mistake," he said. "Knows a horse when she sees one, too, which is more than can be said for some women. And

hands! I don't mind sayin' I was a bit scared when she got up on Saturn the other day—he's an ugly tempered brute—but you should ha' seen her! Never turned a hair even when he did his worst."

On the way back to the house George asked Jane what she thought of Mark.

"He's very good looking, isn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose he is—I've never thought about it," George laughed. "He's a great chap. I hope you and he will become good friends—there aren't many like him about, worse luck."

"What does he do, George? I know you have told me he travels a great deal—has he money of his own?"

"Yes," George was silent for a moment. Then: "Mark spends a lot of time travelling because he's perpetually trying to outstrip his memories, poor fellow. He was engaged to a very charming girl who lived in Salisbury but the wedding never came off. She was killed in a motor smash the night before they were due to be married. Mark never got over it."

"Oh, poor man!" said Jane.

"Yes, it was pretty grim," nodded George. "A thing of that kind would have sent some men round the bend but Mark isn't a weak type. He doesn't ever talk about it, naturally, and if you only know him casually you might think he hadn't a care in the world, but if ever a man's heart was broken, his was!"

"Poor man," said Jane again.

She gave a little shudder and pressed closer to George's side.

"It makes one realise how lucky we are, doesn't it, darling?" she whispered.

#### MOTHER'S SON.

CLIMBING a stile, Jane took the path to the right that eventually led to a secluded wood.

After an almost sleepless night she felt in need of fresh air and, above all, of solitude in which to collect her scattered thoughts.

But there was no room in Jane's heart to appreciate it. In the past two months she had been slowly making the sad discovery that hypocrisy and selfishness, as well as other disagreeable qualities, can flourish under an outward show of tolerance and piety.

Up to now she had managed to avoid an open clash with her mother-in-law, but the previous evening an incident had occurred which had left Jane quivering with humiliation and anger.

It had been trivial enough in itself and, honest as always, Jane admitted to herself that it had been no more than a peg on which to hang a quarrel.

It had happened at dinner. George being away, was not expected back for three days. He had been invited to attend a conference of the manufacturer's association in Glasgow, and when Jane had suggested going with him, he had put her off.

"I'll be busy all day and night and will hardly have a moment with you," he had said. "It isn't as if we knew anyone in Glasgow you could stay with. Better remain here and amuse yourself with Kit, dear."

She had been hurt, though she had said nothing. But she knew it was all a part of the insidious change that had been taking place in their relationship as a result of living at Branksome Towers.

It so happened that a few days earlier Kit had brought a message from Mark Templeton inviting the two girls to accompany him to a point-to-point race meeting that was being held at Lyndon, twenty miles away.

As George was away, Mark had offered

to call for them in his car soon after nine on the morning in question and Jane, knowing that time would hang heavily on her hands otherwise, had gladly said she would go.

Nothing more was said about the outing until the previous evening when, during dinner, Kit had mentioned casually that she hoped it would not rain and spoil the meeting.

Mrs. Carlton, from her place at the head of the table, had glanced across at her sharply.

"To what meeting do you refer, Kit?" she had said curtly.

"The point-to-point at Lyndon, Aunt Eleanor," Kit had replied innocently. "Jane and I are going. Mark is calling for us about nine."

"Really?" Mrs. Carlton's tone had registered extreme disapproval. "This is the first time I have heard of it. I am surprised neither of you thought fit to inform me of your intentions!"

Kit had looked across at Jane.

"I thought you mentioned it the other day when we were at tea, Jane," she had said.

"I may have done—I can't remember," Jane had answered quietly. Turning to the older woman she had asked starkly: "It surely wasn't necessary to ask permission, was it, Aunt Eleanor?"

Mrs. Carlton had flushed with anger.

"Certainly not," she had said. "But I am old-fashioned enough to regard good manners as important. As it happens, I have made other arrangements for tomorrow and your attendance at this affair will seriously inconvenience me."

"I'm sorry," had said Jane. She had gone a little pale and tense. "If you think that I am lacking in courtesy it is a pity, but you see, it never entered my mind to consult you about the matter. Neither Kit nor I are children, you know."

"Children would be taught to behave in a civilised household," had retorted Mrs. Carlton, going too far in her annoyance. "As, presumably, neither of you are going to be here for lunch I consider that the least you could have done was to have told me your plans."

"I quite agree and I'm sorry," had said Jane. "But that does not imply a right to question what Kit or I intend to do with our time. If your plans for to-morrow have been upset, again I am sorry, but in that case, surely you might have consulted us first?"

"I think you are forgetting yourself, Jane." Mrs. Carlton had looked thoroughly outraged. "I am not accustomed to having my authority flouted in this way, neither do I propose to tolerate such conduct on your part. As George's mother I expect the courtesy and consideration that is my due—I won't say your loyalty because that, I am afraid, would be asking far too much."

"Aunt Eleanor!" Kit had looked horrified. "If you find me lacking in loyalty and affection you have only yourself to blame, Aunt Eleanor. When I married George I was prepared to give you the love I thought would be welcome, but you did nothing to encourage me, did you? Right from the start you have made me sense your disapproval. You disapproved of George getting married and you disapproved of me, and of everything I said and did. Do you think that because I have sat quiet under your sneers and insults I haven't noticed—or minded? Well,"—with a bitter little smile—"I have both noticed and minded, but I kept quiet—for George's sake. But now—"

"I think you must have taken leave of your senses, girl," Mrs. Carlton had interrupted frigidly. She had also got to her

feet. "When you feel like apologising for what you have said I shall be pleased to hear you. Until then I must ask you to cease speaking to me."

"Oh, my hat!" had exclaimed Kit in dismay, as Mrs. Carlton had swept regally out of the room. "That's torn it."

Jane had resumed her seat with a sigh. her eyes misting with tears.

"I ought not to have lost my temper," she had owned regretfully. "It doesn't do any good and only makes bad matters worse. Aunt Eleanor can't help being an autocrat and we ought to play up to her accordingly."

"I don't agree," had said Kit vigorously, drawing imaginary patterns on the table top. "She goes too far. I admit we ought not to have forgotten to tell her we were going out, but she couldn't have been more ungracious about it."

"It doesn't matter," had said Jane wearily. "If it hadn't been that it would have been something else. Aunt Eleanor resents me because I committed the unpardonable sin of marrying George, that's all there is to it."

NOW, walking by the river in the woods, Jane was trying to face up to all that was implied by the quarrel that had broken over her head.

She felt strangely alone in her unhappiness, cut off from all that made life sweet, even—she caught her breath—even from the full realisation of her love for George!

For, she reflected sadly, she was being forced into mental and spiritual isolation simply because she loved George too deeply to divide his loyalties.

She laughed ruefully. In marrying George she had placed all her eggs in one basket and unless she were very careful the basket would fall from her hands!

She walked on, a prey to a corroding misery, heedless of the beauty of the day.

It was with a start, therefore, that she heard her name spoken and looking up saw Mark Templeton.

"Mark!" she exclaimed, a little flushed stealing into her wan features. "I thought you had gone to the point-to-point."

"When Kit phoned last night to say that you were not going I decided it wouldn't be much fun going alone," he smiled. "I guessed something pretty grim had happened to cause you both to back out, so I thought I'd stroll over and find out what it was."

"Oh," she said, with an assumption of indifference. "We just changed our minds."

"Is that so?" He smiled quizzically. "I wonder why? It might be interesting to know—or would you prefer me to wander off and commune by myself?"

"How did you know I would be here?" she asked.

"Little bird told me?" he replied, his eyes crinkling with amusement. "To be honest, I saw you in the distance as I walked over the fields and altered course to intercept you. Do you mind?"

Jane seated herself on the low stone wall of the ancient bridge and smiled briefly, staring into space.

With the instinctive sympathy and understanding, she had learned to expect from him, Mark had come in search of her in order to discover for himself the reason for her defection.

"I suppose," she murmured at last, "that it wouldn't be the least use trying to pretend that nothing has happened?"

Mark took out a cigarette and tapped it down on the back of his hand.

"Not a bit, my dear," he said shaking his head. "I flatter myself that I understand a great deal more than, perhaps, either you or George give me credit for."

Jane nodded, the ghost of a smile touching her lips.

"Then you can probably guess what happened when both Kit and I forgot to mention to Aunt Eleanor that we were supposed to be going with you to Lyndon to-day."

"Quite so," he observed sympathetically. He held his lighter to his cigarette and then seated himself on the wall. "I can imagine that Mrs. Carlton took rather a poor view of your—er—neglect. Would you care to tell me about it, Jane? A trouble shared is a trouble halved, remember."

She was silent for quite a minute.

"Well?" he prompted gently.

Jane gestured crossly.

"It's so degrading," she burst out. "Any one would think that Kit and I were children the way Aunt Eleanor goes on. She chose to be annoyed, as you guessed, because we forgot to tell her about the arrangement to go to Lyndon with you and, as usual, she took it out on me."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. Knowing Jane, he did not make the mistake of thinking, from her last remark, that she was being sorry for herself.

He said nothing, however, and encouraged by his silence, Jane explained it all slowly and carefully, going back to the beginning when she had first come to Branksome Towers, his obvious sympathy and understanding helping her to put it clearly.

When she finished—

"Why did you decide to cancel the trip to Lyndon?" he enquired. "That wasn't necessary, surely?"

Jane flushed.

"It would have been spoilt for both of us," she said, bringing Kit into the picture. "Kit felt the same as I did." She looked over the grassy slope on the other side of the river to the woods beyond. "I'm sorry I have bored you with all this, Mark. After all, you can't do anything."

"At least I can sympathise," he said quickly. He knocked the ash off his cigarette, a little movement that gave him a fleeting second in which to form his next sentence. "I may even be able to help, though an outsider can't really do much. Still, another point of view is sometimes a help."

"Another point of view won't make Aunt Eleanor hate me less than she does now," said Jane hopelessly. "I've tried—really tried—to love her because she is George's mother, but it's like beating the air with a feather."

Mark smiled understandingly.

"I don't think Mrs. Carlton hates you, Jane." He turned to face her. "At least, not in a personal sense. When George married you he placed you in an unassailable position if you cared to assert it and it is *that* which she resents. She knows that if you wanted to do so you could make her position untenable."

"I wish I could believe it was only that. In any case, what can I do?"

"Quite a bit," said Mark drily. "You could demand what would be popularly called 'your rights' or you could complain to George and insist upon setting up your own home!"

Jane stared moodily at the water.

"Possible, yes, but only at the price of a great deal of unpleasanliness. In any case, I couldn't come between George and his mother."

"Granted. But I fail to see any good reason why you should submit to being treated as an interloper," he said bluntly. "Surely George realises what is going on?"

"Oh, Aunt Eleanor is much too clever to give him a clue," said Jane scornfully. "Except for last night everything she says and does is carefully camouflaged so that

if I complained I would merely put myself in the wrong."

"And, of course, you don't complain!"

Again she made that angry little gesture.

"How can I? I can't go to George and say his mother is deliberately making things about as impossible as she can. He would want chapter and verse and yet, if I tried to tell him, it would all sound too petty for words! He would probably end up by telling me I was looking for something that wasn't there."

"It's a difficult position, certainly," Mark agreed thoughtfully. "Tell me, if it isn't a rude question, how were you left when your father's affairs were settled up, Jane?"

"Not very well off," she replied frankly, a little surprised at the question. "I didn't know it at the time, but apparently my father suffered some very heavy losses when there was all that trouble over here about the Argentine beef and, as you know, very little was imported for two years. He raised a mortgage on the ranch in order to carry on so that he wouldn't have to dismiss staff and when that was repaid out of the sale of the ranch and the stock, there wasn't very much left. I suppose you are wondering if I am financially independent of George?"

"In a way, yes," he said musingly. "Independence is a good thing sometimes."

Jane rose, still looking towards the woods.

"That wouldn't be any use," she said. "It would be telling George to choose between his mother and me and nothing would induce me to do that." She turned and looked down at him, smiling wistfully. "Thank you all the same, Mark. Just speaking about it all has helped tremendously. I've never really let anything get me down like this, but I feel better now."

He rose in turn and stood looking at her. "There isn't very much one can say," he remarked. "But why don't you tell George just what you have told me and in the same way? It is his place to know if you are unhappy and why. You say that it would sound too petty for words—no doubt it would—but it is the effect of these things that are important, not the things themselves. He couldn't refuse to listen and—"

"You don't understand, Mark," she broke in a little impatiently. "George wouldn't see it as you do. He has been brought up to regard his mother as someone who has sacrificed herself to do everything for her sons—one can't mention even a trip to London without being reminded of the time she did not go because George or Philip had measles or something! The result is he is perpetually grateful to her for running everything as she does."

Mark saw her lip go between her teeth and his heart moved with tenderness and a kind of reluctant pity. She was so alone and, because of ideals which did not permit of coming between her husband and his mother, so vulnerable.

"Has Kit said when she expects Phillip to be home again?" he asked as they moved off.

"According to his last letter he expects to be back in England in about a fortnight's time," said Jane, looking curiously at him. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered," he said, his eyes speculative. "It struck me that they will be going to live somewhere near where Phillip is to be quartered so that you will be left with Mrs. Carlton and George. What will you do then?"

THAT question was one to which Jane had not succeeded in finding an answer by the time her brother-in-law

returned from his visit abroad.

Phillip was a younger edition of George, with the hearty self assurance she had come to associate with flying men.

"It was a good thing father was alive when I came to do my National Service," Phillip confided in Jane. "When I said I intended to apply for a regular R.A.F. flying commission mother went up in smoke but dad backed me up, so I got away with it. I was under age at the time and had to have his consent, you see." He grinned broadly and looked to where George, in tennis kit, was talking to Kit on the edge of the court. "Poor old George was left holding the baby but, as I often tell him, he's cut out for the role of country squire. Besides, he's got a head for business—I haven't."

During his stay at Branksome Towers, Phillip and Kit seemed to be out all day and most of the night, dashing about the countryside in the rakish-looking sports car he called "The Yellow Peril".

Jane liked her brother-in-law and knew that he liked her.

Did he see what George failed to see, or did he take the existing order of things for granted, too? she often wondered. One thing Jane noticed was that Phillip spent little time in his mother's company.

Only when the question of his future movements cropped up did Jane gain a clue as to his outlook as far as domestic arrangements were concerned.

They were all having tea on the terrace at the time and Phillip, who had heard from the Air Ministry that morning, had just told them that he was to be stationed for a time at Buckley, not far from Salisbury Plain, where he had been appointed to command a bomber squadron.

"Well, if you are only going to be a matter of twenty-five miles from here I see no necessity for you and Kit to take a furnished house," said Mrs. Carlton, pouring out tea. "Why can't you continue to live here as you are doing and come home whenever you are off duty, Phillip?"

"No fear," he replied promptly, winking at Kit. "With all due respect to you, mother dear, Kit and I prefer to paddle our own canoe. It may wobble a bit at times when we strike stormy water but at least it *is* ours."

A spasm crossed Mrs. Carlton's smooth features.

"Of course, you know your own business best, my dears," she said. "But I should be sorry to think you regarded Branksome Towers as anything but your own home. George feels the same about it as I do, don't you, dear?"

"Er, yes, that's right, mother. Phil knows that," George said.

Mark Templeton, who had come over earlier and stayed for tea, was seated on the other side of his host. Across the width of the terrace he met Jane's eyes and at the look in them she bit her lip.

Surely, she thought, a little flicker of anger making itself felt, surely George could not fail to see the blatant way she had been ignored?

If anyone had a right to invite Kit and Phillip to make their home at The Towers it was George, and as his wife she should have been consulted.

Responding to the sudden impulse which momentarily got the better of her she got up and put down her empty cup.

"If you have finished perhaps you will walk over to the stables with me," she said abruptly, turning to Mark. "Saturn has been slightly off his feed for the past day or so and I would like to know what you think."

He got up at once, his handsome features impassive.

"Of course, Jane. I shall be only too pleased," he replied. He turned to Mrs. Carlton and gave a slight bow. "Will you excuse me?" he added politely.

"Certainly, Mark," she replied frigidly, darting a venomous glance in Jane's direction. She turned to her son. "Aren't you going, George?"

"Oh, I don't think so," he said lightly. "Mark's the expert on horses. Besides, I'm much too comfortable where I am."

Mark walked down the steps and joined Jane at the bottom.

When they were out of earshot of the terrace he broke into silent laughter.

"I hope you realise what you have done, young lady," he said in a low voice. "If we had been living a hundred years ago George would have considered it his duty to have sent me a challenge to a duel."

Jane looked away, but not before he had seen the tears in her eyes.

"I don't care," she said, in a low, shamed voice. "I don't honestly care. To be ignored like that, just as if I didn't matter."

Mark glanced at her curiously.

"I think you are being just a little hard on him," he said gently. "George is the type that takes a lot of rousing, but when he's roused, nothing will stop him. If you don't mind my saying so, my dear, you made a mistake in acting as you did. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, you played right into Mrs. Carlton's hands."

AS soon as she entered the long drawing room an hour later Jane knew that Mark had been right; that she had gone too far in acting as she had.

George was standing in front of the open window, his hands thrust deep into his jacket pockets, his shoulders squared in a manner that foretold trouble for someone.

He turned at her entrance."

"Has Mark gone?" he enquired curtly.

"Yes," said Jane quietly, feeling the atmosphere of tension. "He asked me to say that he would ring you up to-morrow about those hunters you are thinking of selling. He—he didn't think there was anything much wrong with Saturn."

"I hardly expected there would be," said George sarcastically. "That was just an excuse to cover up your extraordinary behaviour, wasn't it?"

"My behaviour?" Jane looked steadfastly at him.

To anyone not blinded by anger she would have made an appealing picture against the dark oak panelling behind her.

"That's what I said," George declared aggressively.

"I don't understand," she replied, taking refuge in evasion. "What has my behaviour to do with it?"

"Everything, I imagine," he replied, still in that curt, uncompromising tone. "One doesn't normally get up and walk out in the middle of tea as you did not to mention putting a guest in the uncomfortable position of having to be equally guilty of such bad manners."

Jane collected her wits, a little flicker of anger coming into her eyes.

"It doesn't matter about the position you put me in, I suppose?" she enquired. "That's quite another matter, isn't it? In fact, on the face of it, I hardly count."

"What do you mean by that?"

George stared at her with a kind of bewilderment in his eyes. A quarrel had flared up before either of them realised the direction in which they were heading.

"I wasn't aware of having done or said anything to which you could possibly take exception, Jane. As far as I remember we were merely discussing where Kit and Phil were going to live—I don't see anything very out of place in that."

"Exactly!" said Jane, in a hard, brittle

voice. "You don't see quite a lot that is going on under your very nose. Did it never occur to you that your mother never even paid me the compliment of drawing me into the conversation? Why, I mightn't have been there."

George went red and white in turn.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he ejaculated. "Mother did no more than make an obvious, and I think, sensible suggestion. If that is your excuse for such a display of shocking bad manners, then it strikes me as being pretty thin."

Jane looked wonderingly at him, her cheeks aflame.

"Do you really mean that you don't know why I got up and left the family gathering?" she asked.

"I certainly do not," he replied stiffly. "If you had gone out of your way to slight mother you could not have done it more openly. The least you can do now is to apologise to her."

Jane's colour deepened.

"Oh, you're hopeless, George," she breathed, her fists clutching and unclenching. "Why—why even the servants pity me, yet you can't see something that sticks out a mile! Now then—if you want to know I got up and asked Mark to come to the stables with me because it was a family gathering and it was made perfectly clear that, as far as your mother is concerned, I am more of an outsider round the table than Mark!"

"Good Heavens! You must be mad to talk such nonsense, Jane," he exclaimed.

"You may think it ridiculous, George, but as far as I am concerned, it was the last straw," Jane said bitterly. "You either can't or won't see it, but ever since I came to Branksome Towers your mother has gone out of her way to make me feel that I am not wanted here."

"Oh, nonsense!" he declared. "You have received nothing but the respect and consideration due to you as my wife, in which case I fail to see what grounds you have for making such a baseless charge. You knew before we were married that mother would share our home—"

"Please don't call it my home," Jane interrupted passionately. "This isn't a home—it's a kind of so-called superior guest house—and I'm the unwanted guest!"

George took a deep, sighing breath.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he said abruptly. "I can't think why you should imagine that you have been slighted when nothing of the kind has occurred, so we had better say no more about it. Perhaps, when you have had time to reflect, you will reconsider your attitude."

Really, this was too much, thought Jane almost hysterically. In another moment he would become heavily understanding and, after a suitable interval, might even condescend to forgive her!

"It must be wonderful to have your sort of mind, George," she said tauntingly. "It keeps you above the kind of things that matter to other people, doesn't it? No wonder you can afford to be so superior!"

"There is no need to introduce that kind of thing into the discussion," George said.

"I see!" Jane shot back at him. "I suppose that you calling me mad and bad mannered is different. That doesn't count, of course."

"I merely implied—"

"Oh, don't bother to explain." She tossed her head. "Anyone who criticises your mother must be out of their mind and ungrateful."

Even if he considered that she was mistaken, surely if he loved her he would have tried to see her point of view, to understand, to help. As it was—

"I don't know what has come over you, Jane," he said at length, breaking in on her

thoughts. His voice was a shade less cold and there was even a note of bewilderment in it. "As far as I am concerned—"

"But you don't know anything, George," she interrupted. "What is much more to the point you don't want to know! All you want is someone who is complaisant enough to fit into your scheme of things—someone to talk to and take around and to be made love to when you are in the mood. Well, now I know!"

With that she turned and walked out of the room, blinded by the tears she had been too proud to shed, wilfully deaf to his sudden exclamation.

"Jane! Please—wait! I want—"

#### DESTINY TAKES A HAND.

**B**UT, my dear girl, what else did you expect?" Mark Templeton ran his hand through his hair in a gesture of half amused bewilderment. "Not content with putting the cat amongst the pigeons this afternoon, you have apparently piled on the agony by telling George precisely where he gets off! Now you have added to it all by deliberately flouting the conventions by coming to see me. What do you imagine your husband is going to think?"

