

FAMILY JOURNAL

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FAMILY JOURNAL

HER DESERT KNIGHT

By Pat Moreland

PRISONER OF THE DESERT

THE horses with their white-robed Arab riders thundered past in a cloud of dust, the men yelling wildly and waving their rifles above their heads.

Carol Lascot shrank back into a doorway in alarm. A man near her, his back pressed against a wall, drew something from his pocket. It glinted blue in the fierce sunshine and she realised it was an automatic pistol. But her attention was distracted by the horsemen wheeling round. They came charging back, shouting and waving their rifles, some firing into the air.

Carol could now see their leader. He was a tall, swarthy-complexioned man and rode a little ahead of the others. People in the sun-scorched street pressed themselves against the walls.

The man standing beside Carol suddenly took a step forward and raised his arm, and without knowing why, she made to clutch it.

But she was too late. There was a shot, a puff of smoke and the Arab leader collapsed in his saddle. The assailant turned and started to run, but next moment he fell to the ground riddled with Arab bullets.

What happened next seemed to Carol like a sort of mad nightmare. She found herself surrounded by Arabs who had flung themselves from their horses. Two of them seized her by the arms, and a third drew a long knife from his belt.

"Death to the Infidel!" a voice shouted.

The curved blade flashed upwards, and Carol involuntarily closed her eyes.

Next moment a hand had seized the would-be killer's wrist. The knife fell to the ground, and when Carol opened her eyes, she found herself gazing at the darkly-handsome face of the Arab leader.

"You are quite all right," he hastened to assure her.

Carol was startled, for the words were English. Before she could answer the man swayed and would have fallen had not two of his men caught him. It was then that Carol noticed that blood was seeping through his white robe at the shoulder.

Her own danger forgotten, she bent over him as he was lowered to the ground.

"I am a nurse," she said. "Please bring water quickly."

Her order was understood, for one of the Arabs brought a gourd filled with water. Dropping on her knees beside the wounded man, Carol drew aside the robe and examined the wound.

In the fierce sun she could do nothing except wash the wound and bandage it with strips torn from the man's white robe.

"You must be taken to the hospital at once," she told him gravely.

"Yes, and then to prison," he muttered, a bitter smile playing about his lips.

But Carol had forgotten everything save that she was a trained nurse. She saw at

once that a bullet was lodged in his shoulder and unless it were quickly removed, the wound would become septic.

Now pressing in on all sides were fierce-looking Arabs. Some had their hands resting threateningly on the hilts of their curved knives, a look of suspicion and hatred in their eyes as they gazed down at her, for it was obvious that most of them thought it was she who had fired the shot which had wounded their leader.

"Death to the Infidel! Death to the Nazarin woman!" cried a voice, and it was echoed on all sides.

Knives flashed, and once again Carol caught the glitter of sunlight on polished steel and knew that her life hung by a thread.

Their leader spoke again, this time in Arabic, and the men drew back, though they were still muttering threats.

"You must order one of your men to ride to the hospital at Gazea and ask them to send an ambulance," Carol urged.

He made no reply. But two of his men stepped forward and helped him to his feet, and for a moment Carol thought her request was going to be obeyed.

"Gazea is only about three miles away," she added.

As the wounded man was being half-led, half-carried away, a pair of hands gripped her from behind and held her as though in bands of steel. Then a silken scarf was thrown over her head and fastened so tightly that she could not see.

Next moment she was lifted into a saddle, and the man who had bound her climbed in behind her and held her pressed against his chest. She felt the horse move, heard the jingle of harness and excited shouts of the Arabs as the cavalcade moved off.

Carol's heart grew cold within her. Although she had been little more than a month at Gazea, she had heard about the wandering bands of Arabs who sometimes pillaged small towns on the fringe of the desert and even kidnapped people.

To-day had been her half-day off from the European hospital at Gazea, and she had decided to go for a ride on the motor bus which ran between Gazea and the little oasis village of Taliifa.

It was soon after she had arrived there that the Arab horsemen had swept into the village and she had stood watching them, half-frightened, half-fascinated. And now here she was evidently being taken farther away from her friends in Gazea!

At last, there came a sudden halt. Carol felt herself being lifted to the ground, but she was feeling so stiff and exhausted after the long ride in the terrific heat that she found it difficult to stand on her feet, when the scarf was removed from her head, she saw that the sun was sinking below the distant rim of the desert, and was given a gourd of water which she drank with avidity.

Then she was taken to a tent in which, lying on a rug, his head pillowed on a saddle, was the wounded leader. Carol noticed for the first time that his eyes were

grey—a most unusual colour for an Arab.

"Do you think you can remove the bullet from my shoulder?" he asked, with a forced smile.

"It's a job for a surgeon with proper instruments," she answered, "and I am only a nurse."

"Surgeons don't grow in the desert, and as for instruments, I have a penknife," he told her grimly. "So you must make do with that."

He then muttered something to the man who had brought her to the tent. The man disappeared, and returned with a gourd filled with tepid water.

For towel and bandages, Carol had to manage with strips torn from the wounded man's robe. After probing with the penknife, she succeeded in locating the bullet and extracting it. Not a groan escaped the patient's lips, but when, at last, it was over, beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

"Thank you," he murmured shakily when she had finished dressing and bandaging the wound as best she could.

THAT night, Carol slept the sleep of utter exhaustion in a small tent. She was awakened soon after dawn by the sound of men's voices and the neighing of horses. Food was brought her, and tea tasting of wood-smoke and mint.

She went to the tent to see how her patient was getting on. He greeted her with a wan smile, and informed her that they would be moving on soon after sunrise.

"But you ought not to be moved," Carol warned him gravely. "Am I still to remain a prisoner?"

"I would rather you considered yourself as my guest," he answered. "I shall need you as a nurse for a little while, of course. Tell me—what is your name?"

"Carol Lascot."

"Then call me El Hassan," he said.

"How long have you been in this country?"

"Only about six weeks," she answered. "I had just finished my training at St. Clement's Hospital in London when I was invited to join the staff of the newly-opened hospital at Gazea."

"And now," he remarked, with a sardonic grin, "you find yourself held prisoner by a band of outlaw Arabs."

Carol frowned.

"But you can't capture a British subject and get away with it so easily as that, you know," she protested indignantly. "Such things may happen in books or on the films, but not in real life!"

"And yet it has happened to you," he said, with a cynical laugh.

"Yes, and I'm afraid you will have to pay dearly for it," she retorted defiantly. "Probably at this very moment, police and troops are out searching for me."

"Oh yes, undoubtedly," he agreed, with a mocking grin. "And they have the whole desert of El Khali in which to search—a desert which extends over a thousand miles."

"But they will find me, all the same."

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Carol declared, with more confidence than she felt, "and you will be punished."

"In that case, my punishment, if I am caught, will be death. Do you happen to know that?" he asked.

It seemed to Carol that her heart missed a beat, then started pounding furiously.

"But—but not for just kidnapping me, surely?" she stammered.

"For that and other reasons as well," he said. "There is a price on my head, you see. Even so, I will take you back to Gazea myself—that is, if you insist."

Carol shook her head. An outlaw he might be, but she could not make herself responsible for the man's death.

He smiled at her, and said—

"Come closer to me, Carol."

The sound of her Christian name on his lips sent a little thrill through her, and as though drawn by a will stronger than her own, she sank on her knees by his side.

"Kiss me, my lovely desert rose!" he murmured softly.

She bent over him, her eyes gazing into his, and next moment the arm he could use had drawn her to him.

"I love you," he said, smiling into her eyes.

Carol drew back from him, a little frightened by her rash surrender to his bidding. But she knew in her heart that love had suddenly come to her. What, she was wondering, had she in common with this strange man?

"Kiss me," he whispered passionately.

"No," she breathed. "You—you must let me go."

"Why?" he demanded. "You have nothing to fear. No harm shall come to you."

A feeling of angry defiance suddenly welled up in her. The man seemed to have cast a spell over her, she told herself, and it must be broken at all costs.

"Nothing to fear?" she flung back at him.

"Are you hoping that I shall be ransomed or something of the kind? If so, you are entirely mistaken. I have no money except what I earn as a nurse, nor have I any wealthy friends,"

He smiled.

"I love you all the more when you flare up in that way," he said. "I like to see the fire flashing in those lovely blue eyes of yours; I like the way the rose-colour floods your cheeks, and . . ."

"Oh, you are utterly impossible!" Carol broke in helplessly.

"Oh no, nothing of the kind, my desert rose," he said softly. "You are in love with me. I can read it in your eyes—you can no more escape me, than I can escape you. We were brought together by Fate, you and I. It was written thus."

Once more the spell of his fascination held her, once more the music of his voice and the ardent look in his eyes threatened to break down her resistance. But by a tremendous effort of will, she managed to regain control of herself, and became the professional nurse once more.

"You are exciting yourself unduly," she told him severely, "and I expect you're running a temperature. Now please say no more and rest."

"Not until we reach our destination," he said.

"And where is that, may I ask?"

"In the foothills of El Harik," he answered.

Carol sighed. She had never heard of such a place.

On leaving the tent, she found the Arabs saddling their horses and preparing to strike camp. None of them took any notice of her. They all knew, no doubt, Carol reflected, that here in the trackless desert, she had no possible means of escape.

AN orange-red sun sinking behind a low range of hills. A few scattered tents. Women squatting before brushwood fires, cooking the evening meal. Children playing, and men carrying buckets of water to the horses.

Carol lay on a rug in one of the tents. She was feeling very tired and weary. The nomad band had reached its destination—it's G.H.Q., as El Hassan had called it.

Her eyes had closed, and she was falling asleep when something wet touched her hand. With a little cry of alarm, she sat up, and saw a small dog, scarcely more than a puppy, nuzzling her hand. Carol smiled to herself and gently patted it on the head.

Presently she fell asleep—for how long she did not know. She suddenly woke to find a girl in Arab dress standing gazing down at her. In one hand she carried a lantern, in the other a bowl, and even in the dim light, Carol could see that the girl was strikingly beautiful.

"I have brought you food," she said, setting down the bowl.

"You speak English," Carol remarked, sitting up, and gazing at her in wide-eyed surprise. "Who are you?"

"I am called Fatima," the girl replied.

It suddenly flashed into Carol's mind that the girl might be one of El Hassan's wives, and for a moment she knew something like a stab of jealousy, followed by a spasm of fear.

Could it be that she, too, was destined to join the man's harem? she wondered.

But before she could ask any further questions, the girl had left the tent, closing the flap after her.

Carol did her best to eat the food—a highly-seasoned stew of some sort—but was unable to finish it all, and the friendly little dog emerged from its hiding place and ate the remains of it.

Carol slept soundly that night, and when morning came, she remembered that she must have a look at her captor's wound and put fresh dressings on. She had dressed hurriedly and went to his tent. He smiled up at her from his camp bed as she entered.

"I was wondering whether you would come, Carol," he said.

"But you are my patient, aren't you?" she returned, trying to make her voice sound aloofly professional.

He nodded towards a small table on which was a bottle of disinfectant, a bowl of water and some rolled bandages.

"Your hospital could scarcely do better than that, could it?" he suggested, a broad grin on his face.

Carol shrugged her shoulders and proceeded to replace the old dressings with fresh ones.

"And now," she said, when she had completed her task, "you had better try and go to sleep."

"Yes," he murmured smilingly, "and dream of you, my sweet desert rose!"

Carol caught her breath, fighting once more against the magic of his charm and the prompting of her heart.

He then told her he had learned that planes were out searching for her.

"But how are they to tell in which of the many Arab camps scattered across the desert you are held prisoner?" he asked jestingly.

Carol ignored the question. She was thinking that, if only she could contrive a ground signal that would catch the air-men's attention, she might be rescued. Yet how was she to do this unobserved by the members of the gang?

"I suppose you are wondering how you can escape from me, aren't you?" he went on, watching her narrowly. "I wonder why."

"Is there any need for you to wonder?"

Carol retorted. "Do you think I like being held prisoner?"

"But I offered to take you back to Gazea myself, and you refused, didn't you?"

"Yes, but you told me that if you went to Gazea it would mean that you would be captured and probably put to death," she reminded him.

"And, apparently, you do not want me to die?" he said.

"My profession is to try and save life, not destroy it," she answered evasively.

"And was that your only reason, Carol?"

"Can you think of a better?" she countered.

"Oh, yes, a much better reason," he said. "Has it not occurred to you that I can give you all that the heart of a woman can desire—jewels, fine garments, servants to wait on you—and love? Yes, love above all. For I love you, O my desert rose, with a love that only death can end."

Carol's heart was now racing, and once more, despite her efforts, she had fallen completely under his spell. Again came that urge to let love take its course no matter what the end might be.

Reaching out before she realised his intention, he caught her by the wrist, and drawing her to him, she knew again the ecstasy of his passionate kisses.

"Say you love me my sweet desert rose!" he whispered.

"I—I love you!" she breathed tremulously.

Time seemed to stand still for a while as they smiled into each other's eyes, reading in them all the things love knows, but cannot put into words.

Unseen by them, the flap of the tent was stealthily lifted a few inches and a pair of jet-black eyes, flaming with jealousy and hatred, peered through the opening. Then the flap was quickly lowered into place.

A moment or two later, there came the sound of an approaching plane. Nearer and nearer it came, as if flying very low until it seemed to be right overhead. But it passed, and gradually the sound died away in the distance.

El Hassan grinned.

"They are evidently searching for you, Carol," he said. "I wonder if you still want them to find you?"

Carol shook her head. She had fought against her love for him, but love had conquered. Freedom for her now would be heart-break and life without meaning.

When, presently, Carol returned to her tent, she found the little dog curled up on one of the mats. A little later on, Fatima arrived with the usual bowl of food. She set it down and as she was about to leave, the girl gave Carol a venomous look and muttered—

"That aeroplane was searching for you, and I expect it will come back—but it will be too late!"

"What do you mean?" Carol demanded, gazing at her in surprise; but the girl merely laughed and hastily disappeared.

Carol glanced at the bowl of stew, but having no appetite, she placed it for the dog to eat and lay down on the rugs to try and re-live those wonderful moments when El Hassan had held her to him, his lips pressed against hers.

Not for the first time, she puzzled over the mystery which surrounded the man to whom she had so unexpectedly lost her heart. Who and what was he? she wondered. He spoke perfect English and was obviously a well-educated man. Was he actually an Arab? Or was he an Englishman posing as an Arab for some reason or other?

Some day, she told herself, she would pierce this veil of mystery. All that mattered at the moment, however, was that she loved him, and he loved her. A great happi-

ness filled her heart. She would stay with him in the desert, or follow him to the ends of the earth, for wherever he was, there would her heart be also.

Smiling to herself, she presently dozed off to sleep. How long she slept, she did not know, but she awakened suddenly with an odd feeling that some awful danger threatened. Sitting up, she gazed about her, but there was no one in the tent.

"I suppose I must have had a frightening dream of some sort," she murmured to herself.

She rose, and was about to leave the tent when she started back with a cry of dismay. For the little dog was lying beside the bowl of food which Fatima had left for her—dead!

BETRAYAL

CAROL was still gazing down at the dead dog with horror-stricken eyes, when the flap of the tent was drawn aside and Fatima entered. The girl gave a start of surprise as she saw Carol standing there.

"So you—so you hoped to poison me, did you?" Carol muttered accusingly. "Instead the dog has eaten the food you brought me and is now dead!"

"You lie!" Fatima protested violently. "The dog has been ailing for some time."

"Then you had better eat the food that remains in the bowl yourself," Carol challenged.

"What, eat out of the bowl after a dog?" cried Fatima, and with a swift movement, she snatched up the bowl and darted out of the tent.

Carol stood wondering what she ought to do. If she told El Hassan, it would probably mean death for Fatima, and she recoiled at the thought, even though the girl had sought to kill her. She shuddered at thought of the terrible hatred she had aroused in the Arab girl.

When she stepped out of the tent, Carol saw that the women in the little encampment were shaking rugs and cleaning cooking utensils, while children were tumbling over one another at play. No one paid any attention to her.

She wandered up one of the low hills and sat down to think. It occurred to her that even if she did tell El Hassan that Fatima had tried to poison her, the girl would deny it. Therefore the only thing to do was to guard herself as best she could against the other girl's treachery.

When, presently, she returned to her tent, the body of the dog had been removed. But when Fatima arrived with her next meal, Carol insisted on the girl eating some of it herself. Fatima had evidently been prepared for this, for she readily submitted to doing so.

"Now are you satisfied?" she asked, with a gleam of malignant triumph in her eyes.

"Why do you hate me so?" Carol asked.

"Because you have stolen El Hassan from me!" Fatima answered frankly.

"I did not want to do anything of the kind," said Carol. "He brought me here a prisoner. Are you—are you one of his wives, may I ask?"

"El Hassan has no wives," the girl replied, "and—and but for you, he would have married me!"

It seemed to Carol as if a weight had been lifted from her heart. For shadowing her love for El Hassan until now had been the thought that he was already married; that he might, indeed, possess the full quota of wives a Mohammedan is allowed. But evidently he was free—as free as she herself was.

"But you shall never marry him!" Fatima

went on. "I will prevent it, even though it means that El Hassan himself must die!"

Carol stared at her, aghast.

"I do not love in the cold-blooded way of you Nazarin women," Fatima added. "If the man I love cannot be mine, then no one else shall have him!"

"But that is not love—it is hate!" said Carol.

"What is it but love scorned?" the other retorted vehemently. "Had El Hassan given me his love, I would have died for him. But you have stolen from me the love that might have been mine, but you shall not live to enjoy it—nor shall El Hassan. I would prefer to see him dead rather than in your arms—the arms of a Nazarin girl whose love is like the embers of a dying fire!"

Carol sighed.

"I will not argue with you as to the qualities of our love," she said. "So you would rather see El Hassan dead, would you, than enjoy a happiness you cannot share? But I would gladly die if by doing so I could ensure his happiness."

"That is not what we Arab women call love. When we love, we love passionately, giving all and demanding all. But," Fatima added, with a contemptuous shrug, "you are a Nazarin and do not understand. There is no fire in your heart."

She then turned abruptly and left the tent. Try as she would, Carol was unable to fall asleep that night, and at last she stepped out of her tent into the cool night air.

The moon was up. The whole camp seemed to be asleep and there was no sound except the shuffling of the hobbled horses.

Suddenly she gave a start as she caught sight of a shadowy figure climbing the hill in the direction of the level stretch on which she herself had sat earlier in the day. She had an idea it was Fatima, but could not be sure in the uncertain light.

A few minutes later, she saw the figure coming down again, and was then satisfied that it actually was Fatima. She was wrapped in a dark cloak, evidently hoping to make herself less conspicuous.

Vaguely disturbed, Carol stepped back into her own tent and lay down again. But still she was unable to fall asleep. What reason could the girl have had for climbing the hill in the dead of night? she wondered.

ON the following morning, when she went to El Hassan's tent, Carol noted with satisfaction that the wound in his shoulder was starting to heal.

"We shall be on the move again," he told her gleefully. "It is not wise to remain in one spot too long."

"Where are you making for?" Carol ventured to ask.

"Does it matter, my English rose?" he countered smilingly.

Carol shook her head. As long as she was with the man she loved, it didn't matter to her where they went. Nothing at all mattered so long as they were not parted from each other.

A short silence followed. Then—

"Carol, my love, will you marry me?" he asked abruptly.

"Marry you?" she repeated, scarcely realising the import of his words.

"Yes, marry me, darling," he said. "It will be a civil marriage, of course. We shall bind ourselves to each other before witnesses and in the presence of a shereef, and the contract will be valid in English as well as in Mohammedan law. You are the only woman that I have ever loved, and you—and you love me, don't you, my dear Carol?"

"Yes, El Hassan," she murmured. "I—I fought against it, but my love for you is too strong to be denied."

At that moment, there came the sound of an approaching plane. It drew nearer and nearer until it was right overhead. But instead of disappearing, as the other planes had done, it seemed to be circling over the camp.

"Can it be that they've spotted us at last?" El Hassan murmured thoughtfully.

Carol stepped out of the tent, and found that the whole camp was astir with excitement. Some of the Arabs were already saddling their horses, and the women were calling in frightened voices to the children. Suddenly there was a burst of rifle fire at the circling plane as it descended lower and lower.

To her dismay, Carol saw El Hassan rush out of his tent. As he did so, an Arab came scrambling down the hill which Fatima had climbed the previous night. He was carrying what appeared to be a white robe.

El Hassan broke into voluble Arabic and although Carol did not understand a word of it, he made it perfectly clear with gestures that the white robe had been laid out on the summit of the hill as a signal to an aeroplane.

He turned to Carol an accusing look in his grey eyes.

"So," he muttered angrily, "you crept up the hill during the night and spread that cloak on the ground as a signal, did you?"

"I—I didn't do anything of the kind, El Hassan!" she protested, horrified at his words. "I—I think it must have been—"

He made a scornful gesture, and cut her short.

"So, apparently, while I was planning for our marriage, you had already arranged for my funeral!" he broke in, with bitter contempt.

EL HASSAN stood between two armed men. An officer of the Desert Air Patrol, himself an Arab, was questioning him, but Carol had no idea what they were saying.

Fatima, having done her worst, was weeping. She had confessed that it was she who had laid out the signal for the planes. But it was too late now—El Hassan was a prisoner with a price upon his head.

Presently, Carol found herself seated in the plane, as was El Hassan, with two men guarding him. The machine took off and was soon high above the hills. Once she tried to speak to El Hassan, but one of his guards signed to her to be silent.

Suddenly it struck her that the engines seemed to be making a queer noise. Their roar had become a stutter, as though the engines had started to misfire.

The plane began to descend, and there followed a terrific series of bumps before it came to rest. Everyone hastily scrambled out, and El Hassan—no longer under guard for the moment—came up to where Carol was standing.

"Engine trouble, that's why the pilot landed," he muttered sullenly. "Now where do we go from here, I wonder?"

"There doesn't seem to be anywhere to go," Carol murmured, glancing at the wide stretch of empty desert.

"I have an impression that we're on the edge of what is called the Red Sandstone Desert," El Hassan said, "and that's none too good."

"You—you mean we may die of thirst or something?" Carol stammered.

"That is quite possible, of course, but I wasn't thinking of that," he answered. "If we're where I have reason to think we are, it's the happy hunting ground of Bedouin tribes—men who'd make my followers seem like a little band of missionaries! They are so terribly fierce that no Arab ruler dare act against them. Hello!" he

said, scanning the horizon. "What's that?"

Following the direction of his gaze, Carol thought she could glimpse a tiny cloud of dust in the far distance. El Hassan swung round to one of his guards and whispered something to him. Then, turning to Carol, he said peremptorily—

"Get back into the 'plane at once."

There was a note of such urgency in his voice that Carol quickly obeyed his order. Next moment they were all in the 'plane, and the crew had drawn their revolvers.

Glancing out of the window, Carol saw horsemen galloping full tilt across the desert, yelling and brandishing their rifles. The crew of the grounded 'plane opened fire through one of the windows, and several of the horsemen fell, but the others came on.

Exactly what followed, Carol could never really recall. The only thing which she did remember clearly was sitting with her hands tied behind her with her captors—sixty or seventy of them—lounging about nearby.

She looked about her anxiously, but caught no glimpse of El Hassan, or of any of the others who had been with her in the 'plane. A man brought her food and a gourd of water, and when she spoke to him in English, he shook his head to indicate that he did not understand.

The meal over, the men mounted their horses. Carol was made to ride astride one, the bridle being held by a Bedouin tribesman. All through the night they rode, stopping only once to rest the horses.

As daylight was breaking, they arrived at one of those small towns which is always to be found in the desert where there is an oasis. What struck Carol as singular was that the place seemed to be completely deserted.

She was not to know that news had already reached the inhabitants that a band of the dreaded Bedouin of the Nejd was advancing upon the town, the result being that every house was barred and bolted.

The horsemen drew up outside one of the largest houses, and then entered a courtyard.

At a sign from her guard, Carol slid off her horse, but was feeling so stiff and weary that she nearly collapsed when her feet touched the ground. She noticed that a white-bearded man wearing turban and robes seemed to be arguing with the men for having invaded his premises.

A negress stepped forward and signalled Carol to follow her, and she meekly obeyed. She found herself in a cool, darkened room furnished with cushions and Moorish stools. A few moments later, the old, white-bearded Ajab entered.

"You speak English?" he asked abruptly.

Carol nodded.

"I am English," she replied, but the old man shook his head dubiously.

"Oh, no, you are a Circassian," he said, "though you speak English very good."

Carol then explained to him that she was an English nurse from the hospital at Gaza, and that she had been kidnapped.

The old man—whose name she learnt later was Abd el Majid, and that he was a wealthy sheik—smiled and shook his head disbelievingly.

"Oh, no," he said, "you are a Circassian. Your name is Lajah and you have been in England as a domestic servant. Ben Assam told me this when I bought you from him."

"You—you bought me!" exclaimed Carol incredulously.

The old man nodded gravely, and Carol again insisted that she was English, that she had been kidnapped and that 'planes were out searching the desert for her. She also reminded him that anyone who de-

tained her against her will would be liable to severe punishment.

The sheik stroked his beard and smiled. Whether he was only pretending to disbelieve her story, Carol did not know. At last, she gave it up, and sinking down on to a pile of cushions, buried her face in her hands and broke into tears.

She found it difficult to believe that only a few hours ago she had been in El Hassan's tent, dressing his wound. And now, she supposed, he would meet his death at the hands of the marauding Bedouins who held her in captivity!

"I will make preparations for our marriage at once," Abd el Majid was saying. "My other two wives will—"

"Marriage?" Carol broke in excitedly.

"Yes, *our* marriage," he said. "I had three wives, but one has just died, and you will take her place."

Carol was so utterly dumbfounded that she stared at him, unable to speak. All this couldn't possibly be true, she told herself. She must be dreaming. Why, the man was old enough to be her grandfather!

"And now," he went on, "I will send Yaminah to look after you. She is from Jamaica and speaks English very good."

He then turned, and left her. For a moment, Carol was seized by a panic urge to escape, then realised the utter impossibility of such a thing. Even if she managed to escape from the house, where was she to go? All around was nothing but a vast desert.

Suddenly the door opened, and a girl entered the room. It was the negress Carol had met in the courtyard.

"I'm Yaminah. You come with me," she said, in a friendly tone.

"You—you are a British subject, aren't you?" Carol murmured shakily. "Therefore, you must help me to escape from here."

The negress shook her head.

"But how can you escape, missie?" she asked. "Do you not know that this house is guarded? Abd el Majid is a wealthy sheik, and he buys you from Ben Assam, who has now gone and is swallowed up in the desert."

"But 'planes are out searching for me," said Carol. "They found me once, and will do so again. The 'plane that rescued me came down in the desert, but the Bedouins arrived before it could take off again, and they brought me here."

"But no 'planes find you here," said Yaminah.

"Then what am I to do?" cried Carol.

"Oh, I wish they had killed me, as I expect they did El Hassan."

"El Hassan?" the negress repeated. "We often hear talk of him. Some say he is no Arab at all, and some say he is the Devil himself! How come you know him?"

Carol told her what had happened in the oasis village of Talifa when El Hassan had been wounded, and now of his sudden disappearance.

"Are you sure that they killed El Hassan?" asked the negress.

"No," Carol answered. "But how could he have fought off fifty or sixty men?"

Yaminah considered a moment. Then—

"Perhaps he is dead, and perhaps not," she said. "Many times it has been said that El Hassan is dead, but he always come alive again. The desert tribes say he is a magician!"

"He would certainly need magic to escape alive from that murderous horde!" Carol murmured. "No, Yaminah," she added mournfully, "I am afraid there is no hope whatever for El Hassan."

"You cannot tell, missie. You white people say there is no such thing as magic, no such thing as voodoo. But I seen

plenty. And now I must take you to the sheik's wives," Yaminah added. "They are anxious to see you. Yasmin is very pretty, but Azizah is old and ugly."

Carol followed the negress into the women's quarters. They entered a large room giving on a latticed balcony overlooking the courtyard, where two women were reclining on rugs and cushions.

Both stared wide-eyed at Carol, and Azizah, said something to Yaminah in Arabic. Much to Carol's surprise, however, Yasmin addressed her in English.

"So you are to be Abd el Majid's new wife!" she said, in a friendly tone. "It will be nice to have someone new here. I understand you speak English. I speak the language, too, for my father sent me to the English school at Aden. But they say you are a Circassian," Yasmin added smilingly.

"Oh, no, I was born in London," said Carol, "and have been working at the European hospital at Gaza."

"Well, Abd el Majid say you are Circassian," Yasmin remarked. "But what does it matter? Soon you will be one of us, and there will be a wedding and much feasting and music."

She rose languidly from the cushions and extended a slim hand to Carol.

"Now come with me," she went on. "You shall bathe and then put on beautiful garments."

Carol followed her into another apartment, where Yaminah was waiting with towels and a jar of bath salts. The bath, which she so badly needed, did much to restore Carol's morale, and she even tried to force herself to believe Yaminah's hopeful suggestion that El Hassan might still be alive and well.

Yasmin and the negress assisted her to put on the garments of an Arab lady—they were of the finest silk—and showed her how to manipulate the *yashmak* or veil, and was also told that she must never leave the women's quarters unaccompanied, if there happened to be a male visitor in the house.

The wedding preparations started on the following day. The only bright spot for Carol was that her future husband was forbidden by Arab custom to see her again before the wedding-day. But Abd el Majid sent her jewels, bottles of perfume and other expensive presents.

Carol accepted them with the indifference born of despair. In the courtyard below, Arab musicians played monotonous tunes; fortune-tellers were brought to her and their prophecies, translated by Yasmin, were "lifelong happiness and many sons".

Carol was obviously bored with it all, and noticing this, Yasmin tried to cheer her up.

"Life here is not so bad, after all," she said. "We have lovely clothes and jewellery, and delicious things to eat. Sometimes it is a little monotonous, perhaps, but soon you will grow used to it and wish for nothing better. I rebelled at first when my father gave me to Abd el Majid, but now I am quite reconciled to my fate."

Carol sighed.

"I shall never be that," she said dolefully. "I hate the very thought of it all."

Yasmin nodded understandingly.

"You are thinking of El Hassan, of course," she said. "But they say he is dead. So why grieve over what is gone? I have heard that he was very handsome and that he might easily have been mistaken for an Englishman. You loved him very much?"

Carol nodded.

"But if he had lived and married you, what sort of life would you have had?" Yasmin went on. "Living in a tent, moving from one part of the desert to another, and

hunted because there was a price on his head. Sooner or later, he would have been captured, of course."

"Yes, but when you love a man, as I loved El Hassan, danger and discomfort do not matter so long as you are with him," said Carol. "Perhaps you do not understand that."

Yasmin shrugged.

"Oh, but I have read of such love," she said. "Our poets have written songs of great loves, and wandering minstrels sing them. The songs are nice to listen to, but who believes in them? What choice have we Arab women of the desert in such matters? We marry whether we want to or not."

"All the same," Yasmin continued thoughtfully, "I should have liked to see this fabulous El Hassan of whom we have heard so much. He must be the bearer of a charmed life. How wonderful it must have been to be made love to by such a man! I used to dream that a man might make love to me in such a way—but it was only a dream!"

Yasmin sighed, and went on—

"To-morrow we shall listen to a teller of stories and this will be a change from the musicians and fortune-tellers. I will translate for you. But I expect they will be the same old stories that I have listened to before, though they will be new to you."

ON the following day, Yaminah told them that an Arab story-teller had arrived and would be brought into their room when they had adjusted their veils. He proved to be an elderly, bearded man, and he wore the tattered garments common to his profession.

He squatted cross-legged in the centre of the room and started to tell a story. Azizah and Yasmin appeared to enjoy it all immensely, but when Yasmin gave her a rapid translation of what the man had said, Carol could see nothing whatever funny in it, though she gave a polite little laugh.

When, at last, Yaminah had conducted the man from the room, Carol noticed a tiny slip of paper lying at her feet, and she managed to pick it up while Yasmin and Azizah were engaged in conversation.

Not until she was alone did she unfold the scrap of paper. Then Carol's heart gave a sudden bound as she read—

"To-night at the tomb of Sidi Mohammed. I shall be there, my desert rose!"

ESCAPE

AFTER reading the note through several times, Carol suddenly remembered that to-night she was to be taken to the baths for the traditional purification rites that a bride had to perform on the eve of her wedding-day. Evidently, she told herself, El Hassan must have got to know about it, and the time and place.