Jane shrugged.

"I'm afraid George can think what he likes," she said calmly. "Don't you understand, Mark? I had to talk to someone. Kit's no good. She's suffered at Aunt Eleanor's hands, it's true, but not to the same extent, and now that Phil is back she can afford to laugh at it all."

"That may be true, but flying off the handle isn't going to help matters, my dear," he said quietly. "I understand how you feel, but the fact remains, you are not going to gain anything by openly antagonising your mother-in-law, or George for that matter. Look, let me get you some tea and then I'll walk back over the fields with you. It won't take a minute—I'll just ring for Mrs. Rogers and she—"

"Don't bother, Mark," Jane rose, a hand going to her eyes as if her spirit were suddenly broken. "You are quite right, of course. I ought not to have come. I'm sorry."

Mark smiled understandingly, and taking her arm, guided her back to her seat.

"You're going to have that tea first," he said. "There's nothing like what my housekeeper calls 'a cuppa' when you feel het up, and by that time we may have thought of something. Now sit down and relax and try, if you can, to stop worrying."

He went out to tell his housekeeper to make some tea and Jane looked around her with a half interested curiosity.

At the far end of the room was a large, flat topped desk with a portable typewriter on it.

Near at hand, a frame contained the portrait of a very lovely looking girl in her early twenties.

Jane got up to have a closer look at it and was holding the frame in her hand when Mark came back.

"She was called Eleanor, oddly enough," he said smiling gently. "You know what happened, of course?"

"Yes. George told me, Mark. She was very beautiful wasn't she?"

"I thought so," he said, looking down at the picture with eyes that seemed to grow suddenly dark. "She had a very lovely character and it was always a source of amazement to me why I was fortunate enough to win her love."

Jane remembered the occasions when George had glanced at her as if he too, could not believe she had really chosen him.

"Poor Mark!" she said, with a sudden rush of sympathy, looking across at him

with misting eyes.

Mark shrugged.

"Don't pity me, please," he begged. "You see, this life is only a phase—a flash of light in the dark—and when we meet again, as I know we shall, everything will be fine and sweet and terribly exciting, because between Eleanor and I there is a beautiful memory."

"Oh, Mark! That's the nicest thing I've ever heard anyone say," she murmured. Tears fell from her eyes and she rubbed the back of her hand across them. "Don't take any notice of me, please—I'm just being a woman."

"And that's a very nice thing to be," he said. He turned as the door opened and his housekeeper came in with a tray. "Ah, thank you very much, Mrs. Rogers. Put it down here, will you?"

"Yes, sir." The housekeeper, a buxom middle-aged woman, beamed at Jane. "Good evening, ma'am."

"Good evening, Mrs. Rogers," said Jane, with a wan smile. "It is very nice of you to make me tea at this hour. Thank you."

"Ah! I always says that a good cuppa tea warms the cockles of yer heart, ma'am. There's nothing like it and you're welcome, for sure."

She hustled out and closed the door behind her.

Jane looked at Mark and gave a little hunch of her shoulders.

"Now, I suppose, it will be all over the village that I have been visiting you?" she said.

Mark gave a little smile.

"It can't be helped," he said and picked up the sugar tongs. "How many, Jane?" he added.

"Two lumps, please," she said.

"You still haven't told me what I am to do, Mark," she said.

"Simply because I'm not in a position to do so, my dear girl," he replied. He hesitated a moment, then: "May I ask if you are still in love with George?"

Jane coloured.

"Of course," she said, with a note of defiance creeping into her voice.

"Good!" he said, in tones of relief. "If you can hang on to that, you'll be all right. These other things become relatively unimportant in the end."

"I thought that, too," she said, with a sigh. "But lately—"

The sharp burring of the telephone in the hall cut her short.

Presently she saw Mark pick up the receiver, heard his enquiry and then saw him stiffen.

For a moment he said nothing but "Yes?" and "No"—then Jane saw him glance back towards her and knew that the call was from Branksome Towers.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and then, "Yes, she's here," he said. And after listening intently for a moment added: "Very well, I'll tell her."

He put down the receiver and came back into the sitting room, his face grave.

"That was Kit," he said slowly. "She has been trying to locate you and telephoned here on the off-chance that I might have seen you. George has been injured."

"George?" Jane was on her feet, her heart pounding, her face pale. One hand went to her breast and for a moment she felt as if she could not breathe. "You mean—?"

"Apparently he went out in his car soon after you left the house," he said gently. "They don't know exactly what happened."

All the strength seemed to ebb from Jane's body.

"Is—is he seriously injured? Did Kit say?"

"No," he replied, answering the first

question. "At least, as far as she knew. But he's in poor shape. They've taken him to the Branksome Hospital."

"It's my fault that it happened," she said, in a flat voice. "If I hadn't come over here without saying where I was going George wouldn't have started out to look for me." She began to cry, helplessly.

"You don't know that he was looking for you," said Mark patiently. "In any case, worrying about that isn't going to help. You'd better dry your eyes while I get the car round. The sooner you get to the hospital the better for you both, I think."

At the hospital a nurse escorted them to a waiting room, where they were joined after a few minutes by Dr. Bowen.

He smiled cheerfully at Jane and shook her hand giving Mark a friendly nod.

"Ah, good evening, Mrs. Carlton," he said, with a reassuring note in his voice. "Come to see that husband of yours? Well, you can if you promise not to stay more than five minutes. By the way, there is no cause for alarm, but he has had considerable pain and I don't want his temperature to go up!"

"How is he, doctor?" she asked gently.

"He's broken his arm and fractured a collar bone, as well as sustaining a nasty cut on the head," said Dr. Bowen. "Naturally, he is suffering from shock, but that will pass—he's got a splendid constitution and you'll have him sitting up and taking notice before many days are over."

Jane knew that she would never forget the sight of George's white face as she saw it against the pillow of the narrow hospital bed.

When she bent to kiss him he smiled at her, but his voice, when he tried to speak, was slurred and scarcely audible.

Jane sat beside him, holding his hand, an awful blank feeling inside her, and after a few minutes he slipped away into unconsciousness.

"I am responsible for this!" she told herself, looking down at his white face. "If I hadn't let my temper get the better of me it need not have happened."

MARK evidently guessed what she was thinking, for as they turned into the drive on the way back to Branksome Towers he chided her gently.

"You won't help George by wearing a lot of sackcloth and ashes, you know, my dear Jane," he said. "In a way it is probably a good thing that it happened. If you ask me, you were heading for a smash of another kind. Now you can get things sorted out between you without interference from Aunt Eleanor."

Jane sighed. "You can't get away from the fact that if I hadn't quarrelled with George he wouldn't have met with an accident," she said.

"I'm not trying to get away from it, but an accident can happen to anybody," he replied. "Incidentally, I gleaned a little of what occurred while I was waiting for you. It seems it wasn't George's fault. Some youth on a bicycle came careering out of a side road and in swerving to avoid him George ran into the ditch."

"He was probably worrying about me and wondering where I had gone," she said obstinately, like someone determined to lay the lash about her own shoulders.

"That doesn't say much for his driving," Mark laughed, keeping the conversation on as light a plane as possible.

He drove away, reflecting on the irony of a fate which had revived a capacity for love he had thought was buried for ever in a grave in Branksome churchyard.

He would never love anyone as he had loved Eleanor—that first fine careless rap-

ture had been theirs alone → the protective tenderness aroused in him by Jane was love of another kind, deeply sincere and completely selfless.

Each year, as the seasons came and the promise of spring mocked the blood in his veins, Mark had sought to appease his loneliness by travel. But distant places—even danger—had lost their enchantment. Life had become narrowed down to a single focus point so that he no longer denied the love which had come all unbidden to lighten his days, secret though it must remain for ever in his lonely heart.

He let himself into his house and went to the room where he had given Jane tea. Picking up the portrait in its frame he studied it for a moment, a deeply introspective look in his sad eyes.

"You understand, don't you, Eleanor?" he said softly. "It isn't that I love you less—if that is possible, I love you more as the days go by. But Jane is so like you in many ways."

KIT met Jane in the hall, her face drawn and anxious.

"Was that Mark? He took you to the hospital, then? They told us you were there when Phil telephoned." Then:

"How is George?"

"He—he'll be all right."

Jane spoke absently, as if only half aware of what she was saying. She stood in the centre of the wide hall, hands in the pockets of her coat, looking past Kit.

Then, as if conscious of the need to say more, added slowly:

"Doctor Bowen says his injuries aren't serious."

"I know. That's what he told Phil. In fact, he sounded disgustingly cheerful, Phil says, but we have been most terribly anxious. Aunt Eleanor was simply livid when she heard that you had gone direct to the hospital—she wanted to go but Doctor Bowen said that George wasn't allowed any more visitors to-night."

"Hullo, Jane," he said sympathetically, giving a glance at her white face and purple shadows under her eyes. "You've seen George, I gather? How is the old chap?"

Jane repeated what she had said to Kit. For his benefit she added that George had not been able to talk and that he was suffering from shock.

Phillip nodded.

"Bound to be," he said. "Taking it all round, it's a bad show, but thank goodness it's no worse." He glanced at her again. "You don't look so good yourself, my dear girl. Better let Kit tuck you up in bed and take a sedative to make you sleep. Worrying about it isn't going to help."

Jane's lips quivered; she seemed dazed. Kit put an arm around her shoulders.

"Phil's right," she said firmly. "Bed's the best place for you, young woman. Come along! I'll help you get undressed and then I'll bring you something on a tray. I don't imagine you want to face dinner—and Aunt Eleanor—to-night."

Jane submitted like a child and was led upstairs, while Phillip went off to make arrangements about having his brother's wrecked car towed to a garage.

Half an hour later Kit knocked at the door of Jane's room and entered with a glass of hot milk and some thin slices of toast.

She found Jane standing by the window in a blue dressing gown, her hair rumpled, her eyes red and swollen.

"Look!" Kit said cheerfully, putting the tray down on the table between the beds. "I've brought some hot milk. It might be a good idea if you took a couple of those tablets with it."

"All right," said Jane listlessly. "I

shan't sleep, though. I keep thinking of George——” She broke off with a little gesture of abandonment, two tears rolling down her cheeks.

Kit went to her and put an arm around her, leading her towards the bed.

“Oh, my dear,” she murmured sympathetically. “I can guess how you feel. But you mustn’t give way, you know. George wouldn’t want you to become ill through worrying over him, now, would he? Besides, it isn’t as if he were seriously hurt.”

“Still it was all my fault that it happened,” said Jane with a deep, shuddering breath.

“No one is going to gloss over anything,” said Kit, with brusque kindness. “But it’s silly nonsense to say that it was your fault. All right,” she added, “I know that you and George had a row over what happened at tea and that you went off to Mark’s house in a huff, but that doesn’t make you to blame!”

Jane looked at her curiously.

“How did you know I was at Mark’s?” she asked.

“Willis, the under-gardener saw you going over the fields in that direction,” Kit said quietly. “When the hospital rang Aunt Eleanor was out and I ran round in circles trying to find you. Willis was in the grounds and he told me he’d seen you.”

Jane sighed and slipped out of her dressing gown.

“Does Aunt Eleanor know where I was when you telephoned?”

Kit pulled a face.

“Yes, unfortunately. She insisted that she must go to the hospital as soon as she heard, but Phil said it wasn’t any use unless we found out first whether she would be allowed to see George. That’s why he telephoned and, of course, they said you were there. I had to tell her, then, that I had been in touch with you and that Mark had driven you over.”

Jane picked up the glass of milk and began to sip it, staring in front of her.

Then—

“How perfectly priceless!” she said, with a dreary little laugh. “I couldn’t have staged it better if I had planned the whole thing! Now all that Aunt Eleanor has to do is to tell George that I left him and rushed off to Mark for sympathy!”

Kit nodded.

“It’s very awkward, certainly,” she admitted. “But I don’t think you need worry unduly about it, all the same.”

IT was nearly dawn before Jane fell into a troubled sleep at last. As a result, she overslept and awoke with a start to find the sun streaming in at the windows and Kit standing by her bedside with tea.

“I thought I’d better wake you,” said Kit apologetically. “Aunt Eleanor has been on the telephone to the hospital and has spoken to Doctor Bowen. They are bringing George here in an ambulance at eleven. You know what Aunt Eleanor is—she simply took charge and, of course, the hospital people are only too pleased to have George’s bed.”

Jane stared at her in dismay.

“But—but she has no right to do that,” she stammered, going pale. “I——”

“I know,” said Kit, with a shrug. “But have you ever known Aunt Eleanor stop to question whether she has a right to do anything? She’s ordered the room at the end of the corridor to be got ready for George—her excuse being that he will have quiet there.”

“I see,” said Jane, compressing her lips. Then she shrugged. “Oh, well, I don’t think there is anything to be gained by making a fuss. I—I’ve got to think of George, not myself.”

Kit looked sympathetic.

“Aunt Eleanor is probably acting for the best,” she said soberly. “She’s right in one thing—George will be happier at home than in hospital and, of course, you will be able to spend as much time as you like with him. Doctor Bowen said that he could get up at the end of the week if he went on as he is doing. He will have to have his arm in plaster for some time, of course, but at least he will be able to get about. The car isn’t too badly damaged, either,” she went on cheerfully, “so you will be able to take George for long drives.”

“In fact, everything is wonderful and all I have to do is to keep out of the way,” said Jane bitterly.

“You have nothing to reproach yourself with,” said Kit stoutly. “Aunt Eleanor is like one of those ancient colossus things—she crushes all opposition by the sheer weight of her personality.”

Jane put down her cup and sprang out of bed.

“Be a dear and run my bath for me, will you?” she asked. “I haven’t much time—I never realised it was as late as this.”

Kit turned and looked curiously at her, aroused by something in Jane’s voice that made her slightly uneasy.

“Why, what are you going to do?” she asked.

“What do you think?” she asked curtly. “I’m going for a long, long walk! One thing I am certainly not going to do and that is to be here when George is brought home. He doesn’t need me, and never will while his mother is about to fuss over him.”

“WELL?” asked George.

“Well?” Jane replied defiantly. She stood at the foot of his bed looking like a rebellious child.

She had changed and was wearing a simple afternoon frock with short sleeves, George was sitting propped up in bed, his arm in a plaster cast resting on the counterpane in front of him, his head bandaged.

“From the fact that you weren’t here when I was brought home I presume you had other things to occupy your mind,” George said drily. “Of course, it’s no business of mine, but I—well—wondered.”

The sarcasm brought colour to her cheeks.

“What else did you expect?” she enquired.

“What I expected is neither here nor there,” he said, drawing a quick breath. He paused a moment, as if to give his words more weight: “Don’t you consider that you are being a little indiscreet, Jane?”

“I don’t understand, George,” she said slowly. “I wasn’t aware of having been indiscreet in any way.”

“It all depends on how one looks at that kind of thing, of course,” he said, with a slight shrug. “I know that nowadays ideals like loyalty are supposed to be old-fashioned, but I thought you were different from the rest, Jane.”

She stared at him in consternation. She had walked miles that day, striving to find a way out of the maze in which she was wandering, seeking desperately for the opening that would lead her back to the happiness she had lost.

In the end she had returned to the house, determined to seek a reconciliation by any means in her power, even if it meant going to the length of apologising to her mother-in-law.

“I have always been loyal to you, George,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Even when it seemed, as it did sometimes, that you were not altogether loyal to me.”

He gave her a challenging look.

“Is that true, Jane?” he demanded. “Can you honestly say you have nothing on your conscience—that you have always been

consistently loyal to me?”

“Of course I can,” she replied indignantly. Then she laughed angrily. “If I had anything on my conscience, as you so dramatically put it, I would know what all this was about, wouldn’t I?”

“Well, and are you quite sure you don’t know?” he countered. “You don’t deny that you were at Mark’s house last night when Kit telephoned to say I had been hurt, do you? Or that he drove you to the hospital?”

“Certainly not,” she replied, with dignity. “I don’t see anything very wrong in that—I was quite adequately chaperoned.”

“That’s beside the point,” he said curtly. “It may interest you to know that when you didn’t put in an appearance this morning I got Phil to telephone Mark to ask if he had seen you. His housekeeper answered the telephone and said that her master was out for the day and wouldn’t be back until this evening. What could I assume but that you were with him?”

“I haven’t seen Mark all day,” she said defiantly. “You can believe me or not as you wish. It happens to be the truth, though. I went for a walk—by myself.”

“It seems a strange way to behave, in the circumstances,” he said, his eyes never leaving her face. “However, assuming that what you say is true, why did you go to his house yesterday?”

“I wanted to talk to him.”

“I see,”—with heavy sarcasm. “It would be more accurate, I imagine to say that you went to weep on his shoulder! I wonder how you would feel if I rushed off to some girl in order to confide my woes to her?”

Jane turned away and went to stand at the window.

At length she turned to face him.

“I didn’t go to weep on Mark’s shoulder, metaphorically or otherwise,” she said quietly. “He happens to be your friend as well as mine and he’s very much older. I don’t think it is quite the same thing, do you?”

“What I think is neither here nor there,” he said. “It’s what others may think.”

She smiled, her eyes slightly scornful.

“You mean what your mother thinks,” she said. “Obviously, she has been doing her best to make mischief.”

George frowned.

“Why should you think that mother has been trying to make mischief, as you put it?” he asked.

“You ask me why?” Jane enquired, in a slightly raised voice. She laughed again, but there was no mirth in her laughter. “Well, for one thing, she happens to be jealous. Naturally, you won’t believe that. ‘You’re incapable of being jealous yourself, so you can’t understand that anyone could be like that. Why do you think that she made arrangements to have you brought here without letting me know?’

“Because it was the obvious thing to do,” he said. “Mother knew that I would want to be here instead of at the hospital and as there was no reason why I should not be moved she made the necessary arrangements with Doctor Bowen. I can’t see what grounds you can have for objecting.”

“I’ve told you my reasons!”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, they don’t hold water,” said George calmly. “However, it seems a waste of time to go on discussing the matter. The best thing we can do is to try to forget it. I have no doubt your friendship with Mark is and has been, quite open and above board, but the fact remains that, in acting as you did last night, you have laid yourself open to the kind of uncharitable gossip which thrives in the neighbourhood.”

Jane hesitated on the brink of speech. Then she walked to the door and passed through without saying a word.

As the days passed, something very like a temporary truce was observed between Jane and her husband. They were polite and obliging to each other, and no one who did not know them intimately would have guessed that there was a rift in the lute.

As far as her relations with her mother-in-law went, Jane could only marvel at the ease with which Mrs. Carlton played the role she had assumed. In front of George she was careful not to betray a hint of the jealousy of which Jane had accused her. Jane, who had resigned herself to the inevitable, kept a still tongue in her head.

Besides, just then she had other things to preoccupy her mind. George was getting rapidly better and at the end of a week went about almost as if nothing had happened except for his arm being in a cast.

His car had been delivered with all the dents and scratches straightened out and Jane drove him into Southampton on business, or for a drive into the country.

Of Mark she had seen but little. He had come over to visit George on two occasions, but had not stayed very long. Jane had sensed a constraint for which she felt responsible.

Neither did Mark give her the opportunity to speak to him alone, so that she wondered if he had guessed at the true state of affairs and was being careful not to involve her in any way.

Slowly August gave way to September, and as the days began to shorten, Jane knew what she had suspected earlier was true—she was going to have a baby.

Without telling anyone she went to see Dr. Bowen, whose eyes twinkled when she hesitantly told him why she had come.

When she left, he gave her a prescription and some advice.

"Don't overdo things, but take plenty of gentle, healthy exercise," he said. "Long walks especially, provided you don't tire yourself unduly. Come and see me again in a month's time, or sooner if things don't appear to be going right."

Kit and Phillip were living near Salisbury, in a furnished bungalow they had rented.

Mark had gone to stay with a married sister in Cornwall and for the first time in years had decided to winter in England.

On their next visit Jane confided her secret to Kit, who was both surprised and delighted.

"What do you want, a boy or a girl?" she asked.

Jane blushed.

"I don't think I mind," she said. "I daresay George will want it to be a boy."

"You'll have to tell him soon," said Kit pointedly.

Quickly Jane changed the subject and for the rest of the time they talked about Kit's proposed visit to Scotland, where she had friends. Phillip was going on a special flying course and it seemed a good opportunity, she said.

Just before she left, however, she drew Jane to one side.

"Take my advice and tell George about the baby, Jane," she whispered. "It's not fair to keep him in ignorance once you are sure. Everything is all right between you now, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," said Jane, with unexpected flippancy. "Everything is quite all right—as long as I mind my p's and q's and don't do anything of which Aunt Eleanor doesn't approve."

Kit opened her mouth to say something but her mother-in-law came up to speak to them and the opportunity was lost.

THE following day dawned clear and bright. George had to leave early to go into Southampton and asked Jane if she would like to go with him for the sake of

the drive. His arm was perfectly all right again and there was no longer any need for her to drive him about, so she shook her head, saying that she would prefer to spend the day quietly at home.

He seemed disappointed, but did not press her and a little after nine o'clock he left.

Jane saw him off and stood watching until his car turned the corner of the drive. Then she went upstairs and after tidying the bedroom, put on a light coat and a beret and went down again.

As luck would have it, she encountered Mrs. Carlton as she was crossing the hall.

"Are you going out, Jane?" her mother-in-law asked.

"I thought of going for a walk, it is such a lovely morning," said Jane. "Why did you want me to do anything, Aunt Eleanor?"

"Oh, no, I just wondered. If you are going near the village you might get me a five shilling book of stamps, but that's all. I can quite easily send Jenkins, though."

"I'll get the stamps for you with pleasure, Aunt Eleanor," she said. "Are you sure there is nothing else?"

"Quite sure, thank you," Mrs. Carlton said. "You are lucky to be young and to be able to get out on a morning like this," she said. "I envy you."

It was on the tip of Jane's tongue to say that it was her own fault for holding too tightly on to the reins but she refrained. She had long since come to the conclusion that to try to make anyone save Mark and Kit see her point of view was a sheer waste of time. No doubt George thought she was lucky, too!

She walked slowly across the fields, pausing at the stile to watch the reaper at work amongst the barley, taking a childish pleasure in seeing the flailing arms revolve as the huge machine moved slowly up the field, leaving behind it the neatly tied bundles which the men following behind up-ended and stacked in long, straight rows.

There was something almost intoxicating about the sense of space conveyed by the newly cut fields, the long rows of stooks.

For a long, long time she had been mentally alone. But what Kit had said about the baby had brought her up sharply and she knew that very soon she must face up to the position and all that it implied. How would he re-act? Would he be delighted at the prospect of a possible heir?

She came to a place where the path crossed the stream by a little plank bridge. She stepped on to it without thinking and crossed over.

But she did not notice that there was a slippery patch at one end until she crashed to the ground.

For several minutes she lay where she had fallen, gripped by an agonising pain that took her breath away. It gradually subsided and she struggled upright, only to be doubled up again as the pain came on, more violent than before.

Nauseated and dizzy, she half lay, half crouched on the damp ground, tiny beads of perspiration coming out on her brow, and a cold and agonising fear in her heart.

It might have been minutes or hours that she remained there, unable to move without bringing on the pain again. And then she heard footsteps and a shout and Mark's face seemed to swim in a kind of haze in front of her.

"Jane—for pity's sake—what happened?"

"I fell." Her lip quivered and the tears came. "It was—the pain—I—"

Her voice trailed off and she went limp in Mark's arms. He stooped and picked her up as if she had weighed nothing, and walking carefully and steadily, carried her

to where he had left his car.

A few minutes later Symes opened the door of the house to him.

"Oh, Mr. Templeton! Not another accident?" the old butler quavered, recognising Mark's burden. "I—you had better —"

"Call Mrs. Carlton and then ring up Doctor Bowen, quickly," said Mark, cutting him short. "Tell him to come as soon as he possibly can. Tell him it's urgent!"

He laid Jane gently on the couch at the far end of the hall and straightened himself up, a little prayer of thankfulness going up from his heart. He had returned from Cornwall the previous day as the result of a sudden urge, a feeling that he was needed. Well, he had been, he reflected grimly.

A VERY long time afterwards Jane opened her eyes and looked wonderingly at the ceiling of her bedroom. It seemed to be dark and she realised that the curtains were drawn. For a moment she lay quite still, trying to remember what had happened to her. Then, as recollection came flooding back, the weak tears filled her eyes and overflowed on to her cheek.

Instantly someone moved and she felt the pressure of a firm hand on her own. She turned her head to see George bending over her.

"Oh, George . . . my baby!" she whispered.

"It's all right, darling. Quite all right. There isn't anything to worry about. All you have to do is to lie still and rest," he said comfortingly. "Doctor Bowen has been and he is coming again later. Kit is on her way here, too—I telephoned her as soon as I got back from Southampton."

Jane started to cry in earnest.

"I wasn't thinking where I was going—there must have been a slippery patch. Then Mark came—"

"I know. He brought you here." George's voice was husky and he seemed to have difficulty in speaking. "He found you lying by the plank bridge—he had been going into the village and spotted you from the road. Thank God he did."

"Oh!" She lay with her eyes closed for a moment. Then she opened them again. "I—I'm sorry I failed you, George. I—I didn't mean to. I wanted—"

"Hush!" he said gently, kissing her on the brow. "You didn't fail me. I failed myself and in doing so I let you down. But I know now that if anything happened to you life would no longer have any meaning for me. Can you believe that?"

She drew a deep breath and her fingers tightened about his own.

"I always believe—what I want to believe," she said, and fell instantly asleep.

IT was not until four days had elapsed that Jane was allowed downstairs. And during that time a very great deal had happened. George told her most of the news when they were seated in the drawing-room in front of a log fire, for the nights were turning chilly and the cheerful glow of the flames offered a welcome when they came indoors.

"Mark sent a message for you, Jane," he said, breaking a little silence that had fallen. "He left this morning for a long trip to Australia—someone he knows has a sheep farm there and Mark has had a long standing invitation to visit him."

A little chill settled about Jane's heart for a moment.

"He asked me to say," George went on huskily, "that he was so glad that everything had come right for you and that, wherever he went, he would be conscious of your happiness."

Jane looked wonderingly into the flames,

her lips poignant.

"Dear Mark," she said softly. "I wish I had seen him to say good-bye."

"He thought it best to go without seeing you," George said quietly. "I think I know why. You do, too."

"Yes." She nodded. "I realised it the night he drove me to the hospital. It was the reason he went to stay with his sister in Cornwall. Do you mind?"

"No," he said. "I only feel very humble. Oh, Jane, darling, can you ever forgive me for being so blind? You were right when you said that there was so much I didn't understand!"

He knelt on the rug beside her, holding her two hands. Jane looked down at him and smiled wistfully.

"I've always loved you. I always shall," she murmured. "No matter what you do, it won't make any difference. Love isn't something you can turn on and off—it is here, inside one, like a flame." She touched her heart and then gave him her hand again. "Sometimes the flame can die down a little when it isn't tended but it can never go out."

"My dearest." He bowed his head and touched her hands with his lips. "I can only say I'm sorry. I was blind—blinded by pride and ignorance. Well,"—with a little laugh at his own conceit—"They say that pride goeth before a fall and it is true. I've fallen a very long way, Jane darling. Can you—will you—help me up?"

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## LOVE SUFFERETH LONG

By Pat Moreland

### THE NEW HAND AT THE FARM.

IT was late autumn and although the trees were still clothed in gold and russet-brown, the leaves were falling fast to form a soft and mellow carpet.

The village wiseacres declared it was going to be a severe winter. Birds, they declared, had migrated earlier than usual, and there were hints of a plentitude of berries that would presently turn red—and what surer sign could there be than this? Moreover, ground frosts had already been reported, and some farmers had started ploughing the ground for the winter wheat.

On this particular afternoon, a committee meeting was being held in the village hall to discuss the forthcoming church bazaar, the object being to raise funds for the repair of the chancel roof. It was a large committee—it had to be because had any lady of the parish been omitted, she would probably have regarded it as a personal affront.

As the vicar had remarked humourously to Dr. Webber, it was rather like an army with three officers to every private!

But they were all earnest and cheerful workers, and their harmless little vanities could easily be forgiven. They loved the mellowed old church—so ancient that there were no records to show when its foundations were laid, though experts had suggested that it might have been one of the first churches erected after the arrival of St. Augustine.

"Now are we all here?" Mrs. Prater, vice-chairman of the committee, asked smilingly.

"Miss Selby isn't," said Miss Cornish, a middle-aged lady with a journalist's instinct, since she not only gathered the

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"I love you," she whispered. "And love conquers all, my darling. Only—don't ever let me—be lonely—again."

LATER, much later, still holding her in his arms, George told her what they were going to do.

"Mother is going to live in the Dower House at the top of the High Street," he said. "Fortunately, the people who have been renting it all this time are going to Canada so I have got vacant possession. Then, if you are agreeable, I intend to put the Towers into the market. There is an organisation in London which is looking for a place like this to turn into a home for spastics—one of the essential requirements is large grounds, which they have here."

"There is a delightful modern house coming up for sale halfway between here and Lyndon and I have made an offer for it. It isn't too large and has a lovely garden. There are four bedrooms—I'm sure you will be happy there. Now, what have you to say, dearest?"

She smiled up at him.

"It sounds wonderful. Doesn't Aunt Eleanor mind?"

"Strangely enough, she doesn't mind in the least. I think she will be perfectly happy in the Dower House, where she will be the undisputed mistress and also, I have an idea that the thought she is going to become a grandmother has done a very great deal to soften her."

"I'm glad," she said softly. "Oh, George,

you couldn't have given me a nicer present."

He laughed and kissed her.

"I want my wife and child all to myself," he said. He looked teasingly at her for a moment. "You see, in spite of the taunt you flung at me, I am a very jealous man. That's why I was so angry with you about Mark."

Jane flushed.

"Do you believe me when I say that I was never interested in Mark as a man, George? I tried to tell you at the time only you wouldn't listen."

"I do believe you, my darling. If I didn't, Mark would have made that quite clear. He and I had a long talk the day after he found you lying by the stream and—well—we cleared the air pretty considerably. Then Kit read the riot act to me and Phil joined in, so taking it all round, I didn't have a chance." He grinned boyishly. "Now say 'It serves you right'."

Instead, she put up her hands and drew his face down.

"We both made mistakes, but that's how one learns, darling," she whispered. "As long as you love me and will always love me, nothing can really hurt us!"

For the moment nothing mattered except that they had found each other again and she saw once more the look in his eyes which she had begun to think was only becoming a beautiful memory!

THE END.

news of the parish, but put it into circulation.

"I should have thought," observed Mrs. Trent, wife of the local garage proprietor, "that the chairman would have been the first to arrive."

"Ah, here comes Miss Selby," answered Mrs. Prater, in a tone of relief.

Angela Selby, though much younger than any of the other ladies present, had been appointed chairman for the simple reason that her father, Sir Richard Selby, was the biggest land-owner in the district and was virtually squire of Marshfield, though it was a title he never claimed.

"I'm sorry if I'm a little late," she said, as she took her seat at the head of the table, "I had the misfortune to have a puncture on my way here and had to change a wheel," she added apologetically.

There was a murmur of sympathy as the members of the committee settled themselves in their chairs and prepared for business.

"There doesn't seem to be very much for us to discuss," the chairman remarked, as she glanced at the typewritten agenda. "We have already settled the date of the bazaar of course, and—"

"But not who is to be invited to open it, Miss Selby," interrupted Miss Cornish. "And that is a matter of considerable importance, isn't it?"

Thereupon a discussion arose as to whether Lady Selby should be invited, or the wife of the Lord Lieutenant of the county.

When eventually put to the vote, the majority were for Lady Selby.

This matter having been settled, Miss Cornish raised the question as to who was going to do the heavy work such as carrying water for the tea-urns, putting up the stalls and so forth.

"Last year," she reminded the meeting, "the vicar helped and so did Mr. Thurrock from Mayfield Farm. But I understand the vicar will be away attending a diocesan conference or something, and Mr. Thurrock is ill, unfortunately."

"Oh, but there are plenty of men in the village, and surely we could persuade one or two of them to help," suggested Mrs. Prater.

Miss Cornish shrugged.

"I very much doubt," she said. "Most of them will be attending the football match on Saturday."

"But we shall have to find someone," murmured Mrs. Trent, looking helplessly around her. "We certainly can't manage such heavy work ourselves. Have the young men of to-day no public spirit at all?"

"Having worked hard all the week, I suppose they think they are entitled to their Saturday afternoon off," Angela remarked smilingly.

"But that doesn't help us out, does it, Miss Selby?" retorted Miss Cornish.

Following a short silence, Mrs. Webber, the doctor's wife, ventured a suggestion.

"My husband tells me that Farmer Thurrock has a new young man working for him," she said. "I believe he's only there temporarily, but he might be prepared to lend a hand."

"Yes, of course," murmured Angela.

"Then, I move that Miss Selby, as our chairman, be asked to see the man and find out if he will undertake the duty," said Miss Cornish.

"I second that," said Mrs. Prater.

All the members of the committee nodded agreement. But the idea of approaching a strange young man on the subject did not appeal to Angela.

"Don't you think," she suggested, "that it would be better if—well, if someone

older than I undertook this task?"

"On the contrary, Miss Selby, I think you are more likely to meet with success than any of us," Mrs. Trent remarked smilingly. "A young man—if you will pardon me saying so—is more likely to go out of his way to oblige a charming young lady like yourself, than, in all probability, he would be for ladies of a more mature age."

There was a general murmur of assent. Angela flushed with mingled annoyance and embarrassment and wondered whether or not she would be justified in opposing the wishes of the committee.

"I—I think I would much rather someone else did it," she stammered.

"But, Miss Selby, seeing how very important it is that we should have someone to tackle such heavy work," Mrs. Webber said, "I quite agree with Mrs. Trent's suggestion."

"Yes, and the motion has been moved and carried that Miss Selby should act for us in this matter," Mrs. Prater put in.

Angela repressed a sigh, and decided there was no way out.

"Well, if that is your wish, ladies, I will do as you suggest," she said reluctantly, and her decision was greeted with applause.

ON the following afternoon, Angela set out in her two-seater sports car for Mayfield Farm. Suddenly it occurred to her that she did not even know the name of the young man she was going to see.

Then, as she approached a cottage a short distance from the farm, she remembered that old John Turvey lived there and would be sure to know the name of Farmer Thurrock's new man. She drew up opposite the cottage and knocked at the door.

An old man, who was well over eighty, opened the door to her.

"Why, good arternoon, Miss Angela," he said, his weather-beaten face lighting up with pleasure. "I'm right pleased to see ee."

"Well, and how are you keeping, John?" asked Angela, who knew him quite well.

"Tidy fit, thank ee, Miss Angela," he replied. "Touch o' rheumatiz when the weather be damp like, but that's about all, I'm glad to say."

"I'm very pleased to hear that, John," she said smilingly. "I wonder if you could tell me the name of the new man who is working for Mr. Thurrock?"

"Why yes, Miss Angela, he be called Barton—David Barton, and a rare queer'n he be," the old man replied.

"How do you mean, John?"

"Well, miss," he said, "I'm told that he plays chess with the vicar most evenings and borrows books from him. Never knew a farm hand do the like of that afore. You'll most likely find him in the three-acre, Miss, topping the beet—and a rare backaching job it be as I do well know," the old man added.

Angela thanked him, then drove on. A few moments later, she pulled up again alongside a field separated from the road by a low hedge. She could see in the distance a stooping figure bending over the rows of sugar-beet.

Alighting from the car, Angela went through a gap in the hedge and made her way through the green tops of the beet. As he was bending with his back to her, the man was not aware of her approach.

"Good afternoon," she said smilingly, when within a few yards of him.

The young man turned, and gave her a startled look. He was wearing a sack apron over his corduroy trousers and an open-neck shirt. He was well above the average height, and had laughing grey eyes and crisp brown hair.

"Good afternoon," he returned, giving her a questioning look.

"I think you are Mr. Barton, aren't you?" she said, smiling.

"Yes," he answered, smiling back at her. In a few words, Angela explained who she was and her reason for wishing to speak to him,

"Why yes, of course, Miss Selby," he said. "I shall be very pleased to give you a helping hand at the Church Bazaar on Saturday. What time would you like me to be there?"

"Well, the bazaar opens at two o'clock," she said.

"And I have my dinner at half-past twelve," he said. "So I could be along soon after one o'clock, if that would be all right, Miss Selby."

"Oh yes, it would suit us admirably, Mr. Barton," she replied, and then feeling that she ought not to leave him too abruptly, Angela commented sympathetically on the tedious nature of his work in the field.

"Yes, it certainly does make one's back ache pretty badly," he admitted, with a rueful smile. "I shall be glad when this field is finished and I can go between the rows with the horse-hoe."

"I understand that you are only working here temporarily," Angela remarked.

Barton nodded.

"Until Mr. Thurrock is able to get about again," he said.

"And then?" she suggested, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Then I shall have another job awaiting me, Miss Selby—one more exacting, but less tedious," he replied.

"I see," Angela murmured. "Well, thank you very much for your promise to help us on Saturday, Mr. Barton."

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Selby," he said smilingly, as he walked with her towards the gap in the hedge. "The bazaar is in aid of a good cause, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Angela agreed. "But you might have preferred to go to the football match on Saturday, Mr. Barton."

He laughed.

"One well-known writer has said something to the effect that life would be tolerable if it weren't for its pleasures!" he said. "And there is more than a grain of truth in it, don't you think?"

"Yes, maybe that is so," Angela agreed, surprised to find a farm worker expressing such a view.

As she drove away, Angela told herself that she had never before met a farm worker like David Barton. He spoke with an educated accent, and was obviously well-read. It was all rather mysterious and she felt a curious desire to probe the matter further.

An idea suddenly occurred to her as the church came into view, why not call at the vicarage and see if she could learn anything about the young man from the vicar? If they played chess together, as old John Turvey had suggested, the vicar would surely know something about him.

Feeling a little abashed at her idle curiosity, she pulled up at the vicarage and was shown into the study. The vicar gave her a smiling greeting, and by way of an excuse for calling, Angela told him the difficulty which had confronted the bazaar committee, and how she had to solve it.

The vicar nodded understandingly.

"Oh yes, David Barton never refuses a helping hand when it's needed, Miss Selby," he told her smilingly.

"I understand the young man often comes here to play chess with you, vicar," Angela remarked, still fishing for information and trying not to make it sound too obvious.

"Yes, that is so, my dear, and a very good player he is, too," the vicar said. "And he's a very knowledgable young

man, I can assure you. We argued at some length the other evening as to whether a certain passage in Homer should be rendered the 'wine-faced sea', which is an almost literal translation, or the 'wine-dark sea', which is considered more poetic."

Angela gazed at him in surprise.

"But, vicar, one hardly expects a farm worker—" she began.

"Oh, but life is full of the unexpected, you know, Angela," the vicar broke in. "Now tell me," he added, quickly changing the subject, "how is your fiance? And when is he going to favour us with another visit?"

"Well, he might be down this week-end," Angela replied. "But Captain Repton is often unable to keep his promise because of his military duties."

"Yes, yes, of course," the vicar said.

When Angela took her departure, she was not much wiser than she had been before.

At the time appointed on the following Saturday afternoon, David Barton arrived at the village hall and started on his tasks. Lady Selby having duly declared the bazaar open, he was kept busy filling the tea-urns, washing crockery and generally lending a helping hand whenever it was wanted.

The bazaar proved a great success, more than half the money necessary for the repair of the chancel roof having been raised, and when thanking the committee and the workers for their efforts, the Vicar did not fail to include "our good friend David Barton."

But when he sat down to supper that night, the vicar remarked to his wife—

"I am feeling a little worried about David, my dear, and—well, I may as well be frank with you, about Angela Selby."

"But why, William?" asked his wife.

The Reverend William Windford hesitated, reluctant to put his fears into words.

"Well, the fact is, my dear Ruth," he went on, "I am very much afraid that Angela—to use an expressive vulgarism—has 'fallen' for David Barton—at any rate, that the young lady is in danger of 'falling' for him."

Mrs. Windford looked at him in surprise.

"But, William," she said, "Angela is engaged to Captain Repton, and I think she is the last girl in the world to play fast and loose with a man's affections."

"Yes, Ruth, but you know as well as I do that the engagement was practically 'engineered' by Lady Selby," said the vicar. "That the young couple offered no objection at the time, was probably due to the fact that they were both heart-free, if I may put it that way."

A troubled look came into Mrs. Windford's eyes, for she was very fond of Angela.

"I can quite understand Angela liking David," she said, "for he is a very attractive young man. But that is not to say she has fallen in love with him—or he with her, for that matter."

"I hope you are right, my dear Ruth," the vicar murmured. "All the same, I shall feel much easier in my mind when the time comes for David Barton to leave here."

It was on the following afternoon that Angela taking her corgi for a run, chanced to meet David Barton in a lane leading to Mayfield Farm. He was dressed, as she had seen him in church that morning, in a well-tailored lounge suit.

"Good afternoon, Miss Selby," he greeted her smilingly.

Angela smiled back at him, uncomfortably aware that her heart was behaving in a rather odd manner. Not knowing quite what to say, she asked him how he had liked the vicar's sermon at the morning service.

"Well, I thought it a very good sermon, Miss Selby," he said, "although I think it just a little over the heads of most of the congregation."

Angela nodded.

"Yes, I am inclined to agree with you," she said. "I sometimes think that the vicar is too apt to assume that everyone is as well acquainted with the classics as he is," she added smilingly.

"Talking of the classics," David said, as they started strolling on together, "I understand there is supposed to be a Greek temple in this neighbourhood."

"Oh yes, I expect you mean the one that a certain eccentric old gentlemen had erected in his grounds," Angela suggested laughingly. "The grounds have all been cut up now, presumably for building plots, but the temple still remains, though I suppose it will be pulled down before long."

"I'd rather like to have a look at it," David said, "but I don't happen to know where it is."

"Don't you, Mr. Barton? Well, it is only a short walk from here. Would you like me to show you the way to it?" Angela asked, smiling up at him.

"That is very kind of you, Miss Selby," he said delightedly.

"Well, one good turn deserves another, doesn't it, Mr. Barton?" she said. "You came to our help yesterday when we needed it, didn't you? Now I have a chance to repay you in a small measure."

"Oh no, with compound interest, Miss Selby," he told her laughingly.

So they set out for the so-called Greek temple. Angela's conscience was nagging her somewhat, but she told herself that there was nothing wrong in going for a Sunday afternoon stroll with such a pleasant and amiable young man.

#### LOVE IN FETTERS.

LADY SELBY did a lot of disinterested and valuable work in the parish, besides contributing generously to various charitable funds.

Yet because, perhaps, she had spent most of her life in the country, she was a little behind the times, and even if her daughter—and occasionally, her husband—did indulge in a little gentle teasing at her expense, she did not seem to mind.

"I may be old-fashioned," she would laughingly remark, "but so are lots of things—including good manners, which has declined almost to extinction."

As they were about to rise from the tea-table, after Angela had returned from taking David Barton to see the Greek temple, Lady Selby asked her husband the name of the new young man working for Mr. Thurrock.

"I understand his name is Barton," replied Sir Richard, "and that he goes to the vicarage quite a lot to play chess with the vicar. The young man strikes me as being rather a queer bird!"

"He seems to be quite a cultured young man, daddy," Angela remarked thoughtfully.

"Indeed?" murmured her mother. "How do you know that, my dear, may I ask?"

"Well, you see, mummy, it was he who helped at the bazaar," Angela answered. "I really don't know what we should have done without him. He put up the stalls, fetched buckets of water for the tea-urns and did all kinds of other things for us."

"I suppose the man was paid for doing it!" Lady Selby remarked curtly. "Few people do anything nowadays without being paid."

"Then Mr. Barton is one of the exceptions, mummy," murmured Angela. "And

as I have already said, he is an exceedingly well-informed young man."