Her heart was now overflowing with gratitude and joy, and she began to wonder how she was going to be able to conceal her ecstasy.

But she must manage to do so, of course, in order not to arouse suspicion.

"Tell me what actually happens to-night? What do I have to do?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady, when she and Yasmin met late in the day.

"You will be carried in a litter to the baths, and Azizah and I shall go with you," the girl answered. "You will be bathed and anointed and beautified. It's a very simple ceremony."

"I should have thought that it would not be safe to go there at dead of night," murmured Carol.

"Oh, but we shall be properly guarded by Abd el Majid's men," Yasmin told her, with a reassuring smile.

The hours crept slowly by, and as the time drew near for them to set out for the baths, the more nervous Carol became, though she did her best to appear perfectly calm.

At long last the time arrived for the party to leave. It was quite dark, and Yaminah had to guide Carol to the litter waiting in the courtyard. Three more litters were there to take the other women of the household.

Carol's heart was thumping violently. She had no idea as to where the tomb of Sidi Mohammed was, but assumed that it must be near the baths. All sorts of doubts began to assail her. Then, realising that she was working herself into a state of jitters, she managed to regain her self-control.

Nothing happened on the outward journey. Carol meekly submitted to being bathed and perfumed, to having her eyelashes brushed with mascara, antimony black painted beneath her eyes, and her hands and feet painted with henna. During the whole of the ordeal a woman musician played monotonously on the *gibri*—a small guitar-like instrument.

At last, the pre-nuptial ceremonies came to an end and the women returned to their litters for the return journey. Carol lay on the cushions, her heart beating rapidly, her ears strained. Supposing El Hassan did not come, after all? Supposing his plan had been discovered? Supposing . . .

Then, in a flash, it happened. The curtains of her litter were thrust aside; she was lifted bodily out of the litter, and next moment found herself sitting astride a horse, a man seated behind her holding her tightly in his arms. She knew he must be El Hassan, but the pace was too swift for her to ask questions.

Dawn was breaking when, at last, the party came to a halt, and Carol was lifted from the saddle by the man she had thought to be dead.

"Oh, El Hassan!" she gasped breathlessly, as he held her in a tight embrace, and once more she knew the unspeakable joy of his ardent kisses, the feel of his heart against hers. "I—I was so afraid they had taken your life and that I should never see you again!" she murmured falteringly.

El Hassan laughed.

"Oh, no, those Bedouins were afraid to do that when they got to know who I was," he said. "So they gave me a horse and allowed me to ride away. But I happened to know where they were making for, you see."

Carol then told him how she had seen Fatima climb the hill in the moonlight when they were camping at el Harik.

"Yes, she confessed everything to me when I arrived back at the camp," he said. "The girl was absolutely terrified at the result of her vile treachery."

"And—and did you punish her, El Hassan?"

"No," he answered. "I thought she'd had punishment enough. Now I think we had better have something to eat, my desert rose," he added, "and then be off again, as we have still a long distance to go."

"Are you—are you taking me back to the El Harik camp?" Carol asked.

El Hassan shook his head.

"No, my love," he answered. "A dangerous country like this is no place for you—or for any white woman. So I am taking you to Jidda, where, with a little luck, we may find a ship sailing for England—that is, unless you would rather go back

to Gazea?"

"Oh, no—not if you are coming with me, El Hassan," she told him firmly.

"But I can't possibly come to England with you, darling," he said. "You see, my work here is not finished yet."

"Work?" Carol repeated, a puzzled look in her eyes. "What work, El Hassan?"

"Some day I may tell you, my dearest, but not yet," he answered.

"Well, in any case, I shall not leave you!" she said. "I told you that I was prepared to follow you to the ends of the earth, didn't I? I want to share your life from now on—and your dangers, too, El Hassan. So you must take me with you, wherever you go."

"But, darling, I dare not," he said. "I love you far too much to expose you to the dangers and hardships of the desert. Besides, I am a hunted man, remember, and my enemies may get me even yet."

"Then let them get me as well, my dearest. Whatever fate awaits you, please let me share it with you," she pleaded.

"No, no, I cannot possibly allow you to do that, my dear Carol. So, if you really love me, I beg you to do as I advise."

She hesitated a moment. Then—

"Very well," she murmured reluctantly.

"That's a good girl," he said smilingly.

"You must trust me to do the best thing possible for both of us, my love."

"But when shall we meet again—and where?" Carol asked, trying to keep back the tears which threatened to overflow.

"I will tell you—tell you everything—in due course, Carol," he answered evasively.

"Now let us have something to eat, shall we, darling?"

THE *Danae* was a small Greek steamer that was loaded with merchandise at Jidda. She was the only boat in the little harbour when they arrived there and would be leaving for Aden, not England. But El Hassan pointed out to Carol that she could get a boat home from Aden, instead of having to wait several weeks at Jidda.

The captain—a rather surly-looking man who spoke English, Arabic and French equally badly—agreed to take Carol to Aden. He escorted them to a stuffy little cabin which the mate had been prevailed upon to vacate for the unexpected passenger.

As they stood talking, it struck Carol that the captain was staring very hard at El Hassan, who was still wearing his Arab costume, and supposed it was just curiosity on the man's part.

The *Danae* was due to sail that evening, and El Hassan had arranged to stay on board with Carol till the boat left.

"Tell me, darling," he remarked thoughtfully, "what are you going to do when you arrive in England?"

Carol shrugged.

"Oh, I expect I shall go to St. Clement's Hospital, where I was trained," she said. "They are generally short of nurses, and I expect matron will be glad to have me back there again. You will write to me, won't you, El Hassan?"

"If and when I can, darling," he answered. "But please don't forget that there are no post offices in the desert."

Carol sighed.

"Which means that I can't write to you, either, doesn't it?" she murmured consolately.

"I'm afraid that is so, my dearest," he said. "A letter addressed to 'El Hassan, the Dehna Desert', wouldn't stand much chance of reaching me, would it? Besides, it might get into the hands of police agents," he added, with a wry smile.

A short silence followed. Then—

"Tell me, El Hassan, why were you outlawed? Did you—did you do something very terrible?"

"Well, no, not by Arab standards," he answered. "I'm afraid I can't tell you anything more than that at the moment, my dear Carol."

Sensing that he did not want to be questioned further on the subject, Carol decided to leave it at that. But she wished there was not all this mystery about him, and that she knew exactly who and what he was.

"You do trust me, don't you, my dear Carol?" he remarked, as if guessing her thoughts.

"Yes, of course I do, El Hassan," she murmured, with a wavering smile.

"Some day, my love, you will know everything there is to know about me," he went on. "You see, whatever my secrets may be, they are not wholly my own. Other people are involved. You do understand, don't you?"

Carol nodded.

"What I know above everything else, El Hassan, is that I love you, and shall never cease to love you," she said. "My heart is in your keeping in life or in death!"

"My sweet darling!" he said softly. "I promise that I will always be true to you. I want you to remember that, my dear Carol, no matter what you may hear said about me."

He paused, then went on—

"I have enemies who, if they can't injure me one way, will try another. And now, my darling," he added, "I'm afraid I must leave you, as I have a long journey before me."

"You—you will take great care of yourself for my sake, won't you, dearest?" Carol pleaded, as he rose to his feet.

"Yes, of course I will, my love," he said. "As I have already told you, I have a task to complete. After which we shall meet again—and, I trust, under more propitious circumstances."

Impulsively he took her in his arms and their lips met and clung.

"Good-bye, my love!" he whispered tenderly.

"Good-bye, my dearest," Carol murmured brokenly. "God bless you and keep you safe."

As he opened the cabin door to leave, El Hassan found himself confronted by a sergeant and a private in the uniform of the Desert Frontier Corps.

"I understand you are Major James Fermoy, and better known as El Hassan," the sergeant said.

"Well, what about it?" El Hassan returned defiantly.

"We have orders to arrest you on a charge of desertion from the British Army," the sergeant replied, "and to take you to Aden, where you will be handed over to the military authorities."

"Is that so?" El Hassan muttered grimly. "Have you a warrant to arrest me?"

"One does not need a warrant to arrest an outlaw, Major Fermoy," the sergeant replied.

Suddenly Carol stepped between the man she had known as El Hassan and the two men who had come to arrest him.

"No, no, there must be a serious mistake!" she cried indignantly. "Oh, please tell me it's not true that you—that you are an outlaw, El Hassan!" she pleaded.

He shrugged resignedly.

"It—it's all so very complicated and you wouldn't understand, my dear Carol," he said.

"But what will they do to you?" she asked tremulously.

"I suppose I shall have to face a court-martial, and what the outcome of that will be, I just don't know, Carol. You see,

I—"

"You had better say no more for the time being, Major Fermoy," the sergeant broke in, and El Hassan nodded understandingly.

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the cabin under arrest.

Carol sank on to the narrow settee facing her bunk and buried her face in her hands. Her thoughts were in utter confusion and her heart felt as though it were turned to ice. But her most terrible thought of all was that he had not denied the accusations made against him.

But, guilty or not guilty, she still loved the man she knew as El Hassan, and would never cease to love him, no matter what happened.

Presently the door of the cabin opened, and the captain peered in.

"We sailing in an hour's time," he announced gruffly.

Carol looked at him through tear-dimmed eyes. Something told her that this man with his shifty gaze and his half-contemptuous, half-obsequious expression had betrayed El Hassan to his enemies for the price upon his head.

As if he read something of what was in her thoughts, he muttered grimly—

"El Hassan a bad man. Women and children fear him and his Arab killers. I do good job."

"You—you have sold him to his enemies, haven't you?" Carol murmured accusingly.

He gave an enigmatic smile.

"I am good citizen, missie," he said. "I help law and order. You are foolish girl. You fall in love with the man because he has good looks. But you are lucky to be rid of him," he added, then turned and left her.

Presently Carol heard the engines start up, and then the slow movement of the ship. Soon, she reflected sadly, they would reach Aden, where El Hassan was to stand trial before a court-martial. She supposed he was being taken there by a swift motor boat. In any event, she must try somehow to get into touch with him at Aden, and declare her undying faith in him.

Certain things which had scarcely registered on her mind when she first learnt them now came back to her. Outstanding among them was the fact that the man to whom she had lost her heart was an Englishman, and that his real name was James Fermoy!

WHEN, at last, the *Danae* arrived at Aden, Carol went ashore and booked a room at a small hotel. Her first objective was to find out the whereabouts of El Hassan—she still could not think of him as Major James Fermoy.

As she was having breakfast on the following morning, one of the hotel maids informed her that a gentleman had called to see her.

"What is his name?" Carol asked nervously.

"Colonel Richbald," the girl replied, "and I have shown him into the smoking-room."

A handsome, middle-aged man with iron-grey hair rose to greet her when she entered the smoking-room.

"Are you Miss Carol Lascot, late of the European Hospital at Gazea?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered falteringly.

"Please take a seat, Miss Lascot," he invited, placing a chair for her. "I would like you to tell me exactly what happened to you after you were kidnapped at the village called Talilfa."

As there seemed to be no point in hiding anything, Carol gave him a full account of what had happened.

"Are you aware that a man was killed at Talilfa. Miss Lascot?" the colonel asked.

"Yes; it—it was after he had tried to kill El Hassan," she replied. "El Hassan was shot in the shoulder, and I dressed his wound as best I could. We then travelled through the desert until we reached an encampment, at the foot of some hills—I forget the name of the place."

"And were you kept prisoner during that time?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I was," Carol answered hesitantly. "But El Hassan offered to take me back to Gazea."

"And you declined to accept the offer, apparently, Miss Lascot."

"Yes, Colonel Richbald," she answered frankly. "I refused to accept the offer because I had reason to believe that if El Hassan returned to Gazea he would be risking his life."

"I see," the colonel remarked drily. "So you feel no resentment at this—er—at this kidnapping affair?"

"None whatever," Carol answered. "You see, Colonel Richbald," she added, "it was El Hassan who saved me from being forcibly married to—to an old sheik called Abd el Majid."

"But may I remind you, Miss Lascot, that had not the man you call 'El Hassan' kidnapped you, you would not have been in any danger of marrying a sheik would you?"

Carol was at a loss what to say, and the colonel went on—

"There are certain things which I feel you ought to know about this man 'El Hassan'. His real name is James Fermoy. He was formerly a major in the British Army, and as he spoke fluent Arabic and understood the Arabs, he was seconded for service with the Desert Frontier Patrol—an Anglo-Arab force raised to maintain order among the Bedouins. Fermoy deserted from this force, however, and it came to our knowledge that he had thrown in his lot with a band of outlawed Arabs who live by robbery and—"

"But the Arabs certainly did no harm to anyone while I was with them," Carol interrupted.

Colonel Richbald frowned.

"One moment, please, Miss Lascot," he said curtly. "You are probably not aware that Communist agents have infiltrated into the country and that a number of the desert tribes have embraced their pernicious doctrines and are rapidly spreading them. No doubt you will be surprised to learn that one of these bands was led by James Fermoy—or 'El Hassan' as he is known in the desert."

"But I have never heard El Hassan utter a word in favour of Communism," Carol said.

"No, I don't suppose you have, Miss Lascot, since it is hardly a thing the man would be likely to discuss with you. But we have positive proof that Fermoy is in constant contact with Communist agents and that he is one of their most trusted collaborators."

"I'm sorry, Colonel Richbald, but I simply cannot believe it," she said.

The colonel shrugged his shoulders. The girl was obviously head over heels in love with Fermoy, he reflected, and nothing he could say would knock the man off the pedestal on which she had placed him.

"Well, I have given you the facts as they are known to the authorities, Miss Lascot," he said coldly. "I need not have done so, of course, but I felt it my duty to make it quite clear to you that James Fermoy is not worthy of your love, though I seem to have failed to convince you of the fact."

Carol sighed.

"What—what will happen to him, Colonel Richbald, if—if he is found guilty?" she stammered.

"That will depend on the findings of the court," he answered. "But at the best it could scarcely be less than imprisonment for life, and if all the charges are proved, it could be—death!"

Carol shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh no," she cried, "not—not death!"

"Major Fermoy will have a fair trial, Miss Lascot, and whatever his sentence is, you may be sure it will be a just one. I had hoped," the colonel added, "that you would be able to provide us with further information concerning his activities."

"I have told you everything I know, Colonel Richbold," she murmured brokenly. "It is my belief that El Hassan has been falsely accused and that he is completely innocent of the charges brought against him."

The colonel shrugged again.

"How long are you staying in Aden?" he asked.

"Until I hear the result of the court martial," Carol replied. "Then I shall return to England and take up nursing again."

"I see," the colonel remarked thoughtfully. "There is one thing I should like to add, Miss Lascot, and it is this—although you refuse to believe what I have told you concerning Major Fermoy, I shall be pleased to render you any service I possibly can during your stay in Aden."

"Thank you very much, Colonel Richbold," she murmured gratefully.

The colonel then shook hands with her, and took his departure, leaving Carol in a state of feverish suspense. Instinct told her that Colonel Richbold was a gentleman and a man of honour, but he evidently firmly believed James Fermoy to be guilty of the charges brought against him.

A FEW days later, Colonel Richbold called again to see her at the hotel. Carol realised at once by the serious expression on his face that he had bad news.

"Is—is the court martial over, Colonel Richbold?" she asked tremulously.

He nodded gravely.

"And—and the sentence?"

"Death!" he replied.

"Oh no, no!" Carol cried pathetically. "He is innocent! It—it's all a terrible mistake!"

The colonel shook his head.

"I am afraid not, Miss Lascot," he said. "You see, Major Fermoy pleaded guilty to the charges brought against him."

Carol swayed, and would have fallen had not the colonel stepped forward and caught her in his arms.

A GHOST FROM THE PAST

CAROL sat in the nurses' rest-room at St. Clement's Hospital staring unseeingly out of the window, wondering how it was she had been unable to pierce the mystery surrounding James Fermoy's trial, and the sentence of death which had been passed upon him.

She had left for England by air on the day following the trial, having been refused permission to see the condemned man, and had fully expected to see a report of the trial in the London newspapers.

But not a word had appeared. Surely, she told herself, a British officer sentenced to death for desertion and other grave charges was of sufficient importance to merit a report in the newspapers, even if it consisted of no more than a few lines. She took the liberty to ring up the War Office to ask where and when the sentence on Major Fermoy had been carried out.

A bland voice had informed her over the 'phone that no information on the subject was available.

Obviously, she reflected sadly, for reasons best known to themselves, the authorities at Aden had not permitted the court martial and conviction to be made public. And even if the newspapers did know anything about the affair, they were not printing it.

A few days later, the small headline, "Red Round-up", caught Carol's eye in one of the newspapers, and she read—

"A band of Communist agitators who had for long been preaching rebellion against the rulers of the various Arab states, has been rounded up. Among the captured are several of the most prominent leaders, some of whom, it is said, had already been sentenced to death."

"It is now believed that a rising of the savage tribes who roam the more inaccessible parts of the vast Denna Desert and the foothills of Dawasir, has been finally averted. Had such a rising taken place, it is certain that the various oil wells, refineries and pipelines, would have been seriously damaged, if not completely destroyed."

Carol sighed, and put down the paper. The report seemed to bear out what Colonel Richbold had told her in Aden, and which she had refused to believe. And, of course, El Hassan—otherwise, James Fermoy—must have been among the "prominent leaders" referred to in the report. True, his name was not mentioned, but neither were those of any of the other men who had been rounded up.

A few days later, one of her afternoons off, Carol went to one of the local cinemas, not because there was any picture she particularly wanted to see, but because it was pouring with rain. As she entered the vestibule, she came face to face with a uniformed commissioner.

She stared at him, aghast.

"El Hassan!" she gasped tremulously.

"Three shilling seats through the door on the right, Miss," he announced calmly, without the faintest flicker of recognition in the grey eyes she knew so well.

"El Hassan!" she gasped again.

"The door on the right, Miss," he repeated, and because other people were forcing their way in, Carol had, of course, to pass on.

She had no recollection whatever of what the films were about. Sitting there in the semi-darkness, she tried to convince herself that she had been mistaken; that the man in the commissioner's uniform might be El Hassan's double!

And yet—and yet . . .

Her tormented thoughts seemed to be going round in circles, but always coming back to one thing—El Hassan, as Major James Fermoy had been found guilty by a court martial and sentenced to death. She had Colonel Richbold's word for it, and he certainly would not have lied to her.

Therefore, the man in the commissioner's uniform outside, could not possibly be El Hassan.

When she emerged from the cinema, he was still in the vestibule, talking to a smartly-dressed, dark-haired girl who was standing with her back to Carol. Determined to have a few words with the man after the other people had left, Carol drew back a little and waited.

Suddenly she gave a start, and her heart seemed to miss a beat. The girl had raised her voice slightly and was speaking in Arabic! Though she did not understand a word of Arabic, Carol recognised the language, and heard the man answering the girl in the same tongue!

So he must be El Hassan! she told her-

self. The odds were millions to one against there being another man exactly like him, and speaking Arabic, here in London! But what was the meaning of it all? How had he managed to escape from prison in Aden and come to England?

Next moment, Carol had another shock, as the girl turned to leave, she recognised—Fatima! and while Carol stood there, utterly dazed and bewildered, the girl left the cinema, and the commissioner disappeared inside the auditorium.

Carol would have continued to wait in the hope of speaking to the man she was now convinced could be none other than El Hassan, but she was almost due back at the hospital. So, her mind in a tumult, she left the cinema.

But she decided to go there again at the first opportunity, for she was determined to solve the mystery of these two people—the man she loved, and the girl who hated her so bitterly.

On the following evening, the hall porter at the hospital informed Carol that a man had called to see her.

"Did he give his name?" she asked.

"No, Nurse Lascot, he said he wished to speak to you, that's all," the porter replied. "I've shown him into the waiting-room."

Carol went downstairs, her heart beating violently. Could the visitor be El Hassan? she wondered. She could think of no one else who would be likely to call to see her.

When she entered the waiting-room, a tall, swarthy man dressed in a lounge suit rose to greet her. Yes, it certainly was El Hassan!

Instinctively she held out her arms to him. But, to her surprise and bewilderment, he made no response. Instead, he said stiffly—

"I have come to warn you not to go to the Pandora picture house again, still less try and speak to me or show any sign of recognition. If you do, you will not only endanger your life, but mine, too!"

"But I—but I don't understand," Carol stammered. "I—I know that you are El Hassan, of course, the man whose wound I tended in the desert, and who—"

"But you must forget all about that," he broke in quickly. "You must try and believe that such a thing never happened, so please pay heed to my warning and keep away from the Pandora."

Carol gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Does that—does that go for Fatima as well, may I ask?" she said defiantly.

Fermoy was completely taken aback for a moment.

"So you—so you recognised her, too, did you?" he muttered, a note of dismay in his voice.

"Yes, as easily and unmistakably as I recognised you, El Hassan," she answered.

"Thank Heaven Fatima didn't recognise you," he said. "But it makes it all the more important that you should keep away from that cinema."

Carol made an impatient gesture.

"Listen, El Hassan, all this cloak-and-dagger stuff doesn't impress me," she flung at him. "We are in England now, you know, and not in the desert with a gang of Arabs. I shall go to the Pandora cinema whenever I wish to do so."

He stepped forward and caught her arm in a firm grip.

"I am advising you for your own sake, Carol, as well as mine, to keep away from that cinema," he said harshly. "If you ignore my request, you may bring about a disaster greater than you can imagine."

He was in such deadly earnest, that Carol was deeply impressed in spite of herself.

"Very well," she said. "I will do as you say, but only on one condition—that you explain to me what is behind this mysterious affair."

"I cannot—I dare not, my dear Carol," he said. "You—you must trust me."

"Trust you?" she echoed scornfully. "You promised me your undying love, and now you treat me almost as an enemy. Why should I trust you? By your words and actions, you have stepped out of my life, El Hassan!"

But he appeared not to be listening to her. Instead, he stood staring out of the window on to the gravel drive that curved down to the hospital gates. There were tall evergreens on either side, and following his gaze she caught sight of a figure lurking there.

"I can see someone hiding behind those bushes," she said, "and I had better go and tell the hall porter about it, as we do not allow loiterers in the hospital grounds."

"No, please stay where you are!" he said quickly, stepping between her and the door. "Is there any way out of here other than by the front door?" he asked abruptly.

"There is a side entrance," Carol replied. "You could leave by that, if you wish to do so."

"Good," he muttered. "Then please show me the way."

"But what are you afraid of?" she demanded.

"I—I'm being watched and spied upon," he answered agitatedly, "and have evidently been followed to the hospital."

"But why? Are the police on your track?" Carol asked sarcastically.

"If it were only the police, I should have little to fear," he answered. "Now I must be going," he added. "But remember what I have told you, Carol—keep away from that cinema at all costs."

"I understand that you were court-martialled at Aden and sentenced to death," she said. "How did you manage to escape? Did—did Fatima help you to get away?"

"My escape was arranged, that is all I can tell you," he snapped.

"I suppose I may take it that your love for me is dead?" she said, a bitter note in her voice. "Or was it just a passing infatuation you had for me?"

For the fraction of a second, the ardour returned to his grey eyes, and he looked at her the way he had done when he had taken her in his arms before they parted on board the *Danae*.

Carol caught her breath.

"Why—why won't you trust me—Jim?" she asked pathetically.

He gave her a startled look. It was the first time she had used the diminutive of his Christian name.

"Because—because I dare not, my dear Carol," he stammered. "You see, it is not only that your life and mine are at stake, but—" He broke off, and added urgently—"Now please let me out by the side entrance at once."

Carol gave a sigh of despair.

"Very well," she murmured resignedly.

"Thank you, my dear Carol," he said. His voice no longer sounded cold and aloof, but vibrated with the passion which had so often made her pulses tingle and her heart bound.

It did so now, and the urge to throw herself into his arms, to press her lips on his was almost irresistible. Moreover, there was still that barrier between them which his refusal to trust her had erected.

She led the way through a number of corridors until they came to a door which opened on to a yard at the back of the hospital, and he quickly disappeared.

CAROL returned to her duties, torn between perplexity, anxiety and the joy of knowing that, in spite of his efforts to disguise it, Jim Fermoy still loved her. At the same time, the obvious questions continued to torment her, and she could think of no reasonable explanation for the spying and counter-spying and the melodramatic warnings.

Nevertheless, she decided not to go to the Pandora again. But that was not to say she couldn't keep a close watch on this cinema when time and opportunity permitted. For she was desperately intrigued by Fatima's presence in London, and her relations with Jim Fermoy.

So, on her next evening off, Carol took up a position in a shop doorway on the opposite side of the road just before the last performance at the Pandora was due to end. She was not spying in the ignoble sense of the word, she told herself, but merely hoping to satisfy a natural curiosity.

She had not forgotten the all-important fact that it was the Fatima who had betrayed Jim to his enemies in the desert, and since the girl had been prepared to betray him then, might she not be base enough to do the same again?

Presently the audience started to pour out of the cinema, and a few minutes later, the doors closed and the lights went out. Then, from a side-door, she saw Jim come out—Carol recognised him by his height. A girl followed, and tucking her arm through Jim's, they walked off together.

Keeping at a safe distance, Carol followed them. They entered a cafe, and peering through the window, she could see that Jim's companion was no other than Fatima. A waitress appeared, and Jim gave her an order.

Judging by their gestures, they appeared to be wrangling about something. Carol had the feeling that Fatima was using threatening language to Jim. The girl was evidently laying down the law to him about something.

Carol would have followed them when they came out but it was getting late and she was due back at the nurses' hostel. As she was turning to leave, a man stepped out of the shadows and confronted her.

"You are Nurse Lascot, aren't you?" he said brusquely.

Carol nodded.

"I'm Detective-Inspector Harbutt of Scotland Yard," he went on. "You have been following a man and a woman employed at the Pandora Cinema, haven't you? Well, I must warn you to keep away from that picture house. Do you happen to know the couple who you saw enter the Bay Tree cafe a few minutes ago?"

"Well, yes, perhaps I do," Carol admitted reluctantly.

"Well, I warn you to keep away from them," the inspector said, and then turned and left her.

Carol, feeling more bewildered than ever, made her way back to the hostel. Obviously she had been caught up in some widespread and dangerous intrigue, she told herself. But why, she was at a loss to understand.

NURSE HENDRICK opened the door of Carol's cubicle, and thrust her head in.

"Are you asleep?" she asked abruptly.

Carol woke with a start and gazed sleepily-eyed at the other girl.

"I was, until you woke me," she answered. "What on earth is the matter, my dear? It must be well past midnight."

Before Nurse Hendrick could answer, there came the clang of the bells of fire-engines. Leaping out of bed, Carol ran to the window and saw a reddish-yellow

glare against the sky a short distance away. "Oh!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "There's a serious outbreak of fire somewhere, and I suppose we shall be called upon for emergency duty."

"Yes, and I think we ought to get dressed at once," Nurse Hendrick returned, dourly, as the sound of ambulance gongs reached their ears, "for it rather looks as if there will be a number of casualties."

Next moment there came the loud thumping on doors along the corridor, and one of the night sisters was shouting—

"Wake up, everybody! You will all be wanted for duty very soon!"

"Where is the fire, Sister Bentley?" asked Carol, opening the door of her cubicle.

"At the Pandora Cinema," the Sister replied. "Please hurry up all of you!"

"The—The Pandora Cinema!" Carol echoed, with suppressed excitement. "But surely, Nurse Hendrick, there won't be anyone there at this time of night!"

"Not actually in the cinema, perhaps, but there are a number of flats and offices above it," Nurse Hendrick replied. "In any case, we had better get dressed as quickly as possible," she added, and then rushed back to her own cubicle.

With the other nurses, Carol and Nurse Hendrick entered the hospital, and soon everything was in readiness to cope with any emergency that might arise as a result of the conflagration.

The worst casualties brought in proved to be mostly minor injuries sustained while escaping from the burning building. Soon, however, ambulances arrived with more serious cases, and the patients were carried into the vestibule on stretchers.

"I'm afraid there's not much hope in this case, Nurse Lascot," one of the doctors remarked gravely, after he had made a brief examination of one of the casualties. "Please make her as comfortable as you can for the time being."

Carol gave a gasp of astonishment as she bent over the patient.

It was Fatima!

Remembering the doctor's ominous words, Carol's heart was suddenly filled with pity for the girl, notwithstanding her act of treachery in the desert.

"Fatima!" she whispered gently.

The girl opened her eyes for a moment and gazed at Carol. Then—

"You!" she muttered, her dark eyes filled with venomous hatred.

"Yes, it's me," Carol whispered. "But please try and forget what is past, Fatima, and let us be friends."

"I—I loved El Hassan, and but for you, he might have learnt to love me," breathed Fatima. "You—you stole him from me."

Next moment the Arabian girl withdrew a hand from underneath the blanket, that covered her. There was the flash of steel. Carol knew a searing pain at her breast and slumped forward.

THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED

CAROL sat in a comfortable basket-chair on a lawn dappled with the afternoon sunlight where it penetrated the foliage of the trees. A book lay in her lap, but she was not reading for her thoughts were travelling far and wide.

The peaceful English countryside had vanished from her mental vision and she saw instead a street lined with flat-roofed houses. Down the street galloped a band of white-robed Arab horsemen, yelling and flourishing their rifles above their heads.

In front of them their leader, a tall, swarthy-complexioned, handsome man, A flash of steel in the sunlight, the sound of

a shot, then the white-clad leader collapsing in his saddle.

She was awakened from her reverie by the sound of a well-remembered voice, and scarcely able to believe her eyes, she saw Jim Fermoy standing there smiling down at her and now wearing a well-cut grey lounge suit.

"You almost look as if you did not recognise me, my dear Carol," he remarked jestingly.

"I—I have just awakened from a dream," she said, smiling back at him.

He drew a deck-chair close to hers and sat down.

"I did not know you had been sent to a convalescent home until the matron at the hospital told me," he said. "Did you get my letters, Carol?"

"Yes, thanks," she answered. "But they—but they did not tell me all that I wanted to know, and I'm still very much in the dark about it all."

Jim laughed.

"You won't be much longer, darling," he said, "for at last I am at liberty to talk openly to you. But first of all please tell me about yourself. Matron was singularly uninformative."

Carol hesitated a moment. Then—

"There is very little to tell, Jim," she said.

"When I was attending to Fatima at the hospital, she suddenly drew an Arab dagger—which, apparently, she had concealed in her clothing—and stabbed me. Fortunately, however, the wound she inflicted did not go very deep."

"Thank Heaven for that, darling!" Jim murmured fervently.

"Then, when the wound had healed sufficiently," Carol went on, "I came here to convalesce. They told me that you had been sent abroad again, and I was rather worried about it at first, but I didn't mind so much when your letters began to arrive."

"Yes, they sent me back to try and restore some sort of order among the Arab and Bedouin tribes of the Khali Desert," Jim explained, as he lit a cigarette. "You see, it was feared for a time that something like civil war—fomented by the Communists—might break out between the various Arab states."

"And did you manage to prevent it, Jim?"

"Yes, I think so," he answered smilingly. "It's a long and complicated story, my dear Carol—I'm afraid some people might call it rather boring."

"But first of all, Jim dear, I want to know about Fatima—I mean, who and what was she?" Carol said. "Why did she attach herself to that Arab band of yours?"

Jim shrugged.

"Fatima—though that was not her real name—was the daughter of a wealthy Arab merchant," he said. "Her mother was English, and Fatima—we may as well go on calling her by that name—was sent to an English school to be educated. I don't know what exactly happened, but the girl appears to have been caught up in a little clique of high-brow Communists and quickly absorbed their vile doctrines."

"The fact that she spoke Arabic as fluently as she did English made her a valuable ally, in the opinion of the Communist leaders. Anyway," Jim added, "she was sent to stir up trouble and discontent among the wandering desert tribes, and she did it pretty thoroughly, too."

"Yes, Jim, but what were you doing out there?" asked Carol. "I mean, why were you mixed up with these Communists?"

"Well, you see, darling, I was sent out there with that object in view," he explained. "Only by seeming to be a Communist myself could I get to grips with

their under-cover agents and thwart their plans—the chief of which was to wreck the oil installations and pipe-lines. Their other big plan was to bump off the various Arab rulers and overthrow their governments."

"So darling," he went on "I had quite a job on my hands. The most uncomfortable part of it, from my point of view, was that the local authorities—including the British resident officials—firmly believed that I had deserted from the Army and gone Communist. But I had to put up with that, for if by any chance the truth had leaked out, all my work would have gone for nothing—and my number would have been up, no doubt!"

Carol sighed.

"It all sounds to me like a romantic novel combined with a thriller!" she commented drily.