Lady Selby gave an impatient shrug.

"What with free education and the radio and television, I should think it was difficult for anyone not to be well-informed in these days," she said. "In fact, it seems to me that nowadays Jack is not only as good as, but a good deal better than his master!"

Sir Richard laughed.

"I'm afraid you are a die-hard, my dear," he said. "Things have altered very much, you know, since the days when the working-man kow-towed to his boss and called him 'sir'."

"Then more's the pity," retorted Lady Selby. "But," she added, turning to Angela, "how do you happen to know that this young man is so 'exceedingly well-informed', as you put it? You couldn't have had much time for conversation with him while the bazaar was on, of course."

"Well, mummy, I chanced to meet Mr. Earton this afternoon while I was taking Don for a run," Angela replied, and he mentioned that he had heard we have a Greek temple in the neighbourhood, so I took him to see it."

Lady Selby frowned.

"And what did the young man think of it, Angela?" her father asked laughingly. "The thing is a trifle outside his scope, I should imagine."

"Oh no, on the contrary, daddy," Angela replied. "He thinks that the temple must have been dedicated to Athene. Mr. Barton seems to know quite a lot about the Greek goddess."

"The young man must have read it up somewhere, I suppose—or perhaps the vicar told him all about it," Sir Richard suggested.

"Well, he certainly knows a great deal about Greek gods and goddesses," said Angela. "I have passed the 'temple' scores of times without giving it as much as a thought, but I am now interested in it."

Lady Selby looked perturbed. She did not at all like the idea of her daughter discussing such a subject as Greek mythology with a farm labourer.

"I think, Angela, it is rather a pity you allowed yourself to talk on such familiar terms with this young man," she said.

"Oh mummy, please don't be so dreadfully Victorian!" Angela protested laughingly.

"I think that what your mother means, my dear, is that, if you give this young man too much encouragement, he may want to 'walk out' with you, one of these days," Sir Richard remarked.

"But I haven't given him any 'encouragement', as you call it, daddy," Angela said. "I simply had an interesting chat with Mr. Barton, that's all."

"Quite, my child, but one thing leads to another," her mother interposed. "Besides, it would not be fair of you, Angela, to—well, to arouse the young man's interest in you when you are already engaged to marry Captain Repton."

There was sufficient truth in what her mother had said to make Angela feel more uncomfortable than ever. Suddenly she heard the sound of the church bells.

"I'm going to the evening service, mummy," she said smilingly. "Are you coming?"

"Well, yes, I think I will," her mother replied.

Lady Selby, who was feeling rather tired, had decided to spend the evening at home and listen to the church service on the radio. But it had suddenly occurred to her that "this Barton person" might try and speak to Angela when she came out of church, and would quickly change his mind about doing so if he saw that she was with her

mother.

"After all," she told herself, "Angela is still very young, and most girls are given to passing 'crushes' on attractive men—had she not herself, when a girl, fallen desperately in love with two matinee idols, as well as a handsome young groom of her father's, and had not each of these 'crushes' faded away in turn as completely as a summer breeze?"

"Are you nearly ready, mummy?" Angela called from her bedroom.

"Yes, quite ready, my dear," her mother answered, giving herself a final glance in the mirror.

The church was only a few minutes walk from Drayton Manor, and they arrived there just as the bells stopped ringing.

It was not till the service was over and the congregation was leaving that Lady Selby caught sight of a young man whose face was unfamiliar to her and guessed who he was. Angela noticed him at the same moment, but David Barton gave no sign of seeing her. Had he done so and expected an introduction to her mother, Angela was thinking sadly, the situation would have been extremely embarrassing.

Lady Selby was relieved to know that the young man was no Adonis—in fact, he was much less good-looking than Nick Repton, Angela's fiance, she told herself, so there appeared to be no cause for anxiety after all.

They stopped to exchange a few words with one of the old parishioners, and were about to walk on when the vicar overtook them.

"Good evening, Lady Selby. Good evening, Angela," he said, in his usual hearty fashion. "Ha!" he went on, glancing over her shoulder, "Here comes David Barton. Please allow me to introduce him to you, Lady Selby. He is one of the best chess players I have ever met. David, this is Lady Selby. Angela and you know each other, of course, don't you?" the vicar added smilingly.

Lady Selby did not offer to shake hands. She gave a stiff little bow, and David Barton responded in similar fashion.

"David," the vicar continued, seemingly unaware of Lady Selby's frigid response to the introduction, "is doing a magnificent job of work for Tom Thurrock who, unfortunately, is still laid up."

"Is that so?" murmured Lady Selby,

She was thinking it was rather a pity that the vicar seemed to have no appreciation of social values. Of course, in many ways, a clergyman had to be "all things to all men".

"I always think it is rather queer," the vicar went on, slipping into his favourite topic, "how intimately connected agriculture is with the Greek classics. Some of the greatest Greek generals, after retirement, took up farming."

"Do you mean to imply that Mr. Barton is a Greek general in retirement or something of the kind, vicar?" Angela asked laughingly.

"No, no, of course not, my dear Angela," he replied. "What I mean really was that a man who works on the land need not necessarily be what is sometimes called a 'country bumpkin'."

The vicar then set off on another of his favourite hobby-horses. He pointed out that shepherds had become great poets, that tinkers had produced classics, and that some of the world's greatest painters had started life in humble circumstances.

"I am afraid we must be going now, vicar," Lady Selby put in quickly, when he paused for a moment, "or we shall be late for supper."

The vicar nodded.

"Yes, yes, of course, Lady Selby," he said apologetically. "Do please forgive

me for detaining you. As I expect you know, I am apt to let my enthusiasms run away with me at times."

Lady Selby smiled, and linked her arm through Angela's. As they were about to walk on, they heard the vicar invite David Barton to have supper with him.

"Really, Angela, I am sometimes inclined to think that the dear vicar is almost too naive for this world," Lady Selby remarked, with a forced little laugh.

"You mean, because he invites a farm worker to the vicarage to have supper with him, mummy?" Angela asked. "I always think that Mr. Windford is one of the finest and most practical Christians I have ever met."

"Well, did you both enjoy the service?" Sir Richard asked smilingly, when they entered the drawing-room, where he is sitting reading a book.

Lady Selby shrugged.

"It was much the same as usual," she answered, in a casual tone, and then went upstairs to change.

As Angela was about to follow, her father asked, with a sardonic smile—

"What has happened to upset your mother, my dear? Something has, I could tell by her manner."

"Well, daddy, I think it must be because the vicar introduced Mr. Barton to her," Angela replied, in a low voice, and then went upstairs to her room.

The subject was not referred to again that night, but immediately after supper, Lady Selby announced that she had an important letter to write and retired to the library.

ON the following Saturday, Captain Repton arrived at Drayton Manor in his sports car. A rather good-looking young man, he had an air of careless gaiety about him that some people found fascinating, and others a little tiresome.

"Hullo, darling, you are looking as bright and wimsome as ever!" he cried laughingly, as Angela descended the steps to greet him. "By the way, Angy," he went on, using his pet name for her, "I received a sort of ultimatum from your mother the other day, and she seems to have an idea that I am rather neglecting you. But last week I had to be on duty as orderly officer, and the week before that—"

"Oh, come, Nick, there is not the least necessity to invent excuses, you know," Angela broke in laughingly.

Nicholas Repton grimaced.

"H'm, I wouldn't call that exactly a compliment, my dear," he muttered.

"But you can't expect me to break into tears every time you miss coming down here for the week-end, can you?" she retorted.

"Well, no, of course not," he agreed.

"I should feel jolly uncomfortable if I thought you did, my dear girl. I suppose her ladyship has a rod in pickle for me?" he added, with a wry smile.

"I'm afraid mother thinks you have rather neglected us of late, if that is what you mean, Nick."

"Meaning that I've neglected you, eh? And do you feel the same way about it, Angel?"

Angela shook her head.

"To be quite honest with you, Nick, I don't," she confessed. "I like having you here, of course, but my heart doesn't break when you fail to put in an appearance."

"Good for you, Angy," he said, with a sardonic grin. "That's some comfort and relief to my troubled conscience, for I'd hate to think you were unhappy. Anyway, we are not exactly engaged, yet, are we?"

"No, Nick," she murmured.

"Well," he went on, "I suppose I'd better take my little bus round to the garage, and then go and face the music!"

Angela laughed.

"You had better exert some of your famous charm, Nickie," she said, "and then I expect mother will treat you like a prodigal son!"

"As long as she spares me the fatted calf!" he flung laughingly over his shoulder.

Angela sighed as she entered the hall. Nickie could be very entertaining, she reflected, but in many ways he was awfully weak and self-indulgent.

Her thoughts turned involuntarily to David Barton. David was neither weak nor self-indulgent, she told herself. On the contrary, he was strong and dependable and the sort of man a woman could lean on and know security and peace. If only Nick Repton was like David!

"But I must stop thinking like this," Angela admonished herself severely. "After all, Nick and I have an understanding with each other, and I suppose I shall have to make the best of what is ahead of me!"

It was good philosophy, but cold comfort.

The "ticking off" which Nick Repton had expected from Lady Selby in the drawing-room, was not nearly as bad as he had anticipated.

"And now a word of warning, my dear Nick," she went on. "A strange young man has recently arrived in Marshfield, and I have a suspicion that Angela is rather attracted by him."

"Ha, a rival, eh?" he remarked, with a grim smile.

"No, no, of course not, Nick!" exclaimed Lady Selby. "He—he is just an ordinary farm worker!"

"Then why the warning, Lady Selby?"

"Well, as I have told you, my dear boy, Angela seems to be somewhat attracted by the young man. In ordinary circumstances, I do not suppose she would give him a second glance, but you must remember, Nick, that the dear girl is rather lonely. There are few young men of her own class in the neighbourhood, so it is only natural that Angela should be longing for your companionship, isn't it, Nick?"

"Well, why not send Angela up to Town to stay with her Aunt Celia?" he countered. "I'm sure her aunt would be glad to have her stay with her."

"Yes, I know, Nick, but, unfortunately, Angela loves the country—as you know yourself, the dear girl detests London. To me, it seems a strange attitude on Angela's part, but there it is." Lady Selby paused, then added—"Now listen, Nickie, I think it would be advisable for you to make it your business to meet this young man. His name is Barton, and he works at Mayfield Farm."

Nick frowned.

"But why on earth should I do that, Lady Selby?" he asked.

"To warn him—tactfully, of course—to keep away from Angela. That is putting it rather crudely, perhaps, but you see what I mean, Nickie?"

"But hang it all, you can hardly expect me to do that, Lady Selby!" he protested. "Unless," he added, "the fellow is actually annoying Angela."

"Well, no, I don't think it has come to that," said Lady Selby. "In fact, I gather that they went for a walk together on Sunday afternoon to see what is known locally as the 'Greek temple'."

Nick shrugged.

"I can't see that there is much harm in that," he said.

Lady Selby sighed.

"Are you naturally dense, my dear Nicholas, or are you just pretending?" she asked, with some asperity. "If you

can't see what such a friendship can lead to, you must be utterly blind!"

"Well, yes, maybe my vision is a bit blurred, Lady Selby," he said, with a wry smile. "But I still don't see what I can do in the matter. After all, I have no authority to order the young man not to go for a walk with Angela if she invites him to do so, have I?"

"But you are her fiance, Nick."

"Yes, but all the same, Lady Selby, if I did what you suggest, it would be a tacit admission that I regarded this farm chap as a rival, wouldn't it?" he retorted. "And that would scarcely be a dignified role for me to play, you know."

Lady Selby nodded her agreement.

"But," Nick went on, "supposing I went to see the young man, Lady Selby, and gave him the 'once over', as the saying goes? And if, as you seem to suggest, he's a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing, then I certainly will do a spot of warning off. On the other hand, if he's just a simple-minded yokel—well, there's nothing more I need say, is there?"

"I am told that the young man goes to the vicarage to play chess with the vicar," murmured Lady Selby, for want of something to say.

"Is that so?" said Nick. "Then he sounds rather brainy to me. I confess that I've never been able to master all the moves at chess, let alone play the game. Anyway, Lady Selby, I'll do a bit of reconnoitring and report to you in due course," he added.

"Thank you, Nickie," she said, in a more friendly tone. "I knew I could depend on you. After all, it is as much for your sake, as for Angela's—I mean, if anything untoward should happen it could affect the happiness of you both, couldn't it?"

Nickie muttered something inaudible and managed to make his escape. Why on earth, he asked himself, should he be saddled with such a ridiculous task?

#### THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

"WELL," Lady Selby remarked, with a forced smile, "have you been able to give that young man the 'once over', as you put it, Nickie?"

It was the day following their private talk in the drawing-room, and Nickie had kept his promise to see David Barton. Now, standing in a shady corner of the lawn, he found himself confronted by Lady Selby waiting for an account of what had happened at the meeting.

"Yes, I have, Lady Selby," he replied, "and I find that he's a very decent sort of chap."

"Did you give him a warning, as I suggested?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I did in a way—I mean, I told him that Angela and I were engaged."

"And did the young man promise not to molest Angela again?"

"But he never has 'molested' her, as you call it," Nick said, with a wry grin. "Barton told me that they went for one walk together, and it was by mutual consent."

Lady Selby frowned.

"Very well, Nicholas," she said huffily, "as you seem to lack the necessary courage to protect your fiancee from another man's unwelcome attentions, I shall have to take other measures. Needless to say, I am very disappointed in you," she added.

A few moments later Angela came hurrying towards him.

"Hullo, Nickie!" she exclaimed, with a gay little laugh. "Why are you looking so desperately dismal? What has happened to upset you?"

"I've just been having a little encounter with your mother," he muttered grimly.

"Have you, Nickie? What about, may I ask?"

"About you and that new friend of yours," he replied dourly. "Look here, Angel," he went on, "what made you link up with Barton? You ought to have known your mother would get wind of it and that there'd be trouble. In any case, it has landed me in the cart all right. It might interest you to know that I've been to see Barton."

Sally drew a quick breath.

"Have you?" she said, with forced casualness. "And what did you say to him?"

"It's not so much what I said to him, as what he said to me," Nick replied. "Anyway, when I left him I felt like nothing on earth, if you understand what I mean."

"No, I'm afraid I don't understand, Nick," she said. "What exactly do you mean? What actually happened between the two of you?"

Nick shrugged.

"Oh, nothing in particular," he answered. "We—well we just had a quiet talk."

"Nickie, how awfully exasperating you can be!" Angela exclaimed impatiently. "Do please stop beating about the bush and tell me what passed between you and Mr. Barton."

"Oh no, I would rather not do that, Angy," he said, with an impish grin.

"Then I shall ask him myself," she suggested pertly.

"Yes, please do, my dear girl, but beware of your mother if she hears you have been meeting the 'Barton person' again," Nick warned.

"I have a perfect right to speak to Mr. Barton if I want to," Angela said, a note of defiance in her voice. "Really, Nick, one would think from the way you and mummy speak of him, that he was an escaped prisoner, or something!"

"Well, I didn't say he wasn't, did I?"

Angela gave him a challenging look.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded. "You—you can't just leave it at that, you know. Tell me—has Mr. Barton been in prison?"

Nick hesitated. Then—

"Well, if you really wish to know the truth, Angy, you shall have it. The answer is 'Yes'!"

It seemed to Angela as if an icy hand had been pressed against her heart.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Well, you asked for it, my dear, and I've given you the answer," Nick said. "I would rather not have told you, but you as good as forced me to, didn't you?"

"But—but what was he sent to prison for?" she stammered huskily.

"Now listen, Angy, I'm not going to stand being cross-examined by you," he muttered. "As a matter of fact, I've already said more than I ought to have done."

"But, Nickie, you can't leave it all in the air like this," she protested. "You have got to tell me everything you know about—about Mr. Barton."

"There's no 'got to' about it, my dear girl," he said. "I've let out more than I should have done as it is, Angy."

"But, Nickie, was he—was he innocent of whatever crime he was sent to prison for? Oh, do please tell me," she pleaded.

"Oh yes, Barton was guilty all right," he said. "There's no doubt about that, for he admitted it himself." Then, seeing the stricken look on her face, Nick added contritely—"If I had known you were going to take it like this, Angy, I wouldn't have breathed a word."

Angela sighed.

"Does—does the vicar know?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I rather think so," Nick replied, feeling in his pocket for his cigarette case.

"And I suppose Mr. Barton is trying to build up a new life now that he's been discharged from prison," Angela suggested.

"He wasn't discharged—he escaped," said Nickie, lighting a cigarette.

"Escaped!" gasped Angela.

"Yes, during a fog," Nick said. "He was the only one who managed to get clear of his pursuers. The others—about half-a-dozen, I believe—were all rounded up. Tough luck for them, wasn't it, Angy?"

"But if—but if the vicar knows about all this, then he himself is breaking the law, isn't he?" she said. "For I believe it's a criminal offence to shelter an escaped convict."

"That's a matter I'll leave to the vicar's conscience," Nick returned coolly. "I'm not going to be dragged into a controversy of that sort."

"And come to that, you are in the same boat yourself, aren't you?" Angela said.

Nick shrugged.

"And come to that, so are you, my dear girl," he retorted.

Angela was taken aback for a moment, but quickly recovered herself.

"Oh no, I'm not," she protested. "Apparently, Mr. Barton has confessed to you that he is an escaped prisoner, but as far as I'm concerned, it's only hearsay evidence. After all, you may have invented the story, Nickie!"

"Oh come, my dear girl—" he began.

"Anyway," Angela broke in, "I've only your word for it, Nickie. No doubt many people have been sent to prison for crimes they never committed, and I for one refuse to believe that Mr. Barton has done anything seriously wrong. He—he just is not that sort."

Nickie made a grimace.

"All right," he muttered glumly. "You had better ask Barton yourself. I've said all that I'm going to say about the affair."

"Oh no, I shouldn't dream of asking him," she said. "I shall treat Mr. Barton exactly as if I had not heard a word about it all."

"Well, why not ask the vicar if you don't believe me?" Nick suggested.

"If the vicar feels there is anything I ought to know about Mr. Barton, he will tell me, no doubt," she said.

"Very well, please yourself about it, my dear," Nick said resignedly. "Really, Angy," he added, "your attitude would almost seem to make it appear that it was I who was the wrongdoer, instead of Barton!"

"That's nonsense, Nickie, and you know it," she protested.

"Oh no it's not, Angy, you seem to be bubbling over with sympathy for him."

"I was not aware that you needed sympathy," she said tartly. "You have never had to suffer very much, have you?"

"Haven't I?" he said grimly. "Do you think that being dropped behind the enemy lines in Italy was a pleasant holiday for me? Do you think that part I played in the Greek resistance movement was a sort of jolly picnic? Yes, and running the risk of being made prisoner, as lots of our fellows were? And yet you say I've never suffered!"

"But not in the same way as Mr. Barton has, Nickie. I mean, you have not been sent to prison for a crime you never committed, have you?"

"Oh, let's forget it, Angy," he said impatiently. "I'm going to return to Town this evening. I wish now that I'd never come down here—I wouldn't have if your mother hadn't urged me to do so."

"So apparently, you were not particularly anxious to see me!" she said, an accusing note in her voice. "You considered your visit as being a duty!"

Nick shrugged, as she went on—

"Now listen, Nickie, things can't go on like this, you know. Up till now you and I have made a pretence of being in love with each other, but we've known all the time that it's nothing more than pretence."

Nick nodded his agreement.

"But it didn't seem to matter very much at the time, did it, Angy?" he said. "I mean, if we weren't really in love with each other, we weren't in love with anyone else, were we?"

"And now you possibly are, Nickie?" she suggested, jokingly.

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"To be perfectly frank with you, Angy, I am," he admitted. "The girl's name is Jill Ansell, and I met her at a dance. It was a case of love at first sight!"

"I see," murmured Angela. "And does she know you're engaged to me?"

"Well, she doesn't know that I'm engaged to you, Angy, but she does know I am engaged, for I told her about it," Nick answered gloomily.

"In that case, you can break our engagement, can't you?" Angela suggested. "I promise you not to go into a decline if you do, Nickie!" she added jestingly.

"That's all right as far as it goes, my dear girl," he said, "but suppose my father objects and cuts me off with the proverbial shilling? For some reason he and the mater have set their hearts on my marrying you, mainly, I suppose, because they're old friends of your parents, and I know they would be bitterly disappointed if their plans did not materialize!"

Nick sighed, and added—

"You see, Angy, if I were disinherited, the prospect would be pretty dim for me, for I couldn't possibly support a wife on an army captain's pay."

Angela was thinking hard. a possible solution of Nickie's problem had suddenly occurred to her.

"Listen, Nickie," she said, "I think I can see a way out."

"For me, or for both of us, Angy?" he asked, a trifle sceptically.

"For both of us," she answered. "You say that if you break off your engagement to me, your parents will be annoyed and you may suffer financially."

"There's no 'may' about it, my dear girl," he muttered glumly.

"But if I insist on breaking off the engagement, your parents can't possibly blame you, can they, Nickie? I mean, it lets you out, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it does," he agreed. "But how about your people, Angy? I'm afraid they won't take a very favourable view of it all."

"Mummy won't, I expect, but I don't think daddy will mind very much. In any case, I shall not be disinherited, Nickie. Besides," Angela added, "we have both admitted that we are not in love with each other, haven't we?"

"Well, if you're really certain you want it that way, Angy," he muttered.

"Yes, of course I do, Nickie, or I'd never have suggested it," she said.

Nickie smiled at her, and said—

"My dear Angela, you have made me one of the happiest men in the world!"

Angela laughed.

"It's nice to hear you say that, Nickie, but not exactly flattering, you know," she said.

"Oh, but you are not the sort of girl who wants to be flattered, Angy," he told her laughingly. "After all, it's not our fault that we are not in love with each other, is it? But tell me, my dear, when and how are you going to break the news to your parents?"

"This very day, Nickie," she answered. "I think I shall tell daddy about it first,

as he is so very understanding, and I expect he won't mind breaking the news to mummy."