"Romantic!" he echoed laughingly. "That's the last thing I should have expected you to call it, my dear. Did you find it so romantic riding across the desert in the burning sun, living in a stuffy tent and eating almost nothing but nauseating stews?"

"No, of course not," she confessed, with a wry smile. "But tell me, Jim—how did you come to pick up the girl Fatima?"

"I didn't, darling," he said. "She picked me up. Her job was to spy on me and report to her Communist bosses if I showed any signs of being unreliable. It didn't take me long to find that out, and when, much to my embarrassment, she fell in love with me, it made matters worse, for it added jealousy to her lurking suspicion."

Carol nodded understandingly.

"Oh, what a terrible time you must have had, Jim!" she murmured.

"Well, yes, it wasn't any too good, I can assure you darling. But let's turn to a more pleasant topic, shall we? Now tell me when you will marry me, my love," he added, a tender look in his grey eyes.

"Oh, but how very sudden, Jim dear! How do you know that I want to marry you? I may have other plans, you know," she teased.

"Well, yes, of course, my dear. But I carried you off once, didn't I? And I think I'm quite capable of doing so again," he warned her laughingly. "Therefore, I want you to name the day as soon as you possibly can, my dear Carol. And once we've fixed that, we can discuss where we'll go for our honeymoon."

"Yes, and where we're going to settle down afterwards, Jim."

"Yes, yes, of course, darling," he agreed.

"Well, I happen to own a lovely old house in Devonshire—it has belonged to the Fermoy's since the days of the Tudors. Would you like to make that your future home, my dearest?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to, Jim!" she answered enthusiastically. "I have always wanted to live in the country."

"Good!" he said. "We can always run up to London when we feel like it, can't we, darling?"

"Yes, of course," Carol murmured thoughtfully. "But, Jim dear, you haven't yet told me half of what I want to know. For instance, how did you manage to escape from Aden after the court martial?"

He shrugged.

"Well, that wasn't any too pleasant, Carol," he said. "You see, the members of the court believed I really was a deserter from the British Army, and that, in fact, I was guilty of murder. But if I had disclosed everything I knew my secret would have been disclosed too. So I just had to plead guilty. I knew there were any number of spies lying in wait and ready to report to their superiors what happened, and the

fact that I was condemned to death must have convinced them that I was indeed a genuine out-and-out Communist."

"Yes, but how did you manage to escape, Jim?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, word came from the highest quarters that I was to be allowed to escape," he replied. "It must have been an awful shock to my brother officers who, justifiably from the evidence before them, had passed sentence of death on me. Nevertheless, they had to connive at my escape."

"Oh, Jim, what a wonderful book you could write!" exclaimed Carol. her blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"And never shall, my dear Carol. It would be far too risky, and I feel I have taken quite enough risks already. Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that the happiest man, like the happiest nation, is the one that has no history," Jim added, with a boyish grin.

"Yes, you are probably right," Carol agreed. "Oh, Jim dear, please promise that you will never leave me again!"

"Oh, no, I will never leave you again—not if I can possibly help it, my love," he said. "I have arranged for my release from the Army, after which I shall be a free man again."

"And never again will anyone be wanting to take your life," Carol murmured, taking his hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze.

"Well, no, I hope not, darling," he said, with forced lightness. "But there happens to be one man who has a fierce hatred for me because of my work among the Arabs, and that is Fatima's only surviving brother. You see, Carol, he thinks that I was responsible for his sister joining my band of Arabs, also that I induced her to live with me as my unmarried wife, and that I eventually discarded her for 'the Nazarin woman'! It is not necessary for me to tell you that none of this is true. If Fatima did fall in love with me, that was my misfortune, not my fault."

"No, of course it was not your fault," Carol agreed.

"Fatima had two brothers," Jim went on to explain. "One of them was the man who shot at me when I was riding at the head of my men in Talilfa, and was riddled with bullets by my Arabs."

Carol shuddered at the recollection of the tragic affair.

"But the other brother you spoke of, where is he, Jim?" she asked, an anxious note in her voice.

"I really don't know, darling. Both he and his brother pretended to be violently anti-Communist, but actually they were Communist spies, and when I revealed to the authorities all I had learnt about their traitorous activities, the younger brother—Yosif was his name—fled the country."

"What an awful spider's web of intrigue and treachery it all was!" murmured Carol.

Jim nodded.

"Yes, I quite agree, my dear," he said. "Well, Yosif managed to get away and come to London. I came to London, too, but not as El Hassan, the outlawed Arab leader, but as Joe Brown, and I got a job as commissionaire at the Pandora cinema. You see, things had become a bit too hot for the Communists, for most of the Arab tribes had turned against them and London seemed one of the safest places for the villains. So, one by one, they were smuggled into this country—yes, and I played an active part in the smuggling."

"You actually helped in smuggling enemies into this country, Jim?"

"Yes, darling, and with the approval and connivance of the powers that be," he replied. "And what's more, Scotland Yard

detectives who deal with international suspects had them under constant observation—one of the usherettes at the Pandora Cinema was actually a detective from Scotland Yard.

"It may interest you to know that Communist agents rented one of the flats above the cinema," Jim continued, "and it was used as a meeting place for the miscreants I had helped to smuggle into this country. Among them were Fatima and her brother Yosif. They all believed that I was still a member of the fraternity. Little did they know that I was in daily contact with Detective-Inspector Harbutt of Scotland Yard. Then, when we had the key men where we wanted them, and all the evidence we needed was complete, the scoop was made."

"And—and did they set fire to the cinema?" Carol asked.

Jim shrugged.

"Nobody seems to know for certain how the fire started," he said. "It appears to have broken out in the projection-room, but whether by accident or design is anybody's guess. But I have my own theory, about it, and it is based on the fact that all the plans and documents which the Reds kept in the flat were completely destroyed."

"It all sounds utterly incredible," breathed Carol.

Jim gave a mirthless little laugh.

"If you'd been with Intelligence as long as I have, my dear girl, you would regard it as scarcely out of the ordinary," he said. "Anyway, I'm through with it all now. My job is finished. Exit El Hassan, exit Joe Brown, exit Major Fermoy—and enter James Fermoy, country gentleman of modest but independent means!" Jim added jestingly.

"But I wish you knew for certain what has happened to the man Yosif," murmured Carol.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about him, darling," Jim said lightly. "Now let's talk about ourselves, shall we? As soon as you're mobile again, Carol, I want to take you down to Oakford Manor to have a

look at our future home. I've a feeling you'll fall in love with it at sight."

"Yes, I feel sure I shall, Jim dear," she said. "It would be rather nice if we could spend our honeymoon there, wouldn't it?" she added smilingly.

"Yes, that's a splendid idea, Carol," he said delightedly.

Carol glanced at her wrist-watch.

"And now I'm afraid you'll have to leave, my dear Jim," she said, "for visiting time is nearly up."

Most of the patients and their visitors were already beginning to leave the lawn, and they rose and kissed each other goodbye.

"Jim dear, do you remember the first kiss you gave me?" Carol whispered, smiling up at him.

"Yes, darling; it was in that ramshackle tent in the desert after you had dressed my wound," he answered, smiling back at her. "Is it likely that I could ever forget it, my dearest?"

"It—it seems to me a lifetime ago, Jim, and yet it's only a few months."

"Yes, I know, my dear Carol, and now years and years of happiness lie before us," he whispered tenderly, and kissed her again.

She watched him walk briskly down the drive to the gate where he had parked his car. As he disappeared from view, a cloud drifted across the westerling sun and the air seemed to become suddenly chill. Carol shuddered involuntarily, and a vague dread invaded her heart.

But when, next morning, she woke up to find her room flooded with sunlight, Carol forgot all about her gloomy foreboding of the previous evening. When she entered the breakfast-room, the matron gave her a smiling greeting—she was already aware that Carol was engaged to James Fermoy.

"Have you seen the morning paper, my dear?" she asked brightly.

Carol shook her head.

"No, matron, I haven't," she answered.

"Does it contain anything of special interest?"

"Well, yes, it does rather," the matron said. "I see that your fiance has been awarded a K.B.E."

"A K.B.E.?" Carol repeated, a puzzled look on her face.

"Yes, my dear. Mr. Fermoy has been made a Knight of the British Empire. It means that he is now Sir James Fermoy, so that when you marry him you will be Lady Fermoy, of course," the matron added smilingly.

TO Carol, the days now seemed to fly past. She had been discharged from the convalescent home almost before she realised it, and was collecting her trousseau.

Meanwhile, Jim had taken her down to Devonshire to see Oakford Manor. It was a picturesque old house with quaint, twisted Tudor chimneys, mullion windows and a broad terrace approached by a flight of stone steps, and Carol had fallen in love with it at once.

"Oh, how perfectly lovely, Jim!" she murmured ecstatically, as he showed her over the house. "I can scarcely believe that this will be my future home! Really, it—it is like a dream come true!"

A MONTH later, they were married from the house of Sir Lynton Lavstock, a friend of Jim's. As in a dream, Carol found herself walking up the aisle of the ancient village church on Sir Lynton's arm. As in a dream, she saw strange faces peering at her from the pews on either side.

At last, the marriage ceremony was over, and Carol walked slowly down the aisle on her husband's arm as the organ played Mendelssohn's "Wedding March".

Her heart was now filled with joy and gladness, her gloomy forebodings forgotten.

"Happy, darling?" he whispered, as he assisted her into the waiting car.

"Yes, Jim dear—happier than I have ever been in all my life," she whispered back.

THE END

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LOVE AT BAY

By Roy Croft

A FATEFUL MEETING

LYDIA TRAFFORD, having made several small purchases at the chemist's shop, came out and mounted her bicycle to ride home. In the ordinary way she would have come into the town in her father's car, but Phelps, the chauffeur, was recharging the battery, and she had decided to cycle into Yarbidge, a matter of little more than five miles.

She was now glad she had cycled, for not only did she enjoy the exercise, but she could take her time and enjoy the glories of the autumn English countryside. It was so unlike that of France with its straight, monotonous roads, its hedgeless fields with rarely a tree in sight and its almost unbroken skyline.

Here was variety—small, irregular-shaped fields separated from one another by hedges, roads that turned and twisted as if for the sheer fun of it, and lanes that didn't seem to lead to anywhere at all. At no point could she see more than a short distance ahead because of the woods which blocked

the view beyond.

It delighted Lydia and she felt that she never wanted to leave England again. France was all very well, of course, and parts of it were lovely, but, to her, at any rate, it lacked the smiling homeliness of rural England.

Peddalling in a leisurely fashion and reminding herself that in England one kept to the left side of the road, and not to the right as in France, she left the little town behind her. Now she was on a twisting, hedge-lined country road with here and there a cottage or a barn and with an occasional wooden sign on which was painted the warning "Cows Crossing".

Presently came a fairly steep hill down which one could free-wheel and then be carried up the opposite slope for quite a distance. Lydia set her feet firmly on the pedals of her machine and, as she put it to herself, "let it rip."

She had just reached the bottom of the hill, still travelling at speed, when a large dog suddenly bounded into the road a yard or two ahead of her. Acting instinctively,

she quickly applied the brakes with the result that the bicycle skidded and she was thrown to the ground.

Dazed and bruised, she lay for some moments. Then, hearing a car approaching, she tried to struggle to her feet. She heard the car stop and a man's voice say—

"Just a moment, miss. Let me help you."

Next moment, Lydia found herself being gently helped to her feet, and a pair of grey eyes set in a lean, sun-tanned face gazed inquiringly into hers.

"Thank—thank you very much," she stammered, feeling shaky and glad of the man's supporting arm.

She became aware that he was a tall, well-built young man with an unruly mop of chestnut coloured hair, and that he was wearing a tweed suit.

"I think, perhaps, that you had better get into my car and let me drive you home," he suggested smilingly. "I can fasten the bike on behind."

"It's very kind of you," murmured Lydia

"but I think, after I've rested a few moments I can get on my bicycle again."

"Oh no I wouldn't advise it," he said. "Besides, the front tyre has a puncture and the wheel appears to be bent. You came a rather nasty cropper, didn't you?"

"It was because of a dog. It ran right in front of me and I had to brake quickly," she explained.

"Yes, straying dogs are a beastly nuisance," he commiserated. "Responsible for no end of accidents. Now before you get into my car, please sit down on the bank for a moment so that I can see if you need first aid of any kind. I am a doctor, you see," he added, noticing her look of surprise. "I don't think you are badly injured, but it would be as well to make sure."

He half-led, half-supported her to the grass bank beside the hedge, and then made a rapid examination.

"Yes, yes," he announced, when he had finished. "Just bruises and a slight shock. Where do you live, may I ask?"

"The Grange," answered Lydia.

"Why, that's Colonel Trafford's place, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes. I'm Colonel Trafford's daughter."

"That's rather strange," murmured the young man. "I've been in practice in the neighbourhood for nearly three months, and yet this is the first time I've seen you, Miss Trafford."

"That's because I've been away at a finishing school in Paris, and have just returned," Lydia said.

"But I didn't know such places still existed!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I thought they'd gone the way of dame schools, and at about the same time."

Lydia smiled.

"They may have in England, but not in France, you know."

"Is that so?" he said. "Well I suppose it's easier to be rich in France, than it is in England where there's no chance of dodging the tax inspector," he added laughingly. "My name is Regan—David Regan."

"You mean Dr. Regan?"

"Yes," he answered, with a boyish grin. "Being called 'Dr. Regan' still gives me a pleasant little thrill, you know. I wouldn't admit that to everyone, of course."

"But you are rather young for a doctor, aren't you?" Lydia suggested smilingly.

"Well, you see, I was a probationer surgeon in the Navy and that enabled me to get several hops ahead. Then, thanks to a stroke of luck, I stepped into this practice at Yarbridge," he confided.

"And do you like it here?" Lydia asked.

"On the whole, yes," he answered. "It's a little town, and most people here are very nice to me. But I still have the feeling that I'm on probation, as you might say. I'm afraid my youth is a bit against me, as it suggests lack of professional experience. Sometimes I feel that some of my patients think I ought to go about with a card round my neck bearing the letter "L" in red," he added jestingly.

Lydia laughed.

"But you wouldn't go back to the Navy, would you, Dr. Regan?" she remarked.

He shook his head.

"Oh no I've had enough of a 'life on the rolling main', as the song says," he replied. "I want to settle down, and—well, someday, I hope to get married. But a doctor just starting in practice hasn't much to offer a girl unless he has a private income, which I haven't, and it means tough going to begin with."

"But surely that wouldn't matter to a girl if she were really in love," Lydia remarked. "She would be proud to feel that

she was helping the man she loved to achieve success."

David Regan shrugged.

"Well, yes, if she were well-off herself, she might," he agreed.

"Anyway, I don't profess to know anything about that," Lydia said. "My daddy doesn't happen to be a rich man. He inherited the estate from his father, and he also inherited his father's debts as well," she went on to explain with innocent candour. "I rather suspect that my daddy sometimes finds it difficult to make ends meet—not that he ever discusses such matters with me."

David lit a cigarette.

"Sometimes, Miss Trafford," he said, his grey eyes twinkling, "I am inclined to think that wealth is one of the greatest barriers in the world, and I'd hate to think that such a barrier should ever stand between you and me, if I may venture to say so."

"Would you?" Lydia murmured, lowering her eyes.

"Yes, I certainly would!" he said. "Just think if I had to say to myself every time I saw you, 'I must remember that the young lady is the daughter of a wealthy man while I'm only a struggling young doctor, and must therefore watch my step'. That would be really too bad, wouldn't it?"

"Would it, Dr. Regan?" she countered laughingly.

"Yes, of course it would," he said. He paused, then added—"I wonder if you would mind if I called you 'Lydia'? It would sound much more friendly, wouldn't it?"

"Oh no, I don't mind in the least," she answered demurely. Then, glancing at her wrist-watch. "Oh, dear, I ought to have been home long ago!"

"Yes, and I ought to have been visiting my patients," David said.

He helped her into his car, and having placed the bicycle in at the back, he got in beside Lydia and took his seat at the wheel.

"Why don't you join the local tennis club?" he asked. "You do play, I suppose?"

Lydia nodded.

"Then I suggest that I put you up for membership," David said. "They're quite a jolly crowd."

"Oh, thank you very much, Dr. Regan," she murmured.

"David to you, Lydia," he said smilingly, "you don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. Why should I mind?"

"Well, you see, you have been living in France, and I understand the French are very particular about such matters—*la jeune fille* and so forth," he said jestingly.

"Yes, I know," Lydia agreed. "We were never allowed to go anywhere without a chaperone. But this is not France, is it?"

"No, Lydia, it is not, thank goodness! Here a man can strike up a friendship with a girl without it being thought that he has some evil designs on her. Rum people, the French."

"They think the English are 'rum' people too," Lydia returned laughingly.

"Yes, I suppose they do," David said.

"Look," he went on, "that's Marston Hall over there. I expect you know Sir Robert Ambly, don't you? Now he really is a rich man—rolling, so they say. He has something to do with oil, I understand."

"Has he? Well, I haven't met him yet," said Lydia.

"I'm told that he's only just come back from the Middle East. Been engaged in some oil wangling affair, I suppose. Queer, isn't it, Lydia, that the more a man has, the more he wants?"

"Do you happen to know him?" Lydia asked.

"Well, yes, I saw him once professionally, and he struck me as being a typical tycoon!"

Lydia laughed.

"I wouldn't know a tycoon if I met one," she said. "It's not a very nice sounding name, is it?"

"No, but it's awfully descriptive—hard, ruthless and scheming," David said. "Wait till you meet Sir Robert, then I expect you'll understand what I mean."

"Is he very old?" Lydia asked.

"Oh no, thirtyish, I should say. He's good-looking, too, in a dark, sinister sort of way."

"You make the man sound rather like a villain of melodrama!" Lydia remarked, laughingly.

"Yes, and that's what he does look like, now you come to mention it," David said.

"One could easily imagine him turning his daughter out of the house on a winter night. 'Go, you are no longer daughter of mine!' Curtain and appropriate hisses from the audience."

Lydia laughed again.

"You have awakened my interest in the man," she said, "and I really must try and see him. I had an idea that such characters only existed in books or on the films."

"Well, Sir Robert is the goods all right, complete with moustache and sinister smile," David declared. "A real 'Sir Jasper' to the life, in fact!"

A few moments later he turned the car into the curved, tree-lined drive that led to The Grange. As he pulled up outside the big, mellowed brick house, the door opened and a tall, middle-aged man of military bearing with iron-grey hair and clipped moustache, appeared.

"Hullo, daddy!" exclaimed Lydia, as David helped her out of the car. "This is Dr. Regan," she added, and then proceeded to tell her father about her bicycle accident.

"I am greatly obliged to you, Dr. Regan, for your kindness in driving my daughter home," Colonel Trafford said.

He was a handsome man with ice-blue eyes that never reflected the smile which sometimes played about his lips without any hint of mirth. His manner towards David was coldly polite—rather like that of a high-ranking officer addressing a subaltern, the young doctor told himself.

David decided, regretfully, that he did not care very much for Lydia's father, and as he drove from the house, he found himself wondering how a man like Colonel Trafford could have a daughter like Lydia. Father and daughter seemed to have very little in common—the father very reserved and coldly aloof, and the daughter impulsive, warm-hearted and generous.

"I expect Lydia takes after her mother," he reflected, remembering having heard that Colonel Trafford was a widower.

"SO Dr. Regan wants you to join the local tennis club, does he? Why, my dear?" asked Colonel Trafford as he sat opposite his daughter at lunch.

Lydia smiled.

"What a strange question, daddy?" she countered. "What does one join a tennis club for, except to play tennis?"

The colonel frowned.

"Yes, but there can be other reasons, my child," he said. "Surely you are not so innocent as not to be able to guess what some of the reasons I have in mind are?"

Lydia felt herself blushing under the cold, penetrating gaze of her father's blue eyes. She had the uncomfortable feeling that he not only knew what was in her mind, but strongly disapproved of it.

"In any case, Lydia," the colonel went on, "I consider it inadvisable."

"But why, daddy?" she asked. "What can there be in my joining the tennis club?"

The colonel shrugged.

"Because I do not want you to cultivate

the acquaintance of Dr. Regan," he replied. "I will be quite frank with you, my dear. If the young man is not in love with you already, it is quite obvious to me that he is on the verge of it."

"But, daddy—" Lydia began.

"Yes, and you," he went on implacably. "are in danger of falling in love with him, even if you have not already done so. That, too, is obvious to me, and it must be stopped at once."

Lydia sighed.

"But what—but what have you got against Dr. Regan, daddy, even supposing what you say is true?" she asked. "He is a professional man, a gentleman, and—"

"All that is beside the point, my child," her father broke in. "The young man may be a saint for all I know, but he is not the man I want you to marry. He is only just starting in life as a country practitioner." The colonel hesitated, then continued—"There is something I have been wanting to tell you ever since you came back from France, Lydia, and now seems as good a time as any. The fact is, my dear, it is my wish that you marry a wealthy husband."

Lydia caught her breath, and stared at him incredulously as he went on—

"I did not send you to an expensive finishing school in Paris in order that you might marry a country doctor, Lydia. Quite the contrary, in fact. To be perfectly frank with you, I regarded it as a—well, as an investment, and I am now hoping to reap a dividend. Does that come as something of a shock to you, my dear? Ah, I see it does," he added, with a ghost of a smile. "But you will get over it, Lydia."

"So," she murmured falteringly, "I—I am to be offered for sale, am I, daddy?"

Her words startled the colonel out of his cool, self-assurance and aloofness. He shot her a swift glance, then gave a cynical smile.

"Very dramatically put, my dear," he said. "I believe it was the novelist, Thackeray, who coined the phrase 'marriage market'—in 'Vanity Fair', I think it was. Well, although it is supposed to be extinct, the marriage market is still with us, you know. Women—some of them, at any rate—either sell themselves, or are sold, and the higher the social grade, the keener the market, judging from what one reads in the newspapers. I am sorry to spoil any romantic illusions you may have acquired, but it is time you came down to earth, my dear."

"And who—and who do you want me to marry, may I ask?" she stammered, a note of defiance in her voice.

"And yet it is strange you should take this melodramatic view," her father went on, ignoring her question. "You have lived long enough in France to know that marriages are invariably 'arranged' by the parents, and that often the young people concerned have little or no say in the matter."

"But we are in England, daddy."

"Yes, I know, Lydia, and most of our young people are allowed to choose for themselves," the colonel agreed, with cold urbanity, "and the divorce statistics are very informative. The point I wish to make, my dear, is that I am not proposing to offer you up on the altar of parental selfishness. The benefits that will accrue to me, as the result of a satisfactory marriage on your part, will accrue to you in even larger measure."

"But, daddy, you haven't told me who it is you wish me to marry," Lydia reminded him, in a voice as coldly brittle as his own.

"I have not quite decided yet," he answered. "Well-to-do bachelors are apt to be choosy, you know. They can afford to be, of course. By the way, my dear," the

colonel added, as he rose from the table, "I have invited our neighbour, Sir Robert Ambly, to dinner with us to-night."

David's description of Sir Robert—a tycoon, hard, ruthless and scheming—flashed across Lydia's mind. Was this the man her father was hoping she would marry?

"And," the colonel hurried on, "I want you to be particularly nice to him, Lydia."

"So he's the man!" she breathed.

"Whether Sir Robert is the man or not, depends on you, my dear Lydia. You are young and extremely attractive, you know," her father remarked smilingly.

"And supposing I do not like him, daddy?"

"Oh but I cannot imagine a man as rich as Sir Robert not being desirable in any girl's eyes, my dear," her father returned lightly. "He can take his pick among beautiful women, you see, and I suspect that the reason he has not fallen so far, is that he has been hunted a little too avidly."

"I see," Lydia remarked thoughtfully. "Love appears to have very little to do with it, daddy."

"Love is a luxury which only the relatively poor can afford, my child. You must remember that we have a position to keep up, social obligations to fulfil and certain standards of living to maintain."

Lydia made a grimace, and her father went on—

"The fact is, my dear Lydia, I am deeply in debt, and unless I can find a considerable sum of money quite soon, I shall be turned out of here and The Grange will be sold over my head. Now have I made the situation quite clear to you?"

Lydia's heart sank, and she turned deathly pale. It seemed to her that her father had left her no choice—unless she married Sir Robert Ambly, or some other rich man, the responsibility of their being homeless would fall on her shoulders.

"Incidentally," her father went on, watching her closely, "Sir Robert is among those to whom I owe a large sum of money."

"And I suppose I am to repay him at the cost of my happiness!" she suggested, greatly daring.

Her father made an impatient gesture.

"You are talking rather like a heroine of a Victorian novel, Lydia," he retorted, in a tone of exasperation. "Are you really so innocent as to suppose that wealth, security and a recognised position in society count for nothing? Do please use your common sense, my girl. You have passed the age of childish and romantic day-dreams. You are now a grown-up young woman, and your future is in your own hands."

He then turned and strode out of the dining-room. Lydia sat there for a little while, staring straight in front of her. She had read of girls in a similar position to herself, torn between love and duty, but in the end everything had come right and they finished up in the arms of the man they loved!

But this was not a story from a book. No good fairy was likely to come along with a magic wand to put everything right for her. But common sense told her that she had her own life to live, and that if her father had got into debt, it was up to him to get himself out of it. But the duty she had been brought up to believe she owed to her father, could not be dismissed as easily as all that, nor was the alternative so simple.

Presently, her face white and set, Lydia went upstairs to her bedroom and stood gazing out of the window at the smooth lawns, the flowerbeds and the neatly trimmed hedges. Beyond these were an orchard, a vinery and glass-houses, with

woods and rolling hills in the background.

She wondered how many generations of Traffords had looked out on the peaceful scene, feeling that it not only belonged to them, but that they were part of it. Strangely enough, however, Lydia did not have the feeling that she belonged to it. She loved it all, but that was not quite the same thing, of course.

"I suppose there's something missing in me, but I'm at a loss to know what it is," she murmured disconsolately.

CROSS CURRENTS

"SIR ROBERT has asked me—as a mere matter of form, of course—if he may pay his respects to you, my dear," her father remarked, his blue eyes twinkling. "It sounds a bit old-fashioned, perhaps," he added, as he lighted a cigar, "but I appreciate the courtesy none the less."

It was the day after Sir Robert Ambly had dined at The Grange. When Lydia had retired to the drawing-room, leaving her father and his guest to their port, the question of marriage had been discussed.

To say that Sir Robert had fallen in love with Lydia, would be an exaggeration, but it had occurred to him that she was precisely the type of girl he could mould into the sort of wife he wanted.

"Naturally, Sir Robert will put the question to you himself, Lydia, but I have given him to understand there can be no doubt as to your answer," the colonel continued. "All I have to add is that, whether you realise it or not, you are one of the luckiest girls in the land, my dear."

"And did you drive a satisfactory bargain?" Lydia asked, with a cynicism that rather startled her father, and he frowned.

"I have done what is the duty of every father to do for his daughter—if he can," he returned testily. "I have found you a rich and handsome husband, what more can I do for you, I should like to know?"

"Anyway, daddy, you can't object if I resent being treated as though I were a piece of merchandise to be sold to the highest bidder," Lydia retorted. "Besides, you haven't even troubled to ask me whether or not I like the man of your choice, have you?"

"Well, don't you?"

"No, certainly not, daddy—far from it, in fact."

"Then what in Heaven's name do you want, my girl? a film Romeo, some love-sick fool to mumble poetry to you and whose idea of success is a suburban villa and a job in the City? Hang it all, Lydia," her father added in exasperation, "I can't make up my mind whether you're unbelievably old-fashioned, or repulsively modern!"

They were seated in the study, and the colonel rose to his feet and started to pace up and down the room.

"In any case, when Sir Robert calls and makes you a formal offer of marriage, I insist that you accept him. Is that understood?" he demanded, stopping suddenly in front of her.

Lydia sighed.

"I suppose I have no option in the matter," she said sadly. "I have never been taught to do anything useful, and I doubt I could even get a job as a housemaid."

"Quite" her father agreed triumphantly. "Then what sort of wife would you make for a poor man? For I imagine that in your present sentimental mood, you have a picture in your mind of love in a cottage. Sheer sentimentality, of course. But that's what the public wants, apparently, and

authors—like other tradesmen—must supply the goods demanded."

The colonel gave a scornful laugh, and tossed the butt of his cigar into the grate.

"But one thing the purveyors of such nonsense find it convenient to forget," he went on, "is the old adage that 'When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window'. However, you are going to be sensible, aren't you, my girl, and accept what the gods offer?"

"When do you expect Sir Robert to call here to see me?" Lydia murmured.

"Probably to-morrow or the day after," her father replied. "There's one thing I have already mentioned to you, Lydia, and let me repeat it—unless you marry Sir Robert Ambly, I shall be a ruined man. I'm having great difficulty in staving off my creditors, and their patience is just about exhausted."

He then left the study, but Lydia remained seated there feeling ashamed and humiliated at having surrendered to her father's wishes. Yet what else could she have done? she asked herself. What would her feelings be if she had refused and, as a result, her father were ruined and turned out of house and home?

No, the moral lessons she had learnt in childhood, could not be ignored. It was her duty, as a daughter, to obey her father. The dilemma with which she had been confronted, was as old as the hills. Countless women had been faced with it—no end of love stories were based on this endless conflict between duty and desire.

Presently, she rose and went out into the grounds. Reaching a gate giving on to the main road, Lydia paused, unable to make up her mind whether to walk on or to turn back. She was still hesitating when a car appeared round a bend, and she caught her breath as she recognised Dr. Regan sitting at the wheel.

He pulled up when he caught sight of her, and jumped out of the car.

"Hullo, Lydia!" he exclaimed delightedly. "I was thinking of calling at The Grange to inquire how you were getting on after that bicycle mishap of yours."

Her heart was beating painfully fast. Joy and despair seemed to be tearing her apart as she gazed into those adorable grey eyes of his.

"Well, I—I'm glad you did not come up to the house, David," she stammered.

"But, why, Lydia?" he asked. "Because of your father? Somehow I'm afraid I did not make a very favourable impression on him," he added, with an amused grin. "But never mind, perhaps the colonel will learn to like me when he knows me better. But tell me—are you feeling quite all right again?"

"Yes, more or less," she answered, with a forced smile. "Though the bruises I received are still a little painful."

"You know, Lydia," he said. "I realise now that I didn't make the most of my opportunity. I ought to have pretended that you were much more badly hurt than you actually were and given you a thorough examination. That would have impressed your father, perhaps, and have led to more friendly relations."

"Oh no, I'm afraid not, David," she murmured sorrowfully.

He gave her an inquiring look.

"What is troubling you, Lydia?" he asked solicitously. "Are you suffering from the after-effect of shock?"

Lydia sighed.

"It—it's nothing that I can tell you about, David," she said.

"As secret as all that?" he challenged. "But, Lydia, somehow, I have a feeling that anything which concerns you, concerns me as well. As a matter of fact, I have

completely lost my heart to you, my dear Lydia.

"I'm afraid that must sound awfully unconventional," he went on smilingly. "For we have not been properly introduced, have we? And we know almost nothing about each other. All the same, love is not governed by such things as conventions and introductions. It just happens—and no permission asked!"

He took her hand and drew her so close to him that Lydia wondered if he could feel the tumultuous beating of her heart. Then, suddenly, she burst into tears.

"Lydia dear, why are you crying?" David asked, a troubled look in his eyes. "I hope I haven't offended you. Perhaps I ought to have waited a little longer. Do you—do you think you can bring yourself to love me, too, my dear Lydia?"

"Yes, David," she murmured shakily. "Then why those tears, darling? Why this 'secret' of yours?" he asked. "We—we belong to each other now, don't we?"

His words suddenly brought Lydia to her senses. What could she be thinking about to let such an impossible situation continue? With an effort, she braced herself to say—

"No, David, we do not 'belong' to each other, and never can, I'm afraid."

"But—but why, Lydia?" he demanded, staring at her in surprise. "I love you, and you love me. What else is needed?"

She decided that it was best to tell the truth, to let him see at once how utterly impossible it was for them to continue to love each other.

"I—I am already engaged—or soon shall be—to Sir Robert Ambly," she stammered.

He gazed at her incredulously.

"You're going to become engaged to Sir Robert Ambly?" he exclaimed excitedly. "I just can't believe it, Lydia. You are only joking, aren't you?"

"I wish I were," she murmured, "but it's true, all the same, David."

The startled look in his eyes that made her shrink back from him, as she might have done from a threatened blow. Never in all her life had she felt so utterly wretched, so self-contemptuous.

"So," he muttered—and the scorn in his voice was like a whip-lash—"to you, money spells love, does it? I know, of course, that it does for many women, but I never thought that you were the sort of girl to sell herself, Lydia. But obviously I was wrong. Anyway, please accept my felicitations, Miss Trafford," he added, and then got into his car and drove on, leaving Lydia dumb with misery, anger and humiliation.

How, she asked herself, could he be so heartless, so lacking in understanding? Could he not have guessed that her betrothal to Sir Robert Ambly was not of her seeking, but had been forced upon her?

Then she remembered that David, too, had been hurt very badly. Her confession that she was about to become engaged to Sir Robert must have been a terrible shock to him, of course, and it was only natural that he should hit back at her the way he had done.

But David was now bitterly regretting the cruel words he had flung at the girl to whom he lost his heart. On the spur of the moment, he had hit out blindly without stopping to think. But the suspicion now entered his mind that Lydia had been coerced into accepting Sir Robert Ambly as her fiancé, and was acting under parental pressure too strong to be resisted.

"Colonel Trafford and Sir Robert are evidently birds of a feather!" he muttered to himself. "Both are tyrants, both are selfish and, in their respective ways, quite ruthless!"

For he had taken a dislike to Lydia's father at their first meeting. Under the colonel's handsome exterior, his military bearing and chilling politeness, David had sensed the martinet, the egoist and the self-seeking cynic.

David stopped his car outside the thatched cottage occupied by Joe Falk, Colonel Trafford's head-gardener. The old man was suffering from asthma which was sometimes so bad that he had to keep to his bed. Having knocked at the door, the doctor was admitted by Mrs. Falk, a gaunt woman who gave the impression of harbouring a permanent grudge against life.

"I told my husband that he ought to stay in bed, but he would come downstairs," she mumbled, as she stood aside for Dr. Regan to enter.

The patient was sitting by the kitchen fire pulling at an unfilled pipe. He was gaunt and lean like his wife, but unlike her the old man possessed a sense of humour and seemed able to get a little fun out of life.

"Mornin', doctor," he said, with a cheerful grin. "Brought a Number Nine with you?"

They both laughed at this time-honoured joke, and David sat down.

"How's the breathing?" he asked.

"Just about enough to keep me alive, sir, but I reckon the old pump's nigh wore out. Worked too hard all my life, I have, that's the trouble," chuckled the old man.

"Don't you believe it, Joe, hard work never killed anyone," returned David, feeling in his pocket for his stethoscope.

"You just wait till you've tried it yourself, doctor, then you'll know better," Joe said. "Now look at Colonel Trafford. He's only ten years younger than me, but you'd think it was all of thirty. And I'll tell you why. It's because the colonel has never done a hard day's work in his life."

"But how do you know that?" David asked. "Just unbutton your shirt, Joe, so that I can take soundings."

"How do I know?" echoed the old man, as he obeyed the doctor's order. "Well, I was his batman for more years than I can remember, and of all the blinkin' wangers—and they breed 'em in the Army all right—the colonel left the others at the post."

"Now, Joe, that'll do," his wife put in warningly.

"The missus is afraid the colonel might get to hear what I'm saying about him, doctor," Joe said, a broad grin on his face. "But as I've told her before, she don't need to worry. When the colonel starts to hand out the sack, I'll be the last one to get it."

"Now please stop talking for a moment," David ordered, as he placed the stethoscope in his ears. "Well, yes, much about the same," he murmured. Now take my advice Joe, and don't smoke more than you can help. In fact, it would be better if you didn't smoke at all. And what," David added as he put the stethoscope away, "makes you think that if there was any sacking, you'd be the last to get it?"

"Because of what I happen to know, doctor," Joe replied. "Maybe you think the colonel's kept me on because of sentiment, but it's nothing of the kind. It's because he's a bit afearod of me."

"Shut up, Joe, you talkative old fool!" rasped his wife.

"I'll say what I like," Joe growled back at her. "The colonel can't do worse to me, than what I could do to him—and he knows it. Yes, and when I get my final discharge, it'll be a happy day for me."

At any other time, David would not have deigned to listen to the old man's idle

chatter, but after his talk with Lydia, he had become specially interested in anything to do with Colonel Trafford.

"As to that, Joe," he remarked jestingly, "you may outlast Colonel Trafford, you know."

The old man shook his head.

"Not me," he said. "Not with my breath getting tighter and tighter the way it is. You needn't try and put any of that bedside stuff across me, doctor. I'm an old soldier. So's the colonel, but in a different kind of way, of course."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" David asked.

"Don't quite know how to put it," Joe said, "and maybe I didn't ought to try. What I mean to say is that the colonel knows every trick on the board and a few that ain't, for that matter. If he didn't, The Grange would have been sold over his head several times inside the last ten years. Why, it's not six months since he had the last lot of bailiffs in. But some ways or other, he managed to get rid of 'em, though the Lord knows how he done it."

"I see," murmured David, feeling that his suspicions were being confirmed.

"And now," went on the old man, "I hear talk that Miss Lydia's going to marry Sir Robert Ambly up at Marston Hall. Now if that ain't clever, I should like to know what is. Oh, yes you've got to hand it to the colonel."

"Matter of money, I suppose?" David suggested.

"What else?" chuckled Joe. "It ain't nothing to do with love, you can be quite sure of that. That girl's the last bit of property the colonel has to sell, and he'll stick out for the highest price he can get. Sir Robert Ambly is rolling in wealth, by all accounts, so he can afford to pay up all right."

"Yes, and it's a very good match for Miss Lydia," put in Mrs. Falk.

Her husband shrugged.

"I dunno about that, Sarah, but it's a very good match for the girl's father," he said. "The colonel didn't send Miss Lydia to an expensive school in France for nothing. He knew what he was doing of all right. Sprat to catch a whale, so to speak. A long shot, maybe, but it looks as if it's come off."

"Well, I have several more patients to see, so I must be off," said David, feeling that he had learnt quite a lot. "Now just follow my instructions, Joe," he added, pausing in the doorway, "and they won't be sounding the 'Last Post' over you for quite a while!"

As he got back into his car and drove off, David's thoughts were not with the patients he had yet to visit. He felt bitterly ashamed of the unkind and wounding things he had said to Lydia, and would have given anything to be able to recall them. But, he decided to write her an apology.

Yet it was a small consolation for him. For whether Lydia accepted his apology or not, he had still lost her. And as he thought of this and the fact that her father had literally sold her—sold her as callously as any old-time slave-dealer—David's hands clenched the steering wheel of his car till the knuckles showed white.

"And, apparently, there's nothing I can do about it," he muttered to himself, in an agony of despair. "Nothing—absolutely nothing!"

When, at last, he got back to his surgery, the waiting-room was full of patients. He had just started attending to them when Mrs. Comber, his housekeeper came to tell him he was wanted on the telephone.

"Who wants me and what for?" he demanded irritably.

"It's Sir Robert Ambly, sir," the house-

keeper replied. "The maid says that he has a severe attack of lumbago and wants you to come to Marston Hall at once."

David frowned.

"Very well, tell him I'll come when surgery's over," he said.

"Very good, sir."

He might be a millionaire, David told himself, but he would have to take his turn with the other patients. It would irritate him, no doubt, but a little annoyance would probably be good for his soul, supposing he had one!

An hour or so later, David got into his car and drove to Marston Hall.

The door was opened to him by Mrs. Sowerby, the housekeeper, a somewhat grim-faced woman.

"This way, doctor," she said, and led the way along a corridor to a room which appeared to be a study.

Sir Robert lay on a day-bed near the window, and it was clear from the glum expression on his face that he was in pain, and also in a vile temper.

"I rang you up over an hour ago!" he muttered angrily, as the door closed on his housekeeper.

"Yes, I know," David said, "but I had other patients waiting attention."

"And I've been lying here in agony while you've been dishing out bottles of medicine to panel patients!" Sir Robert protested violently. "If there'd been another doctor in the district, I'd have called him!"

"I share your regret that no other doctor was available, Sir Robert. Now tell me exactly where the pain is," said David, controlling his temper with difficulty at the other man's arrogance.

"Where you'd expect it, of course—here in the base of the spine—and it's been giving me hell!" Sir Robert flung back at him.

"Very well, I'll give you an injection," David said. "You had better take off your jacket and waistcoat, and turn over so that I can get at your back. Come, let me help you," David added.

Though he despised the man who obviously thought that his money should give him priority over everyone else, David was still a doctor whose business it was to relieve pain and suffering. He gave the injection, and made the patient as comfortable as possible. Then—

"I'll write you a prescription, Sir Robert," he said, taking a notebook from his pocket. "The local chemist will make it up for you."

He could see that the pain was now not so acute, but that the patient's temper had by no means improved.

"You can give the prescription to my housekeeper," he growled. "She'll attend to it."

It was not so much the words, as the tone in which they were uttered which made David all but lose his temper. They might have been addressed to a tradesman. Moreover, he could not forget that this was the man who, because of his wealth, had robbed him of all hope of happiness.

"I will leave the prescription on the table, and you can give it to your housekeeper yourself," David said.

"Very well," Sir Robert muttered. "How much do you want? I'm not one of your panel patients, and I'll pay you now."

David realised that it was a deliberate and calculated insult and meant as retaliation for having been kept waiting.

"I will send you my bill in due course," he said, biting back the words he would have liked to say. "I would also advise you to consult another doctor when you need attention, Sir Robert."

"That I certainly shall do!" the other

snapped. "And if insolence were an offence in your profession, Doctor Regan, I should have no hesitation in reporting you to the Medical Council."

"Yes, and I regret, Sir Robert, that impudence on the part of an unwanted patient would not justify me in refusing to see you, even if you were in direst extremity," retorted David.

It was all very foolish and very undignified David knew, but such was his intense dislike of the other man that he could not resist the temptation to administer a rebuke.

WEEKS passed. David had written a letter of apology to Lydia, but she had not replied to it. After all, David reminded himself, there was nothing she could have said. So why start a correspondence with him?

In due course, the wedding took place. It was one of the grandest affairs that Yarbridge had ever known. The church was packed lines of luxurious cars were drawn up outside. Reporters and photographers from the London papers were there since Sir Robert was such a well-known man in the City.

The "happy couple", it was made known, would spend the night at Marston Hall, and on the following day would leave in a specially chartered plane for their honeymoon in Italy.

David had just finished his evening surgery when his housekeeper rushed in to inform him that an urgent call had come from Marston Hall, and that he was wanted there at once.

"But I've already told Sir Robert Ambly to engage another doctor—" David began, when the housekeeper interrupted him.

"It was not Sir Robert who rang up, sir—it was the police!" she said. "I understood the speaker to say that—that Sir Robert is dead!"

MURDER OR SUICIDE?

"HEART FAILURE!" David announced gravely.

He and Inspector Chubb of the County Police and a constable, stood in the library at Marston Hall. On a couch lay the body of Sir Robert Ambly, and on a table by his side was an empty champagne bottle and a glass.

Inspector Chubb handed the doctor a small bottle with a label on it.

"Dormital!" David exclaimed, as he took the bottle which contained several white tablets.

"Would two or three of them, taken at one time, be likely to prove fatal, Doctor Regan?" asked the inspector.

"Well, yes, taken with alcohol—the chances are that they would," David answered.

"I see," the inspector murmured thoughtfully. "Well, I'm going to work on the assumption that Sir Robert took, or was given, several of these tablets. All the same, it seems most unlikely that he should have committed suicide—and on his wedding-day too, doesn't it, Doctor Regan?"

David nodded.

"Yes, that certainly does," he agreed, "and I should say that suicide was highly improbable."

"I understand, Doctor Regan, that you have been attending Sir Robert," the inspector remarked, after a short pause.

"Twice only," David replied.

"Well, we are left with three possibilities—suicide, accident or murder," the inspector went on. "Suicide seems unlikely.

and accident even more so. Murder suggests revenge. A man as rich as Sir Robert was, must have had a number of enemies, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think it more than likely," David replied.

Inspector Chubb paused again. Then—"By the way, Doctor Regan, you have seen Lady Ambly?"

"Yes, and she has suffered a very severe shock," David answered. "So if it can be possibly avoided, I would advise you not to ask her any questions about this tragic affair for time being."

"I quite understand, doctor," the inspector said. "It must be a very severe shock to her, of course. Do you happen to know her well?"

"Well, no, I have only met her on two or three occasions," David said.

"I see," Inspector Chubb returned thoughtfully, "very well, Doctor Regan, I don't think I need detain you any longer. I have 'phoned for our photographer and finger-print expert, and there's nothing much to be done till they arrive."

"Then I'll leave you to it, inspector," David said. "But think I had better go and see Lady Ambly again before I go, as she may need another sedative," he added, as he turned and left the room.

"Well, Moffitt, how does it all strike you?" asked the inspector when they were alone.

"Well, sir," the constable replied, "I've been recalling certain hints I've heard. I didn't attach much importance to them at the time, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

Inspector Chubb nodded.

"No smoke without fire, Moffitt," he remarked, meaningly.

"Yes, that is so, sir," the constable agreed. "One of the stories going around is that Miss Trafford—as she was then—was being forced into marrying Sir Robert. I've met the young lady once or twice, and I somehow got the impression that Sir Robert Ambly was the last sort of man she'd marry."

"Merely an impression, eh?"

"Yes, sir, and it's a bit difficult to explain. I may have been quite wrong, of course."

"And maybe not, Moffitt. But if the young lady actually was forced into this marriage, who did the forcing and why? Could it have been her father, I wonder?"

"Well, yes, I think there's reason to think so, sir," the constable replied. "It's no secret that Colonel Trafford is heavily in debt, and that he has had the bailiffs in several times."

The inspector gave a wry grin.

"Sounds a bit like a sentimental novel, Moffitt," he said. "Lovely heroine sacrifices herself to save her father from ruin and the rest of it. Still, it's been done in real life often enough, but in this case there's one thing missing."

"And what is that, sir?"

"The other man, my dear fellow. In all the stories I've read, there has always been a man whom the heroine really loves, but whom she has had to discard. The 'hero', I suppose you'd call him," the inspector added, half-quizzing, half in earnest.

The constable stroked his chin thoughtfully. He was remembering something which still seemed of little significance. And yet—

"Come, Moffitt, you've thought of something, haven't you?" the inspector said, "what is it?"

"Oh, but it seems a bit silly and—"

"Never mind that, Moffitt," the inspector broke in. "What may seem silly and trivial to you, may turn out to be a vital link in the chain of circumstances later on."

"Well, sir, old Mrs. Hogburn who lives

in a cottage on the road to Yarbridge, recently complained to me that her dog had been knocked down by a girl on a bicycle. The dog didn't get hurt very much, but the young lady was thrown off her machine on to the road. Just about the same time Doctor Regan came along in his car. He stopped and started talking to the girl, and Mrs. Hogburn says it was Miss Trafford."

"Yes, go on, Moffitt," the inspector said. "And what happened then?"

"Well, sir, Mrs. Hogburn told me that Dr. Regan and the young lady sat side by side on the bank by the hedge quite a long time and they were laughing and chatting away like old friends. She was watching them out of her bedroom window, and after a while, Dr. Regan and Miss Trafford drove off together, with the bicycle inside the car."

"In other words, Dr. Regan is the 'other man',—the 'hero' of our story. Is that the idea, Moffitt?"

"Well, yes, but it sounds a bit far-fetched, doesn't it, sir?"

"All the same, the couple might have fallen in love with each other on the spot, my dear chap. Love at first sight isn't so uncommon as you might think," the inspector added, "and love is one of the strongest motives in the world, as no doubt you know."

The constable nodded.

"Yes, I see what you're getting at, sir," he said.

"Now tell me what else you have picked up that might be a clue, Moffitt?"

"Can't think of anything at the moment, sir. But I know that quite a number of people around here who had no liking for Sir Robert Ambly."

Inspector Chubb considered for a moment or two. Then—

"We shall have to find out if Sir Robert made a will, and if so, what's in it," he said. "Suppose, shortly before his death, a will was drawn up leaving everything to his wife? Does that suggest anything to you, Moffitt?"

"Well, in that case, sir, Lady Ambly would be a wealthy woman, of course, and seeing that she's supposed to be under her father's thumb, the money would as good as belong to Colonel Trafford, wouldn't it?" the constable remarked.

Inspector Chubb nodded his agreement.

"Improbable as it may all seem, Moffitt," he said, "we have to start from somewhere. Then there is the housekeeper, and the rest of the domestic staff. They will have to be questioned, of course, and—"

The inspector broke off abruptly, as Superintendent Benson opened the door and entered.

In the meantime, a maid had taken David upstairs to Lydia's room. The room was darkened, and she was lying on the bed.

"Dr. Regan to see you, Lady Ambly," the maid announced softly, and then withdrew.

Lydia opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Yes, David," she murmured. "Does—does my father know?" she asked pathetically.

David nodded.

"Your father rang up a little while ago," he answered, "and I warned him that you must not be disturbed at present. Now, before I leave, I am going to give you another sleeping draught," David went on. "Then, after a good night's rest, you will be better able to cope with the situation." He paused, then added—"An inquest will have to be held, of course, and I'm afraid you will be called to give evidence."

"But I—but I know nothing whatever

about what happened," Lydia murmured brokenly. "When we arrived here, after the reception at The Grange, I came upstairs to this room to rest for a short time, as I was feeling dreadfully tired, and must have fallen asleep. I was awakened by Mrs. Sowerby, who told me that Sir Robert had been found dead in the library! I rushed downstairs and when we entered the library, I saw Sir Robert lying on a couch."

"Was it Mrs. Sowerby who discovered him?" David inquired gently.

"No, it was the butler, David. He told Mrs. Sowerby, and she hurried upstairs to tell me. Then she tried to telephone you, but the number was engaged, and later on, the police rang you up."

"And is that all you know about it?"

"Yes, David, everything. It was a terrible shock to me, as you can imagine. What—what do the police think about it all?" Lydia added falteringly.

"They're still in the dark, of course," David replied. "According to Inspector Chubb, the question they have to decide is whether it is a case of suicide, an accident—or murder! Suicide I regard as practically out of the question. And as for an accident, it depends on whether Sir Robert was in the habit of taking drugs. But as I have only attended him on two occasions, I am not in a position to offer any opinion on that point, of course."

David rose to his feet, and opening the little bag he had brought with him, he added—"I am going to give you a sleeping draught, Lydia," then wished her a formal goodbye and took his departure.

"CAN you tell us, Lady Ambly, whether your late husband was in the habit of taking dormital?" asked the coroner. "Dormital," he explained to the jury, "is a drug used in rheumatic and arthritic complaints. In itself, it is harmless, but taken with, or on top of, alcohol, it can prove deadly."

"No," answered Lydia. "I—I knew very little about him."

"I understand that your engagement was a very short one?"

Lydia nodded.

"You have told us, Lady Ambly," the coroner went on, "that on arriving at Marston Manor after your wedding, you went straight upstairs to your room. Did your husband say anything to you that, in the light of later events, now strikes you as significant?"

"Nothing at all," Lydia answered. "He advised me to go and have a rest, which I did."

"Were you aware at that time that Sir Robert had made a new will leaving you everything?"

"Sir, I must object to that question!" said the lawyer who had been engaged on Lydia's behalf.

"Very well, I won't indulge in a legal argument with you, Mr. Hyford, so we'll let it pass," said the coroner. "Thank you, Lady Ambly, that is all for the present."

John Linnet, the butler then testified to entering the library and finding Sir Robert lying dead on the couch. In reply to the coroner, he said that, so far as he knew, Sir Robert never took drugs, nor was he a heavy drinker.

"He was subject to severe attacks of lumbago, was he not?" suggested the coroner.

"Yes, sir," replied the witness. "On the last occasion I was directed to ring up Dr. Regan, who I understand, gave him an injection and wrote out a prescription."

"I see," the coroner said. "Well, I have seen the prescription and it is perfectly harmless—it certainly does not include

dormital. Do you happen to know whether Sir Robert was worried about anything in particular?"

"No, sir. I was not in Sir Robert's confidence to that extent."

"In other words, he seemed perfectly normal in every respect?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is all, thank you. Please call Mrs. Sowerby," the coroner said.

The housekeeper looking even more dour and grim than usual, stepped forward. Her evidence threw no further light on the affair, but she was a difficult witness and seemed very reluctant to answer questions. She had, she admitted, been with Sir Robert seven years, first as cook and later as housekeeper.

"Then you can tell us whether or no Sir Robert was ever in the habit of taking drugs, Mrs. Sowerby," suggested the coroner.

"If he was, he wouldn't have told me," was the reply.

"He never did to your knowledge, Mrs. Sowerby?"

"No, sir. But Sir Robert was away abroad for quite a long time, and I wouldn't know what he was doing then."

"You were in the employ of the deceased for many years, Mrs. Sowerby, and in spite of his absences abroad, surely you must have got to know him very well and have become acquainted with his habits. Was he, in your opinion, the sort of man who would ever think of committing suicide?"

"Well, no sir," the housekeeper murmured.

"May I take it that you got on well with him?"

Mrs. Sowerby hesitated. Then—

"Sir Robert was not an easy sort of man to get on with, but I had my living to earn and had to put up with him."

"You rather sound to me, Mrs. Sowerby as if you owed your employer a grudge," the coroner commented drily.

The housekeeper shrugged.

"Well, yes, maybe I did, sir, but that's my affair," she muttered testily. "Anyway, I wouldn't be the only one. Sir Robert didn't go out of his way to make himself loved—leastways, not unless he had a very good reason for it."

"I'm afraid that doesn't help us very much, Mrs. Sowerby," the coroner remarked. "Please call Miss Estelle Viney," he added.

A smartly-dressed and rather pretty girl then stepped forward. She admitted to being the late Sir Robert's private secretary, but stated that her work was in London and that she had never been asked to accompany him to Marston Hall.

"You are aware of the circumstances of Sir Robert's death, Miss Viney," said the coroner. "From what you know of him, had he, in your opinion, any suicidal tendency?"

"None whatever," the witness replied.

"Was he neurotic, impulsive or temperamental?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Do you know if Sir Robert had any enemies?" asked the coroner.

"Well, yes, sir, I rather think he had certain enemies in the City—I mean, men who would have gladly ruined him financially. In fact, several business rivals of his did their best to do so, but they would never have dreamed of going so far as to take his life."

"One more question, Miss Viney," said the coroner. "It has been suggested that Sir Robert's death may have been due to an accident—that he might, for instance, have mistaken the dormital tablets for aspirins or something equally harmless. Do

you consider that as being as all likely?"

"No, I do not, sir," the witness replied firmly. "Sir Robert was not a man to do anything absent-mindedly. I have never known him to take aspirins, but I am perfectly sure that he would have carefully read the label on the bottle before doing so. He was that kind of man—always very deliberate, though, when necessary, he could make his mind up in a flash."

Other witnesses followed, members of Sir Robert's indoor and outdoor staff, but nothing any of them said shed any light on the mystery. Finally the inquest was adjourned for a fortnight to enable the police to make further investigations.

IT was the day following the inquest. Inspector Chubb sat facing the Chief Constable, Sir Wilbur Hartfell. Both men looked worried.

"It has been suggested," Sir Wilbur was saying, "that we ought to call in the Yard. But I don't much like the idea, for it's rather like a confession of incompetence. Chubb, I feel that it's up to us to solve the mystery of Sir Robert Ambly's death off our own bat."

"I quite agree with you, Sir Wilbur," said the inspector.

"What is your view of the affair, Chubb, in the light of what we now know?"

"Well, sir, at present there are four possible suspects—that is to say, four people who have something to gain by Sir Robert's death," Inspector Chubb paused, then went on—"First, Colonel Trafford. Obviously he knew the terms of the will before Sir Robert married his daughter. It was part of what you might call the contract they had made, in addition to other financial considerations."

"In other words, he appears to have sold his daughter to Sir Robert, eh?" commented the chief Constable. "But the money was left to the daughter, not to her father."

"Yes, Sir Wilbur, but in my view it practically amounted to the same thing. The girl was completely under her father's thumb, and she would find it easier to obey than to resist. It is my opinion," Inspector Chubb added, "that it would seem the most natural thing in the world to her to hand over control of her money to her father."

"I see. Yes, go on, Chubb," Sir Wilbur prompted.

"Well, the girl was practically forced—persuaded, if you prefer it—into marrying Sir Robert. I have reason to believe—though I have no absolute proof—that she was told that, unless she married Sir Robert, her father would be ruined—and which he would have been, no doubt, for the bailiffs were virtually sitting on Colonel Trafford's doorstep."

"Yes, Chubb, but that doesn't suggest a reason for the girl murdering her husband on the very day of their wedding—or murdering him at all for that matter," objected the Chief Constable.

"Oh, but there's more to it than that, sir," said the inspector. "You read the evidence which Mrs. Hogburn gave at the inquest—"

"You mean, the woman whose dog capsized the girl's bicycle?" Sir Wilbur broke in. "She rather suggested that after the accident, when Dr. Regan came along, he and Lydia Trafford—er—well, seemed to take a great liking to each other, shall we say?"

Inspector Chubb nodded, and went on—

"It may be a long shot, Sir Wilbur, but supposing they really fell in love with each other? Sir Robert would then present an insurmountable obstacle, wouldn't he? And we mustn't forget that Sir Robert died on his wedding-day. That seems to me a

very significant fact."

"Yes, I see your point, Chubb," the Chief Constable remarked. "So that if, and when, the girl married the doctor later on, she would go to him—how shall I put it? Well, still untouched by any other man!"

"Exactly, sir," the inspector said. "There is no limit to what a woman in love will do. And now we come to Dr. Regan."

"I suppose his motive would be precisely the same as Lady Ambly's—to get her husband out of the way," the Chief Constable suggested. "But how? Dr. Regan only visited Sir Robert on two occasions, and, according to the coroner, the prescription he gave for his lumbago was perfectly harmless."

"Yes, Sir Wilbur, but Dr. Regan gave his patient an injection first," said the inspector. "I have been given to understand that dormital can be used in that form, and that its effects are delayed with the result that the drug is more potent in the victim's system."

The Chief Constable stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"Well, I must admit that this places the doctor rather high on the list," he said. "Now who is your fourth suspect, Chubb?"

"Sir Robert's housekeeper," the inspector replied. "As a result of careful inquiries, I've discovered that Mrs. Sowerby's daughter was once Sir Robert's mistress and that she had a child by him. The woman is now married—happily, I believe—and lives in Liverpool, where her husband is employed as a docker."

"But if the daughter is now happily married, Chubb, why on earth should Mrs. Sowerby—"

"Because she wanted Sir Robert to marry her daughter," Inspector Chubb broke in. "It's understandable, I suppose, for the girl would have become Lady Ambly and the wife of a millionaire. However, Sir Robert continued to employ Mrs. Sowerby as his housekeeper—to keep her mouth shut, in all probability."

"But if the woman had it in mind to put an end to Sir Robert's life, why did she wait so long?" asked Sir Wilbur. "All the same, you're quite right to keep her in mind, Chubb, for sometimes the slenderest threads lead to important results. And what is your next step?"

"I suggest that we leave Dr. Regan out of the case for the moment, and do our best to find out where the dormital came from," answered the inspector. "It's not a common drug, and it appears that none of the Yarrbridge chemists stock it. Moreover, it can only be obtained on a doctor's prescription."

"Enter Dr. Regan again, eh?" the Chief Constable remarked jestingly.

"Anyway, that would be the easiest solution, Sir Wilbur, and it may prove to be the right one. So I am having inquiries made of all the chemical firms from which Dr. Regan may have obtained it. If we find that he has bought the drug quite recently, it would definitely be a pointer, wouldn't it, sir?"

"Yes, but how about your other suspects, Chubb? How would any of them have got hold of the drug? How, in fact, would they know there was such a drug?" the Chief Constable asked.

"Well, yes, that is one of the problems which remain to be solved, Sir Wilbur. So far as Lady Ambly is concerned, it could be that Dr. Regan handed her the drug, in which case, it would be collusion, so to speak, wouldn't it?"

"And what about Colonel Trafford?" the Chief Constable remarked.

Inspector Chubb shrugged.

"He's a pretty dark horse, sir," he said. "I've been able to learn very little about Colonel Trafford except that he was some time in the Middle East—including Cairo."

Sir Wilbur nodded.

"Now you begin to feel you're getting warmer, don't you, Chubb?" he said. "Drug smuggling and all that sort of thing, eh? Question is—is dormital that sort of drug? Hash-ish, opium, and so forth, yes. Pleasant dreams until you wake up. But is dormital also one of the roads to a dream paradise?"

"That I don't know, sir," Inspector Chubb replied with a grin. "The point I have in mind is that if Colonel Trafford, while he was in the Middle East, did happen to contact any of the drug smugglers—well, one never knows. He might have been able to wangle things."

The Chief Constable shook his head. "I'm afraid you're on a false trail, Chubb," he said. "It presupposes that Colonel Trafford was in some way interested in illegal drug traffic, and I should find that hard to believe. After all, he was an officer in the British Army, you know."

"He was, until he was cashiered, Sir Wilbur. It happened in Egypt—misappropriation of mess funds. He was a captain at the time, and the affair was hushed up for the sake of the regiment. But it's all on the record. And since he left the army, he's promoted himself to colonel," Inspector Chubb added.

"And you mean to tell me that no one in Yarbridge knows of this, Chubb?"

"Well, you see, Sir Wilbur, it happened more than three years ago in Egypt, and it probably never got into the English newspapers at all."

"This makes the affair more complicated than ever," muttered Sir Wilbur. "Wonder what other unsavoury secrets we shall unearth in the course of the investigations. It leaves a nasty taste in the mouth."

"Yes, I quite agree, sir," Inspector Chubb remarked thoughtfully.

LYDIA, looking pale and wan, sat in the drawing-room of Marston Hall. David Regan sat opposite her, a dour expression on his face. They had been silent for some little time, when a maid-servant entered carrying a tea-tray.

She placed the tray on a low table beside Lydia and then departed.

"I shall throw up my practice and go abroad as soon as this ghastly affair is finished," David remarked, as Lydia handed him a cup of tea.

Lydia sighed.

"Oh, David, must you really?" she murmured.

"What else can I do, my dear girl? The barrier between you and me has grown higher since Sir Robert's death. You are now an almost fabulously rich girl, Lydia, while I'm only a country G.P. with just a beggarly income."

"It is not the money which stands between us, David," she said, with gentle reproach. "It is your pride."

"Call it pride if you like, Lydia, but it's honest pride. I want to support the woman I love, and not be supported by her."

"But, David—"

"Oh yes, I know what you're going to say," he interrupted. "You'll renounce your inheritance and so forth, but it would make no difference, Lydia. In fact, it would make the situation worse since it would entail a sacrifice which no man who valued his self-respect could accept."

Lydia sighed again.

"Oh, David, why are you trying so hard to make our happiness impossible?" she pleaded. "We love each other, isn't that enough? Does the money really matter one way or the other? Can't we both forget it? You know that I would come to you, in spite of everything."

"My darling, do please try and understand my point of view. Why does a man love a woman and marry her? It's because if his love is real, he wants to protect her, to shield her, to provide for her, to make her feel he is the one person in all the world on whom she can depend utterly."

"Call it masculine pride, if you will," David went on, "but it's what Nature intended—that man should be the protector and woman the protected. That may seem an old-fashioned view to you. Well, I am old-fashioned in that respect. So are lots of other men—so is Nature!"

"Oh, David, why must you say such things?" murmured Lydia, her eyes filling with tears. "Haven't I told you that I would gladly give up everything for the sake of our love? Is not refusing the woman you love because she is rich, as ignoble as to refuse her because she is poor? In either case, isn't it making money, and not love, the master?"

"No, it's not the same thing, my dear Lydia. Your argument may sound reasonable, but it isn't really," David sighed, and added—"I suppose it's impossible for a woman to see things from a man's point of view."

Lydia rose from her chair, and crossing to him, put her arms round his neck.

"David dear," she whispered brokenly, "can't you see that I'm fighting for my happiness—for our happiness? Compared with that, money is of no account. It—it's merely a—well, a vulgar intrusion. It's *us* that matter, our lives, our future. Are we to sacrifice our happiness because, by sheer accident, I have suddenly come into money?"

Her face was pressed close to his now, and David could feel her tears against his cheek.

"You—you spoke about your pride just now, my dearest," she went on. "I, too, have my pride—a woman's pride. Yet I have put it behind me to do the most humiliating thing a woman can do—plead for love withheld."