"And will you write to me saying that our engagement is off, Angy?"

"Of course I will, and I wish you and the girl to whom you have lost your heart every happiness, Nickie."

"Thank you, my dear Angy," he said, with a grateful smile. "And now I think I'll buzz off, if you don't mind, as I am anxious to avoid meeting your mother again for the time being. You—you understand, don't you, Angy?"

"Yes, of course," she answered lightly. "Mother will understand all right, Nickie."

A few minutes later, Angela stood at the window, a thoughtful look in her eyes, as she watched his car disappear down the drive.

"I HAVE rather suspected this for some little time, my dear," remarked Sir Richard, when Angela broke the news to him that she was not in love with Captain Repton and had broken off their engagement.

"I'm glad it hasn't come as a shock to you, daddy," Angela said, feeling relieved at the way he had taken it.

"But I'm afraid your mother will be greatly upset on hearing the news, my dear," Sir Richard went on, "for she had set her heart on the match, as you know. Moreover, from the purely worldly point of view, it had much to commend it."

"I know, daddy," Angela murmured, "and I'm sorry to disappoint you and mummy."

"Better to do that, Angela, than to submit to a lifetime of unhappiness. In any case, I am very glad to know that, in the circumstances, you decided on the course you have taken. Tell me, my dear," her father added, hesitantly, "have you lost your heart to someone else?"

Angela shook her head.

"No, daddy," she answered. "It was only when Nickie told me that he was in love with some other girl, that I decided to break off our engagement."

"I see," Sir Richard remarked thoughtfully. "I think it would have been better if Captain Repton had come to me and broken the news, instead of leaving you to do it. I think it shows a lack of moral courage on his part, don't you?"

"Yes, daddy, perhaps it would have been," Angela agreed.

"Well, I suppose I had better go and break the news to your mother," Sir Richard went on. "I'm afraid, Angela," he added, with a rueful smile, "that you will be out of favour for a while."

"Yes, I'm afraid so, too, daddy."

IN the event, however, Lady Selby took the news far more calmly than they had anticipated. This was partly due to the fact that she was furious with Nickie for what she called his "pusillanimity" in dealing with the "Barton person", and partly because he had left for London without a word of excuse or apology.

"It's no use crying over spilt milk, as the saying is, Richard," she said. "The only thing to do now is to try and find an eligible *parti* for Angela. Therefore, I think it would be a good idea to send the girl to London to stay with her Aunt Celia for awhile."

Sir Richard considered a moment. Then—

"But Angela may not want to go to London," he said. "as you know, my dear, she is essentially a country girl, and the 'bright lights' of London do not appeal to her."

"Then you must exert your authority, Richard, and insist upon her doing as I

wish. After all," Lady Selby added, "Angela is nearly twenty-five, and unless she gets a husband soon, the odds are against her ever doing so."

"In other words, my dear, the law of diminishing returns will come into operation!" Sir Richard remarked jestingly.

No doubt his wife was right, he told himself, but he did not at all like the idea of insisting that Angela should go and stay with her aunt in London.

THAT same afternoon, Angela decided to go for a walk to think things over. The knowledge that she was no longer engaged to Nick Repton, was like a weight lifted from her mind. As she walked along, deep in thought, she was overtaken by David Barton, who was riding a bicycle. He jumped off his machine and gave her a smiling greeting.

"Good afternoon, Miss Selby," he said. "What a glorious afternoon, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," she agreed, noticing how smart he looked in his grey slacks and open-necked shirt.

"I've just returned from Havertree," he went on. "It's rather a long way to cycle, but the farm car happens to be out of order at the moment."

He propped his bicycle against the hedge, then turned and smiled at her again.

"I suppose, instead of dismounting from my machine, I really ought to have continued my way to the farm to milk the cows feed the pigs, see to the chickens and the rest of it," he remarked, as if seeking for something to say.

"But surely you do not have to attend to all that yourself?" Angela said.

"Well, no, not quite all, Miss Selby," he admitted, with a boyish grin. "But, as Shakespeare says—

*'Care keeps his watch in every old man's eye,  
And where care lodgeth sleep will never lie.'*

And wasn't the Bard right!"

Angels smiled.

"Evidently, you read quite a lot, Mr. Barton," she ventured to suggest.

"I used to," he said. "But, unfortunately, I haven't much time for reading now. But I love what Swift called 'The artillery o' words', and am often tempted to fire a broadside myself. It has been said that every man has one book to write—not that I believe it. All the same, in my own case, I think I have enough material stored away in my mind to write several weighty volumes."

"Have you? And what would you write about, Mr. Barton?"

"Oh, personal experiences—pleasant and unpleasant," he answered lightly.

"Such as?" Angela prompted.

"Being in gaol, for one thing, and of escaping and being hunted. Fleeing by night and hiding by day; the sense of furtiveness, of being afraid to look men in the face—and the still greater fear of men looking into mine!"

David laughed, and went on—

"You mingle with people in the marketplace, you rub shoulders with them, you walk defiantly, you behave—if your nerve holds out—as if you were a freeman of the world and not a wretched prisoner expecting capture every moment. Sometimes it works, sometimes not."

"And—and do you still feel like that?" Angela asked.

"Well, yes, I'm afraid I do occasionally," he admitted. "You see, Miss Selby, once fear has taken root in you, it is hard to shake it off. It becomes a sort of second nature. You are, figuratively speaking, constantly looking over your shoulder.

It goes to prove Shakespeare's words: 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all'."

Angela repressed a gasp.

"By the way, Miss Selby," he went on, quickly changing the subject, "I had a *chat* with your fiance, Captain Repton, the other day."

"Did you?" murmured Angela. "But he—but Captain Repton is not my *fiance* any longer. We—we discovered that we were not suited to each other."

David gave her a startled look.

"Is—is that so?" he stammered. "I was not aware of that."

"The—the engagement was broken off because neither of us were prepared to face a loveless marriage," she explained.

"Well, that's what I call common sense, Miss Selby. So many people discover their mistakes when it's too late."

David sighed, and went on—

"But we all look at things from such different angles, don't we, Miss Selby? Our values are seldom quite the same, and we differ emotionally. A woman can sometimes read a man like a book, but to a man, woman is the eternal enigma!"

Angela smiled.

"Really, Mr. Barton, you are talking a lot of platitudes," she said.

"You mean, I suppose, that it has all been said before?" he suggested laughingly. "Well, haven't most things we read about in books been said before? We have to go on saying the same old things for the simple reason that there is nothing new to say. The best we can do is to try and dress up our thoughts in different words. Now let's talk about ourselves, shall we, Miss Selby?" he added smilingly.

Angela shook her head. In spite of everything, she had to admit to herself that David Barton attracted her as no other man had ever done. It was not just the mystery which surrounded him—though that was intriguing enough—or even his good looks.

But it was dangerous. This she did know and common sense told her that the wise thing to do was to make some excuse and leave him here and now.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Barton, but I'm afraid I must be going now," she said.

"But why so soon?" he asked. "Is it because my talk is boring you, Miss Selby?"

"Oh no," she answered, "I have been very interested in what you have been saying, Mr. Barton."

"But just think how much more interested you may be in the things I have not yet told you—of 'scapes by land and sea, of adventures in strange distant lands!" he said, his grey eyes twinkling.

"All the same, I think I had better go," murmured Angela, struggling against an almost overwhelming desire to stay.

"Which means that you needn't if you don't want to, doesn't it?" he commented.

Angela shrugged.

"Tell me, Mr. Barton," she said, before she could stop herself, "what did you do to make them put you in prison?"

She saw the startled looked in his eyes, the nervous twitch of his lips. He remained silent for several moments. Then—

"Didn't Captain Repton tell you?" he asked. "He—he knows all about it."

Angela shook her head.

"And hasn't the vicar told you?" he prompted.

She shook her head again.

David stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Does it really matter so very much to you, Miss Selby?" he asked.

It was an embarrassing question, and she was at a loss to know how to answer it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Barton," she murmured apologetically. "I—I realise now that it

was very tactless of me to ask you such a question. Do please forgive me."

"Yes, of—of course I forgive you, Miss Selby," he stammered. "You see, I had taken it for granted that Captain Repton had told you everything."

"But naturally Captain Repton would not betray a confidence, Mr. Barton."

"There was no reason why he shouldn't as far as I am concerned," David said. "He was under no pledge of secrecy."

"In that case, it is all the more to Captain Repton's credit that he kept silent, isn't it?" Angela countered.

"It all depends, Miss Selby," David said. "A few moments ago, I confessed to you, in a matter-of-fact sort of way, that I had been in gaol and had escaped. Yet you appeared to pay little heed to it, did you? Why, may I ask?"

"I suppose it was because I am not really afraid of—well, of an escaped convict!" she answered, with a forced smile.

"Convict?" he repeated.

"Well, that is what people are usually called when they are sent to prison, isn't it?" she said. "You may have been innocent, of course, and—"

"Oh no," he broke in, "I was guilty of the charge brought against me. I think I have already admitted that, haven't I? My one great regret about it all, is that I was stupid enough to let myself be caught. All the same, the sentence the court passed on me was a perfectly just one."

"Then—then you are not even sorry for what you did?" she asked, amazed at his seeming callousness.

David shook his head.

"Not in the very least, Miss Selby," he said. "In fact, I should be prepared to do it all over again, if necessary. There now," he added laughingly, "that has given you a bit of a shock hasn't it."

"Well, yes, it certainly has," she answered. "I had an idea that you were quite a different sort of man."

"And now, I suppose, you think I'm beyond all hope of reform?" he said.

"Naturally, in view of what you have just told me, Mr. Barton. It goes to show how one can be mistaken in people."

"Well, yes, I suppose it does," he agreed, with a wry smile. "I expect you would like to know exactly the reason why I was sent to prison, wouldn't you?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Barton, I—I have heard quite enough," she answered coldly, then turned and walked quickly away.

The man must be completely abnormal. It did not occur to her that her indignation and distress proved that her feeling for David Barton had been something more than a passing interest. Hurt and disillusioned, Angela tried to make herself believe that she despised him for his almost unbelievable callousness and lack of remorse.

David's first reaction to the snub she had given him so unexpectedly, was to run and overtake her. Then as suddenly he changed his mind.

"Perhaps I ought to have told her everything," he muttered to himself. "It would have been only fair, of course. As for Nick Repton—well, I'll tell him what I think of him when next we meet!"

#### THE SLOW DAWN

THE vicar, pottering about in his garden, suddenly looked up and caught sight of Angela as she was passing the vicarage.

"Good afternoon, Angela," he called, smiling at her. "If you can spare a few minutes, I should like to discuss a little matter with you."

"Very well, vicar," she said, smiling back

at him as he opened the garden gate for her.

"But first of all, I will finish tying up the last two of my chrysanthemum plants in case we get a high wind," the vicar went on. "Now what did I do with that bass, I wonder? I never seem to be able to put anything down without losing it."

"It's hanging out of your coat pocket, vicar," Angela told him laughingly.

"Dear me, dear me, so it is!" he exclaimed. A broad smile on his face.

He bent down, inserted a stout stick in the ground and tied one of the plants to it.

"They should make a very nice border when in flower," he remarked.

He then led the way to the vicarage, pointing out various shrubs and plants which he hoped would blossom before winter set in.

"But the chrysanthemums are my chief hope," he added. "Last year the cold east winds blackened and shrivelled them up, but I hope to be favoured with better luck this year. Fortunately, your father has hot-houses, my dear, or I don't know what we should do for flowers in the church during the winter."

"Oh yes, daddy is very proud of his Japanese chrysanthemums," Angela remarked.

"They are lovely flowers, of course, but between ourselves, Angela, they are just a little too exotic for my taste, if I may say," confided the vicar. "I prefer homely blossoms—the Tom, Dick and Harrys, so to speak, of the floral world. One can feel on familiar terms with them, but with the others—well, one feels one always has to be on one's best behaviour!"

"Now if you will kindly wait in the study, Angela, I will go and wash my hands," he added smilingly.

The vicar's study, which she knew so well, was lined with books, and his desk was littered with papers, reference books, fragments of manuscript and so forth. Angela knew that he was still hard at work with his translation of Homer's *Odyssey*.

"How are you getting along with the translation, vicar?" Angela asked.

"Slowly, my dear, slowly," he answered thoughtfully. "There are times when I wonder whether it is worth while since so many great scholars have done it before me. Then I remind myself that Homer's great poem is like a diamond in that it has many facets."

"However, I have not brought you in to discuss Homer, my dear Angela, but something much more practical and urgent at the moment," he went on. "It has been suggested to me that we ought to have a sort of youth club in Marshfield. We have the village hall, of course, where the young people can foregather to play table tennis, darts and so on, unfortunately, the attendance has been falling rapidly of late—indeed, on some evenings scarcely anyone puts in an appearance."

"I think, vicar, it is largely due to the fact that most young people get rather tired of such pastimes, and they want something a little more exciting," Angela said.

The vicar nodded.

"It worries me very much to see our young men and girls loafing about the village of an evening idling away the time," he said. "It reminds me of the saying that Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do. It therefore behoves us to find something new and entertaining for them if we possibly can." The vicar paused, then added—"It was Mr. Barton who made what seems to me a very sensible suggestion."

"Mr. Barton?" murmured Angela.

"Yes, my dear. David is a most interesting young man. He has had many strange

and exciting experiences."

"So I—so I understand, vicar," Angela stammered. "He—he has actually served a term of imprisonment, hasn't he?"

The vicar nodded gravely.

"But—but why was he sent to prison?" she ventured to ask.

"Sabotage, my dear—sabotage."

"You—you mean against his own country, vicar?"

"No, of course, not my dear," he replied. "You see, David was working with the Resistance in Greece and had the misfortune to be captured by the enemy."

A feeling of almost overwhelming relief, mingled with deep remorse, swept over Angela. The vicar's words made sense out of what had hitherto seemed to her a fantastic situation. It now began to dawn upon her that if the young man really had been an escaped convict from an English prison, he would not have been able to find sanctuary in a country village the way he had done!

David Barton had never spoken to her about Greece, or of the war. But men of his type never did boast of their deeds.

"Well, now, Angela," the vicar was saying, "I think a series of interesting talks would appeal to our young folk if we can only find sufficient speakers. David Barton has promised to lead off with an account of his wartime 'underground' experiences in Greece."

"And what about Captain Repton?" the vicar went on. "I understand he was dropped behind the enemy lines in Italy. That should make an excellent 'subject', too."

"Yes, of course," Angela murmured as the vicar paused as if for an answer.

"Very well, Angela, then I think I will consult your father in the matter," the vicar said, with a pleased smile. "Sir Richard knows quite a lot of interesting people, and he may have some useful suggestions to make."

"Yes, I expect he will," Angela agreed. She paused, then added—"Tell me, vicar, why is Mr. Barton working as a farm hand? I suppose it is because he has to make a living."

The vicar shook his head and smiled.

"Well, no, not because of that, my dear," he said. "As a matter of fact the young man's family is quite well-off. Unfortunately, David was taken ill after his theological exams—he worked much too hard, I expect—and when he was convalescent, the doctors advised him to have plenty of fresh air and outdoor exercise for some little time."

"You—you mean that he has been studying to become a clergyman, vicar?"

"Yes, of course, Angela. After leaving the army, David went to Oxford and took an arts degree. Then, having decided to enter the Church, he took a course at a theological training college, and is, I understand, to be ordained in the near future."

"I—I see," murmured Angela.

"Their father, Sir Templeton Barton, is patron of a living in Shropshire," the vicar continued. "The present incumbent, I understand, is getting on in years and wishes to retire, so I think it quite likely that David, after acting for a time as curate, will eventually become rector there—that is pure surmise on my part."

Angela rose to her feet.

"It's nice to know who one's neighbours actually are, vicar," she said smilingly. "I have noticed that Mr. Barton has been singularly uncommunicative."

"Well, yes, but I don't suppose David thought you would be particularly interested in him," the vicar remarked innocently.

Angela left the vicarage with very mixed feelings, but with the conviction that she

owed David Barton some sort of an apology.

Deep down in her heart of hearts, Angela knew, though she refused to admit it, that she was in love with David Barton and had been almost from the moment when they first met.

SEVERAL days passed, and she had seen nothing more of David. Then, one afternoon, Angela's mother sprang a surprise on her. It was while they were having tea in the drawing-room, and her father remarked that Tom Thurrock would soon be able to take over the management of his farm again.

"And a fine state everything would have been in," Sir Richard added, "had not young Barton taken charge."

Lady Selby gave a cynical little laugh.

"Evidently, you do not know who Mr. Barton really is, Richard," she said.

"Well, no," her husband muttered.

"Then let me tell you, Richard—David Barton is the younger son of Sir Templeton Barton of Lyndfall in Shropshire," Lady Selby announced impressively.

"Then why on earth is the young man working as an ordinary farm hand?" Sir Richard asked.

Lady Selby then proceeded to relate much of what the vicar had already told Angela.

"But if you knew all this, my dear, why didn't you tell us about it before?" demanded Sir Richard.

"Well, you see, Richard, I only got to know all about it this morning when I met the vicar in the village," Lady Selby replied. "I happened to mention Mr. Barton's name, and then it all came out. Then, after a pause—"After leaving the vicar, I happened to meet Mr. Barton and invited him to come here and have tea with us to-morrow."

Angela suppressed a gasp. How was she going to find courage to face David Barton again after the discourteous way she had treated him at their last meeting? she wondered.

"I'll think up some excuse for not being in for tea to-morrow afternoon," she told herself.

So, shortly before tea-time on the following day, Angela quietly slipped out of the house, taking with her a pot of home-made raspberry jam she had persuaded Mrs. Gambidge, the housekeeper, to let her have, and paid a visit to old Mrs. Clodbeater, who lived at one of the farm cottages on her father's estate.

"You haven't called to see me for a long time, my dear," the old woman remarked, her eyes lighting up when Angela entered the cottage. "But there, I reckon you've plenty to occupy your time up at the big house. Now please sit down, Miss Angela, and I'll put the kettle on for tea," she added smilingly.

"You always did like them golden little cakes of mine, didn't you, Miss Angela, ever since you was no more than so high?" the old woman went on.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Clodbeater, there are no rock cakes as nice as yours in all the world," Angela declared laughingly.

"Miss Cornish called on me the other afternoon," the old woman continued, "and she told me that the young man who has been working up at Mayfield Farm for Mr. Thurrock is going to become a parson. That's very strange, isn't it, my dear? I mean, seeing that he has been working as an ordinary farm hand."

"Well, yes, I suppose it is," Angela agreed. "But I gather that he has been working on the farm because he has been ill and the doctors told him he needed fresh air and exercise."

Over tea she chatted with Mrs. Clodbeater about parochial affairs, discussed a new knitting pattern, and then decided it was time for her to go.

She decided to return home by a roundabout way. It was a lovely evening, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, yet its very beauty saddened her. Everything was perfectly quiet and peaceful, and yet there was a dull ache in her heart.

She was standing at a stile in a lane a short distance from her home, deep in thought, when David Barton rode past on his bicycle. On catching sight of her, he dismounted, and said smilingly—

"Hello, Miss Selby! Why have you taken such pains to avoid meeting me? I hope I have not offended you in any way."

She hesitated a moment, at a loss what to say. Then—

"I—I'm very sorry, Mr. Barton," she murmured, her eyes downcast. "I realise now that I—that I made a foolish mistake."

"You see, I—" "Yes, I think I understand, Miss Selby," he said, when her voice faltered. "Thinking back, I can see how ambiguous my remarks must have sounded to you. But I so took it for granted that you knew I had been a prisoner of war—"

He paused, then added.

"But why did not Captain Repton explain everything to you, Miss Selby? He knew, of course, for he served under me for a time during the war."

"Yes, but as you know, perhaps, Captain Repton has a somewhat perverted sense of humour," Angela answered, in a low voice. "Keeping the truth from me and so leading me to—to misjudge you, Mr. Barton, was probably his idea of a joke!"

David nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, I quite understand, Miss Selby," he said.

"Then—then do you forgive me?" Angela murmured.

"My dear Miss Selby, there is nothing to forgive," David answered, smiling at her. "I blame myself for not having explained everything to you. So the question really is—do you forgive me?"

"I can only repeat your own words, Mr. Barton, and say 'there is nothing to forgive,'" she returned, her face lighting up with a smile.

EXACTLY why she had chosen the Greek temple as the objective of her afternoon walk, Angela did not quite know.

She did not go inside the building, but sat down with her back resting against one of the pillars. Presently she became aware of voices close at hand, seemingly a man's and a woman's.

With something of a mild shock, she recognised the man's voice as Dick Barton's. They had stopped on the opposite side of a creeper-covered lattice screen so that, though she could not see them, Angela could hear distinctly every word they said.

It seemed so like eavesdropping to remain where she was, that she was about to rise and move away when something which David said kept her rooted to the spot.

"Of course I'll marry you, my dear Frances. I'm looking forward to it as eagerly as you are."

"I hope it will be quite soon, David," said the girl. "I've got my trousseau ready, and all that really remains to be done now is to send out the invitations, and ask the rector to publish the banns. Mummy is very excited about it all, of course—she will hardly talk of anything else. I do hope she won't break down during the ceremony and start crying, though I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she did."

David laughed.

"Oh well, you must try and comfort her, my dear, and tell her that she's gaining a son and not losing a daughter! There's an old rhyme that runs something like this—

*'My daughter's my daughter all her life,  
But my son is my son till he takes him a wife.'*

And I suppose there is some truth in it, as there is in so many of those old saws."

"Mummy will feel awfully proud of you, David—prouder even than she was when she learnt you would be awarded the D.S.O."

"Oh, that was nothing," he said. "D.S.O.'s and M.C.'s 'came up with the ratings', as we used to say in the army."

"Well, if you deserve a D.S.O. at all, David, it will be for marrying me!" the girl said, with a gay little laugh.

Angela did not wait to hear any more. She rose and stole silently away feeling heart-broken. Although David Barton had not told her in so many words that he was in love with her, she thought she had read it in his eyes—just as he must have read it in hers her love for him!