David did not speak for a moment. Then, on an impulse, his hands went up and clasped hers. He felt the quivering of her half-choked sobs as she leant against him, and his resolution faltered.

"You—you make it so terribly difficult for me, darling," he stammered in a voice as shaky as her own. "Oh, if only you could see things from my point of view!"

"And if only you could see it from mine, David," she breathed.

"That's just it, my dear Lydia," he said. "We are unable to see the same thing from the same angle. That's because you're a woman, and I'm a man. You spoke of my pride, I shouldn't be the man you know, and you love me because I am *me*, with all my faults and weaknesses. Don't you realise that, darling?"

"All that I realise, or want to realise, is that we love each other, David. Only a short while ago, there was an insuperable barrier between us. Now that barrier has gone, and it seems to me that you want to erect another—and one just as insuperable!"

"Oh, come, that's not fair, my dear Lydia."

"What do you think I care about fairness, David, when all that matters to me in life is at stake? Do please forget all about this beastly money of mine. I hate the very thought of it."

She kissed him on the cheek, tasting, as she did so, the salt of her own tears.

"If—if Sir Robert Ambly had foreseen his death, Lydia, and wanted to make sure of revenge," murmured David, "he couldn't have devised a better way than to leave you all his money."

"And supposing that were so, you are doing your best to see that he gets his

revenge, aren't you?" she retorted. "Now, please take me in your arms and kiss me David," she whispered. "I'm so, so dreadfully unhappy. Oh, if only I could die with your kisses on my lips!"

"Oh, please don't talk like that, my darling!" he breathed.

"But it's true, David dear. All I have to live for is *you*. My father as good as sold me, and I submitted to it all because it seemed the only way to save him from financial ruin, and had I not done so, it would have been on my conscience for the rest of my life. But I have done my duty—if duty it was—and now I have the right to some happiness. And yet you who love me—"

Her voice faltered and broke. David impulsively threw his arms around her and next moment his lips were pressed to hers in a long, passionate kiss that had more pain than joy in it, and which seemed to them both to wrench their very heart-strings so that the agony of it was almost unbearable.

Breathless, they drew apart, gazing into each other's eyes, reading in them not hope, but frustration.

"I—I ought not to have done that," David murmured shakily, and would have put her from him, but Lydia resisted and clung to him more tightly still.

She raised her face once more to his, her lips demanding, provocative, compelling, and because he was only human, David surrendered, his lips again pressing on hers, drinking in their sweetness, their passion, their fathomless yearning.

Once again they drew apart, breathless, trembling and, in some queer way—frightened. Suddenly, Lydia moved away from him, sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Lydia dear," David whispered hoarsely and moved towards her, but she motioned him away.

"No" she breathed, "it—it was all wrong, all wrong, and I was to blame. When you rejected our love, David, I should have been strong and told you to go. But please leave me now, before I weaken again."

David hesitated for a long moment, torn between conflicting emotions. He did not want to leave her like this, yet to remain, to try once more to make her see his point of view, would be endangering her self-control, as well as his own.

It was at this moment that the drawing-room door opened and a bewildered-looking maid appeared.

"A—a lady has called to see you, Lady Ambly," the girl stammered.

"A lady?" repeated Lydia, rising to her feet. "Did she give you her name?"

"She—she said she was Lady Ambly."

"I suppose, Anne, you mean that she said she wanted to see Lady Ambly, don't you?" Lydia suggested, with a forced smile.

"No, m'lady, she said she was Lady Ambly."

Lydia and David exchanged puzzled glances.

"Well, you had better show her in," said Lydia.

"And I'd better go," David remarked quickly.

"No, David, please stay," Lydia said. "I—I may need you."

Before David had time to say any more, the door opened and a tall, slim, smartly-dressed and rather beautiful brunette was ushered into the room. She gave a quick glance from one to the other, then said smilingly—

"I suppose you are rather surprised at my calling myself 'Lady Ambly'?"

"Well, yes, I am," murmured Lydia, placing a chair for her to sit down.

"Naturally," the visitor said coolly.

"Well, no doubt you will be interested to learn that Sir Robert Ambly was my husband. The queer thing about it is that he did not know it! I suppose that sounds rather curious to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does rather," agreed Lydia, trying to keep her voice steady. "Allow me to introduce Doctor Regan, a friend of mine," she added, turning to David.

David and the visitor bowed slightly to each other.

"Sir Robert and I," she went on, "were married eighteen months ago in Buenos Ayres where we first met at my father's house. Robert and my father were business acquaintances and had put through several big deals together. My maiden name is Ansell—Inez Ansell. My father is English, but my mother was Spanish."

She paused, and then continued—

"The day before Sir Robert left happened to be my birthday, and my father gave a big party at his *hacienda*, some miles outside the city. There were over a hundred guests present, and during the evening, someone suggested charades. So several of us went into another room to fix on a word and to decide what the scenes should be. One of them was to be a wedding I was to be dressed as a bride, Sir Robert was to be the bridegroom, my brother was to give me away, and a friend of his was to be the parson.

"It was a huge success," she rambled on, "especially the wedding scene which we had tried to make as realistic as possible, even to my having a ring placed on my finger by my 'bridegroom'. Next morning Sir Robert flew back to England, and, as you say in this country, that seemed to be that!"

She paused again, and Lydia and David sat silent and tense, sensing that the real revelation had yet to come.

"Perhaps I ought to mention," she continued, "that by the time the charades started, some of the guests were a little the worse for drink, and it partly accounts for what happened. Well, the morning after the party, my brother came to me looking very perturbed, and what he told me, gave me the greatest shock of my life, for my marriage to Sir Robert during the charade, had actually been a real marriage, though, of course, we were both unaware of it at the time.

"My brother informed me that the man who had performed the ceremony, was actually a real parson. His name was Arthur Selby. He had been ordained after leaving Cambridge University and been appointed curate in some parish or other. But he soon gave up the Church and came out to the Argentine to live.

"But he had never been 'unfrolocked', and was still what I think is called 'licensed to perform marriages and such like functions. Apparently, being slightly intoxicated at the time, he had forgotten all about this, and it was not until the following morning, when he had come to his senses again, that he realised what he had done."

"But why didn't you send a cable to Sir Robert to let him know about it at once?" David asked. "It was as important to him as to you, of course."

"Well, you see, Doctor Regan, first of all, we wanted to make sure that the marriage actually was a real one," she said. "Although Mr. Selby believed it was, we wanted confirmation from some recognised authority. We should have looked very foolish if we had cabled Sir Robert that he was a married man, only to find out later that he wasn't."

"And so you got the confirmation you needed, apparently?" suggested David.

The woman nodded.

"Yes we did," she said. "We were informed by a high ecclesiastical authority

that the marriage was legal and binding. But we decided to keep the secret to ourselves for the time being—only I, my brother, and Arthur Selby really knew about it."

"And were you in love with Sir Robert Ambly?" asked David.

"Well, no, not really," the woman answered. "But something happened which put the affair right out of my head. My father was thrown from his horse and seriously injured. For weeks he hovered between life and death and I helped to nurse him. It was during this time that my brother promised to write to Sir Robert and tell him about the marriage, and he assured me that he had done so.

"But I never received any reply from Sir Robert. So perhaps he never received the letter. On the other hand, he may have decided to ignore it so that he could pretend, in case the matter ever cropped up, that he had no suspicion that he was my husband."

"I—I see," David remarked. "Then what has made you come to England and claim that you are Lady Ambly?"

"A notice in an English newspaper that Sir Robert Ambly was to be married to a Miss Trafford of Yarbridge, England," she replied. "I realised, of course, that if he did this, he would be committing bigamy. So I sent him a cable requesting him to stop the marriage and then booked my passage to England by air."

"And you now know, I suppose, that you have arrived too late?" remarked David.

She nodded.

"When I did arrive in England, I saw in a newspaper that Sir Robert had married Miss Trafford the day before," she said. "And then you heard that he was dead."

She nodded again.

"In a will, made shortly before his marriage to Miss Trafford, Sir Robert left most of his wealth to his wife, but without specifically naming her."

"That is a matter about which I know nothing as yet, Doctor Regan," she said.

"There is much that has to be straightened out yet," David went on. "As a matter of fact, there is a suspicion that Sir Robert was murdered."

"Murdered?" the woman repeated, staring at David incredulously. "Oh, this is dreadful! But I—but I have seen nothing about it in the newspapers."

"No, nothing about it has appeared in the papers, so far," David said. "Sir Robert's death was due to a drug called dormital. Have you ever heard of such a drug, may I ask?"

"No, I have not," she answered.

"Then you, at any rate, will not be under suspicion, since you say you did not arrive in England until after Sir Robert's death."

When the woman had taken her departure, David and Lydia stood looking at each other in dead silence for some moments, both feeling a little dazed by this startling development.

"So," David said at last, "you are not a wealthy widow after all, my dear Lydia!"

Lydia gave a quivering sigh.

"Oh, David," she murmured. "I feel as if a terrible burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Now—now I am free to love!"

"And be loved, my darling," he said, taking her in his arms.

THE MILLS OF GOD.

COLONEL TRAFFORD paced up and down his study at The Grange, his hands clasped behind his back, his face a mask of mingled frustration and

fury.

When it first came to his ears that another woman, and not Lydia, was the real Lady Ambly, widow of the late Sir Robert, he had refused to believe it. But the lawyers had soon obtained evidence to prove that the girl from the Argentine was right, and that in the eyes of the law she was Sir Robert Ambly's widow and, therefore, heiress to his wealth.

Lydia now sat watching him, pale-faced but outwardly composed. Though she had obeyed her father by agreeing to marry a man she did not love, her very obedience had killed all her affection for him.

"This damnable woman turning up has ruined me beyond hope of recovery," he declared beside himself with anger. "When your engagement to Sir Robert was announced, I had credit thrust on me, and naturally I took advantage of it. And now you've let me down, haven't you, my girl?"

"That is a very unfair thing to say, and you know it!" cried Lydia rebelliously. "For your sake I agreed to marry a man I didn't love, and whose fault was it if he turned out to be married already? Surely not mine!"

"It doesn't matter a hang whose fault it was," he flung back at her. "The fact remains that we shall soon be kicked out of here and the place put up for auction—that is, unless I can think of some other well-to-do husband for you, my girl."

"Well, let me say at once, father, that I am going to marry Doctor Regan," she retorted.

He swung round sharply, and glared at her.

"Marry Regan—that penniless nobody?" he cried. "You—you must be mad! Anyway, I forbid it."

"All the same, it will make no difference, father," Lydia said. "I'm going to marry the man I love, and who loves me."

"Love!" he shouted contemptuously. "You talk like a silly, sentimental school-girl! How many people d'you suppose marry for love? They marry for a home, for money, for position. Evidently, you've been reading a lot of sickly, romantic novels, you little fool! But let me tell you this—you're only nineteen, my girl, which means you're not yet of age and cannot marry without my consent."

He hesitated, then went on—

"I've still got another shot in my locker. Keith Barkley is nearly as rich as Robert Ambly. He's a South African, and is in the diamond trade. I met him in my club, and must ask him down here to meet you."

"But I'm not on the market any more, father!" Lydia said, with biting scorn.

"What's that you say?" he demanded.

"In other words, I'm not for sale, father," she answered coolly. "You bullied me into obedience once, and it's not going to happen again. I may be only nineteen, but in all other respects I'm quite grown up, you know."

Realising that Lydia meant what she said, Colonel Trafford suddenly changed his tactics, and sinking into a chair, he shook his head sorrowfully, and sighed.

"So," he muttered, "this is the reward I get for bringing you up as though you were the daughter of a millionaire and for pouring out money on you the way I have done, Lydia." He sighed again, and added—"Why, you have changed beyond recognition."

"Yes, father, I know I have changed," she said, "and you are responsible for it. You sold me into bondage, and from now on I—"

"All right, my girl," he broke in impatiently. "Let's cut out sentiment. let's

forget all the money I have lavished on you. You've become more hard and ungrateful than I would ever have thought possible. Now we can get down to brass tacks. Unless I can pacify my creditors, I shall be without so much as a roof to cover me—and that goes for you, too. If I'm penniless, so will you be. What have you to say to that?"

"I shall get a job and work for my living," Lydia replied.

The colonel gave a scornful laugh.

"You're talking arrant nonsense, my girl," he said. "You couldn't even get a job as a kitchen-maid. But there's still one chance left to us to retrieve our fortunes. This man, Keith Barkly, I spoke about just now—"

"I have already told you, father, that I am not for sale any more," she interrupted.

"Anyway, I shall invite him to come here and stay with us for a few days. I take it that I may count on you to be polite to him?"

"Yes, of course," Lydia answered. "Why shouldn't I be polite to him?" she added, and then left the room.

Later on in the day, she met David and told him of her father's refusal to consent to their marriage. This was a new obstacle which neither of them had foreseen, and David frowned.

"Hang it all, darling," he said, "no sooner is one obstacle to our marriage disappears than another is sprung on us!"

"Yes, I know, David dear," Lydia murmured. "But the obstacle which would have separated us forever has vanished, hasn't it?" she added soothingly. "We are at least free to love each other."

David nodded.

"Yes, that is so, my dearest," he agreed, smiling into her blue eyes. "Nobody can ever take you away from me now, my love."

David told her that when he called to see Joe Falk on the previous day, he found the old man the worse for drink.

"You know, Lydia," he said, "it strikes me there's something queer about the old chap's relations with your father. He has dropped several curious hints to me lately, as though there were certain things he knew about the colonel which were best left unsaid. Evidently, Falk has a grudge of some kind against him, and I've often wondered why the old man has stuck to the colonel all these years, after leaving the Army."

"I suppose Joe feels he has what he would call a 'cushy job', and doesn't want to throw it up," suggested Lydia.

THAT same evening, Joe Falk's "missus", as he called her, was giving him a "piece of her mind" as they sat facing each other across the kitchen table.

"You're a fool, Joe Falk, and a drunken fool at that!" she was saying. "I dunno what's come over you lately, quarrelling with the colonel the way you do and him able to throw us out of the cottage any moment he likes."

"But I can do a lot worse to him, than what he can do to me," growled Joe. "That's what I've been reminding him of. Tried to do the 'on parade' stuff with me this morning, he did—stand to attention when you address me', style, and I'm not standing for it."

"Look, Colonel," I says, 'you and me's out of the army now. You can't give me a pack drill, nor C.B. I'm as good a man as you,' I says. And you should have seen his face, Sally!"

"I wonder he didn't throw you out of the house like you deserved," said his wife, with bitter scorn. "Can't understand why the colonel hasn't sacked you long ago,

you being that free with your tongue!"

Joe gave a drunken chuckle.

"Maybe you can't understand, old girl, but the colonel can," he said. "I know how to keep my mouth shut when it suits me to do so. All the same, I don't mind letting you into a secret. Sally. You don't know what stands between the colonel and quod, do you? Well, I'll tell you—it's me!"

"You're drunk, Joe, that's what's the matter with you," his wife muttered contemptuously.

"Drunk, am I? Well, maybe I am a bit," Joe grinned, and went on—"Yes, I must be, or I wouldn't be opening my trap so wide. But drunk or sober, I don't like seeing people done wrong to—especially a sweet young lady like Miss Lydia."

"You're talking utter rot, Joe. Why should the colonel wrong his own daughter?" Mrs. Falk demanded.

"His own daughter did you say?" Joe cried laughingly. "That's what you think, Sally. And it's what Miss Lydia thinks, come to that. Maybe there's been no harm in it up till now, but it's about time Joe Falk said his piece."

"You'd better go and lie down and sleep it off, and p'raps you'll come to your senses by the time you wake up," Mrs. Falk advised tartly.

"It won't make no difference whether I sleep it off or not, old girl," Joe retorted. "I been waiting fifteen years for the moment what's coming. And why have I waited? 'Cause it suited me. His nibs would have liked to get rid of me long ago, but I've clung to him tighter'n what the ivy clings to the oak. Yes, and it all started way back in India when he was a subaltern and—"

"Shut up, Joe!" his wife broke in quickly. "There's Dr. Regan coming up the garden path. Now go and wait for him in the parlour."

When David knocked at the door, it was opened to him by Mrs. Falk.

"Can I speak to you a minute, doctor, before you go and look at Joe?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Of course, Mrs. Falk. Is your husband's asthma worse?"

"It's not that, doctor," Sarah whispered. "What I'm afraid of is that he's losing his senses. Just before you came, he was saying the most ridiculous things. But he isn't properly sober, you see."

"Is that so?" David murmured. "And what has he been saying, Mrs. Falk?"

"Oh, a lot of crazy rubbish about him and Colonel Trafford, sir. You'd think, by way the foolish man talks, that he and not the colonel was boss. Whether it's due to the drink Joe's been taking lately, or to downright lunacy, I really don't know."

"Very well, I'll go and have a look at him. Mrs. Falk. He's in the parlour, I suppose?"

Mrs. Falk nodded, and opened the parlour door. David found his patient lying on the couch. He looked up and grinned.

"Hullo, doctor!" he muttered thickly. "I expect the missus has been talking to you, hasn't she?"

"Well, yes, and she seems a bit alarmed about you?" David replied.

"Anyway, the old girl nagged me into saying things," Joe said. "She'd got to hear that me and the colonel had a few words this morning. I s'pose one of the servants must have told her about it."

"And what did you and Colonel Trafford fall out about, may I ask?" David remarked.

"Well, you see, I told him I wanted some money, and the colonel tried to come the old military stuff with me," Joe said. "He'd forgot about what I knew until I reminded him of certain things. Then he went off the deep end, and I left him to do a bit of quiet thinking. I lay he did, too!"

Joe sniggered, and went on—

"Me and the colonel are birds of a feather, as the saying is, doc. Both old soldiers we are, and I don't mind letting you into one little secret, seeing you're an ex-service man yourself. Navy, wasn't it?"

David nodded.

"Well, when the colonel was a subaltern in India, and I was his batman," Joe continued. "I fell for a Eurasian girl—Anglo-Indians, they call 'em—and she was a proper peach if ever there was one. I wanted to marry her, and she was willing. Then, one day, Second-lieutenant Trafford, as he was then, happened to cast his greedy eyes on her, and that was the end of my hopes."

"I wouldn't have minded so much if he'd married the girl," Joe added. "But he didn't, not even when she had a baby by him, and in the end the poor girl drowned herself and the child with her."

"I see," David remarked. "And yet, apparently, you still continued as Colonel Trafford's batman, and have remained with him after you both left the army."

"Yes, and after he was cashiered!" Joe muttered grimly. "And I'll tell you why, doctor. I wanted to get even with him. I wanted to revenge the death of the girl I loved. But I decided to bide my time, and when the colonel forced Miss Lydia to marry Sir Robert Ambly, I knew the time for revenge was pretty near. Then that woman from South America turned up and claimed that she—that she was the rightful Lady Ambly."

Joe gritted his teeth and broke off. David realised that the old chap was in a drunken stupor and decided to cut his visit short.

"Well, and how is the asthma?" he asked. "Are you feeling any better after taking that new medicine I prescribed for you?"

Joe hiccupped.

"Aye, I—I think my breathing has been a bit easier, doctor," he mumbled.

"Good!" said David. "Now take my advice and keep off the drink, Falk, or it is going to put an end to you quicker than the asthma," he added, and then wished him good-day.

David finished his rounds in a very pre-occupied mood. Though he tried to assure himself that Joe Falk had merely been talking a lot of boastful nonsense, he could not get it out of his mind that there might be a certain amount of truth in what the old man had said—that there had been some smouldering hostility existing between the two men that had now broken into open warfare!

IT was three days later when, as David was taking surgery, Inspector Chubb rang up requesting him to come to The Grange at once.

"What has happened?" David asked.

"Colonel Trafford has shot himself," came the grim reply. "He's not dead, but I'm afraid he can't last long," Inspector Chubb added, and then cut off.

When he arrived at The Grange, David found Colonel Trafford lying on a couch in the library. One glance was sufficient to tell him that the end was near.

The dying man opened his eyes and seemed to recognise David, who was bending over him.

"Dr. Regan?" he gasped.

David nodded.

A pause. Then—

"My bureau—left-hand drawer—papers—"

The words ceased, and after a few moments David turned to Inspector Chubb who, with P.C. Moffitt, were standing looking on.

"He's gone!" David murmured gravely.

"Do you happen to know if Miss Trafford is in?" he inquired.

"I don't think so. She was out when we arrived here," Inspector Chubb replied. He hesitated, then added—"We have a warrant for Colonel Trafford's arrest on a charge of murder."

"Murder?" repeated David, staring at the inspector aghast.

"Yes, Dr. Regan, the murder of Sir Robert Ambly. His accomplice, Mrs. Sowerby, the housekeeper at Marston Hall, has already disappeared," Inspector Chubb added.

"But I—but I don't understand," stammered David.

"But you soon will, Dr. Regan," the inspector said. "We have reason to believe that those dormital tablets were given to Sir Robert Ambly by his housekeeper. The woman appears to have had a secret grudge against Sir Robert because of something he was supposed to have done to her daughter."

"Apparently," Inspector Chubb continued, "Colonel Trafford got to know about this, and he, too, wanted to take revenge on Sir Robert when he found that his daughter had been baulked of the fortune that would have been hers had not the first wife turned up so unexpectedly

from South America. We have been greatly helped in our investigations by a man named Falk who, it seems, has for a long time been nursing a bitter enmity against Colonel Trafford, and it was he who gave us the 'low-down' on the Colonel's secret meetings with Mrs. Sowerby."

"I—I see," David murmured thoughtfully. "And did Colonel Trafford shoot himself in your presence?"

"Yes, doctor, it all happened in a flash," Inspector Chubb replied. "I had just started to read the warrant to him when the Colonel whipped a revolver out of his coat pocket and shot himself. He evidently knew he was dying, for after I had 'phoned to you he openly confessed to his part in the murder of Sir Robert Ambly."

IT was six months later, and David and Lydia were now married. They sat side by side on a rocky ledge overlooking a charming little Cornish bay. Behind them lay the picturesque little town of St. Trenwin, where David had recently acquired a practice.

"It's strange," Lydia remarked, her head resting on her husband's shoulder, "but even now, David I'm sometimes a little afraid that I may wake up and find that all

this is just a lovely dream."

"Oh no, it's no dream, my dearest," he said. "But I must confess that I was as deep in despair as you until I happened to find those papers in the drawer of the colonel's bureau, proving that you were not his daughter."

"I wonder why he wanted to keep it secret from me?" murmured Lydia.

"He had his reasons, I suppose," David said. "As you know now, darling, your parents died during a cholera epidemic in Bombay. Also, you know that your father, Major Winton, and your mother, were great friends of Trafford's wife, who was alive then; that they appointed Trafford your guardian in the event of anything happening to them, and that in his will your father left an ample sum of money to provide you with a good education."

Lydia nodded, and David went on—

"You were a baby when you lost your parents, and as Trafford never told you who you really were, you naturally grew up believing yourself to be his daughter. But let's try and forget it all, my love. It's all over now, isn't it, darling?"

"Yes, David dear, it's all over now—and only love remains," Lydia whispered.

THE END.

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LOVES PRISONER

By Helen Crane

THE HANGING SWORD

BENSON'S SCHOOL, though founded in 1650 by a rich wool merchant for the "goodly and pious education of twelve poor scholars", did not rank among the principal English public schools. But until the middle of the nineteenth century it was reasonably prosperous, and then, due partly to the shifting of the population, and partly to the fact that it concentrated on a classical education, it began to decline.

It was true that, some years later, Benson's compromised with modern requirements by adding a laboratory, but it was a make-shift, half-hearted affair with a science master who took little interest in his work, and less in his pupils. They were shown a few simple experiments, a few chemical equations, and there the matter ended.

So, year by year, the number of pupils decreased until, at last, the Board of Governors was faced with a serious financial deficit. The headmaster, John Ingleford, M.A. who had been thirty years at Benson's, was not to blame, for besides being a first-rate classical scholar, he was popular with boys and parents alike.

Now, as he sat at breakfast with his two daughters, he was reading a letter from the chairman of the Board of Governors, Sir Philip Shalford. Judging from his expression as he read, the letter was not a very comforting one.

"Daddy, you're letting your coffee get cold," admonished Joan, the elder of the two sisters.

"What did you say, my dear?" murmured her father absent-mindedly.

"Your coffee, daddy, it's getting cold."

"Er—yes, of course," he muttered, and took a gulp of coffee, with his eyes still fixed on the letter.

Presently he put the letter down with a heavy sigh.

"Is it from Sir Philip, daddy?" Joan ventured to ask.

"Yes, my dear. He is coming over to see me either to-day or to-morrow."

"That sounds rather ominous, doesn't it, daddy?" Fay, his younger daughter, ventured to remark.

"Well, yes, I'm afraid it does, my child. It sounds as if the governors had come to some definite decision and, I fear, not a very pleasant one."

"You—you mean they're going to close the school, daddy?" stammered Joan.

"Oh, no, surely not!" cried her sister in dismay. "Not after it has been in existence for over three hundred years. The governors couldn't possibly be such—such vandals!"

"I scarcely think such an action could be described as vandalism, my dear, although, were the ancient buildings destroyed, that would be an appropriate description," said Mr. Ingleford, with a faint smile.

"Then what do they propose to do, daddy?" asked Joan, as she handed him another cup of coffee.

"They do not actually propose anything, Joan, but I have a shrewd suspicion as to what they have in mind," he answered, "I rather think they intend to transfer Benson's—or, at any rate, the pupils and staff—to St. David's at Wilmington. In other words, St. David's would swallow up Benson's."

"Oh, daddy, but surely they could not do that!" said Joan. "As you know, St. David's hasn't been established fifty years and it's practically without any traditions. It—it would be quite unthinkable!"

"Nevertheless, that is what I foresee, my dear Joan. And as for tradition, that counts for very little these days, especially when weighed against financial considerations."

"And if it did happen, daddy, would you go, too?" asked Fay.

"I doubt it, my child. In any case, it would not be as headmaster. The lesser does not absorb the greater, you see, and St. David's has several hundred pupils. Besides," her father added, with a wry smile, "I am accounted old-fashioned, which seems to be regarded as a heinous offence nowadays!"

"Oh, daddy dear, and look at the number of brilliant scholars you have turned out!" dear Joan.

"Yes, my dear, but all classical men—no scientists, no great soldiers, no one who has become eminent in medical research. These are the people who count to-day. But it's not for me to complain. Times and fashions change—and my offence is, I suppose, that I haven't changed with them."

With a shrug, Mr. Ingleford folded up his table napkin and rose from the table.

"It is time I took prayers," he said. "Now, where is my gown?"

Fay fetched his gown and helped him into it, then handed him his somewhat battered mortar-board. The two girls stood at the window and watched him cross the ancient quadrangle to the school building of mellowed brick.

"Poor daddy!" murmured Joan. "I'm afraid it would break his heart if he had to leave this place."

"Apart from the school, it wouldn't break my heart at all," said Fay. "After all Bridgefield isn't much more than a sprawling village. There's nobody worth knowing here and next to nothing to do."

By "nobody worth knowing", Fay meant that there were no eligible young men, and that the chance of getting a husband was discouragingly remote. Yet she was an extremely pretty girl with corn-coloured hair and gentian-blue eyes—she would have been even more attractive but for her discontented expression and lips too often pouting with ill-humour.

Her elder sister was also very attractive, but in a more mature fashion. Joan's hair was fair, too, and her eyes were a deeper blue and somehow suggested a depth of feeling, a capacity for emotion, that her sister's did not.

Fay gave an impatient toss of her head, and went on—

"Oh, I know what you're thinking, Joan. You're thinking that I ought to be happy and satisfied to spend my life here in this lovely old place amidst historic surroundings and all the rest of it, aren't you? Well,

I'm not."

Joan shook her head, and started to clear the breakfast table.

"Oh, no, I wasn't thinking of that at all, my dear," she said. "Indeed, I sometimes feel that way myself."

"Do you really?" exclaimed Fay, staring at her sister in surprise. "But I thought you were so very content, Joan—I mean being mistress of the house."

"All the same, I would prefer to have a home of my own," Joan said. "I mean, a home one has planned oneself, to suit one's own taste, not one that has been planned by other people long, long ago."

Fay nodded understandingly.

"I've always thought of this place as—well, as sort of sacred because mummy lived and died here, and we were both born here," she remarked.

"Yes, I have, too," said Joan. "It's not the house itself that I've grown to dislike, but the stuffiness of it all, the feeling of being 'enclosed', as it were. Then there is the old-fashioned Victorian furniture and the—Oh well, you know what I mean, don't you, dear?"

Fay nodded again, and Joan went on—"Between ourselves, Fay, I believe mummy felt much the same about it as we do, before she died. In fact, mummy hinted as much to me. She said what a pity it was that each succeeding headmaster here had to take over all the furnishings of his predecessor."

"I didn't know that," Fay remarked.

"Well, it's the rule, apparently," Joan said. "But just think of the huge expense of refurbishing a rambling old place like this!"

"Yes, of course," Fay murmured. "Do you know, Joan," she added, "I almost hope Benson's will be what daddy calls 'swallowed up' by St. David's. Then we'd be able to make a fresh start and say good-bye to all this Victorian clutter, wouldn't we?"

"Yes, but what about daddy?" Joan asked. "He'd be losing his school to which he has devoted the best part of his life, and that, I'm afraid, would almost break his heart."

"Yes, I know," Fay said. "Naturally, I'm sorry for daddy, but after all, Joan, he has had his life, hasn't he? I mean, daddy has done the things he wanted to do—he was able to marry the woman he loved and to have children. But what about us, Joan? We've had no opportunity at all to do the things we've wanted to do, have we? I've never even had a boy friend, and as things are, I am never likely to, that is unless I can break the chains that bind me to this place."

"Well, you could leave here if you really wish to, couldn't you?" Joan said. "You know that Mr. Marsham offered you a job."

"And what good would a job like that be to me?" demanded Fay. "I'd still be here in the dead-and-alive backwater of Bridgefield where all the men are either old or married—or just oafs! The fact is, Joan, you and I are almost as segregated as nuns!"

Joan smiled.

"Well, we shan't be if we go to Wilmington," she said. "As you know, it's quite a big town and there'll be some sort of social life there."

"But suppose daddy refuses to go there and decides to retire?" suggested Fay. "He'd probably take a cottage here in Bridgefield, and we'd be no better off than we are now—worse, in fact, because we should have lost the prestige of living at Benson's."

Joan started to put away the crockery in the huge kitchen, after they had finished washing-up the breakfast things. There

had been two servants in the house when their mother was alive, but times had changed since then, and now it was almost impossible to get domestic help of any sort.

Old Mrs. Guffin, who lived in a nearby cottage—came in twice a week—when her rheumatism permitted—to do a little scrubbing and cleaning. Otherwise, the two girls had to run the straggling old house by themselves.

"By the way, Joan, do you ever hear from that boy you met at the Red Cross dance?" Fay remarked.

"Oh, you mean Roger Brent, I suppose?" Joan suggested, with forced lightness.

"Yes, and I think he came from Cornwall, didn't he?"

"He wasn't Cornish," answered Joan. "He was studying at the Camborne School of Mines. He's probably got his diploma and left by now."

"And did he ever write to you, Joan?"

"Yes, he wrote twice."

"And you replied, of course?"

Joan shook her head.

"What would have been the use?" she replied wearily. "It would only have encouraged him—"

"Oh, then he did fall for you, apparently?" Fay broke in laughingly. "I always suspected he had, but you were so 'cagey' about it I never liked to broach the subject."

Joan shrugged. Her thoughts rushed back to that wonderful evening in early spring when, for the first time in her life, love had come to her. It had been so sudden and unexpected.

A good-looking man she had never seen before had asked her for a dance. His age was about twenty-five, she supposed—tall, well-built, rather dark and with grey eyes that made her think of sea-washed pebbles.

The seductive strains of the Blue Danube had just struck up. It was by "special request", and Joan had surrendered to his arms almost without thinking. While they circled the floor, he asked her what her name was and she told him.

"Oh, then you are the daughter of the headmaster of Benson's, Miss Ingleford!" he had laughingly exclaimed. "Really, you make me feel a little afraid!"

"But why? Afraid of what?" Joan had demanded.

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"Oh, I don't know, but I suppose you're frightfully learned and all that sort of thing. I expect you know Latin and Greek and so on," he added vaguely.

Joan had smiled, and said—

"I've never learnt Greek and, I'm afraid, have forgotten most of my Latin."

"Same here," he had confessed, grinning.

"By the way, my name's Brent—Roger Brent. I'm studying at the Camborne School of Mines at present, but I hope to get my 'ticket' before the year's out."

"And then?"

"Oh, well, I expect to get a job with some mining concern—probably in South Africa."

"I see," Joan had remarked. "And what, may I ask, are you doing here in Bridgefield, Mr. Brent?"

"I'm staying a few days with an aunt of mine," he had explained. "She lives in a village called Pebjoy, about five miles from here."

When the dance ended, he escorted Joan to a seat and sat down by her side. They said nothing for a few moments, but Joan was curiously aware of his presence, his nearness, his virile masculinity. No other man she had ever met had affected her in quite this way, and she felt a tiny bit frightened, though she could not have said why.

"Have you lived here all your life, Miss Ingleford?" he asked, smiling at her.

Joan nodded.

"And you enjoy living a quiet life in the country, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Joan answered. "Not that it matters one way or the other. You see, since my mother died several years ago, I have had to keep house for my father, and my sister Fay."

"Then is your sister younger than you?" he probed.

"Yes, four years younger," Joan explained.

"And you have come to the dance alone, apparently?"

"Well, yes," she replied. "As this is a Red Cross function, my father thought that some member of the family ought to be present."

The orchestra struck up again, and as if by mutual consent, they stood up. Roger held out his arms to her, and they took the floor with the other dancers.

When the dance ended, they strolled out into the garden at the back of the hall. It was a lovely night, and in the silver light of the moon everything looked dream-like and unsubstantial. No one appeared to be there except themselves.

"It's nice and cool out here, isn't it?"

Roger remarked, as they sat down. "You know," he added, his voice low and attuned as it were to the night, "this setting rather reminds me of a play I saw when I was in London a few weeks ago."

"Oh yes, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' I suppose," Joan suggested.

Roger nodded.

"That and something else as well, Miss Ingleford."

"Yes?" she prompted.

"Well, of a fitting quotation. I expect you know it: 'How silver sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,'" he quoted softly.

Joan had heard those words uttered on the stage, and she had read them in her volume of Shakespeare, but their wistful sweetness had never thrilled her as they did at that moment. She was aware of her heart beating faster, and of a yearning that was new and strange to her.

He was speaking again, very softly, and his hand had sought and found hers.

"You and I have known each other a very short while, Joan," he was saying, "but love takes no count of time, of introductions and other such formalities. It masters us whether we like it or not. But willing or unwilling, what can we do but obey its promptings?"

Joan said nothing. She was trembling, and her heart was beating so fast that it almost stopped her breathing. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before; no former experience had ever filled her with this wonderful mingling of joy and pain, of suffering and gladness, of awakened hope.

"So I am taking the liberty of telling you that I have fallen in love with you, Joan," he went on, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Years of knowing you could not have made me love you more, or have made me more certain of that love. Please say you love me in return, my dear Joan," he pleaded, smiling into her eyes, "if only a little to give me hope!"

She could not answer. She could not speak for the tumult in her heart. But Joan knew that she had fallen in love with him, too—she had never been more certain of anything in all her life. Yes, love had come to her, the thing which all women desire above all else, and yet she must thrust it from her, tear it from her heart be the cost what it might.

Joan sighed.

"I—I am sorry, but it is quite impossible, Roger," she managed to murmur at last.

WELL, perhaps it was like what one read in stories, Joan reflected sadly

—the daughter placing what she considered to be her duty to her father and her younger sister, before her own happiness, sacrificing it for their sake. But that did not make it any the less real, or the necessity for doing it any the less imperative.

In a flash of imagination, standing there in the kitchen she had lived it all over again. Fay repeated her question—
"Then he evidently did fall in love with you?"

Joan nodded.

"We fell in love with each other," she said, "but nothing came of it, of course, because it was all so hopeless. That's why I never answered the two letters Roger wrote me when he went back to Camborne, for it was better that he should forget me."

Fay shrugged.

"Well, I suppose it was very noble of you and all that sort of thing," she said. "But had I been in your place, my dear, I'd have married him. Why should you sacrifice your happiness for father's sake? As for me, I've ceased to be the 'baby of the family'. I can look after myself—and I'm going to. I hate the thought of your having made sacrifices on my account, Joan. It—it's so darned humiliating, you know!"

"But, Fay dear, if I did make any sacrifice, it was for daddy, not for you," Joan said. "Besides, it wouldn't have been necessary in your case. Supposing Roger and I had married, you could have come to live with us, if necessary, couldn't you? So please don't get it into your head that you're beholden to me in any way, because it would not be true."

"Thank goodness for that," returned Fay drily. "I'll tell you quite frankly, my dear, that I wouldn't do it for you—I mean, give up the man I loved because I thought I owed a duty to you or anyone else. I—"

"Hullo, was that the telephone?" Joan broke in.

"Yes, I think it was," said Fay and dashed off to the study to answer it.

While she was gone, Joan finished tidying the kitchen, and went into the living-room.

"It was Sir Philip Shalford—or rather Bruce, his son," Fay said, when she entered the living-room. "He says his father is not well and can't come to discuss matters concerning the school with daddy, at any rate, not yet."

"So we'll have to continue in a state of uncertainty," muttered Joan. "I do wish our fate could be settled one way or the other. It's so wearing, all this suspense."

"Bruce told me that he will be coming over to see daddy to-morrow morning," Fay went on. "I suppose he'll hear what daddy has to say, and then report to his father."

"Yes, and Sir Philip will report to the Board of Governors and they'll do exactly what he tells them to do, of course," murmured Joan.

"I wonder what he's like?" mused Fay. "Bruce Shalford I mean. Funny we've never seen him—except for a passing glimpse on the rare occasions when he's been home. Ought we to address him as 'Mr. Shalford' or 'Mr. Bruce'?"

"'Mr. Shalford', of course," Joan replied. "It would have been much better if Sir Philip had waited till he was well again, and then come himself."

"Anyway, we'll be seeing a new face, and that's quite an event in Bridgefield, isn't it?" Fay remarked, with a cynical laugh. "I wonder if he's good-looking. What's the betting, Joan? He may be quite a nice young man, even if his father is a baronet. I'm simply dying to see him. Besides, when he marries, his wife will someday be Lady Shalford, won't she?"

"Oh, please don't talk such nonsense, my dear," Joan laughingly protested.

Then, following their usual routine, Fay went upstairs to make the beds, while Joan attended to the downstairs rooms, after which she went to the kitchen to prepare lunch—macaroni cheese, her father's favourite dish.

When he returned to lunch, Fay met her father in the hall and told him that Sir Philip Shalford's son had rung up to say that he would be coming over to see him, instead of his father, who was indisposed.

"Mr. Shalford said he would call here to-morrow morning," Fay explained, "and I would advise you to be very nice to him, daddy, since it's quite possible that what he reports will influence Sir Philip quite a lot," she added, as they entered the dining-room.

"Naturally, I shall treat the young man with ordinary politeness, my dear," her father answered smilingly. "I am not seeking any favours of anyone. Benson's stands or falls on its merits."

"Anyway, the board evidently hasn't come to any decision yet, daddy, as you thought at first," Joan put in hopefully, as her father took his seat at the head of the table.

"Yes, and while there's life, there's hope!" Fay remarked, with forced lightness.

"Oh, come, girls," muttered Mr. Ingleford, laughing in spite of himself, "I do not need to be sustained by optimistic platitudes, though kindly meant. If my work here is to be brought to an end, which I fear is only too likely, then I shall have to accept the inevitable, of course."

LOVE, THE MAGICIAN

ON the morning that Bruce Shalford was due to arrive at the school, Fay sat at the dressing-table in her bedroom trying to decide what frock she should wear for the occasion. For the visit of a strange young man was an occasion, even though it seemed scarcely likely to be a very cheerful one.

Ill-natured people—and Bridgefield, like most small country towns, had its full share of them—were wont to declare that Fay Ingleford was vain and frivolous, and quite unlike her more sedate sister.

But others, less censorious, demanded to know what an extremely pretty girl like the schoolmaster's younger daughter shouldn't be a little vain and frivolous when there was an opportunity for frivolity? And such opportunities in the sleepy little town of Bridgefield were few and far between.

"Really, if I have to submit to this sort of life much longer," Fay muttered to herself dolefully, "I'll be old before I'm thirty—sometimes I feel I'm that now. Joan has had some sort of romance—at least, a man has told her that he loved her, and asked her to marry him. 'Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.'"

At last, she rose, and after taking a final glance at herself in the mirror went downstairs to find her sister laying the table for lunch.

"I've just discovered a bottle of Graves in the cupboard—I had no idea it was there," Joan said elatedly. "We'll put it on the table with some wine-glasses. It'll look rather impressive, won't it?"

"Yes, as if we always had wine at lunch," laughed Fay.

"And after lunch, we'll have coffee in the drawing-room," Joan suggested smilingly.

"I wonder what sort of guy this Bruce Shalford is?" murmured Fay.

"For goodness' sake don't use that awful American slang in daddy's presence," warned her sister. "You know how he hates slang of any sort."

"Oh yes, any ideas or language later than Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee are taboo here!" muttered Fay. "If you ask me, we're all half-dead from the neck up!"

"Fay, that isn't a very nice thing to say," protested Joan. "For a schoolmaster, I think daddy has very liberal views. His ideas on education may seem a bit old-fashioned, but they're sound, and, as you know, he has turned out quite a number of well-known scholars."

"You needn't give me a testimonial on daddy's behalf, my dear," Fay returned laughingly. "Anyway, I wasn't thinking of daddy, but of this mouldy old place in general. I wonder if I'll ever get away from it? I hope our visitor is not going to keep lunch hanging about, as I don't want to have to spend the afternoon in the kitchen washing up."

"Oh, but he's here already," Joan said. "I saw him arrive in his car, and he went into the school."

"Really? What was he like to look at?" Fay asked quickly.

"I only had a brief glimpse of him," answered Joan. "In any case, what does it matter what he looks like? The important thing is—what sort of report will he make to his father? Everything will depend on that, of course."

"Tell you what," said Fay mischievously. "I think I'll make love to him—dazzle and fascinate him with my charm so that he'll do anything I ask!"

"Don't be such a little idiot!" Joan exclaimed laughing.

As she spoke, the two girls, who were standing at the window, saw their father and a tall, well-built young man unconventionally attired in a sports jacket and grey flannel slacks, crossing the quadrangle towards the house.

Fay was rather surprised at this, for she had pictured Bruce Shalford as wearing formal morning dress and carrying a rolled umbrella. She was glad to know that the young man hadn't thought this necessary, for it had a suggestion of informal friendliness about it which might make things all the easier.

A few moments later, they heard their father call from the hall—

"Joan—Fay, where are you? I want to introduce you to Mr. Shalford."

They hurried into the hall and the introductions followed. Joan, as usual, was grave and courteous, but when Fay's turn came, she bestowed a mischievous smile on the young man as they shook hands, and he returned it.

The reason for Bruce Shalford's visit was not mentioned during lunch. The conversation was general, and the guest directed most of his remarks to Fay. He asked if she played tennis? Did she ride? Could she drive a car, and so on. Without the least intending it, they made both Joan and her father feel rather out of it.

"If you will go into the drawing-room, I will bring in coffee," announced Joan, when they had finished lunch.

In the kitchen, where Fay was helping her prepare the coffee, Joan mildly suggested that they should both "take a back seat" while their father discussed the matter of the school with their visitor.

"Of course I won't butt in," promised Fay, "but I do think I made rather an impression on Bruce, don't you?"

"Don't you think it's a trifle premature to refer to Mr. Shalford by his Christian name?" suggested Joan, with gentle reproach.

Fay pouted.

"Really, Joan, you might have taken the

words out of daddy's mouth!" she protested. "Don't be so beastly stuffy, my dear! You'll find that he'll be calling me 'Fay' before he leaves here. I say, Joan," she added, with a roguish smile, "wouldn't it be wonderful if I made a conquest?"

"Don't talk such utter nonsense, my dear!" Joan retorted. "Now please take in the coffee percolator, and I'll bring in the hot milk."

When they returned to the drawing-room their father and Bruce Shalford were discussing the future of the school. Mr. Ingleford was insisting that a foundation like Benson's with 300 years of tradition behind it, could not be closed down like a surplus village school.

"Please do not think that I am opposed to modern education, Mr. Shalford," he went on, as Fay handed round the coffee. "I realise as well as anyone its importance. But if we are to teach science as it should be taught, we must have an up-to-date laboratory and a properly qualified master."

"All of which would cost a great deal of money, Mr. Ingleford," countered Bruce, "and as things are, the school fees do not even meet the current expenses. There are not enough pupils, as you know, and the present curriculum is not calculated to attract more."

"That," Bruce added, as he took the cup of coffee which Fay handed to him, "is why it has been suggested that the school should be amalgamated with St. David's and transferred there. At least, that is what the board has been discussing."

"A school which has been established barely fifty years!" commented Mr. Ingleford.

"I am afraid, Mr. Ingleford, that tradition has to give way to efficiency these days," Bruce said smilingly. "After all, you know, a study of the Greek and Latin poets is not going to be much use to a youngster who will have to find himself a job later on."

He sounded so brisk, so efficient and so businesslike, that for a moment Fay felt just a little awed.

"No," Mr. Ingleford returned satirically, "a classical education is not of much use to those engaged in making the H-bomb. I am with you there, Mr. Shalford."

"Why not transfer St. David's to Benson's, Mr. Shalford, instead of Benson's to St. David's?" Fay ventured to suggest, greatly daring.

Bruce considered for a moment or two. Then—

"Well, yes, that's an idea, Miss Ingleford," he said, smiling at Fay. "I wonder no one has thought of that before. Of course they would have to build a new wing on to this place to provide the extra accommodation that would be needed, and that would cost money."

"Couldn't they sell St. David's and use the money for such a new wing?" Fay continued, her confidence restored. "I expect the building could be turned into a factory or something of that sort."

"Yes, yes, of course," Bruce agreed. "What do you think, Mr. Ingleford?"

John Ingleford hardly knew what to say. The situation had somehow become rather baffling. Here was his younger daughter who, until now, had never shown the slightest interest in educational matters, talking as though she, and not he, were headmaster of Benson's.

"Well, yes, it is an idea," he somewhat reluctantly admitted.

"And a very excellent idea, too, Mr. Ingleford," declared Bruce, with growing enthusiasm. "What beats me, is why the governors themselves never thought of it. Perhaps it's because they're so close to the problem and can't see the wood for the

trees, so to speak."

"Do you intend to put this idea into your report, may I ask, Mr. Shalford?" inquired the headmaster.

"Yes, of course I shall, Mr. Ingleford. It seems to me the solution of our problem" Bruce added.

"But how about the headmaster of St. David's?" Mr. Ingleford asked.

Bruce shrugged.

"When the original idea was first mooted," he said, "no one as far as I knew, said 'What about the headmaster of Benson's?' In other words, Mr. Ingleford, if the governors were prepared to sacrifice you in the interests of the school, why shouldn't they be equally prepared to sacrifice the other man if that seems to be the better solution?"

"Hear, hear!" cried Fay, now feeling quite important.

But her father was still feeling a little dazed at having, as it seemed to him, the whole affair taken out of his hands by his younger daughter whom he still regarded as little more than a child.

"Either Fay is intelligent beyond her years, or I am more behind the times than I thought I was," he was thinking. "Or the girl is possessed of an impudence I never suspected!"

"I suppose, Mr. Ingleford," Bruce was saying "you have no objection to my putting forward such a plan to the Board of Governors?"

"Naturally I have not, Mr. Shalford, since it would mean, if adopted, a sort of rebirth of the old school," Mr. Ingleford answered.

"Splendid!" Bruce said delightedly.

"Then I'll put it before my father, and I think he will fall in with the plan. And if he does, I have no doubt that the board will agree to it."

They had finished their coffee by now, and Bruce rose to leave.

"By the way, where are the playing-fields, Mr. Ingleford?" he inquired, and Joan noticed that he was looking at her sister as he spoke. "I'd like to have a look at them, if I may."

"Would you, Mr. Shalford? Then I'll take you to them if you like," Fay put in smilingly, before her father had time to reply.

"That would be very kind of you, Miss Ingleford," Bruce said, and Joan could almost have sworn that he and Fay winked at each other.

Mr. Ingleford, who was due to take a class, accompanied them across the quadrangle, then disappeared inside the school.

"I say, Miss Ingleford, that was a nobby idea of yours," Bruce remarked, with a boyish grin as he and Fay walked on. "How did you come to think of it?"

"Oh, it just came into my head, that's all, Mr. Shalford," she answered. "I had never thought about the matter seriously before."

"Couldn't you call me 'Bruce'?" he suggested. "It's so much less of a mouthful than 'Mr. Shalford', isn't it?"

"As to that," she returned smilingly, "'Fay' is much less of a mouthful than 'Miss Ingleford', don't you think?"

"I should say it is!" he agreed, smiling back at her.

"Well, here are the playing-fields and—" Fay began.

"Blow the playing-fields!" he interrupted. "I didn't really want to see them, Fay. Come to that, all playing fields look more or less alike don't they?"

"So you got me to bring you here under false pretences, didn't you?" she retorted laughingly.

"Look," he said, pointing, "there's a clump of trees over there. So let's go there and sit, shall we?"

A few moments later, as they sat side by side underneath the trees, Bruce smiled at her, and said—

"You know, Fay, you're quite the prettiest girl I've seen for ages."

"You flatter me, kind sir," she said, her eyes lowered demurely.

"Oh no, I mean it, Fay. Tell me," he went on, taking her hand in his. "do you believe in love at first sight?"

"I have heard there is such a thing," she answered. "Do you believe in it?"

"I certainly do now," he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

Fay felt the colour mount her cheeks.

"I—I was only teasing," she murmured, a little shakily.

"All the same, you do believe in love at first sight, don't you?" he persisted.

"Well, yes I—I suppose so," she breathed.

Bruce drew her close to him so that her head rested on his shoulder.

"I love you, my darling Fay," he whispered.

"And I—and I love you, Bruce," she whispered back, and next moment their lips met in a long, ecstatic kiss.

"I wonder whether we're both dreaming all this?" Fay murmured presently. "Do you—do you think we are, Bruce?"

"No, of course not, my love," he answered, smiling into her eyes. "How could two persons be dreaming the same thing at the same time?"

"Yes, but suppose it's only me dreaming, and you are just part of the dream? Suppose there isn't really such a person as Bruce Shalford, or even a school called Benson's—"

Fay got no further, for he silenced her in the most effective way possible.

"Now when can I see you again, my darling?" Bruce asked, when he withdrew his lips from hers.

Fay pondered this for a long moment, then sighed.

"One has to think of gossip, Bruce dear," she murmured thoughtfully. "You see, a headmaster's daughter has to be—"

"Like Caesar's wife, above suspicion!" he finished for her. "I—I understand, darling. Now listen, Fay," he added, "I see that a concert is being given at the Wilmington Town Hall next Saturday evening. Are you fond of music?"

Fay nodded.

"Good!" Bruce said. "Well, if you decide to attend the concert, no one will be surprised at that, will they, Fay?"

"No, I suppose not," she admitted.

"Good," he said again. "Then you could take the bus into Wilmington and we could have a lovely evening all to ourselves, couldn't we, darling?"

"You mean, at the concert?"

Bruce laughed.

"No, of course not, my dear girl!" he said. "We'll go for a rollicking spin in the country. I know a road-house where there's dancing. And I promise to get you back in time to catch the bus to Bridgefield. I could take you home in the car, of course, only people might see and—"

"Yes, of course," Fay broke in. "We mustn't let that happen, Bruce, or the whole place would be gossiping about it the next day."

"That's what I was afraid of, darling," he said. "Not," he added, smiling at her, "that they won't have plenty to talk about later on when our engagement is announced."

"Then you—then you really want to marry me, Bruce?"

"Haven't I told you that I love you, my sweet?" he answered. "Isn't marriage the sequel to love?"

Fay's heart gave a sudden leap.

"Oh, Bruce dear," she whispered, throwing her arms around his neck, "I do love you so—so very much that it almost hurts!"

"I know, darling," he breathed, his lips brushing her ear. "I feel that, too. I realise now that I've never known what love was till I met you. And yet it has all happened so suddenly. We had never met before this morning, had we? We weren't even aware of each other's existence. Really, it's as if a miracle had happened!"

"And if your father had not been too unwell to come over here to-day, it would never have happened, would it, Bruce dear?" murmured Fay.

"Anyway, it has happened, my love, and that's all that matters, isn't it?"

Fay nodded, a shining light in her eyes. "I think I had better go back now, Bruce, or my sister and daddy will be wondering what has happened to me," she said.

"Then you'll meet me on Saturday evening, as arranged, darling?"

"Yes, of course, Bruce."

They kissed once more while she lay in his arms their hearts beating against each other. Bruce then rose and helped her to her feet.

"Good-bye, my dearest," Fay whispered shakily.

"Good-bye—till Saturday, my love," Bruce whispered back, giving her hand an affectionate squeeze.

Fay then returned to the house, and Bruce drove off in his car.

"WELL, my dear, what did you think of Sir Philip Shalford's son and heir?" Mr. Ingleford remarked smilingly, when he and Joan were alone that evening.

"He seemed to be quite a jolly sort of young man, didn't he?" Joan replied. "What did you think of Fay's suggestion, daddy?"

Her father shrugged.

"Just a passing idea flung out on the spur of the moment," he said, "and I think we can dismiss it from our minds as I do not think for a moment that St. David's will ever consent to being swallowed up by Benson's."

"Do you know, daddy," Joan said thoughtfully, after a pause. "I have a suspicion that Fay was a trifle smitten with the young man."

"Good gracious, I hope not, my dear!" her father exclaimed.

"But why, daddy?"

"Well, isn't it obvious to you, my dear Joan? Sir Philip is a wealthy man, and a power in the county. Is it likely that he would countenance a—well, a love affair between his only son and the daughter of an obscure shoemaker?"

"But, daddy, supposing Mr. Shalford has fallen in love with Fay?"

"That would only make matters worse. There would then be two unhappy people instead of one." Mr. Ingleford sighed, and added—"if there is any truth in what you suggest, my dear, it is very disturbing—very disturbing indeed."

Joan was sorry she had mentioned the matter to her father. After all, her suspicions concerning Fay might be quite unjustified. And at the worst, it might resolve itself into a brief and harmless flirtation. She ventured to mention this to her father.

"Oh no, my dear Joan, I doubt if any flirtation is harmless," he said. "Such an unfortunate happening could not but upset your sister, and make her restless and dissatisfied."

Joan gave an inward sigh. Fay was that already, she reflected, but she did not voice the thought. Her father was worried enough already about the future of the school, without other worries being added, she reminded herself.

"Of course, daddy," she said, "I am probably quite mistaken about Fay and Mr. Shalford. After all, I don't suppose

there can be any real falling in love seeing they met for the first time to-day. In any case, it is not likely that they will see each other again, now that Mr. Shalford has completed his errand."

"Yes, that is so, Joan," her father agreed. "I suppose the next thing will be a letter from the Board of Governors letting me know what decision they have come to. In the meantime we must remain in suspense."

WHEN Fay returned to the house after leaving Bruce Shalford, she had said nothing to her sister about what happened between them. It was not until bedtime that night that she came into Joan's room and took her sister into her confidence.

"Oh, Joan darling," she said, unable to withhold the news any longer. "the—the most wonderful thing in the world has happened!"

"Well, what is it?" Joan asked, a trifle irritably, for she was already beginning to guess something of what was coming next.

"Will you promise to keep a secret if I tell you?" Fay asked, in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Yes, of course I will," Joan answered—"that is, providing it's not something dreadfully dreadful!"

Fay laughed.

"Oh no, it's something wonderfully wonderful, my dear!" she said. "Bruce and I—Bruce and I have fallen in love with each other, and we're as good as engaged to be married!"

"Engaged to be married?" echoed Joan.

"Yes, to Bruce Shalford, of course," Fay returned triumphantly. "For heaven's sake, darling," she added, "don't stand and stare at me like that! I haven't committed a crime, you know!"

Joan sighed.

"I—I really don't know what to say," she stammered.

"I should think there was only one thing to say, and that is 'Congratulations!'" Fay retorted, with one of her characteristic pouts.

"But you don't know yet whether the young man's father will approve of the engagement," Joan murmured.

"But why not?" demanded Fay. "Anyhow, the Inglefords are as good as the Shalfords so far as decent breeding is concerned, even if we are not well-off."

"Yes, I know, Fay dear, but one has got to be realistic. Money does make a difference, you know—more so now, perhaps, than ever it did before."

"Anyway, money is not going to make any difference to Bruce and me. I can tell you that much!" Fay declared obstinately.

Joan sighed again and said no more. Bruce Shalford had not struck her as the sort of man who would consider the world well lost for love, still less sacrifice his patrimony for it.

"Well, I hope everything will turn out all right for you," she murmured.

"Of course it will, my dear," Fay said airily. "Don't be such a wet blanket, Joan. And please don't forget that you have promised to keep it all secret," she added, then kissing her sister lightly on the cheek. Fay went into her own room.

THE HIDDEN HEART

JOAN was in her father's study checking the household accounts; Fay had gone to Wilmington, and Mr. Ingleford was at the school discussing the term's progress with Mr. Harper, the senior master.

Suddenly there came a ring at the door bell, and wondering who the caller could be, Joan went to answer it. On opening the

door, she gave a gasp of surprise. It was Roger Brent.

"Roger!" she exclaimed, with suppressed excitement. "But I—but I thought you were in Camborne!"

"Did you, my dear Joan," he said smilingly. "But I am not an immovable object, you know. I was in Camborne, but I am not wedded to the place for life. I can still leave it when I feel like doing so. Now aren't you going to invite me to come in, may I ask?" he added, his grey eyes twinkling.

"Yes, of course, Roger. Do please come in. I was doing the accounts when you rang," she explained, trying to keep her voice steady as she led the way to the study.

She placed a chair for him, then resumed her seat at her father's desk with its account books.

"I see you are still determined that there shall be a barrier between us, Joan," he remarked, nodding towards the desk which separated them.

"Oh, please, Roger," she said. "we're not going over all that again, are we?"

"If we do, I'm afraid it will be for the last time, my dear Joan," he answered, with a wry smile. "It is said that Love knocks three times at everybody's door, and as far as you and I are concerned, this is the third time, you know."

"Roger, please!"

"You see, Joan," he went on, "I have now passed my final exams and have been offered a highly-paid job in South Africa."

"Well, I—I wish you every success, Roger," she managed to say. "You—you know that, don't you?"

"I know nothing except that I love you, my dear Joan, and that—yes—and that you love me," he muttered doggedly.

"But, Roger, I have already told you why it is impossible for me to marry you. My father has no one to look after him except me and—"

"What about your sister?" he interrupted. "Why can't she keep house for your father? Why should you sacrifice yourself just because you're the elder of the two daughters? You've got a right to live your own life, haven't you?"

"You—you don't or won't understand, Roger—"

"Oh yes, I think I do," he broke in again.

"The fact is, you are obsessed by this notion of yours that you are indispensable to your father and sister. The 'elder daughter' stuff, of course! You've got an irrepressible urge for self-sacrifice. You're like one of those spineless heroines one reads about in novels who marry some rich man they dislike in order that their aged parents may end their days in comfort or something of that sort. That's what it all amounts to, my dear girl."

"Roger, you have no right to say things like that to me," Joan protested. "You are being both unkind and ungenerous."

"Oh no, I'm not," he flung back at her, rising from his chair and starting to pace up and down the room. "It's you who are being unkind and ungenerous, Joan. Just for a bit of sticky sentimentalism you are prepared to sacrifice my happiness as well as your own. How do you know that your father and sister can't get along without you?"

"Your father is not a doddering old man, and your sister has long since been out of the nursery," he went on. "Oh no, you're not being as unselfish as you think, my dear girl. In order to enjoy the sweets of self-sacrifice, you're willing to plunge me into lasting unhappiness and, I think, to place both your father and sister under a moral obligation they would bitterly resent if they but realised it all."

Joan had buried her face in her hands, and he strode over to her and placed his arms about her.

"Darling," he said contritely, "I know what I have said may sound cruel to you. But I was speaking the truth. It is not as if your father were an invalid. And as for your sister, she'll be getting married quite soon, no doubt."

"Oh, Roger, you make it all sound so plausible," Joan murmured, looking at him through tear-dimmed eyes. "But it isn't like you say at all. You have left out all that really matters. My father does not regard me as a household drudge, as you seem to think, but as someone who is necessary to his life and well-being. And as for my sister, she is just at that stage when she needs someone to guide and help her. So you see, in a way, Roger, I actually am indispensable to them both."

"And I suppose I don't count!" he suggested glumly. "You are indispensable to me, too, you know. Don't you realise that?" Joan sighed.

"I don't think you quite realise what you're saying, Roger," she murmured brokenly. "But what is the use of going on accusing and blaming each other like this? Besides we've been over it all before, haven't we? So I—so I think you had better go now Roger."

He hesitated a moment. Then—"Do you realise that this is probably the last time we shall ever see each other, my dear Joan?" he asked. "If I go to South Africa, the chances are that I shall never return to England again. So—so this will be our final good-bye!"

Just for a moment. Joan's determination faltered. This dreadful finality wrenched at her very heart. The knowledge that she might never see again the man she loved—the only man she could ever love—was wellnigh more than she could bear.

But the moment of wavering passed. With a tremendous effort, and at a cost no one but herself would ever know, Joan managed to regain her self-control.

"Good-bye, Roger," she said steadily, her face deathly pale, and without another word, he turned and strode from the room.

She heard the front door slam shut after him.

"Roger! Oh, Roger, my one and only love!" Joan murmured to herself, and then burst into tears.

ON the following Saturday evening, Fay and Bruce Shalford met at Wilmington, as arranged.

"Are you awfully keen on going to the concert, darling?" Bruce inquired.

Fay shook her head.

"Are you, Bruce?" she asked.

"Not a bit," he answered. "So let's go for a drive into the country, shall we, Fay?"

"Yes, let's," she agreed happily.

They drove through the town and out on to a quiet country road. Presently, Bruce slowed down, steered the car on to the grass verge and brought it to a standstill.

"Do you really love me, darling?" he asked, placing his arms around Fay's shoulders, and pressing his lips to hers.

"Yes, of course I do, Bruce dear," she answered smilingly.

"I wonder what your father will say when he knows, Fay?"

"And I wonder what your father will say?" she countered.

Bruce shrugged.

"Oh, well, I expect he'll go off the deep end a bit at first," he said. "But he'll soon come round to my way of thinking." Bruce hesitated, then went on—"As a matter of fact, my father is rather keen on my marrying a girl called Camilla Tanberry—she's the daughter of a business associate of his. But I shan't do it, of course."

"Is she—is she pretty?" Fay murmured.

"What a truly feminine question, my

dear," Bruce exclaimed laughingly. "Well, yes, she is rather. Camilla is a brunette—you know, Spanish type. Her mother is a Latin."

"And is she fond of you, Bruce?"

"Well, yes, she likes me all right," he answered thoughtfully, "and I daresay she'd marry me if her parents said she had to. All the same, I think the young lady is far from being crazy about me, for I'm not really her type—I'm too unemotional, too Anglo-Saxonish, if you know what I mean."

"And do you—do you care for her at all?" Fay probed.

"Not in the way you're thinking of, darling. Camilla and I are quite good friends and she likes me taking her places, but that's about all there is to it," Bruce added lightly.

"She's awfully rich, I suppose?" mused Fay.

"Oh yes, her father is simply rolling in wealth," Bruce replied. "He's a director of several big oil companies."

Fay sighed.

"I—I'm afraid, Bruce, your father will never approve of your getting married to me," she murmured gloomily, "for I'm no catch for the son and heir of a baronet, am I?"

"If you say that again, my love, I—I'll give you a good spanking!" Bruce declared laughingly. "There's only one thing you can do now, my girl, if we're not going to part for ever!"

"Oh, Bruce!" she cried, in mock alarm, "And what is that?"

"Kiss me!" he answered, and taking her in his arms, they kissed, not once, but again and again.

"Now is honour satisfied?" Fay asked, a little breathlessly, a glowing look in her blue eyes.

"Well, no, not quite, my darling," Bruce replied, and he threw his arms around her again, for yet more kisses.

Then feeling in his pocket, he drew out what looked like a postcard with a number of different sized holes in it.

"Now please put your engagement-finger through these holes, and carefully note the one that fits, my dearest," he said, with an impish smile.

"But what for, Bruce?" she asked with pretended innocence.

"As if you didn't know, darling!" he teased. "Naturally, I want to know what size engagement-ring to get for you."