MUCH to her mother's surprise, Angela readily agreed to go to London and stay with her aunt for an indefinite period.

Weeks passed. Aunt Celia, with all the enthusiasm of a born match-maker, escorted her niece from one social function to another, but all to no purpose.

Then, one morning at breakfast as she was idly glancing through a newspaper, Angela's eyes alighted on the following paragraph in the social column:

*"A pretty wedding took place on Thursday last at the parish church of Lyndfall in Shropshire. The bride was Frances Barton, only daughter of Sir Templeton and Lady Barton, and the bridegroom that well-known writer on sociology, Mr. Frederick Lashwood, M.A. The ceremony was performed by the bride's younger brother, the Rev. David Barton, D.S.O., formerly a Major in the army, and who was decorated for his outstanding achievements with the Greek resistance movement during the war."*

The paper dropped from Angela's hands. Now, too late, she understood that conversation she had overheard outside the Greek temple. So Frances Barton was David's sister and they had arranged for him to marry her as soon as he had been ordained!

This time Angela did not have to call up her pride, but fight it down. Should she, or should she not, write to David and confess how, for the second time, she had wronged him? It would also mean she would have to confess that the two letters he had written her had been destroyed unread.

Suddenly she remembered those words, "Love suffereth long and is kind."

Her love for David had suffered long, yet it had not been kind. And if he loved her, then his love, too, would have suffered long. Even so, might it not still be kind, with a kindness great enough to forgive, to understand, to find a place for her in his heart?

She wrote to David that same evening, her eyes blurred with tears as she did so.

ANGELA and David sat side by side on a rock on the Cornish coast gazing out to sea, which was sparkling in the spring sunshine. His arm was about her shoulders, and he gave a sigh of deep contentment.

"My darling wife!" he murmured huskily.

"My beloved husband!" Angela whispered back, a radiant smile on her face.

THE END.

# THE LOVE OF TWO HEARTS

By Peter Munday

## FRIEND OR FOE?

HAVE you heard that Redfield Aerodrome is going to be taken over by the Americans, Jim?" Agnes Bretton asked her brother. "Miss Lines told me when I was shopping this morning. Apparently it was discussed at the meeting of the parish council yesterday."

"You don't mean to tell me we are going to be invaded by a lot of gum-chewing Americans, do you?" he exclaimed with some heat.

"Miss Lines just said that the U.S. Air Force had arranged to take over the derelict buildings," Agnes replied quietly, refilling her brother's tea cup and passing it back to him.

"Well, I think it's the giddy limit," he said in tones of complete disgust. "I don't know what the country's coming to!"

There was a third person present in the kitchen of the old-world farmhouse. She was Norma Bretton, a remarkably pretty girl, with grey-green eyes and auburn hair.

Agnes, who was twenty-three, and eighteen months older than Norma, had brown eyes like Jim, with dark blonde hair brushed smoothly back from a pale forehead.

"Mr. Reeves was saying after choir practice the other day that we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Americans," Norma said, taking up their defence. "He said it was due entirely to them that peace has been maintained for so long and that without their aid this country and many others, would have been in a very serious position by now."

"Well, that's no reason for going down on our bended knees in gratitude," said her brother. "Don't worry, they know on which side their bread is buttered. You surely don't imagine that they are pouring out money like water just because they like us—or the French and the Germans, for that matter!"

"That's what you want to do as well, Jim," Norma replied a little defiantly. "In any case, I can't see why you should object to a silly old airfield being taken over by them. Personally I think it is a good thing."

"What! A good thing to have thousands of American airmen going about as if they owned the place?" Her brother laughed angrily.

"Well, you don't have to know them now," put in Agnes quietly.

"No, and I'll see to it that I don't!"

With that he rose to his feet, a handsome, if somewhat arrogant-looking man in his early thirties.

"And what's more," he added, "if either of you have any ideas about inviting any of them to this house you can think again. I know just what it will be—everybody in the village will run around talking a lot of sentimental claptrap about opening up their homes to the lonely boys from the States—I've heard it all before."

He lifted his cap from a peg and stalked determinedly out of the kitchen, leaving a little silence behind him.

Agnes was the first to break it.

"Jim's a dear," she sighed, "but there are times when he's utterly impossible! No one would ever think that he's really very kind and generous. The truth is, of course, he's never got over what happened at Harwich during the war."

Norma nodded. Although it had happened over eleven years ago both girls knew the story.

During the war Jim had been attached to an American Army division as a signals officer. Before going overseas he had become engaged to a girl in the W.A.A.F., who had been stationed at Harwich.

But the affair had been short-lived. Whilst Jim had been in France an American airmen, with an impressive list of air victories to his credit, had captivated the girl, and she had broken off her engagement to Jim and married him.

As a result of that Jim had taken on a completely unreasonable dislike of all Americans. The fact that he had probably had a lucky escape from marrying a fickle girl had never entered into it.

"I can see that we are going to be in for a difficult time, Norma," Agnes continued, after a pause. "We'll probably be asked to do what we can to make the Americans feel at home and I have no doubt that everybody will do all they can. But it's going to make it awkward if Jim adopts this attitude towards them."

"I agree," nodded Norma. "Once he gets an idea into his head it would take almost an earthquake to shift it. I mean to say, look how he acted over that boundary dispute with Gerry Mortlake. I always felt so sorry for Helen over that."

"I know, if it hadn't been for that quarrel with her brother I think Jim would have married Helen by now," said Agnes.

It was on the tip of Norma's tongue to say that their brother quarrelled with nearly everyone in the village at some time or another.

"It's time I started feeding the hens," she said. "I'll help you wash up first, if you like, though."

"No, I'll do it—it won't take a moment," said Agnes. "You get your feeding done and then you can help me in the garden. I've got some plants that want putting in the rockery."

"All right, dear, I won't be long."

Norma crossed the yard to the shed where the poultry feeding-stuff was stored. Tall and slenderly built, her workmanlike jodhpurs and close-fitting jumper accentuated her youthfulness.

Together with her brother and sister she had been born and brought up on High Tor Farm, which in turn had belonged to their father and his father before him.

When their parents had died within a short time of one another, Jim had taken over control and had set about modernising the place until now it was a very prosperous little concern.

They ran poultry on a large scale, both for eggs and table birds and looking after them was a full-time job for Norma. Agnes ran the house and lent a hand with other farming jobs when she could.

As she supervised the work of feeding the hens there was a tiny little frown of concentration between Norma's brows, as if her thoughts had turned in on themselves.

Half an hour later Norma emerged from the incubator room, which housed four large incubators filled with hatching eggs from selected laying pens. Jim was almost a fanatic about the high standard of his breeding stock in both hens and cattle. His herd of pedigree Jersey cows was one of the best in that district of Devon.

"You can't make farming pay unless you do the thing properly," was his argument. "It costs as much to feed a low-born cow as it does to feed a high-grade milker, so why not go all out for the best?"

She was thinking vaguely of several things on her way to the brooder house

when a pleasant, drawling voice wished her, "Good afternoon!"

A little startled she turned to see a tall, well-set up young man in the smart blue uniform of the American Air Force.

"Oh, good afternoon," she smiled, her slender eye-brows raised in a look of enquiry.

She was quick to notice that he wore the chevrons of a top sergeant on his arm and the "wings" of a pilot. There was a row of campaign ribbons on his tunic as well, though she did not know what they represented.

"I guess I'd better introduce myself," he said. "I'm Sergeant Plunkett—Dick to my friends. I reckon you'll have heard that the American Air Force is going to take over the old aerodrome way back." He jerked his head in the direction of Redfield.

Norma smiled.

"Yes, we have heard," she said.

"That's fine." He spoke as if everything had been put right. "The reason why I've come is because I was told we could get eggs here. That is, if this is High Tor Farm?" He consulted a slip of paper and read: "Miss Norma Bretton, High Tor Farm."

"That's me," said Norma. "But I'm afraid you'll have to see my brother about eggs. You see, we supply the Egg Board and strictly speaking we are not allowed to sell our eggs locally. Although, we have to sometimes when there is a surplus."

"I get it. We have the same kind of idea where I come from," the sergeant said. "Can I contact your brother right now or won't that be convenient, Miss Bretton?"

"I think, perhaps, that I had better speak to him, Sergeant Plunkett," Norma replied hastily, fully aware of the kind of reception he would get at Jim's hands. "He is rather busy just now," she went on. "If you tell me how many eggs you would want, and how often, I could let you have a post-card saying if we can supply them or not."

"Grand!" he assented readily. He scribbled on the slip of paper. "There. That's the address, Miss Bretton. We want a regular supply for the sergeant's mess."

"Twenty-five dozen a week," she murmured, reading what he had scribbled. "That seems rather a large order, Sergeant."

"We're a large mess, Miss Bretton," he grinned. "I don't know how much you've heard, but it may interest you to know that we're gonna turn Redfield back into a bomber base."

"Oh really?" Norma said with interest. "Does that mean there will be a lot of you here?"

"About three thousand, I guess, counting the erks," he said.

"Erks?" she questioned.

He grinned again.

"Sorry! One gets into the habit of talking air force languages so that it becomes second nature. Erks is a word we've borrowed from your own Royal Air Force. It means the mechanics and ground staff concerned with servicing the aircraft. But they are all real good guys."

"What a lot we've got to learn," Norma observed deumurely, her eyes dancing.

"You sure have," he drawled. "But it's like chicken farming—once you know how there's nothing to it."

"I wouldn't say that," said Norma, laughing despite herself. "I think there is a very great deal to it. Even now I come up against all kinds of snags. Do you know anything about chicken farming, Sergeant

Plunkett?"

"I reckon I know a little," he said. "I was brought up on one and studied at the Wisconsin School of Agriculture before I went out to Korea. After that I decided to stay on in the Air Force for a time at least. But one of these days I'm gonna run chickens again in a big way."

He looked across at the laying houses.

"I see you run yours on Rhode Island lines, Miss Bretton," he continued. "It's the best system, I reckon. They get plenty of fresh air and exercise and yet they're under control. You trap nest each season's pullets to pick out the best layers, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Norma eagerly. "We make up selected breeding pens from the pullets which show the most promise and then we keep a careful check on their output so that we can cull those who don't come up to expectations."

"That's easily the best way to do it," he agreed. "Now, in the States——"

Twenty minutes later Norma was suddenly brought to a realisation of the time by the sight of her sister coming across the yard.

Seeing Norma's companion, Agnes looked a trifle surprised.

Norma introduced the young airman, and after that he seemed to have no difficulty in winning Agnes over.

Norma saw that he was the type of young man who would be exceedingly popular wherever he went, for he possessed a very strong personality.

Neither she nor Agnes would dare ask him to the house; not because they were afraid of their brother, but because he would be almost certain to behave in a manner that would cause any man of spirit to turn on his heel and walk out of the place. Or stay and be rude.

"I can't see any reason why you shouldn't have eggs from us," said Agnes, when she had learnt the reason for the sergeant's visit. "Norma can dispose of the surplus over and above the egg board's requirements as she pleases. If, as you say, you can make arrangements to collect them twice a week, why, then, that makes everything easy."

"Yes, but I thought——" Sergeant Plunkett looked rather puzzled.

Norma flushed.

"You see, Agnes, I thought it would be best to ask Jim about it," she explained. "I mean——"

"Oh, that isn't necessary," her sister interrupted, with a little laugh. "You wouldn't think it necessary to consult Jim if someone from the village wanted eggs! When can you send for them, sergeant?"

Dick Plunkett smiled. He did not understand what lay behind the sisterly exchanges, but it did not matter. He had got what he had come for; and something else besides, if he was not mistaken.

"I'll make sure they are collected on Wednesdays and Saturdays, in the afternoon, if that suits you, Miss Bretton," he replied. "I'll make it my job to come for them myself, in fact. Eggs are like bombs—they've got to be handled carefully, I reckon."

When he had gone Norma turned to Agnes.

"Why did you tell him he could have the eggs?" she asked, almost crossly. "Especially after I had said we must ask Jim first."

Agnes smiled.

"Because Jim would have said 'No' on principle," she remarked drily. "As it is he may be angry, but there's nothing he can do about it."

"He can forbid me to supply the eggs," said Norma.

Agnes shook her head, a curious expres-

sion in her eyes.

"Jim wouldn't do that," she said. "The poor dear may be very obstinate at times, but he would never do anything that would make you or me look foolish. All you have to do is to appear to take it for granted that, as far as Jim is concerned, Sergeant Plunkett is just another customer whose order you are glad to get."

And this proved to be correct. When Jim Bretton learned of Sergeant Dick Plunkett's visit—and the reason for it—his face darkened for a moment and Norma braced herself, fearing an explosion.

But instead her brother merely remarked that the selling of eggs was her business.

### THE RIVALS.

IT took a month for the American Air Force to settle in at Redfield and by that time Norma knew that she and Dick Plunkett had become good friends.

By now it was impossible to go into Ardingford village without seeing the American servicemen in the twisting old High Street, their friendly greetings meeting with a ready response from the local residents.

Ardingford's history went back many centuries and some of its buildings were now regarded as Ancient Monuments. The Norman church at the end of the High street was photographed a dozen times a day by the visitors from across the Atlantic.

"These boys get a kick out of seeing an old place like Ardingford. They've nothing like it in the States."

The speaker was Gerry Mortlake at the tennis club one Saturday afternoon.

He and Norma had been playing in a mixed doubles contest and were seated on the terrace in front of the pavilion, watching Gerry's sister, Helen, partnering an American lieutenant.

After a period of National Service, during which he had served in Malaya, Gerry had astonished everyone by throwing up a perfectly good job in an engineering firm in order to start afresh as a farmer.

He now lived at the next farm to High Tor, with his widowed sister, Helen Lascelles.

Everyone thought that it was most unfortunate that Jim Bretton and Gerry should have quarrelled soon after the latter had come into the district.

It was a trivial enough matter that had caused the quarrel, but both men regarded it as involving a question of principle and it had only been through the joint efforts of Helen and Agnes that it had been ended by a compromise.

Meanwhile, although Jim and Gerry were very polite to each other, they behaved, as Agnes despairingly put it, like two dogs walking round and round a juicy bone, each waiting for the other to pounce.

Helen was the eldest of three girls.

At twenty-one she had married a famous test pilot and at twenty-seven—last year—she had been widowed when her husband had been killed in a jet-plane crash. She now ran her brother's home for him, as Agnes ran her brother's.

In the beginning Jim had seemed duly impressed by her and both Agnes and Norma had entertained hopes that he and Helen would find solace in a second flowering of their frustrated emotions.

But the quarrel with Gerry had altered all that. While Helen refused, outwardly at least, to allow it to make any difference, so far as she was concerned, it seemed to have made a great deal of difference to Jim.

Until the American Air Force took over Redfield Aerodrome, Gerry Mortlake had

been content to allow matters to drift on as they had been doing since he and Norma had met and become friendly. It was not that he was bashful but simply because he recognised that Norma was not yet ready to hear him say that he loved her.

But now Gerry was beginning to wonder if he hadn't left things a bit too late; for in the person of Sergeant Dick Plunkett he sensed a serious rival!

As the tennis match drew to an end Gerry began putting on his blue blazer. He was a good-looking young man with a mop of brown wavy hair.

"Is it true that you are going to sing the anthem solo in the Harvest Thanksgiving service next month, Norma?" he said suddenly. "I heard Mr. Reeves saying something about it to Agnes last Sunday."

"Yes, Gerry," Norma answered, without a trace of self-consciousness. "Mr. Reeves asked me if I would now that Molly Davenport has left the choir to get married. I know my voice isn't as good as hers, but I can only do my best."

"Oh, I think it's better," Gerry said stoutly. "It's sweeter, at any rate, even if it isn't as powerful. Besides, she was a mezzo-soprano and I always think that mezzos are neither one thing nor the other."

Norma smiled absently.

"You are very loyal to your friends, aren't you, Gerry?" she said teasingly.

"I'm loyal to you," he said boldly, his eyes caressing her.

Norma flushed and got up.

"Well, you mustn't let your loyalty run away with your better judgment," she said lightly. "After all—with a little shile he always found irresistible—"it's just as well to know one's own limitations, you know."

She gave him no time to say anything more, but turned to greet Helen and her partner, who had just finished their game. She had just finished their game.

Together the four of them walked across the lawn in search of refreshment, chatting easily and light-heartedly about everything from the latest best-seller to a film someone had recently seen in Exeter.

A LITTLE later she started for home carrying her racket, and wearing a white coat over her tennis things, having declined Gerry's offer of a lift.

He and Helen were taking the American lieutenant back for supper and had wanted Norma to make a foursome of it, but she had explained, almost too carefully, that she had not arranged for anyone to do the feeding for her.

She knew that it was a mere excuse: that much she admitted to herself as she walked back along the banks of the river which ran past the end of the village. She could easily have telephoned and asked Agnes to see to the hens.

If only things were not so difficult at home. Both she and Agnes were free to come and go as much as they wished, but neither of them wanted to make trouble over the question of whom they might and might not invite to the house.

It just would not be worth it. Broad-minded and considerate though he was in other matters, Jim Bretton had a blind spot and in this one thing he had allowed his prejudices to overrule his judgment—he disliked Americans.

Then again, as Agnes pointed out, it was Jim's house and he had a perfect right to make rules. If they didn't like the rules, the remedy was in their own hands—leave!

"Say, you look thoughtful enough to have the cares of the world on your shoulders, honey!"

Norma looked up with a start.

The first time he had used the little

American term of endearment she had looked at him in surprise.

Whereupon he had laughingly declared that "Miss Bretton" was much too formal, and that in any case the title belonged to Agnes, as she was the eldest, adding with a twinkle, that to an American all girls were "honeys".

"I didn't see you coming, Dick," she said, her confusion mounting at the expression in his eyes.

His glance rested appreciatively upon her. In her short white coat and tennis skirt, her hair fastened back by a ribbon, she looked about seventeen. To the lonely young American she represented all that was best and loveliest in English girlhood.

"I was at a loose end, so I thought I'd drop in at the tennis club on the off-chance of finding you there," he said falling in at her side. "Your friend Mrs. Lascelles told me you had just left and she thought you would come this way."

"It struck me that you might like to go for a run somewhere in the car," he suggested, almost casually. "How about it? A breath of air would do you good after your tennis."

Norma laughed.

"What do you think I've been breathing all afternoon?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, fresh air, of course, but I was thinking of sea air," he replied, with mock seriousness. "They say that the ozone is mighty good for the complexion. It's not far to Pengelly Bay," he added coaxingly.

Norma sighed.

"I'd love it, of course, Dick," she said frankly, "but I'm afraid it's impossible to-night. Some other time, perhaps."

"Okay, okay," he said, with a shrug.

One of the nice things about Dick was that he never attempted to force his attentions, Norma thought gratefully.

But now he glanced curiously at her.

"I'm going to stick my neck out and ask you a personal question, Norma," he said. "What's wrong? There's something, isn't there?"

Her lips trembled. She longed to tell him just *why* she had refused to go out with him. It was all linked up with her brother's unreasonable attitude towards anyone wearing an American uniform, but loyalty to Jim kept her lips sealed.

"Oh, it's nothing, Dick," she murmured evasively. Then she gave a little laugh. "I must be careful how I look when you are about or you'll start imagining all kinds of things!"

"Well, they say imagination's a good thing, sometimes," he declared. "I guess I can see through a brick wall as far as the next and it hasn't taken me long to come to the conclusion that you could be a great deal happier than you are. Now tell me where I get off."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the kind," she said, laughing with genuine amusement. "It is very kind of you to be so interested, but I assure you I am quite capable of looking after myself."

"I've heard that before!"

All the same it had not escaped him that while the two sisters were friendly enough, and always seemed pleased to see him when he called for the eggs, he was never invited into the house.

Neither had he been deaf to the things being whispered in places like the tennis club, to which various members of the American forces had been made honorary members.

Thus Dick had heard it said that Jim Bretton hated Americans; the American Air Force in particular.

A girl with whom Dick had danced at a recent social had openly confided that she was sorry for the Bretton girls.

But not for worlds would he have allowed Norma to know that he had seen through the facade of loyalty with which she tried to shield her brother.

Instead, he set out carefully and cautiously to win her trust and confidence by degrees, knowing that if he succeeded he would win a prize above rubies.

After saying good-bye he drove back to the airfield in a thoughtful mood. He knew now that he had fallen in love with the shy, sensitive girl who lived at the lovely old farmhouse. He knew, too, that without Norma to share it, life would lose much of its meaning for him.

At the same time his love brought with it a wealth of wisdom.

Like Gerry, Dick knew that Norma was poised on the brink of awareness, but was not yet ready to hear his avowal.

Then the fact that he was an American citizen was a handicap; the thought of separation from her sister and brother was bound to lurk in the background. All of which made Dick go cautiously.

Meanwhile, life became very pleasant for him; and for Norma when she was in his company.

He had told her a great deal about himself, though not all. She knew that his father had been a doctor in a Middle West town, and that both his parents had died in a car accident when he had been a schoolboy.

Thereafter he had been brought up by an uncle on a farm where his love of the open air, and a natural flair for handling livestock, had been given full rein. One day he wanted to settle down on a farm of his own, but not while trained pilots were still needed as instructors.

"Aren't you ever afraid?" Norma had asked him on one occasion, when he had been describing a flight back to base in a damaged aircraft.

Dick had shrugged.

"Oh, I guess everybody's afraid at some time or another," he had said evasively.

THE next day was Sunday and Dick was kept busy on routine duties at the airfield. After tea he drove into Ardingford to go to church.

There was a fair sprinkling of service uniforms in the congregation, and the church was nearly full.

Seated at the back he caught sight of Agnes on the far side of the aisle, with Gerry Mortlake and Helen next to her.

Then his glance went to the choir stalls, where he could see Norma next to a buxom young girl in blue.

The first hymn chosen was a special favourite of Dick's. It was one that he had heard sung often in the little church at home.

On this occasion he did not join in the singing, but listened instead to Norma's pure soprano voice, rising high above the others, enfolding him in a web of enchantment that left him feeling strangely moved.