"But Bruce, you—you said—"

"Yes, I know," he broke in laughingly. "I said that our engagement must be kept secret for the present. Even so, that's no reason why I shouldn't give you a ring, my dearest. Of course you must not show it off in public yet, but you can wear it when we are alone together, can't you, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Bruce, and when I'm in bed," she said, her eyes sparkling with delight. "I'll put it on as soon as I reach my room, and take it off in the morning. It—it will make me dream of you, Bruce dear!"

He smiled.

"I shan't need to wear a ring to dream of you, my sweet," he said. "I dream of you all the time—both night and day!"

"Do you?" she murmured. "Oh, darling, if—if you were ever to stop loving me. I think I should die!"

"But that will never happen, my dearest," he assured her, a tender look in his eyes, "as the song says, 'the desert shall grow cold and the sea dry up'—or words to that effect—before I stop loving you."

"But, Bruce, suppose—suppose your father refuses to give his consent to your marrying me, what are we going to do then?" she asked.

"Get married, all the same, of course," he answered lightly.

"You—you mean you would give up everything on my account, Bruce?" she

breathed.

"Haven't I told you that I love you, my darling?"

Fay gave a sigh of contentment and snuggled closer to him while he gently stroked her golden hair and whispered words of love in her ear.

Later on that evening, they arranged to meet again when, Bruce promised her, he would bring her the ring which he was going to buy in London.

IT was on the following morning at breakfast that Joan remarked, casually that the "For Sale" board outside the picturesque old house known as "The Hall" had been removed.

"I noticed it yesterday as I was cycling past the house," she added. "So it looks as if we're going to have a new neighbour, daddy."

"How very exciting!" cried Fay. "I wonder who has bought it? Someone quite well-off, obviously."

"Not necessarily, my dear," her father said. "It is not a very large place, you know."

"Five bed., three recep., kitchen and usual offices, daddy," Fay said, a trifle pertly. "I hope the newcomers will be nice people."

"Well, I expect I shall know all about it when Mrs. Guffin comes," Joan suggested, referring to the woman who came in to help with the housework. "Very little happens in this neighbourhood without Mrs. Guffin being aware of it."

And so it proved. "The Hall", Mrs. Guffin was able to inform Joan, had been bought by a lady from London, named Mrs. Drummond, who was coming to live there as soon as certain alterations and repairs had been completed.

"She's a widow, by all accounts," the woman explained. "Her husband was killed in a motor accident two or three years ago. She's not so old, either, according to what I can gather."

"But how on earth did you come by all this information, Mrs. Guffin?" Joan asked laughingly.

"Oh, well, people will talk, you know, Miss Ingleford," the woman went on. "Besides, my son Alf works for Mr. Pettridge, the estate agent at Bridgefield, so he got it from the 'orse's mouth, as you might say."

When, later on, Joan passed on this information to her father and sister, Fay frowned.

"Oh, a widow, eh?" she commented. "It sounds awfully dull doesn't it?"

"To my mind, Fay, it suggests sadness rather than dullness," her father remarked.

"Well, it will be interesting to find out what the lady is like," Joan put in. "She may be quite nice, of course. In any case, I think we ought to hold out the hand of friendship to her, don't you, daddy?"

"Yes, yes, of course, my dear," her father replied, rising from the breakfast-table. "I must now hurry into school, or I shall be late for prayers."

"Anyhow, it'll be a new face among us," muttered Fay, as she started to help Joan to clear the table. "How awfully tired one gets of always seeing the same old faces. Sometimes I'm even tired of my own."

"And mine and daddy's, too, I suppose!" laughed Joan.

Fay shrugged and made no reply.

WHEN she next met Bruce at what had become their trysting place, he took a small box from his pocket and opened it.

"Oh!" Fay cried in mingled awe and admiration. "How—how lovely, Bruce!"

"I'm glad you like the ring, darling," he said. "Now let me slip it on your finger."

So she held out her left hand and he

slipped the ring on her finger.

"Oh, it's lovely, lovely!" she breathed ecstatically, spreading out her fingers and holding up her hand the better to observe the effect.

"I'm glad you like it, my dear," Bruce said smilingly.

"But it must have cost you a small fortune, Bruce!"

"Small or big, as long as it pleases you, honeybird, that's all that matters," he told her laughingly.

Fay immediately rewarded him in the coin most precious to lovers. Then—

"Of course I'll have to take the darling thing off before I get home," she said. "But I shall put it on again as soon as I get into bed. In the daytime, I shall wear it round my neck attached to a silken thread, and all the time I shall be thinking of you, Bruce dear."

When Fay returned home that evening, Joan gazed at her suspiciously. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks flushed, and there was a suggestion of suppressed excitement about her.

"What has happened, my dear?" Joan asked smilingly.

"Oh, nothing," answered Fay evasively. "I—well, I'm just feeling in good spirits, that's all."

"It's a change for the better, anyhow, darling," Joan remarked drily. "Is it—is it anything to do with Bruce Shalford?"

"That's my affair," Fay retorted, and then went upstairs to her room.

Though Joan's suspicions were strengthened, she decided not to pursue the matter, knowing that it would be quite useless. Not unnaturally her thoughts turned to Roger Brent and her own broken romance.

Joan sighed, and with an effort, dismissed it from her mind, for what was the use of nursing buried hopes? she asked herself.

It was on the following afternoon that Joan went to answer a knock at the front door and found a middle-aged, kindly-looking woman standing there.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you," said the visitor, in a soft, cultured voice, "but can you tell me where Mr. Jebb lives? It's somewhere near here, I think."

"Oh yes, Mr. Jebb lives at Rose Cottage—a short distance down the lane," Joan explained.

"Thank you so much. I'm told he does gardening and odd jobs. If so, he's just the man I want."

Joan hesitated a moment. Then—"Excuse me," she said. "Are you Mrs. Drummond?"

"Yes, I'm the new tenant at 'The Hall'. And you are Miss Ingleford, I suppose?" Joan nodded.

"I thought you must be," Mrs. Drummond remarked smilingly. "I have heard quite a lot about Benson's School during my brief visits here. Your father is the headmaster, isn't he?"

Joan nodded again.

"Won't you please come in, Mrs. Drummond?" she invited.

"May I just for a few minutes, Miss Ingleford? To tell the truth, I'm feeling rather tired. I have just finished going over the house and deciding what alterations are needed," Mrs. Drummond explained, as she followed Joan into the drawing-room.

"And when do you expect to move in, Mrs. Drummond?" inquired Joan, as they sat down.

"Well, I find there is not really a great deal to be done, so I am hoping to be able to get settled down in about a month's time," Mrs. Drummond replied. "I am so dreadfully tired of living in London with all the noise and bustle. After all," she added laughingly. "I'm not as young as I was, Miss Ingleford!"

Joan smiled.

"Well, you certainly don't look so very old, Mrs. Drummond," she remarked.

"But old enough to enjoy a little peace and quiet, my dear. I think I was very lucky to get 'The Hall'. It's a lovely old house, isn't it, Miss Ingleford?"

Joan nodded.

"Yes, I think 'The Hall' is nearly as old as Benson's, which means something like three hundred years," she replied.

"Any ghosts, do you know?" Mrs. Drummond inquired jestingly.

"I have never heard of any," Joan answered laughingly. "I'm sure you could do with a cup of tea, couldn't you, Mrs. Drummond?" she added, rising to her feet.

"Oh, thank you very much indeed," Mrs. Drummond murmured gratefully.

Joan then excused herself and went into the kitchen. She decided that she liked the new tenant of "The Hall". There was a kindness and gentleness about her which made her singularly attractive.

When, a few minutes later, she brought in a tea-tray, her guest was standing looking out of the window at the ancient quadrangle.

"What a lovely old place this is!" she commented, turning and smiling at Joan.

As they sat having tea, Joan told her something of the history of the school, and soon they were chatting away like old friends, their first shyness having worn off. Neither noticed the passage of time, until the door opened and Mr. Ingleford entered, still wearing his academic gown.

"Daddy dear," Joan said, springing to her feet, "this is Mrs. Drummond who is coming to live at 'The Hall'."

John Ingleford bowed, and shook hands with the visitor.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Drummond," he said. "So you are to be our new neighbour?"

"Yes, that is so, Mr. Ingleford," she returned smilingly. "And now I'm afraid I have trespassed on Miss Ingleford's time and hospitality quite long enough," she added. "So if you will excuse me—"

"Oh no, please don't hurry away, Mrs. Drummond—that is, unless you have to," Mr. Ingleford broke in with a pleased smile.

"Yes, please stay and have a chat with my father, Mrs. Drummond, while I go and make a fresh pot of tea," Joan urged, and then hurried into the kitchen.

When she returned, her father and Mrs. Drummond were chatting happily away as though they had known each other for years. Indeed, Mr. Ingleford had reached the stage when he was confiding to the attractive widow his worries concerning the future of Benson's School.

When at last, Mrs. Drummond left to catch her train back to London, he accompanied her to the door.

"A most charming woman, my dear," he remarked, smilingly, when he returned to the drawing-room.

"Yes, I quite agree, daddy," Joan said. "I'm glad Mrs. Drummond is going to be our near neighbour. I have a feeling that we shall be great friends."

Mr. Ingleford nodded in agreement.

"I suppose you have heard nothing from the board yet, daddy?" Joan said.

"No, and I can't think why they are taking such a long time to make up their minds," he answered. "But I suppose there will be lots of negotiating to be done before any decision can be reached in the matter."

"And in the meantime, daddy, you must try not to worry about it unduly," Joan suggested smilingly. "I expect everything will come right in the end," she added hopefully.

"I trust your prognostication will prove correct, my dear," murmured her father, and then went to his study.

When Fay returned home, Joan told her about Mrs. Drummond's visit and the good

impression she had made on both herself and their father.

Fay smiled.

"She sounds the sort of person who'll cheer daddy up," she said. "So we must cultivate her, Joan."

Later on that evening, when Joan had occasion to enter her sister's bed-room, she found Fay standing at her dressing-table. She was holding up her left hand before the mirror, twisting it this way and that and, apparently, admiring the reflection of a diamond engagement ring on her finger.

Fay swung round, an angry flush on her face.

"What do you mean by creeping in and spying on me like that?" she demanded.

Joan was so taken aback, that for a moment, she was at a loss what to say. Then—

"What on earth is the matter with you, Fay?" she exclaimed. "I came in to bring you these clean pillow-slips which I forgot this morning."

Fay had the grace to apologise.

"Sorry," she murmured. "Anyway, you saw it, didn't you?"

"You—you mean that ring on your finger?" Joan asked. "Yes, of course I saw it."

"Well, now that you have seen it, you may as well know all about it," Fay muttered defiantly. "Bruce gave it to me. It—it's an engagement ring!"

Joan gave her a startled look.

"Fay, does—does his father know?" she stammered.

Fay shook her head.

"Not yet," she answered. "Bruce wants us to keep the engagement secret for a little while."

Joan sighed.

"I don't like secret engagements, Fay," she said. "If—if the young man's intentions are honourable, why should he want to keep the matter secret?"

"Bruce has his reasons, that's all I can tell you," Fay answered, with a toss of her head. "Anyway, you won't say anything to daddy about it, will you, Joan?"

"Of course not, if you don't want me to," Joan replied. "But how long is the engagement to be kept secret, may I ask?"

Fay shrugged.

"I—I don't know," she said. "It depends on Bruce. I expect he wants to wait till his father is in the right humour and then break the news to him."

Nothing more was said about the affair between the two sisters. But secretly, Joan felt very worried about it all. It seemed to her that there might be great unhappiness in store for her sister.

WHEN Fay met Bruce on the following evening, she told him that Joan had discovered their secret.

Bruce frowned.

"Good heavens!" he muttered angrily. "If it reaches my father's ears—the news of our engagement, I mean—the fat will be in the fire and no mistake! Do you think you can trust your sister not to blurt it out?"

"Yes, of course I can," Fay said.

"But she might let it out inadvertently, my dear girl."

"Oh no, she won't, Bruce. In any case, I don't see why you should be ashamed of being engaged to me," Fay added, an aggressive note in her voice.

"Don't be so frightfully touchy, Fay," he retorted. "There's no question of being ashamed. It's just a matter of expediency—of breaking the news to my father at the right time and when he's in the right mood. We don't want to spoil everything by being in too great a hurry, do we?"

"No, I suppose not," Fay agreed. "But

how long are we to keep our engagement secret? Half the fun of being engaged is receiving the congratulations of one's friends, and being envied by other girls!"

Bruce gave a forced little laugh.

"Well, it won't be very long—not a moment longer than I can help," he said.

"But," he added warningly, "a premature disclosure of it all might ruin everything."

"How do you mean?" she demanded.

"For one thing, I have no income of my own," he replied glumly. "My father is fixing up a pretty decent job for me with one of the companies in which he's interested, and if I upset him now, before the arrangements are completed, the whole thing might fall through."

"But isn't your father as likely to be upset later on, as he would be now?" Fay asked.

"Well, yes, probably," Bruce admitted. "But by then I should have got the job and he couldn't throw me out. You see what I mean, Fay?"

It did not seem a very satisfactory answer, but she had to accept it, although, in her heart of hearts, Fay felt anything but happy about it.

"I—I hate these hole-and-corner affairs, Bruce," she said, a trifle irritably. "I shan't feel happy until the whole world knows of our engagement and there isn't any need for secrecy."

"Yes, I think I know just how you feel, my dear Fay," he said. "In fact I feel exactly the same myself. But we must be sensible, mustn't we, darling? A little patience and everything will be all right. Now kiss me and tell me that you love me as much as ever," he added, and Fay meekly obeyed.

A WEEK later, Roger Brent called to see Joan again. As on his former visit, she happened to be alone in the house.

"Oh, Roger," she said, with suppressed excitement. "You—you really ought not to have come, you know."

"But I felt I had to come and see you, my dear Joan," he said. "You see, everything is now definitely fixed up for me to go to South Africa to take up a well-paid job, and I want you to come with me."

"But, Roger dear, how many more times must I tell you that such a thing is quite impossible?" Joan said. "As I have told you before, I can't possibly leave my father to look after himself."

"And as I've said before, your sister can keep house for your father, can't she?" Roger countered.

"But—but Fay is engaged to be married —" Joan began, and then checked herself abruptly.

"Oh, so your sister is engaged, is she?" Roger muttered. "That's something new to me, Joan."

"Yes, and I ought not to have told you about it, for it's supposed to be a dead secret at present," Joan said. "So you must promise me not to mention it to anyone, Roger."

"Then your sister can become engaged to the man she loves, Joan, notwithstanding everything, while you have to stay single and I've got to be made unhappy for the rest of my life!"

"But, Roger, as you know, I am the elder daughter, and mine is therefore the responsibility," Joan sighed, and added wearily: "Oh, Roger dear, don't you realise that you are making things far harder for me than they need be?"

"But what about me, my dear Joan?" he demanded. "Do you think I find it easy to stand aside while the girl I love insists on immolating herself—and quite

unnecessarily—on the altar of self-sacrifice?"

"Roger, please!"

"To be quite frank with you, Joan," he went on, ignoring her plea, "you are simply dramatizing the situation and yourself. You are just living it as if it were a story you had read in a Victorian novel, with yourself as the heroine!"

Joan shook her head sorrowfully.

"I—I wish it were as you say, Roger, but it isn't," she murmured shakily. "Do you think for a moment that I do not value my happiness—and yours, too?"

"Then why deny yourself—and me—of happiness, my dear Joan?"

"I must do as my conscience dictates, Roger."

"Conscience!" he echoed sarcastically. "That conscience of yours is prompting you to do all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons, my dear Joan. What about your father's conscience and your sister's? Would their conscience lie easy, do you think, if they realised the sacrifice you are making? Of course not, however," Roger added, with a gesture of despair. "I cannot go on arguing with you for ever, Joan. One of us is right, and one of us is wrong. But which is which, I don't know."

"Don't you? But I do, Roger..."

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

"BRUCE dear, I do not wish to hurry you, of course," Lady Shalford remarked smilingly. "But is it not time that you came to an understanding with Camilla?"

"You mean, mother, that I ought to propose to her?" Bruce returned glumly.

"Yes, of course, dear. It has been an understood thing for quite a long time now that you and Camilla should get married, in due course, hasn't it, Bruce? And you know as well as I do what her answer will be when you put the question to her," Lady Shalford added, with a gay little laugh.

"But I don't think Camilla wants to get married just yet," Bruce said. "She appears to be having a good time in London—and —"

"Yes, Bruce, but your father is getting a little impatient," Lady Shalford broke in. "He thinks, and so do I, that it is time your engagement was formally announced. That does not necessarily mean you need get married at once, of course. Naturally, Camilla will require time to collect her trousseau."

They were in the drawing-room having tea, and Bruce frowned into his cup.

"For a young man who is supposed to be in love, my dear Bruce, you seem singularly morose," his mother went on, a touch of asperity in her voice. "I simply do not understand you modern young people. Really, most of you are about as emotionless as fish! Do you actually bore one another as much as your attitude seems to suggest?"

"I expect it depends on the young people concerned," Bruce muttered. "Don't forget, mother, that this match between Camilla and me is a parent-made affair. You and Camilla's mother practically arranged it without consulting either of us, didn't you?"

"Oh no, that is not strictly true, my dear Bruce. When it was put to you and Camilla neither of you offered the slightest objection, did you? I am not suggesting that it was love at first sight," Lady Shalford went on "for such a thing rarely happens outside the imagination of writers of fiction. But both Mrs. Tanberry and I felt convinced that you and Camilla were eminently suited to each other."

"In other words, mother," Bruce suggested satirically, "love did not enter into the affair. It was just a question of 'suitability'—especially from the financial point of view!"

"Bruce, that is most unfair of you," his mother protested. "It is downright insulting, in fact."

"Sorry, mater," Bruce murmured contritely.

"If—if you did not want to marry Camilla, or she you, why did neither of you say so at the time?" Lady Shalford went on. "That would have put an end to the matter, of course. Instead, however, you both seemed quite content to fall in with the arrangement."

"I think we were both rather taken by surprise," Bruce said. "I know I was." He paused, then added—"Besides, mother, we were neither of us in love with anyone else at the time, so it didn't seem to matter very much then."

"Exactly what do you mean by that, Bruce?" his mother asked suspiciously.

"Exactly what I said, mother—I mean, that Camilla and I were not in love with each other," Bruce answered evasively.

"We are wandering away from the subject, Bruce—which was that the time has come for your engagement to Camilla to be officially announced," Lady Shalford said brusquely. "Have you anything against it?"

"Well, no, I suppose not, but—"

"Very well," Lady Shalford broke in, "then I will inform your father, and an announcement of the engagement can be made at once."

"But—but what about Camilla?" stammered Bruce, "she hasn't shown any anxiety about becoming officially engaged to me, has she, mother?"

"No, and I think she has been most patient with you, Bruce. Naturally, a girl would hesitate to say what is in her mind—she has to wait for the man to say it for her!"

Bruce smiled inwardly as he remembered that he had recently come upon Camilla in the arms of her father's chauffeur—a good looking ex-army officer. She had begged Bruce not to tell her parents about it, and he was now wondering what Camilla's reactions would be when she found that she was officially engaged to him!

"Well, that's settled then, Bruce dear," his mother was saying. "I will tell your father about it at dinner to-night," she added, in a tone of satisfaction, and then left the room.

Bruce remained sitting there staring gloomily in front of him. He wished he had shown more courage and openly admitted that he did not want to marry Camilla Tanberry. But that would have resulted in a "scene" with his mother. Worse still, his father would probably have stopped his allowance.

"Anyway, I suppose I'll have to see Fay and break the news to her," Bruce muttered to himself.

If only he could "wangle" that promised job out of his father right away, all might yet be well, his troubled thoughts ran on. For the firm whom he would be working for, wouldn't care two hoots whether he married Camilla Tanberry or anyone else! And his father would not be able to do anything about it, either, without loss of dignity.

AS Lady Shalford had predicted, her husband was very pleased to hear that Bruce had agreed at last that the engagement between himself and Camilla Tanberry should be officially announced. As a business man, Sir Philip believed in doing things in a business-like way, so he rang

up John Tanberry to find out if his daughter was agreeable to having the announcement made right away.

"Why, yes, of course, Philip, and it's about time, too, isn't it?" John Tanberry answered, with a hearty chuckle.

It never occurred to him to consult his daughter in the matter, for the affair had been "fixed up", unofficially, months ago.

So, after dinner that evening, Sir Philip Shalford went into his study to draft the announcement that was to be sent for publication in "The Times". It read as follows—

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place, between Bruce, only son of Sir Philip and Lady Shalford, and Camilla, elder daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Tanberry, of Grosvenor Street, Park Lane, London, W."

"Now it's up to you to get Camilla to name the day—and tell her to make it as soon as possible, my boy," Sir Philip said, giving his son and heir a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Bruce hid his consternation as best he could,

"What about that job for me you have been talking about, father?" he inquired. "When do I make a start?"

Sir Philip hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, it's not quite settled yet whether you will have to stay in England, or be sent to our Bombay office," he replied. "But I shall know something definite within a day or two."

Next morning, Bruce decided to drive over to Bridgefield to see Fay. He could imagine only too well the stormy interview that awaited him.

"Gosh!" he muttered to himself as he got into his car. "I've made a proper mess of things. If it hadn't been for that promised job, I'd have told the old man this morning that I had no intention of marrying Camilla Tanberry."

As if to relieve his feelings, he drove at a furious speed and as the car rounded a bend in the road, it collided with a heavily-laden lorry and overturned with Bruce underneath it.

"WELL, daddy, is there anything startling in the paper this morning?" asked Joan, smiling at her father across the breakfast table.

"Nothing sensational, if that is what you mean, my dear," he answered, putting down "The Times", and reaching out for his cup of coffee. "A good thing, too," he added, "for sensational news is usually bad news."

"And here comes the postman!" cried Fay, springing to her feet. "He's rather late this morning. I'll go and get the letters," she added, and hurried out of the room.

Joan guessed that she was hoping there might be a letter from Bruce Shalford, and when Fay returned with the letters, she could tell from the glum look in her sister's eyes that she had been disappointed.

Mr. Ingleford took the letters from her, and dropping the newspaper, started to open them. Joan picked up the paper and glanced idly at the page dealing with Society matters. Presently her gaze travelled down the "Forthcoming Marriages" column and she gave a start as she read the heading:

Mr. B. Shalford and Miss C. Tanberry.

There followed the official announcement that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place . . .

Fay had noticed the startled expression on her sister's face.

"What is it, Joan?" she asked.

Joan hesitated for a moment, then

handed her the paper, knowing it was no use trying to keep the news from her, since everyone in Bridgefield would be discussing it before the day was out.

When she had read the announcement, Fay turned deathly pale, and Joan feared she was going to faint. But with a tremendous effort, Fay managed to pull herself together.

"So that's that!" she murmured shakily, and then quietly slipped out of the room.

"Well, well, this is good news indeed!" Mr. Ingleford suddenly exclaimed, looking up from the letter he had been reading. "Where is Fay?" he asked. "I did not see her leave the room."

"She has rather a bad headache, daddy, and I think she has gone upstairs to her room to lie down for a short time," Joan said.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that, Joan. Now just listen to this, my dear," Mr. Ingleford went on, his eyes lighting up, "it has been decided that St. David's shall amalgamate with Benson's, and not the other way about. This means, in effect, that St. David's will disappear, and that Benson's will remain," he added, a triumphant smile on his face.

"But what wonderful news, daddy!" cried Joan. "Does that—does that mean you will remain headmaster?"

"Yes, my dear, this letter from the Board of Governors specifically says so. It appears that the headmaster of St. David's has secured an important educational post in Canada, so he would not be available in any case."

"So Benson's is saved, daddy!"

John Ingleford nodded.

"Yes, Benson's is saved, thank Heaven," he said. "I imagine that an extra wing will have to be built on to the school and a new laboratory. No doubt there will also be changes in the curriculum, but the tradition will remain."

"Oh, I'm so glad—so very, very glad, daddy," Joan murmured, and kissed him.

"I know you are, Joan, as glad as I am. Well, I must now hasten over to the school my dear. The next few months are going to be exceptionally busy ones, I fancy," her father added, then slipping on his gown took his departure.

Joan then ran upstairs to her sister's room. She found Fay seated on her bed, white-faced, but seemingly calm.

"Oh Fay dear, I don't know what to say to you," Joan murmured.

"There's nothing to say," Fay muttered, in a cold, hard voice. "I—I'm now going to get myself a job," she added, in a defiant tone.

"But what sort of a job can you get dear?" Joan asked, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"Well, I read in a newspaper a few days ago that well-educated girls are wanted to train as air stewardesses, and I'm going to apply. I don't see why I shouldn't stand as good a chance as anyone else."

"Of course not, darling," Joan replied, though she was not favourably impressed with the idea.

"I shall write in to-day, stating my qualifications," Fay went on. "I speak French pretty fluently, so that ought to be a bit of a help, didn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it might," agreed Joan. "But," she added, "I've heard that about only one applicant in a hundred has any chance of being taken on."

"Well, why shouldn't I be that one?" muttered Fay. "Someone has to be."

It was not till later in the day that Mrs. Guffin, the daily help, and unfailing purveyor of all the local gossip, mentioned that young Mr. Shalford had met with a serious car accident.

"He ran slap into a lorry, they say," she told Joan as they were in the kitchen washing-up. "His car was completely smashed up, I'm told, and it's a miracle the poor young man wasn't killed outright."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that," Joan said, wondering what effect the news would have on her sister.

"He was took to the Cottage Hospital in an ambulance," the woman went on. "Of course it don't follow that because he was alive when they picked 'im up that he's still alive now, Miss Ingleford. But I reckon we'll read all about it in the local paper when it comes out on Friday."

Greatly perturbed, Joan decided to ring up the matron of the Wilmington Cottage Hospital, a Miss Ellis whom she knew quite well.

When the answer came through, it was to the effect that the patient was still unconscious and that his condition was serious.

WHEN, at last, Bruce Shalford recovered consciousness, it was to find himself in hospital, scarcely able to move because of the bandages and splints with which he was encased. He could not recall how he came to be there, and when he asked the nurse, she told him he must not talk, but should try to go to sleep again.

Several days elapsed before he was able to remember what had happened up to the moment of the crash and the reason for his reckless driving. Then it suddenly dawned upon him that it was when he was on his way to Bridgefield to warn Fay about the announcement of his engagement to Camilla Tanberry and to assure her that, in spite of everything, she was the only girl he loved, and that he was determined to marry her at all costs.

His parents had made frequent visits to the hospital, but they had carefully evaded his questions. All Bruce could get out of his father was that Benson's School had been saved and John Ingleford was to remain as headmaster. That was good news, but it did not go far enough.

Bruce was not surprised that Fay had not come to see him. She must, of course, have heard about his supposed engagement to Camilla Tanberry, and had probably come to the conclusion that he was a despicable cad of whom she was well rid!

But Fay, behind a mask of hard indifference, was suffering as she had never thought it possible to suffer. True, she had muttered to herself all the things which Bruce imagined she had said about him, but this did not prevent her from going on loving him. It was a humiliating admission to have to make, even to herself, but there was no evading it.

And she knew in her heart of hearts, that no other man could ever take Bruce's place. Love, she had discovered to her bitter cost, could not be reasoned or wished away. Even pride could not kill it, nor the recognition of its worthlessness stamp it out.

Then, one morning, Fay received two letters. One, she could tell by the writing, was from Bruce, and acting on impulse, she tore it up unread and threw the fragments into the kitchen fire—but only to regret having done so when it was too late.

The second letter was from a B.O.A.C. official, requesting her, in answer to her application, to appear before a Preliminary Selection Board on the following Tuesday morning at eleven o'clock.

Then, as she read on, her hopes were dashed, for the letter informed her that, even if selected for training, this did not imply that she would be engaged, and that, in any case, she would have to go before

another selection board after passing a medical examination and various other tests.

"I must say, it doesn't sound very encouraging, my dear," commented Joan, to whom Fay read the letter. "Have you shown it to daddy?"

"No, and I think I will wait till I stand a real chance of getting the job before I mention the matter to anyone except you," Fay answered gloomily.

When she returned from her visit to the selection board, Fay was no wiser. They had informed her that she would be hearing from them "in due course".

"Oh, well, there's no need to despair yet, darling," Joan remarked, with an optimism she did not feel. "All the other girls who went before the board will have had the same sort of letter, of course. By the way, Fay," she added. "Mrs. Drummond is coming to tea this afternoon."

"Is she?" Fay murmured, with an air of indifference. "Mrs. Drummond seems to be coming here quite a lot now that she has settled into her new house, doesn't she?"

"Well, yes, and daddy seems to like her very much," Joan said thoughtfully. "They get on wonderfully well together—which is a good thing, of course, because it helps daddy to take his mind off his work. These last few weeks have been very trying for him, as you know, Fay."

At lunch that day, Mr. Ingleford asked Joan if either she or Fay had been to the hospital to see Bruce Shalford.

"No, daddy," Joan answered. "I don't think they would allow him to see visitors yet."

"Possibly not, my dear, but I think that if either you or Fay were to make a personal call at the hospital it would be a gracious thing to do. You see, I feel we owe a great deal to the young man's father—in fact, I have no doubt that it was due to Sir Philip's influence that Benson's was not swallowed up by St. David's."

"Very well, daddy, I'll call at the hospital this afternoon," Joan promised—"unless you would like to go, Fay?" she added, glancing at her sister.

Fay shook her head.

"Indeed," went on Mr. Ingleford meditatively, "I should not be surprised if Bruce himself had something to do with it. I think the young man's report, after his visit here that day, must have carried considerable weight with his father—had it been an adverse one the result might have been very different."

Joan cycled over to Wilmington Cottage Hospital that afternoon and was given permission to see the patient for a few minutes. She found that Bruce was still heavily bandaged and propped up in bed in a private ward.

"I am so glad to know that you are getting better, Mr. Shalford," she said, smiling down at him.

"Thank you, Miss Ingleford," he murmured. He paused, then added—"How is Fay? Why hasn't she been to see me?"

"Oh, but I understand that only very special visitors have been allowed to see you, Mr. Shalford," evaded Joan.

"But why didn't Fay come to-day?" he persisted. "Do you happen to know," he went on, "if there has been an announcement in the newspapers of my—of my engagement to Miss Camilla Tanberry?"

Joan hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, yes, Mr. Shalford, I happened to see the announcement in 'The Times'," she answered.

Bruce frowned.

"Did you?" he muttered. "I—I thought my father might have held it back because of this smash-up of mine. And does Fay know about it?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Shalford."

"Then please tell her that that is all a mistake and that I have no intention whatever of marrying Camilla Tanberry," he said. "Camilla and I are not in love with each other, and never have been. Fay is the only girl I love, and when I am able to get on my feet again, I'm going to—"

He broke off as the door opened and a nurse entered.

"I am afraid your time is up, Miss Ingleford," she said.

Joan nodded, and rose from her chair. She gave Bruce an understanding smile and wished him good-bye.

When Joan returned home and told her sister what Bruce had said, Fay shook her head dubiously.

"If he had really meant to break with that other girl, why didn't he do so before the engagement was announced?" she asked, a bitter note in her voice. "It would have been possible then, and now it isn't, of course. Besides, how could I marry him after he had jilted his fiancée? For that's what it would be. Why, people would regard me as a 'man-snatcher'—the sort of despicable creature who doesn't care what misery she causes so long as she gets what she wants!"

Joan had to admit to herself that there was some truth in this, and she could think of nothing comforting to say. The situation was an impossible one, for both Fay and Bruce. Joan's only hope was that her sister might later on, fall in love with some other man, and that the old wound would be healed and forgotten.

BRUCE was back at his home again, but he still had to use crutches. He was now seated in the drawing-room facing his father and mother, and had just taken the bold step of announcing that he had no intention of marrying Camilla Tanberry.

There had been tears from his mother, angry exclamations and even threats from his father. But the young man had shown unexpected firmness. He insisted that neither he nor Camilla wanted to marry each other and that the engagement had been forced upon them.

"In other words," his father snapped, "I suppose the truth of the matter is that you are in love with some other girl. Who is she?"

"I would rather not tell you, father," Bruce replied doggedly.

Sir Philip glared at him.

"Very well, my boy," he said grimly. "I can't turn you out of the house in your present condition, but as soon as you are in a fit state to leave here, I'll find you a job abroad and we shall have to invent some sort of a story to save our faces."

Bruce shook his head vigorously.