Afterwards he waited outside the church and was joined by Agnes and the other two. He and Gerry exchanged greetings that were almost studiously casual and Agnes smiled to herself. Then Norma came up and slipped a hand through her sister's arm, smiling impartially at one and all.

"Dick was just saying that with your voice you ought to be on the radio or television, Norma," Helen remarked smilingly. "He became quite lyrical about it."

"I don't know what you mean by lyrical, Mrs. Lascelles," he said, "but I still say that Norma has an exceptionally lovely voice and that it's a pity she hides her light under a bushel."

"But I haven't even been trained," said Norma modestly. "I like singing, but that doesn't mean anything. In any

case, I can't croon and that is all that people seem to want these days."

"And I hope you never will," Gerry put in. "There ought to be a law against crooning. You stick to anthems, my dear Norma."

"Speaking of anthems, Norma is singing the solo next Sunday night," said Helen, turning to Dick.

"Oh, and what solo is that?" he enquired, looking interested. "Something special?"

"In a way," said Helen. "It's the harvest thanksgiving service and Mr. Reeve always has an anthem for both morning and evening services. Last year the solo was sung by a girl who has since left Ardingford, so this is Norma's big chance. The choir-master thinks a lot of her, you know."

"Then he's wise," said Dick, with a smile in Norma's direction. "I'm fond of anthems. In our church at home we used to have one every third Sunday. Sometimes one of the boys took the solo—we had one kid there with a voice like an angel. Seems a pity boy's voices only last such a short while."

"One of the choir-boys here takes the solo at the morning service," said Agnes. "You'll come, won't you, Dick?"

"Sure, I'll come," he said, a sudden light springing into eyes.

"How nice for Norma to know that she is going to have such an appreciative audience," said Gerry, with the faintest suspicion of sarcasm. He turned to Norma before Dick could retort. "You'd better take precautions against getting a sore throat, my dear. It would be a pity to disappoint our friend here, especially after all he has said."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence, broken at last by Dick.

"I reckon I always say that I mean, old man," he drawled quietly. "To my way of thinking, that's a lot better than wrapping things up. Don't you agree?"

Gerry smiled in a superior fashion.

"Oh, quite, my dear fellow, quite!" he said. "As an example of uninhibited phraseology our English habit of instructing the unwary in plain, blunt language has much to commend it. Like that notice over there, for instance."

He indicated a board fastened to a small stake thrust into the ground at the edge of the greensward.

Dick followed the direction of his glance and his eyes hardened. The notice said tersely: "Keep Off The Grass".

In an instant the atmosphere had become charged with tension, but Helen Lascelles pretended to ignore it.

She put a hand on her brother's arm.

"We must be going, I'm afraid," she said, including them all in her survey. Then to Agnes. "Tell Jim I shall expect to see him at church next Sunday evening. It might be an idea to adjourn for supper at our place afterwards, don't you think? Anyway, I'll give you a ring during the week and we can discuss it, Agnes. Good-night, Norma dear, and good-night, Sergeant Plunkett!"

"Good-night, ma'am," Dick said, saluting. He met her glance and grinned faintly. "Thanks a lot."

#### A WOMAN'S SCHEMING.

FOR the whole of the next week Dick was kept busy at the air-base. A flight of new bombers had arrived after being flown across the Atlantic, and the subsequent work of ground and air tests kept him fully occupied until late each evening.

Norma did not know, as she looked up and saw the huge planes droning across the sky, that Dick was probably at the control of one of them, looking down and wonder-

ing what she was doing or whether she was thinking about him.

Jim Bretton noticed them, too. He came in for dinner one day livid with fury.

"I'm going to complain to the officer commanding at Redfield," he announced to the two girls. "It's bad enough having them taking off and landing less than three miles away without low flying into the bargain. One of them came over the hill so low this morning that the cows nearly broke out of the meadow. They will be put off their milk if this goes on."

Another sergeant called for the eggs on Wednesday and brought a message from Dick telling her that he would be waiting for her outside the church when she left after choir practice on Friday evening.

True to his word he was there.

"I only just made it, but here I am," he grinned. "I thought it would be nice to walk back as far as your place together. That is, if you don't mind?"

"Of course not," she said. "But you don't mean to tell me that you've come all the way from camp just for that?"

"Why not?" he asked, in tones of amusement. "I'd come a lot further than that the privilege of a few minutes of your company, honey. What's so strange about that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Only, it seems—I mean—it isn't as if I——" She stopped, blushing, and looked helplessly at him.

It was an opening of which few men would have hesitated to avail themselves, but Dick was not one to rush his fences.

Instead, he took her arm and opened the wicket gate for her to pass through, giving her just that respite she needed.

So he cast around in his mind for something else to talk about.

"How did the practice go?" he enquired, as they paused a moment while he closed the gate. "I'm counting the hours till Sunday evening, when I hear that anthem."

"I don't think there'll be an anthem, Dick," she said, in a troubled tone. "Mr. Wollaston, the organist, was taken ill yesterday. Mr. Reeves said that the chances of his being fit enough to play on Sunday are very remote! So in that case we shall have to call it off."

"What bad luck!" he exclaimed, looking, Norma thought, as dismayed as she felt. "How did you manage this evening, then?"

She sighed.

"Not very well," she confessed. "Miss Collins, who plays for the Sunday school, took Mr. Wollaston's place, but she isn't really suitable. I don't mean that unkindly, because she manages the Sunday school hymns quite well, only——"

"Handel is a bit over her head, that it?"

"I'm afraid so." She smiled ruefully, "Miss Collins was quite frank about it and though she is willing to take the service, she won't attempt to play for the anthem."

"Well, you can't blame her," he said. "Isn't there anyone else you can get?"

"Not at such short notice, I'm afraid. Mr. Reeves is very upset about it, of course, but there really isn't anything he can do."

"It's certainly tough," Dick said thoughtfully.

Suddenly Dick said:

"How far had you got with the anthem, honey? I mean, had you put in some practice with the whole choir?"

"Oh, yes," Norma replied, looking surprised at the question. "We had gone over it several times before Mr. Wollaston was taken ill. Why do you ask, Dick?"

"Oh, I just wondered," he said, but refused to be drawn.

It was dark when they came to the farm gate and Norma stopped.

Near at hand, in the stables, there was the rattle of a chain and not far off a dog

barked.

"That's Rover," she said, rather unnecessarily. She sounded nervous and Dick felt a little rush of pity for her.

He said quietly—

"Rover is your brother's Alsatian, isn't he? I've seen him about. Where is he kept?"

"He's got a big kennel behind the dairy. We have to chain him up at night because he started to wander, and with so many sheep in the district Jim said he couldn't take any chances of him getting out."

"Very wise of your brother, I think. But then he strikes me as the kind of man who wouldn't take a chance, anyway. Not even on getting to know an American!"

She made a little gesture.

"I'm sorry, Dick. But you mustn't be too hard on Jim. He was very badly let down by an American airman during the war and he hasn't got over it yet."

"And he thinks we're all the same, I suppose?" He shrugged. "Tell me, why do you stick it?"

"What can I do?" she asked helplessly. "I can't very well quarrel with Jim over a thing like that, can I? Not that it would do any good if I did."

"But surely——"

"No, Dick." She shook her head firmly. "I know what you are going to say, but please don't. Things are difficult enough as it is without making them worse. I would very much like to ask you in for coffee, but it's out of the question."

"Say, how old are you, honey?" he enquired.

Norma blushed vividly.

"Twenty-one," she answered, smiling tremulously. "Why?"

"Old enough to decide for yourself, at that rate," he said. "Tell me, does your brother's ban on Americans apply to your going out with one of them?"

"I—what do you mean, Dick?" she faltered, her eyes widening.

"Just what I say, honey," He sounded almost impatient. "I've asked you to come out with me on several occasions but you keep fobbing me off. Now I'm asking you again. Not to-night—it's too late for that, anyhow and we won't want to start off on the wrong foot. But even if you can't ask me to the house is there any reason why we shouldn't go places? What time do you finish to-morrow?"

"Sometime about half past six. But——"

"I'll be here at seven-thirty—sharp," he broke in, before she could protest. "That'll give you time to change, won't it? We'll go to Pengelly Bay—it's only half an hour's run—and then find somewhere to eat."

For a second Norma hesitated, a medley of emotions warring within her.

While she hesitated, Dick took out a tobacco tin and rolled a cigarette with a deliberation that told her he was thinking deeply.

Then—

"Listen, honey," he said, speaking with a quiet intensity that masked his rising anger. "I don't know your brother and judging by the way he treats you, I don't think I want to. But the way I look at it is this. There comes a time in everyone's life when it is necessary to choose the road you're going to travel. Well, it seems to me that you've come to that now, possibly without realising it! At any rate, you've got to make up your mind whether your brother is going to rule your life—or you are. And—it's your life, remember!"

"I—I suppose you are right, Dick," she murmured hesitantly, at last. "But—but it isn't as easy as all that. I try to avoid hurting people if I can, especially when—when life has hurt them terribly. I mean——"

"I guess I know what you mean, honey,"

he said gently. He saw tears glistening on her lashes. "It goes against the grain to do anything that seems disloyal to one's brother. Naturally it would. You are quite the most loyal little person I have ever met and I give you full marks for feeling as you do. But has it occurred to you that your brother owes something to you, as well?"

"I know," she whispered, "but——"

"'But' seems to be your favourite word to-night," he said teasingly, not allowing her to finish.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and stood looking down into her eyes.

Then, while it seemed that the night waited with bated breath, he bent his head and gently kissed her lips.

"There," he said, smiling at her in a curiously tense fashion. "That's just one on account. Now don't forget—seven thirty sharp! On second thoughts we'll make it Exeter. There's a symphony concert on there that I reckon you'd like better than the pictures. I don't imagine we'll have much of a job getting seats."

Norma stood where he had left her, one hand going to her breast as if to still the wild throbbing of her heart.

All she knew was that the world had turned upside down and that everything that went to make up the ordered pattern of her life became suddenly unimportant in the face of the miracle that had happened—she was in love!

GOOD morning, Sergeant Plunkett! Isn't it a lovely day?"

Dick wheeled round to see Helen Lascelles smiling at him.

His hand went to his cap in a casual salute and he walked across the pavement to where she was seated at the wheel of a small shooting brake, the back of which was loaded with packages.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said smilingly. "Seems you've been buying up the village!"

Helen's eyes danced.

"Oh, I leave that to you boys," she said teasingly. "We poor inhabitants have to be content with the crumbs from the rich man's table. But I was wondering if I can give you a lift anywhere?" she went on. "If you are going back to the aerodrome I could easily drop you there—it isn't out of the way."

"That's surely kind of you, ma'am, but I've got my car here," he answered. "To tell you the truth. I was wondering whether to go and have a cup of coffee over in that cafe there. The trouble is, I don't like having it alone." He grinned in a fashion that Helen found most engaging.

She laughed merrily.

"In that case, it is my obvious duty to join you," she said. "Our vicar has impressed upon us all that we must show you Americans something of British hospitality, so what better opportunity than now? You have been calling on him, I gather?"

"Sure," he acknowledged. "That's why I got time off to come into town. We had some business to discuss. I'll tell you about it over coffee, if I may."

"On one condition," said Helen, getting out of the car and turning to pick up her handbag. She was wearing tweeds and a jumper and looked very attractive.

"What's the condition, ma'am?" Dick enquired, as he escorted her across the road, putting a detaining hand on her arm as a coast-bound coach lumbered past. "Those things give me the Willies," he added, in an aggrieved tone. "They drive on the principle that they're bigger than you so if you bump, you're the one who'll get hurt."

"That's the first criticism I've ever

heard you make," Helen said as they gained the pavement and entered the old-fashioned little cafe. "Still, I agree."

"Sorry!" He grinned. "Now, about this condition?"

"Oh, it's quite a simple one. Merely that you stop making me feel a middle-aged woman by using that ridiculous expression you seem so fond of and call me Helen instead."

"That's real kind of you, ma'— I mean, Helen," he said, a slight flush rising up under his tan. "It works both ways, though."

"Of course—Dick. Now we're quits and can talk about something else. Norma, for instance. Were you by any chance seeing the vicar about putting up the banns?"

Dick went properly red this time.

"You know everything, don't you?" he said accusingly, as he sat down. "I needn't tell you, then, that I wish I had been doing that very thing. Unfortunately, I've got a few hurdles to get over first."

"And Norma's brother is one of them?" Helen opened her bag and began powdering her nose.

"The biggest," said Dick slowly. "I don't quite get the set-up there—Norma's very loyal." He paused a moment, his eyes bleak. "There's quite a lot else, including your brother. I don't know how he stands where Norma is concerned, but—well—you saw what happened on Sunday outside the church?"

Heien laughed softly.

"When Gerry warned you to keep off the grass? A blind man could have seen it. I told him afterwards that he really must try to be more subtle. It was anything but tactful, especially in front of Norma. But Gerry isn't a hurdle."

"You mean—?" Dick looked enquiringly at her.

"Norma isn't in love with Gerry," said Helen decidedly. "To be quite honest, I don't think he's really in love with her—he's very fond of her, of course—or he would not have been content to let matters drift along as he has done for the past year. The point is—are you?"

Dick rested his hands on the table, looking directly in front of him.

"Sure," he said, in a tone that convinced Helen more than any other words could have done. "I reckon I fell in love at first sight. I don't expect you to understand but that's how it was."

Helen waited, smiling, until the waitress had placed their coffee in front of them, and had Dick been looking at her he would have seen that her eyes were misty.

"You're wrong—I do understand, Dick," she said softly, when the waitress had gone. "That's how it should be, but so seldom is! Mind, you will have to be careful. It's a big step for a girl to make when it comes to deciding to leave her home and family behind in order to go to another country with the man she loves. As you said just now, Norma is very loyal and she has very deep roots in England. But if you go about things the right way I'm sure it will work out all right in the end."

"Hi!" he exclaimed, stirring his coffee rather too vigorously. "Aren't you going a little fast? Norma hasn't even said she'll have me yet."

"She will," said Helen, laughingly. He laughed in turn.

"I guessed you didn't stop just to pass the time of the day," he said. "The thing is, what am I to do?"

"How patient can you be?" she asked, sipping her coffee and giving him a funny little sideways glance.

Dick shrugged.

"With hope, very patient," he said.

"Then that's all right," she answered,

with a little sigh. "You mustn't try to sweep Norma off her feet or anything like that. And believe me, Jim is the last person to stand between Norma and happiness once he is convinced that it is for her happiness to marry you. It would be too frightful if she were forced to choose between you and her loyalty to her brother."

"Granted all that is correct, how are we going to convince him?" Dick enquired. "From what I gather anyone wearing an American uniform is poison to that guy."

"I know. But it isn't really his fault. He has brooded over something that happened a long time ago until he has lost his sense of proportion," she said. "But now that I know you are really serious I'll do all I can to help you, but you must give me time."

"You mean—you'll talk to him?" Dick's eyes widened.

"I'm not at all sure what I can or will do," said Helen, a little note of finality creeping into her tone. "You must leave that to me. In the meantime, remember what I said—don't try to rush things." She finished her coffee and put down the empty cup. "Now satisfy my curiosity and tell me why you were calling on the vicar?"

Dick's eyes twinkled.

"It's a dark conspiracy," he said, his lips quirking, "but I don't see why you shouldn't know. I went to tell him that I would play the organ for the anthem service on Sunday night if he liked?"

Helen looked taken aback.

"Do you mean to say that you can play the organ, Dick?" she cried.

He grinned.

"I know playing a church organ and flying a B-49 don't seem to go together, but as it happens I've done quite a bit of both," he said. "Where I come from we have a fairly big church and when I was quite a kid I had lessons from our organist for some years and then studied under a quite well known teacher. Later, when I was still a schoolboy the church organist retired and they asked me if I would take his place. That's how it is."

"I had no idea you were so accomplished," she said, impressed.

"I'm not a bit. It's just that I like playing—the organ especially."

"Wasn't the vicar surprised?" she asked.

"He seemed to think I was pulling his leg," Dick laughed. "But he became quite enthusiastic when he found out I could manage the whole service. I'm to run through it with him this afternoon. The only thing that worried me was this Miss Collins. I didn't want to do anything that would upset her but Mr. Reeves said she would only be too pleased to stand down.

"I think it's simply splendid of you, Dick," Helen said enthusiastically. "Peggy Collins won't mind—she'll be relieved, if if anything. And she knows the order of the service well, so that she'll be a great help. Does Norma know?"

"Not yet. Mr. Reeves said he'd send a message to ask her to be at the church at three o'clock to run through the anthem."

Helen picked up her bag, her eyes pensive.

"I'm very glad, Dick," she said. "I think it is very nice of you to come to the rescue in this way and also, though I don't quite know how, I have a feeling that it is going to help in a lot of ways."

HELEN LASCELLES was nothing if not thorough. After lunch she washed up and then, telling her brother she was going for a walk, called Roddy, her Aberdeen terrier, and set off at a brisk pace across the fields towards High Tor Farm.

It being Saturday afternoon she was fairly certain that she would find Jim in the yard. Except when the harvest was in full swing, Saturday on the farm was odd-

jobs day.

She climbed the stile that was set in the fence which had been the cause of the quarrel between the two men she liked most. Only by the sheer force of her personality had she succeeded in preventing the dispute becoming an open breach that would have kept them all at loggerheads.

She saw Jim at the same time as he saw her and waved in greeting.

He waited till she came up, his face set. "Uncompromising to a degree, he was utterly incapable of dissembling in any form, so that it was quite evident to Helen that he was in anything but a good mood.

"Hullo, Jim," she said, smiling determinedly. "You look very glum, my dear. Anything wrong?"

He stared morosely at her for a while and then said harshly—

"If you must know I've quarrelled with Norma."

"Oh dear, how unfortunate! Still, I suppose it was inevitable," she added.

"So you think it was inevitable, do you?" he grunted. "May I enquire just why you should think that, Helen?"

Helen permitted a brief smile to touch her lips, then looked pityingly at him.

"Norma is a high-spirited girl with lots of character," she said quietly. "If she were less so she might go on putting up with your somewhat heavy-handed methods, my dear man. As it is, I'm surprised she hasn't rebelled long before this. I certainly would have done."

"Really?" he said sarcastically. "You seem to know a lot about it, yet you haven't even troubled to enquire what we quarrelled about."

"Is that necessary?" She put her head a little to one side and regarded him with friendly interest. "I suppose Norma told you that Mr. Reeves had telephoned and asked her to go to church this afternoon to try over the anthem!"

"Exactly! She also informed me that some jumped-up sergeant from the American Air Force was to play the organ in place of Mr. Wollaston," he said coldly. "Naturally, I considered it a piece of confounded impertinence and didn't hesitate to tell her so."

"Oh, Jim! What a bear you are, to be sure!" she sighed. "I came over to tell you about it because I hoped that I might make you see—well—the other side of the question. If Norma took exception to what you said, you have only yourself to blame, you know. Dick Plunkett is the very reverse of what you think he is. He's quiet and modest—and very much in love with your sister. Why can't you be reasonable about it, my dear?"

"I don't consider that I am being unreasonable," he said stiffly. "Norma is twenty-one, of course, and she can make or mar her life as she thinks fit. But so long as she remains under my roof I expect her to fall in with my wishes. In case you have forgotten it, I happen to be her only male relative and it is my responsibility to see that she doesn't make a fool of herself over any man."

"You're not paying Norma much of a compliment, are you, Jim?" Helen said quietly. "As for Dick, if you had taken the trouble to find out something about him you would have thought differently. He never talks about it, but one of the campaign ribbons he wears is that of the Congressional Medal of Honour—probably the highest award an American soldier can attain. It's like our own Victoria Cross."

"I met one of his officers at the tennis club the other day and he told me about it," she went on. "Dick brought a bomber back from a raid on the Yalu River, in Korea, with only one engine functioning

and half a wing shot away. They say his exploit is a legend in the American Air Force."

"Really? And what is that supposed to prove?"

He was like a wall and she was only hurting herself beating against it. It was so unfair, too, she thought.

Tears sprang to her eyes.

"To someone like you it would prove nothing, of course," she said, with a sharply indrawn breath. "But to any reasonably-minded person it would prove a very great deal. Listen, Jim"—she laid a hand on his arm—"I can't bear to see you like this! Please—please try to think differently about it all. Life isn't meant to be spent looking over one's shoulder. I found that out—long ago." She caught back a sob. "We've got to look forward—got to, do you hear, Jim? If we don't, then we would have nothing to live for!"

"That kind of thing is easy enough to say," Jim said almost roughly. "But what do you—or I—really know about this fellow Plunkett? He may be amusing himself with Norma for all I know."

"He's not. I swear he's not, Jim. I—I've talked to him and—I'm a woman. I know. Won't you believe me?"

"Why should I believe you?" he asked bitterly. "You are just as likely to be mistaken in your judgment as anyone else."

"But you won't even give your judgment a chance," she flashed back, her anger kindled by his obstinacy. "Instead, you wall yourself up in your own misery so that you don't even realise you are being cruel and unjust—that you are punishing two innocent people for another's sin!" She moistened her lips. "There was a time, not so long ago, when I thought I had come near to loving you, but now I am beginning to wonder if I don't despise you even more than I despise myself."

With that she turned abruptly and walked away, her head held high.

For a moment he stared after her like a man bereft of speech; as if he was finding it difficult to grapple with something that had happened to him.

Then in a few quick strides he was at her side, grasping her arm and pulling her round almost fiercely.

"Helen! What—what was that you said?" he demanded, his face white.

"Oh, let me go!" She looked and sounded furious. "You've quarrelled with practically everybody who has ever dared to hold an opinion that differs from your own and now you've added me to the list. Isn't that enough?"

"No, oh no, Helen," he said, and there was a note in his voice she had not heard before. "For one thing, we haven't quarrelled and for another—Oh, Helen darling, can't you guess what I'm trying to say? I'd grovel if it would do any good, but I don't suppose you want that."

"Don't darling me! I only want to be left alone," she said obstinately.

"You've a hope!"

He grinned suddenly, like a sheepish schoolboy and the next moment they were both laughing.

A second later Helen found herself in his arms, his lips seeking the kisses which lifted them into a world of light and colour where the shadows that had darkened their lives no longer had any place.

"I never dreamed that you cared, my sweet," he said, after a long time when, as Helen quaintly said, it was necessary to come down to earth again.

"You're an idiot, Jim," she said, and laughed, nestling against him. "But you're quite a nice idiot, all the same. And after the shameless way I've been throwing myself at your head, you must have been

blind as well—until now."

"I thought—well, Gerry's your brother and—"

"Oh, you men!" She stamped her foot. "Did you really think that a few yards of silly old fence would make any difference to me? I thought the whole thing was too trivial for words and I told Gerry so, more than once."

"It seems I have a lot to learn," Jim said humbly.

She smiled and put her hand into his.

"You certainly have my lad," she agreed. "But so long as you really love me that's all that matters."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Are you sure of that?" he asked. "You know I was in love with another girl once, don't you?"

She met his eyes fearlessly, her colour mounting.

"And I was in love with Phillip," she said quietly. "But he and the girl you loved belong to a part of our life that is over, Jim. We are neither of us children, and though what we feel for each other may not be quite the same as that other, it belongs to us—and to no one else!"

"Darling," he said huskily. "My own darling."

#### DARK THE SHADOW.

THE news that Helen and Jim were engaged was received by the others with equal surprise and pleasure. When they got back to the house Norma had just returned from milking and was in the kitchen with Agnes.

Jim went straight up to her.

"I'm sorry, Norma dear," he said quietly. "I was unreasonable and rather stupid, but if you'll forgive me I'll do my best to make amends. And now"—he half turned and proudly drew Helen forward—"we've some news for you both."

"You needn't tell me," said Agnes drily. She gave Helen a hug and kissed her brother. "It was written all over you both as you came across the yard. I'm glad—more glad than I can say!"

A little while afterwards Norma hurried out to get the feeding done early, a song in her heart.

Then she left for the church.

The reconciliation with her brother was enough in itself to make her happy, without the rest. But when to this was added the wonderful thrill of singing to Dick's playing, it seemed that her cup of happiness would hold no more.

As the first throbbing notes swelled and filled the ancient church, it seemed that the great organ was responding to a master's touch.

The vicar and Miss Collins exchanged significant glances and settled down to listen with rapt attention.

Norma sang as she had never sung before, and when her last notes died away into silence she found herself being hugged by Miss Collins, whose eyes were unashamedly filled with tears.

Nor was the vicar less enthusiastic. He kept on saying, "Wonderful, wonderful", pausing only to blow his nose vigorously.

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" Norma said reproachfully, as she and Dick were walking back to the farm. "All I knew was that Mr. Reeves telephoned to ask me to be at the church this afternoon—even then he didn't say who it was who would take Mr. Wollaston's place. You are an old fraud."

Dick laughed.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he said. "Besides, I wasn't sure last night whether the vicar would welcome the idea. He asked me a lot of questions this morning before he agreed to a trial run this after-

noon—I felt as if I were being put through a High School examination." He chuckled. "Incidentally, that's a mighty fine organ."

They parted at the crossroads near her home, without Norma saying anything about the quarrel with her brother and without Dick mentioning that he had met Helen that morning.

For one thing, he could not very well tell Norma about it without giving away more than would have been wise at that juncture.

Back at the farm, Helen had laid her plans well. She had been invited to stop for tea and Agnes had telephoned to tell Gerry to come over and join them.

He had just arrived when Norma got back to the house, and it was a merry party which sat down round the red-checked cloth in the oak-beamed kitchen.

"Well, Norma, how did your practice go?" Helen asked, taking the bull by the horns. She smiled across at the younger girl in an innocent manner. "Agnes told me all about it while you were out."

"Oh, it went off very well, thank you, Helen," Norma replied, blushing slightly. "Mr. Reeves was very pleased."

"I'm so glad, dear. I think it was terribly sweet of Sergeant Plunkett to offer to play the organ in Mr. Wollaston's place. He managed quite well, then?"

"Perfectly, thank you," replied Norma. She was uneasily aware of something mocking in the glance Gerry bestowed upon her, but Helen was not to be diverted.

"It's been arranged for you all to come over to our place for supper to-morrow after the service," she went on with apparent artlessness. "That includes Sergeant Plunkett, of course. As you will be seeing him before I do perhaps you wouldn't mind telling him, Norma? It will save me phoning the airfield."

She gave Norma a meaning glance which brought a fresh tide of colour to the girl's cheeks.

Intercepting it, Gerry reddened with sudden anger. "Hang it all, he thought disgustedly, his sister was going on as if they were engaged already."

He was still feeling ruffled when, the tea things cleared away, Norma went out to lock up the hens.

On the pretext of helping, Gerry followed, and wasted no time coming straight to the point.

"I gather that this paragon of manly virtues is playing the organ for the service to-morrow night," he observed sarcastically, as soon as they were out of earshot of the others. "Tell me, is there anything he can't do?"

"Quite a lot, I should imagine," said Norma indifferently.

Gerry laughed in a sneering fashion.

"You girls are all the same," he exclaimed, letting his annoyance carry him away. "A chap's only got to dress up in a fancy uniform to have you all running around in circles. No wonder the Americans are so vain and conceited!"

"I think you are being rather silly, Gerry," she said reprovingly. "For one thing, I don't see what you have against the Americans, and for another, Sergeant Plunkett isn't a bit conceited."

"That merely shows how ignorant you are, my dear girl," he said blandly. "Men like Plunkett are experts at playing to the female gallery—they've had such a lot of practice putting over a modest-hero act that it has become second nature to them."

"Oh, please stop, Gerry, do!" she interrupted impatiently. "I don't want to quarrel with you, but that's how we will end up if you persist in saying such unjustifiable things. In case you have forgotten it, Sergeant Plunkett happens to be a friend of mine." She tossed her head.

Gerry looked completely taken aback. He was often moody, but on nearly every other occasion Norma had gone out of her way to placate him, so that he could only stare at her in blank surprise.

Up to now he had not believed that she was wholly in love with the young American airman, even though she was, perhaps, momentarily attracted.

Norma sighed and looked wistfully at him as he stammered something about being sorry.

"It's all right, Gerry," she said. "I know you don't mean to be unkind, but I can't allow you to criticise someone I both like and respect, especially when your criticisms are completely unjustifiable. If we are to remain friends, you mustn't trespass."

An anguished expression crossed Gerry's face.

"I'm sorry, Norma," he said again, in a curiously jerky manner. "I didn't mean to—to trespass, as you put it. I—I only want to look after you. I mean to say, you—"

"To look after me?" she broke in, her brows arched. "I don't understand, Gerry. I don't need 'looking after'! What a curious thing to say."

"Is it?" He laughed mirthlessly. "Well, if you find that curious, then I've nothing more to say. It only proves that you've changed since you started going about with this other chap. I know where I stand now. Please forgive me."

Norma smiled tremulously.

"Of course I forgive you, Gerry," she said gently. "But please don't say any more. I—I don't think I can stand it."

"All right," he said. He took her hand and held it for a moment. Then he straightened himself up and smiled. "So long as you still regard me as a friend I'll try to behave."

"I shall always regard you as a friend, Gerry, but you must remember that friendship has its obligations as well as its privileges, you know."

They returned to the house soon after that. It was getting dark and Gerry stopped when they came to the kitchen door.

"I don't think I'll come in, if you don't mind, Norma," he said slowly. "Make my excuses to the others, will you? Say I wanted to have a look at the stock or something—you understand."

She nodded and put out her hand.

"Yes, Gerry," she whispered, "I understand. Good night."

He looked at her for a moment and then did a surprising thing. Surprising for Gerry Mortlake, that is. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

IT was Agnes who met Dick at the gate when he drove up at half past seven, an hour after Gerry had parted from Norma.

"Norma can't come out with you to-night, Dick," she said, giving him a friendly smile. "It's nothing to worry about, but she has a bad headache and has gone to bed. She asked me to apologise."

"I see," he remarked a trifle grimly, his young face set. Then he kicked a pebble away and looked directly at her. "What's the real reason?" he demanded bluntly.

"There isn't one—at least, not in the sense I think you mean, Dick," Agnes hastened to assure him. "But Norma has had rather a difficult time to-day, one way and another and she really has got a bad head. She used to suffer from it when she was a child, especially if anything happened to upset her."

"And something has!" he said shrewdly. "As a matter of fact I could see she had been crying when she turned up at choir-practice this afternoon, though when I asked her about it she wouldn't say. If

someone's been getting at her—" He checked himself abruptly, drawing in a deep breath.

"No one has been getting at her," said Agnes, speaking in a tone of half pitying amusement. "If you must know, Norma and Jim had a frightful row, but it's all over now and finished with."

"Then why—"

"Listen!" she said, resting a hand on his arm as if to check his impetuosity. "Norma has had a very difficult time, as I said, and you must make allowances for her. My brother's attitude wasn't the only thing she had to contend with, you see."

"You mean—?" He looked puzzled.

"I mean that Gerry Mortlake came over to tea," she said significantly. "No doubt Norma will tell you all about it in her own time, but I don't think she felt she could face you this evening. You understand, don't you?"

"I guess so." He pushed his cap back and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he laughed angrily. "It strikes me that the bloke who wrote that poem about the course of true love never running smooth knew his onions. What's Mortlake been saying to her?"

"I don't know, Dick. All I can tell you is that he went with her to shut up the fowls and that she looked upset when she came back. Gerry wasn't with her."

"That guy wants to look out for himself," he said darkly. "What's more, if he starts on Norma he's going to have me to contend with. I—"

"Don't be silly, Dick," Agnes broke in, a little impatiently. "The very worst thing that could happen would be for you and Gerry to quarrel over Norma! Besides," she added, with a gleam of amusement coming into her eyes, "you are going to be invited to Helen's place for supper tomorrow. Think how awkward it would be for everybody if you and Gerry were at daggers drawn!"

"But aren't we that already?" he said morosely. "Say, I don't get it. What's all this about supper?"

"It's Helen's idea. We're all to go there after the service. I have a feeling that she thought it might make things easier all round if you and Jim met for the first time on neutral ground, as it were. You see, he and Helen are engaged."

Dick stared at her in blank amazement.

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated. "When did all this happen?"

"To-day," said Agnes, amused at his expression. Then she added gently: "It's all right, Dick. Helen told me she had met you in Ardingford this morning and what you talked about. She thought you wouldn't mind."

"Sure I don't mind," he said. "I'm glad. I reckon you know I'm in love with Norma, anyhow."

"I've known it for a long time, Dick," she said.

He grinned suddenly.

"It seems to me that everybody's known about it—except Norma," he remarked.

"I think Norma knows, too," she said wisely. "But she is still a little unsure of herself and up to now her loyalties have been torn two ways. That's why she couldn't trust herself to go out with you to-night. You must give her time, Dick."

He nodded.

"I guess that's the answer," he said. "It's just as well, perhaps. I mean, I'm not so hot at this strong-silent-man stuff and it's possible I might have spoken out of my turn if I'd seen she was feeling raw."

He saluted and would have turned away, but Agnes stopped him.

"Can I give Norma a message, Dick?"

"Sure," he said. "I'd be glad if you would, Agnes. Just give her my love. I can

say that, can't I?"

"Yes, I think you can safely say that," replied Agnes, with a little sparkle in her eyes. "In fact, I feel sure that your message will go a long way towards curing her head ache!"

DICK got into his car and drove slowly down the lane towards the main road. Agnes had told him enough to enable him to fill in the gaps for himself.

He had no real idea what had transpired between Gerry and Norma,

Evidently Helen's brother had seized the opportunity to steal a march on his American rival, and being a shrewd judge of character Dick was fairly certain he knew the line the other would have adopted in his conversation with Norma.

A spurt of rage shook him. Why couldn't people leave them alone? First her brother and now this! He was tempted to stop the car and retrace his journey to the farm with the object of demanding to see Jim Bretton, but the memory of what both Helen and Agnes had said restrained him.

With a muttered exclamation he thrust out the clutch and applied the footbrake gently.

As he did so a figure stepped from the hedge into the beam of his headlights and restrained him to stop.

Dick braked and switched off the engine, a little pulse beating in his temple. With the recognition of his rival an icy rage gripped him, for he thought he had no illusions as to why Gerry Mortlake had been waiting there.

He opened the door and got out.

"Anything wrong?" he asked curtly.

"That's for you to say," Gerry answered curtly, his glance going towards the empty seat of the car and then returning to Dick's face. "Where's Norma?"

"I expect you'll find her at home," said Dick quietly. He took out his tobacco tin and began rolling himself a cigarette. "Did you wish to speak to her?"

"I thought she was going out with you," said Gerry suspiciously. "That's what Agnes told me."

"Well, as you see, she isn't here." Dick fished in his pocket for his lighter and applied the flame to the cigarette.

Gerry drew a deep breath.

"So she changed her mind!" he said.

"Must have done," Dick agreed calmly. He put the lighter back in his pocket, his eyes never leaving Gerry's face. "She's got a right to do that, I guess. Or don't you agree?"

"What do you mean?" Gerry demanded.

Dick shrugged.

"Well, it strikes me that you and some others I could mention seem to think you've a right to make up Norma's mind for her," he said slowly. He paused a moment, his eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged once more. "Now, if you're nothing to say I'll go," he went on.

"Just a minute, Plunkett! There are one or two questions I would like to ask you!" Gerry took a step nearer, his hands clenched. "One of them is—"

"Hold it!" Dick's voice rang with sudden contempt. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, Mortlake, but when you've a right to ask me questions I'll—not answer them before. In the meantime, I'm not interested. Now beat it!"

"Oh, no, you don't!" exclaimed Gerry, as Dick turned away. He was white to the lips and shooting out a hand, grasped Dick's arm. "If you think I'm going to let you amuse yourself with a decent girl like Norma, you're making a big mistake. I know you and your type and—"

"That's enough!" Dick interrupted him, his anger fanned to white heat. He jerked his arm free. "If you're wise you'll take

that back, Mortlake! You may think you know everything, but what you *don't* know would fill a book! I don't know why you—or anyone else, for that matter—should assume that I am amusing myself with Norma, but when you say it in so many words, let me tell you that you lie!"

Gerry stared at him, his frame suddenly slackening.

Then Gerry drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"You mean you—you're serious about Norma?" he asked, in a strangled voice.

"Anyone but a fool would have seen that," said Dick scornfully. "If it's any satisfaction to you I want to marry her, though why I should bother to tell *you* that, I don't know."

There was another little silence. Then Gerry drew himself up, his face even paler than before.

"I apologise," he ejaculated, in a muffled tone. "I—I didn't know. I thought—"

"Yeah! You thought! It's a pity you didn't think a little straighter," Dick broke in coldly. His anger suddenly spilled over. "I didn't know what right you imagined you had to interfere, in any case, but what kind of a girl do you think Norma is? Do you think she's like some of those other little flipperty-gibbets who are ready to chuck their caps over the moon in return for a good time? If you do, you must be even a bigger fool than I thought."

"All right, you needn't rub it in," exclaimed Gerry angrily. "What do you want me to do—crawl?"

"No. Just stand back and take a good look at yourself, that's all. I reckon you think you're in love with Norma, don't you? Well, all I can say is you've got a funny way of showing it."

"I don't *think* I'm in love with her," said Gerry stiffly.

Dick laughed shortly.

"Okay, chum, we won't argue about it," he said scornfully. "But get this clear! I happen to love Norma as I didn't think it was possible to love anyone! That means I would put her welfare and happiness first, last and all the time. I don't need you running round playing Sir Galahad—and neither does she!"

It was very quiet in the garden as Norma walked slowly towards the orchard. Behind her the light gleamed out from the kitchen where Agnes was getting supper and she could hear the rattle of the cow chains from the byres.

At the gate leading to the orchard she stopped for a moment, glad of the almost unearthly quiet which pervaded the atmosphere, her mind a deep well of misery which seemed to be full to overflowing.

And now Dick might be dead! Dick, to whom she had given her heart almost without knowing it!

She caught back a sob as fear and anguish suddenly engulfed her.

Everything had seemed to pile up on them at once, so that they had been crowded by events which had cheated them out of their shining hour. The quarrel with Jim—his engagement to Helen—then Gerry!

She closed her eyes, retracing all that had happened in a fruitless endeavour to sort out her emotions.

When Dick had first kissed her she had been left uncertain of herself, a new, strange wonder permeating her being, like the period between sleeping and waking, when everything was nebulous and dream-like. The ugliness of the quarrel with Jim, coupled with Gerry's reproaches had shattered her dream, leaving her a prey to nameless fears.

The church had been full for the Harvest Thanksgiving Service, Dick's playing had

been all that anyone could have wished for, as also had been her singing.

There had followed the little supper party at Helen's house, but Dick had not been there. After the service he had made an excuse, saying that he had to go back to camp, and at the time Norma had been very hurt.

Sensitive to a degree, she had wondered if he had been annoyed with her for not going out with him the previous night. She had not known then that he and Gerry had met at the entrance to the lane.

Later Gerry had been honest about it to her.

"I don't know what to say, Norma," he had said, after telling her about meeting Dick. "I suppose the truth is I was too worried to think and—well—I can only say how sorry I am."

He had said that after the news had come that Dick's plane had crashed into the Atlantic.

A flight of four B-49's had left Redfield early on Monday morning on a training flight to Gibraltar and back. As one of the staff instructors, Dick had gone in the leading bomber.

In the normal course of events they would have returned late the same day, but instead of four, only three of the bombers had touched down on the runway. Dick's was missing!

They had learned the grim news of what had happened from the sergeant who had come for the eggs in Dick's place.

"Dick asked me to let you know if anything went wrong at any time, Miss Bretton," he had concluded awkwardly.

Jim and Agnes had been there as well. Agnes had put her arm about her sister's shoulders, steadying her. Jim had gone a little pale.

"Didn't the lost aircraft send out an S.O.S. or give its position?" he had enquired.

The sergeant had shaken his head.

"No. That's what puzzles everyone," he had said.

Meanwhile two destroyers had left Plymouth to search for the missing plane.

On hearing, Helen had come over at once with Gerry.

The latter had told her of his meeting with Dick in the lane. It accounted for the fact that Dick had made an excuse not to join the others at supper and for that reason Norma was glad to know.

If only she had known then the meaning of the emotions which had seized her! She would have thrown reticence to the winds so that he would have known that she loved him. Now—

From where she stood she could see the flashing light at the top of the beacon at Redfield—the light which had guided Dick in to land so often.

Seventy-two hours had passed since they had heard of the crash. There was still no news.

Jim had been particularly sweet, she thought, with a little rush of gratitude. He had promised to try to make amends, and in his way he had done so.

A little sound caused her to turn and listen. It was the sound of a jeep coming along the main road, the muffled roar of its exhaust one she had heard so often.

Unconsciously she braced herself, waiting breathlessly to hear whether it slowed down for the turning into the lane or went on to Ardingford.

Then, just as she thought it was going on, it slowed and she heard the whine of the motor as the gears were changed and saw the beech trees near the gate stand out blackly in the gleam of the headlights.

The car stopped and someone got out. Her heart leapt—

It was Dick! He was still wearing

flying kit, with his cap pushed back on his head, a silk muffler about his throat.

He came straight to where she was standing, like a pale moth in the moonlight, her eyes wide and dark with a wonder that stifled all utterance. In a swift glance she saw that he had one hand heavily bandaged.

"My darling!" He took her hands and stood smiling down at her, his eyes alight with a loving tenderness that seemed to enfold her like a cloak.

"Oh, Dick!" she whispered, almost choked with emotion.

He put up a hand and touched her tear-lined cheek. Next moment his arms enfolded her and she was being held close to his breast.

"Dick! Oh, Dick! I've prayed for you to come back to me," she whispered.

"I reckon your prayers saved my life, honey," he said, with a little laugh of pure happiness. "For forty-eight hours we just paddled around in a rubber dinghy. Gee, it sure was cold!"

"Oh, darling, how terrible," she said tenderly. "But you're not hurt, are you?"

"Only my hand—it's nothing."

"How were you rescued?" she asked presently. "It's been awful waiting, Dick."

"We were picked up by one of your destroyers," he said. "We landed at Plymouth a few hours ago."

"I thought I'd never see—" she broke off sobbing like a child.

"Hey, there's nothing to cry about, honey," he said, tenderly. "This is all part of the day's work. I'll be quite fit to attend the wedding."

"The wedding?" She looked wonderingly at him. "Oh, you mean Jim and Helen. But—"

"I don't mean anything of the kind," he broke in, laughing gently. "I mean our wedding, my sweet. That is, if you don't mind marrying an American!"

"Mind?" She laughed for the first time. "Oh, Dick, I would marry you if you were an Eskimo! I never realised how much I loved you until I heard that you were missing. I was sorry, then, that I hadn't gone out with you on Saturday night."

"Never mind, honey! There are lots of other Saturday nights. In any case, I guess you weren't in the mood. Now it's different. I suppose"—whimsically—"We'd better go up to the house and tell them I'm here. I've yet to meet my future brother-in-law, you know." He fumbled in his pocket for a moment and then brought out a little box. "But first I want you to put this on!"

"Oh, Dick darling!" She pressed his hand to her cheek, and in her eyes were tears and laughter and a wonderful happiness.

He slipped the ring on her engagement finger and held it so she could see.

"Diamonds to match the stars in your eyes, my sweet," he said. He drew her close and kissed her again. "There's never been anyone but you and there never will be, honey. I guess that goes for you too."

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "That goes for me, too, Dick. If—if I needed any proof, I had it when I heard the news that you were missing. It seemed, then, that the world had ended for me."

He bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. Then Norma looked up and slipped a hand through his arm.

"Come," she said gently. "We must go and tell the others. They've been wonderfully kind and nearly as anxious as I have been!"

And so together they walked up the path to the house where a welcoming light shone forth, two young people linked together by the greatest and purest of all emotions, walking hand in hand towards their destiny.

THE END.

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