"Oh no, father," he said. "I'm not going to be sent abroad in disgrace—as if I'd robbed a till! I'll find myself a job. As you know, I've got a university degree and that ought to be some help to me."

Sir Philip gave a sarcastic laugh.

"From a commercial point of view, university graduates are two-a-penny, my dear fellow—that is, unless they hold science degrees—which you do not," he said.

"All the same, father, I'll get a job of some kind, all right—and not one that's been found for me because I'm my father's son!" Bruce retorted defiantly, and then hobbled out of the room.

A FORTNIGHT later, Bruce was able to discard his crutches, and without asking permission, he took his father's car and drove over to Benson's School. He had hoped to see Fay, but Joan, who opened the door to him, informed him that her sister had gone up to London to undergo a medical examination.

"A medical examination?" Bruce repeated, staring at Joan in surprise. "What on earth for?"

Joan nodded, and told him about Fay's hopes of becoming an air hostess, and how she had already been before the Preliminary Selection Board.

"The fact that Fay is being medically examined, rather looks as if she really stands a chance," Joan added.

Bruce suppressed a groan.

"But—but if Fay is still in love with me, surely she would prefer to marry me rather than accept a job of that kind!" he said.

"Oh, but my sister hasn't got the job yet, Mr. Shalford. I gather from what she has told me, that there are quite a number of applicants for the post, and Fay thinks she is somewhat handicapped by the fact that she has had no nursing or catering experience—both of which, I understand, are regarded as important assets."

"Yes, of course," Bruce murmured. He sighed, and added—"I never realised that I had made such a horrible mess of things, Joan, and it seems to me that the only thing left for me to do is to go abroad."

"But what about—about Miss Tanberry?" hazarded Joan.

Bruce shrugged.

"Oh, she'll be as glad to see the back of me, as my father will," he answered, with a bitter laugh. "By the way," he added, "I suppose your father is in school?"

"Yes," Joan replied. "If you would like to speak to him, you could go and wait in his room. The class he is now taking will soon be over."

Bruce thanked her, and strolled across the quadrangle. Joan saw him pause indecisively at the school door, and then enter. She wondered what he wanted to see her father about.

IT was two weeks later, when Fay announced triumphantly that she had been accepted by the B.O.A.C. for training.

"Of course," she said. "that doesn't mean I've actually got the job. The training course lasts about ten weeks and during that time one has to pass the various examinations. I expect it will be an awful swot!"

"Tell me—when do you start, my dear?" asked her father, who secretly disliked the idea of his daughter becoming an air stewardess.

"In about a week, daddy," Fay replied. "I shall get a letter telling me the exact date and where to report. Isn't it awfully exciting?"

Her father shrugged, but made no reply. But when he had left for the school, Fay sank into a chair and burst into tears.

"Darling, what is the matter?" Joan asked rushing to her sister's side and putting an arm about her.

"Don't—don't take any notice of me," Fay sobbed. "Oh, what an utter little idiot I have been!"

"But I thought you were ever so pleased at being accepted for the training course, dear," murmured Joan.

"So—so I am," muttered Fay, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. "It—it isn't that."

"Then what is it, darling?" Joan asked

gently. "Is it Bruce?"

"Yes—yes," Fay murmured chokily. "I—I still love Bruce, in spite of everything. I know it's dreadfully silly of me, but I just can't help it, Joan. The thought of him married to a girl—he does not love—"

"Well, please think no more about it, dear," Joan broke in. "You are only torturing yourself, and the more you do that, the harder it will be to forget. So try and concentrate on that new job of yours, Fay."

"But I haven't got it yet."

"Oh, but you will get it, of course, my dear. After all, Fay, you are not the only girl to have an unhappy love affair, you know," Joan added. "I expect most of those who do, somehow manage to find happiness in the end."

"Oh, yes, but only in stories and on the films!" Fay murmured brokenly.

Thinking of her own unhappy love affair, Joan withdrew her arm from about her sister. It was difficult to comfort others when you needed comfort so badly yourself, she reflected sadly.

"Have you—have you heard from Roger Brent lately?" asked Fay.

Joan shook her head, and flushed.

"You—you have never told me very much about it, have you?" Fay went on. "But I know you're in love with him, Joan, and he with you. So why don't you make up your mind and—and marry him?"

Joan hesitated a moment. Then—

"Because such a thing is out of the question, Fay. Even when you need me no longer, daddy will, and who else is there to look after him?"

"But suppose—suppose daddy were to marry again?" Fay remarked thoughtfully. "After all, he's not too old, and—"

"Now you're talking utter nonsense, my dear!" Joan interrupted.

"Well, yes, perhaps I am," Fay admitted. "All the same, Joan, it seems such a pity about you and Roger. You are so well suited to each other, aren't you?"

Joan sighed.

"I would rather not talk about it, if you don't mind, Fay," she said.

"Very well, just as you like, darling. But please don't think I'm so full of self-pity that I can't sympathise with your troubles. Joan. But I do think you might have taken me more into your confidence."

"It wouldn't have helped either of us if I had," Joan said. "In any case, it's all over and done with now, for the last time I saw Roger, I told him quite definitely that I could not marry him."

"And did he accept it as final, Joan?"

"What else could he do, my dear? Roger told me that he has accepted a good job in South Africa and that he'll be going out there very soon. Perhaps," Joan added wistfully, "I'll feel more resigned when I know there are a thousand miles of ocean between us!"

"I know if I were a man and wanted a girl I'd have her even if I had to drag her to the altar," Fay declared, with a forced little laugh. "Men are too tame these days, if you ask me."

"Well, I'd like to see Bruce Shalford forcing you to the altar against your will!" Joan retorted jestingly, and then gave a start as she glanced out of the window. "Good heavens!" she gasped. "Here he comes!"

"Here who comes?" asked Fay.

"Why, Bruce, of course! He's hurrying across the quadrangle towards the house. What can have happened, I wonder?" Joan added, with suppressed excitement.

A few moments later the front door bell

rang and Joan went to answer it.

"Is—is Fay in?" Bruce asked, a little breathlessly.

Joan nodded, and led the way into the drawing-room. Then, almost before Fay realised what was happening, she found herself tightly embraced in Bruce's arms.

"I'm free, my darling Fay—free to marry you, my love!" he cried, kissing her again and again.

He then proceeded to tell her that Camilla Tanberry had eloped with her father's chauffeur, and that they had been married by special licence.

"But, Bruce, are you—are you quite sure about all this?" Fay stammered.

"Oh yes, quite sure, darling," he answered, "Camilla has written me a letter telling me all about it."

"Will—will this affect the job your father promised you?" Joan ventured to ask.

"Who cares?" Bruce returned, with an air of indifference, his arm still encircling Fay's waist. "I don't know if your father has told you about it, but he has offered me the post of senior classical master here. I happen to be an honours graduate of Cambridge, you know, Joan, and now that Benson's is to include St. David's, more masters will be needed here."

"Yes, of course," Joan agreed. "Well, Fay dear," she added, with an ironic smile, "What about that training course now?"

"I'm going to be generous, Joan, and let some other girl have my chance," Fay answered, smiling happily.

"What a nice and generous girl you are, my dear!" Joan exclaimed laughingly, and then went upstairs to her room, glad beyond words that everything had come right for her sister.

ON the following morning, Joan received a letter from Roger. In it he told her that everything had been settled regarding his appointment in South Africa and that he had been given a month's leave to prepare for his departure.

"Among the things I shall get," the letter went on, "is a special marriage licence—I have an idea what your answer to that will be, my dear Joan, but I don't care. I am determined to marry you, at all costs—even if I have to drag you to the altar! I have thought the matter over long and carefully, darling, and I have come to the conclusion that, if your father knew the facts, he would not stand in the way of his daughter's happiness."

"So no more of this self-sacrificing heroine stuff, my dearest—since the role is now out-moded, you know, and I warn you that, one of these days, I shall swoop down on Benson's like a wolf on the fold and carry you off willy-nilly, parental protests—if any—notwithstanding! All my love, darling, now and for ever,

"ROGER".

Joan put down the letter, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or cry. But she did both, telling herself the while that it was all nonsense—that she could not possibly marry Roger and that her father had first claim on her in spite of everything.

Yet she found it hard—terribly hard, to steel her heart against its yearning for happiness, against the awareness of the emptiness and misery that would be hers when Roger had left her forever.

Joan knew, of course, that Roger's letter was largely bravado; a last, desperate attempt to break down her resistance, to carry her by storm, as it were. She decided that he must be prevented from coming to the house.

So she wrote him a brief, and rather curt little note, warning him that her resolution was still unshaken, and that no efforts on his part could make her swerve from what she believed to be her duty. She wished him success in his new job in South Africa, and signed herself "Yours sincerely, Joan Ingleford".

Having to do some shopping in Wilmington that afternoon, Joan took the letter with her to post it there, and when she returned home, Fay met her in the hall, and said, with suppressed excitement—

"Daddy wants to speak to you, Joan. He's in the drawing-room with Mrs. Drummond."

"What does daddy want to speak to me about?" asked Joan.

"Better go in and see, darling," Fay answered smilingly.

Joan entered the drawing-room to find her father and Mrs. Drummond seated side by side on the divan.

Her father smiled up at her, and said, a little awkwardly—

"Joan dear, I—I want to tell you that Mrs. Drummond and I have decided to share our lives together. I am sure you will wish us every happiness, won't you, my dear?"

For a moment, Joan was too taken aback to speak. Then—

"Why, of—of course, daddy. I—I wish you and Mrs. Drummond every happiness," she stammered, and gave both her future stepmother and her father an affectionate kiss.

But at the back of Joan's mind was the thought that she had sacrificed her own happiness—and Roger's—unnecessarily. She had thought herself to be indispensable to her father's welfare and happiness, and now realised that this was not so!

She had forgotten all about Roger's letter and his threat to carry her off "willy-nilly". Besides she had not taken it seriously.

When, therefore, Joan answered a ring at the front door bell soon after breakfast on the following morning, she gave a gasp of surprise when she saw Roger standing there.

Before she realised what was happening, he had swept her into his arms and his lips had found hers.

"I—I told you that I'd drag you to the altar by force, if necessary, didn't I, darling?" he breathed, kissing her again and again. "And I've come to do it!"

Joan's heart leapt with joy.

"But, Roger dear, there's no need for you to use force," she whispered shakily, her eyes glowing with happiness. "I—I am no longer love's prisoner. Everything has worked out all right, and I am free to marry you at last!"

THE END.

The small boy had submitted a surprisingly good essay. "Are you sure this is all your own work?" asked the teacher. "Well," replied the boy, "you might find some of the words in the dictionary."

* * *

Customer: "I should like to try on that frock in the window." Assistant: "Sorry, madam, but the management will not allow that. Would you care to try it on in our private fitting room?"

* * *

An enthusiast but unskilful golfer, he confided to his caddie: "You know, I seem to be improving. Can you see any difference?" "Yes," replied the caddie, "You've 'ad your 'air cut."

LOVE AGAINST THE WORLD

By Joan Telscombe

STRANGE NEW NEIGHBOUR.

"SORRY I'm late, everybody, but I had to come all the way round by the road. *That awful man* has closed the path through Five Acre Wood and put up a 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' notice!"

The heads of the five people seated at the table in the roomy, old-fashioned kitchen dining-room of Rosemead Farm, turned to the door, where a pretty, fair-haired girl of nineteen had come in on the heels of her words, her cheeks flushed with indignation and exertion.

The scorn with which she uttered the expression "*That awful man*" found reflection in the chorus of criticism which followed.

"Never mind, Dulcie dear. Sit down and make yourself at home," invited Mrs. Wishart, a plump, middle-aged woman with hrewd, twinkling grey eyes.

"Do you mean there's a fence across the path, my dear?" enquired Mr. Wishart, from the head of the table.

"Yes, indeed I do, Uncle Tom," replied Dulcie Emmett, taking the cup of tea her aunt handed to her. "Barbed wire at that! Horrid!"

"But he's no right to fence up the path," declared twenty-six year old Mervyn Wishart, getting up to fetch a chair for the girl. "The track through Five Acres Wood has been a public right-of-way for donkey's years."

"All the same, he's done it," said Dulcie, her blue eyes sparkling. "Not only that, but the fence appears to enclose the whole of the lower part of the wood, right up to the main road at the other end."

"That's easily settled, then," declared sixteen year old Derek Wishart, with a wide grin. "Mervyn has a hefty pair of wire cutters in the workshop. With those I reckon it won't take us very long to make short work of Mr. High-and-Mighty Stirling's wire fence."

"Hi, not so fast, son," warned his father soberly. "Leave that kind of behaviour of those who don't know any better. If, as I understand, there is a right of way through Five Acre Wood, there are legal means of seeing that it is kept open. This is a matter for the local authorities. You'll only get into trouble if you try to take the law into your own hands."

Twenty-year old Frances Wishart glanced at her father, a gleam of respect coming into her soft grey eyes. She knew his judgment was generally sound and that he always made sure of his facts before expressing an opinion on any subject. Her brother Mervyn evidently thought the same.

"Dad's quite right, of course," he conceded. "You damage your own case if you go in for that kind of thing. All the same, I don't see the point of closing the path. It doesn't go anywhere near his house, so there can be no question of privacy involved, and the woods themselves are no longer a game preserve."

"There may be reasons we know nothing about to cause Mr. Stirling to close the path, Mervyn dear," said his mother quietly. "After all, he hasn't lived at the Grange for very long and he may not know all the ins and outs of things. I daresay, if someone went to see him, and told him that we have always used the path, he would put a gate in the fence."

She beamed round the table, thinking

how fortunate she was to be blessed with two such fine boys as Mervyn and Derek, and a daughter as good and as lovely as Frances. To her gentle way of thinking, it was quite impossible that anyone should want to go out of their way to annoy neighbours.

"Mother is right," said Frances, making her first contribution to the discussion. "I don't suppose anyone has told Mr. Stirling that the path is the recognised short cut to Runcton. After all, he is a stranger here."

"Well, surely it was up to him to find out," argued Mervyn. "After all, he's been employing local people, hasn't he? Do you mean to tell me that old Mitchell, for instance, hasn't told him that it is a public footpath? I've never known the old chap backward in expressing his opinion whether it was asked for or not."

Thereafter the conversation developed into a hotch-potch of reminiscences and arguments such as usually enlivened tea-time in the Wishart household.

It was a typical English setting. The big, old kitchen, with the bacon curing hooks still in the rafters, the oak dresser filled with blue and white china and the small latticed windows.

It was a scene as familiar to Frances as the faces of the others. Her father, grey-haired and handsome, her mother kindly and gentle, but all the same the rock beneath whose shade they all took shelter.

Then there was Mervyn, broad-shouldered and good-looking, taking his full share in running the farm, which had been in the family for over a hundred years; and finally, Derek, who was going to an agricultural college for the next three years.

Dulcie, too, had to be included as one of the family now that she and Mervyn were engaged. She and Frances had been at school together.

"Does anyone really know anything about the fellow?" asked Mervyn, during a brief lull in the conversation. "It strikes me as being rather odd for a young chap like that to buy a place the size of Morton Grange. There must be fifteen acres of parkland as well as the gardens—and Five Acre Wood."

"How do you mean, odd, Mervyn?" enquired Dulcie.

Mervyn smiled.

"Doesn't it strike you that way, too, my dear?" he asked. "By all accounts, Stirling is unmarried—at least I haven't heard that there is a Mrs. Stirling—so what does he want with a house like that?"

"Perhaps he's going to start an orphanage or a convalescent home?" said his fiancée.

"More likely he's a half-mad scientist who's invented a new kind of bomb," suggested Derek mysteriously. "He's put up the barbed wire because he's afraid of spies!"

"Oh, don't talk such horrid nonsense, Derek," said his mother reprovingly. She turned to Mervyn. "Hasn't he anyone to do for him, poor man?"

"It all depends upon what you mean, mother dear," said Mervyn, laughingly. "He brought a couple of family retainers of sorts with him, I believe—husband and wife. I gather the wife acts as cook-house-keeper and the husband as general handyman. His name is Sims, I believe, and from what I've heard, he's a secretive sort of chap."

"You mean he refuses to gossip about his employer, I suppose," said Mr. Wishart, with a knowing chuckle. "I can imagine that *would* annoy Runcton folk!"

"Maybe you're right, dad," smiled Mervyn. He met his sister's eyes and added; "What about you, Fran? Haven't you any ideas on the subject?"

"Not one, I'm afraid," she shrugged. "I haven't met your mystery man yet, Mervyn, so I can't express an opinion. Frankly, I don't even know what he looks like."

"Oh, Fran's much too deep," put in Derek, with a wink in Dulcie's direction. "She prefers to sit tight and say nothing and then afterwards she'll pretend to have known all about it."

"Nothing of the kind" said Frances equably. "I don't think there is much point in speculating when we have so little to go on that's all. All we *know* is that Morton Grange has been bought by somebody called Stirling, and he has a couple named Sims."

Just then there was the sound of a car stopping outside.

Mervyn looked out of the window. "That's Tom Merriman's shooting brake, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes. It's a new one. Simply super!" enthused Derek. "That's Tom all right. You couldn't mistake his red hair even on a foggy night."

As he spoke a tall young man in grey flannels and sports jacket got out of the brake in the farmyard drive. He was about Mervyn's own age and had a frank, open countenance surmounted by a mop of fiery red hair.

"Well, I must be off back to work" said Mr. Wishart, rising to his feet. A smile lurked deep in his eyes. "I don't imagine Tom has come to see *me*."

"I don't imagine Tom would notice whether you were here or not so long as Frances was in the room," said Derek impishly. "Golly, look at her blushing!"

"Pack it up, young fellow," his brother said reprovingly, giving Derek a little kick under the table.

All the same, he couldn't resist giving his sister a teasing glance. She had gone pink and looked, as he afterwards confided to Dulcie, as if she could run away and hide.

For the truth was, Frances was not at all sure she wished to see Tom Merriman at that moment.

Tom was chief valuer to a firm of land and estate agents in Ambledean, the nearest country town to Runcton, and for some time past Frances had been trying to make up her mind about him.

She knew that he was in love with her: he had made no secret of the fact, and she herself was quite fond of him. Yet something held her back from giving him the answer he sought, as if a warning voice was urging her not to mistake affection for love.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Wishart. Good afternoon, everybody! I'm not intruding, I hope?"

Tom Merriman entered the kitchen, his glance going from Mrs. Wishart to Frances.

"Of course not, Tom," said Mrs. Wishart warmly. "We're nearly finished tea, but I'm sure Frances will love to make a fresh pot."

"Thank you," he said gratefully, taking a chair. "I've been to Westmoring to inspect a property that has come into the market and as I had to pass here on my way back I thought I'd drop in and tell you the latest news. It's all the rage in Runcton."

"I bet we know what it is," said Derek irrepressibly. "You're going to tell us that the path through Five Acre Wood has

been wired up, aren't you?"

"As it happens, I was," said Tom, a little disappointed.

"Dulcie told us. She had to come all the way round by the road," said Mervyn, frowning his young brother to silence. "We've been discussing the matter all during tea, but we still haven't got anywhere."

Tom laughed.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "I imagine it's the subject of discussion at every tea table for miles around. The way people are talking isn't going to do much good, though. Sam Raikes told me that some of our local hotheads propose going there to-night and uprooting the fence posts and making a bonfire of them."

"That's bad," said Mervyn gravely. "That kind of thing only leads to serious trouble. From the little I know of the new owner of Morton Grange he isn't likely to take interference like that lying down."

"I don't know. I think it's a jolly good idea," said Derek belligerently. "It would teach him not to play monkey tricks with people's rights."

"We don't know that they are rights, Derek," said Tom. "You can take it as certain that Mr. Stirling's solicitors checked the title deeds of the property when he made the purchase. He knows what he's doing."

"Have you met Mr. Stirling, Tom?" enquired Frances.

"No, my dear," he answered, turning to her. "But I heard that he's been abroad for a number of years and only recently returned to this country. He's an architect by profession, I believe."

Looking at them both, Mervyn wondered idly what his sister really thought of Tom. She was, he thought, looking particularly attractive in a tweed skirt and a saxe-blue polo necked jumper. She looked exactly what she was, an outdoor girl with character and self-reliance in every line of her charming face.

"Was the Grange furnished when it was sold?" Dulcie cut into Mervyn's thoughts.

"I don't imagine it was," he said. "When Sir Phillip Morton died, all the stuff was put into store and then was sold separately later."

"Mr. Stirling must be a very well-to-do man, then," said Dulcie. "I mean, it would cost the earth to furnish a place that size at to-day's prices and father said it would take several hundreds to put it into proper repair after being empty for so long."

"Being an architect, perhaps he's going to turn the place into a model village," suggested Derek. "You know like that place the other side of Ambledean. They cut up the old estate there and put up ten largish houses."

"That's possible," Tom agreed. "He would have no difficulty in getting planning permission from the county council for a scheme of that kind."

Mervyn rose to his feet, pushing back his chair.

"All the same, I hope that won't prove to be the case," he said. "Houses are wanted badly enough, I know, but there are other places where they can be built without cutting up a lovely old estate like Morton Grange." He turned to Derek. "Come on, young feller-me-lad. You can lend me a hand with the milking. I want to get it finished earlier as I'm taking Dulcie to the pictures."

DULCIE was nearly as much at home in the big kitchen as she was in her own home on the other side of Runcton, and she kept up a laughing conversation with Tom and Frances while she helped clear away and wash up.

When Mrs. Wishart had gone upstairs, and when, a little later, Dulcie went off to find Mervyn, Tom and Frances were left

alone.

"Do you really think there'll be trouble over the fence in Five Acre Wood, Tom?" Frances asked, as they strolled out of doors, after saying she wanted to cut some flowers for the house.

Tom looked thoughtful. When he spoke, he chose his words carefully unwilling to appear in the role of alarmist.

"I really don't know," he answered at length. "You know how deeply country folk resent any encroachment upon their liberties. Men like Sam Raikes and Jed Harmsworth, can't see any fair reason why the path should be closed, especially as they've used it for years to get to work. Frankly, I can't blame them for cutting up rusty, but as Mervyn pointed out, they will do more harm than good if they act foolishly in the way they threaten to do. There is always a smattering of irresponsible youths who take advantage of such a situation to indulge in a little hooliganism and goodness knows what they may start up."

Frances snipped a dead rose off a bush with a pair of scissors.

"If you think it is possible that something may happen, isn't it your duty to warn Mr. Stirling, Tom?"

"Warn him?" He looked at her in a way that told her the idea had never entered his mind. "Hang it all, my dear girl, it isn't any affair of mine! Besides what good would that do? The chances are he would mount guard over his fence with a shotgun and then somebody might really get hurt."

"I see," she said quietly.

She did not refer to the subject again, but turned the conversation into other channels, earnestly wishing she could decide whether she loved Tom enough to become his wife.

Up to now she had been content to drift, taking life as she found it, seeking an outlet for her energies and emotions in the work on the farm, where she helped her mother and acted as book-keeper and secretary. Rosemead Farm was a large one and possessed one of the best dairy herds in the county, so that there was a great deal of clerical work involved in sending out accounts and filling in returns for the Milk Marketing Board.

Tom broke a short silence.

"I suppose it is no use hoping to persuade you to come to the pictures to-night, Frances?" he asked somewhat diffidently. "It's ages since we went, you know."

Frances shook her head and smiled a little wanly.

"I'm sorry, Tom, but honestly, I don't feel like the pictures to-night. I've a bit of a head and besides, I'm so behind with my work." She squeezed his arm and tried to soften the blow. "I'll come with you one evening next week if you like."

"All right," he smiled. "I'm sorry about the headache. What do you think it is—the weather?"

"I suppose so," she answered listlessly. "There's been thunder about all day. I wish we could have a good storm and clear the air."

It was more or less the truth for she did have a slight headache. But she knew, deep down, that she had used it as an excuse to avoid going out with him. She felt sorry, however, when she saw his expression.

"Oh, well, I suppose I'd better be getting along," he said, kicking a stone out of his path. He looked up suddenly. "When shall I see you again, Frances?"

"Whenever you like, Tom. You know you are always welcome," she said, putting eagerness into her voice.

He smiled a little anxiously, she thought, almost as if he felt it necessary to placate her, and for some reason the thought made her cross.

"That's very kind of you," he mumbled

awkwardly, going red. "I mean to say, you know how I feel about you and all that. Naturally, I want to see you as often as I can, though I don't want to be a nuisance and make you bored with me."

Her momentary crossness evaporated and she smiled.

"Dear Tom," she said softly. "You know you could never be a nuisance! I only wish,"—she sighed deeply—"that I could give you the answer you want, Tom, but I've got to be quite, quite sure, you see. I mean, I couldn't give you my word and then back out, could I?"

He took her out-thrust hand, a sudden premonition seeming to tell him that the road before them was bestrewn with unseen things and that she was destined to know sorrow before she would find happiness. The thought made him suddenly protective towards her.

"All right, Frances, I understand," he said gently. "So long as you don't tell me that you have fallen in love with someone else I shall continue to hope! I know that you will be quite honest with me and that if ever you feel differently you will tell me so. You know I'd give my life to make you happy, don't you?"

"Yes, I know," she answered, her eyes moist. "You make me feel horribly selfish when—when you talk like that, Tom. I promise that if ever that happens I'll tell you at once."

"That's all I need, then," he said with a little smile. "As for feeling selfish, that's just silly," he went on. "You can't help it if I fall in love with you and, as you have said on more than one occasion, no one can fall in love to order. I would marry you on any terms, you know that, but I understand just how you feel. So please don't worry on my account."

"What a dear you are, Tom," she murmured with deep feeling, tears fringing her long lashes. "You very much tempt me to say 'Yes', but it wouldn't be fair to you, my dear. To—to become your wife I would have to love you as you love me. Anything else would be second best, you see."

"I know, Frances." He put his lips to her fingers for a moment, something almost debonair in his manner and at the same time oddly protective. "Now I must really be going. Walk as far as my new car with me—I want to show it to you. I came to the conclusion that for my work I wanted something a bit better than that ramshackle old motor-bike."

When he had driven away, Frances stood at the garden gate for a time, her eyes deeply thoughtful. No one but Tom would have so tactfully lifted her down from the emotional heights they had scaled, she thought.

At length she turned and made her way back to the gracious old farmhouse wondering for the hundredth time if she were doing right to hold out in the face of Tom's unselfish love.

As his wife she would know security and happiness such as did not offer itself every day. But in holding him off she was running the risk of throwing away the substance for the shadow. That, at least, was how others would see it. Was she, then, being merely foolish in straining after an ideal that, maybe did not exist?

Worrying though the problem might be nevertheless she had too much character to allow herself to be coerced into a decision which might prove fatally wrong.

If she were to marry Tom, only to find out that she could not give him all that she would want to give him, there could be no real happiness for either of them. At the same time he was too fine a man to be deceived.

AN hour later, a tweed jacket over a jumper, Frances let herself out of the

house and taking the path alongside the barns, opened a gate which gave on to a shady lane.

Her mother and father were listening to a talk on the wireless, and Derek was studying. Mervyn and Dulcie had driven off to Ambledean, so she was free to please herself for an hour or so.

It was a balmy evening in August, and following the recent long dry spell, the trees were already turning colour.

Her way took her past the turning which led towards Five Acre Wood, away to the north, and beyond was the village.

In front, the ground rose in gentle folds to the crest of the South Downs, only the last few yards being really steep. From the top one could obtain a wide view of the valley through which the river wound its way to the English Channel.

As she walked the cool evening breeze played on her temples, driving away the headache that had nagged her all day, so that it was with a spirit of uplift that she reached the crest of the hill and sat down to regain her breath.

She had been resting for some minutes when she heard a nightingale burst into song.

It was late in the year to hear a nightingale and for that reason she listened enthralled by the lovely notes.

How long she sat there Frances had no idea. But at length the bird stopped, ending its concert with a cascade of liquid jewel-like notes.

Barely had silence followed than there was a rustle in the grass and a huge, black Labrador dog bounded over the crest of the hill.

Startled, she jumped up and saw a man coming towards her.

"Heel, Rastus!" he ordered sharply, and the dog instantly obeyed, circling behind its master and sitting down on the grass.

The stranger smiled apologetically. "I'm very sorry," he said. "I hope we did not startle you?"

"I was more surprised than anything," said Frances, adding as she looked at the dog:

"He's a beauty, isn't he?"

"He's rather nice," the man admitted, patting the animal. "Unfortunately, he has no ear for music. He just could not understand why I wanted him to keep quiet while that nightingale was singing. You heard it, of course?"

"Yes, it was lovely," she nodded. "I'm glad Rastus didn't frighten it away. I would have been cross in that case!"

The young man, for he looked no more than thirty, laughed.

"I can't imagine you being cross with anyone," he said daringly. "If I am any judge, you'd probably end up by spoiling Rastus unmercifully."

Frances thought he was like her brother Mervyn in many ways, with the same hard core of integrity that breeds complete indifference to what others might say or think. He evidently possessed a good sense of humour as well if the rather ironic gleam of amusement in his eyes was anything to go by.

All at once she realised who he was.

"You are Mr. Stirling, aren't you?" she said, with characteristic refusal to stand on ceremony. "I'm Frances Wishart—I live with my parents at Rosemead Farm."

He gave a little bow.

"It is kind of you to waive a formal introduction, Miss Wishart," he said. "I am Peter Stirling, as you have guessed, and he fact that you live at Rosemead Farm makes us neighbours. I should have called

to pay my respects on your family before this, I know, but truthfully. I haven't had much time to look round yet. There's a lot to be done when settling into a new place."

"Being neighbours is considered sufficient introduction in Sussex, Mr. Stirling," she said smilingly. "I gathered who you were when I saw Rastus—someone had already mentioned that you had a Labrador. Besides, we don't get many strangers in this part of the world."

"So I should imagine," he said. He glanced at her keenly for a moment. "That probably accounts for the somewhat vulgar curiosity my arrival appears to have aroused. I've come to the conclusion that the majority of people hereabouts think they know more about my private affairs than I know myself."

"I'm afraid village gossip is one of the things one has to contend with in the country, Mr. Stirling," she evaded. "But it's generally fairly harmless for the most part. I find."

"Really?"

Frances thought she detected a hint of sarcasm in his tone. "Well, I'll take your word for it, Miss Wishart," he smiled. "I must say, though that it never occurred to me that buying an old property would cause so many other people to take an interest in my affairs."

Just in time she stopped herself from telling him it was his own fault if people discussed him. After all, he appeared to have caused the trouble himself—by closing the path through Five Acre Wood.

Aloud, she said—

"Morton Grange was the home of the squires of Runcton for hundreds of years, Mr. Stirling. There are only the house and grounds left now, but I suppose there is still a feeling that whoever lives there is in a sphere of his own."

"You mean I have bought a tradition as well as a house?" he said.

"Yes, in a way," she nodded. "It isn't easy to explain—I daresay it all sounds rather silly to you—but if you had lived here all your life, as I have, you would understand."

"Perhaps I do," he said quietly. "But, unfortunately, I don't feel in the least like donning the mantle of my predecessors. That may sound churlish to you, but I bought Morton Grange because I wished for a place in the country that was not too far from London, where I can have comparative freedom from interruptions. Believe me, the last thing I want is to become involved in local affairs."

"I see," Frances murmured. She hesitated a moment, then said: "Do you like it here, Mr. Stirling? I always think Sussex is one of the loveliest counties. But then I'm prejudiced, having, as I just said, lived here all my life."

"Being prejudiced in that particular way is quite understandable, Miss Wishart," he replied. "It is a very different thing from clinging to outworn beliefs and traditions which usually go by the same name."

She nodded.

"I know what you mean, of course," she said. "All the same there is something to be said for tradition. Or are you one of those people who want to sweep everything away that isn't new and streamlined, including one's freedom to believe in the things one believes to be right?"

"Heaven forbid!" he laughed, shaking his head. "I sincerely trust I haven't given you that impression. I would never have bought a lovely old house like Morton Grange if I had been a modernist, you know. One of the things I hope to do—gradually, of course—is to restore it to some of its former beauty. It is going to be quite a job but one well worth doing, I think. Unfortunately, I haven't the time

to devote myself to the work as fully as I would like, but then Rome wasn't built in a day, either."

Frances smiled.

"Everybody has been wondering why you bought the Grange," she said with a little quirk of amusement. "I might tell you that speculation has ranged from a convalescent home to a building estate! It'll be a relief for everybody to learn that their fears are misplaced."

"Very much so," he remarked, with a certain amount of grimness. "As I have said, I bought the place because it suited my purpose and, incidentally, my pocket, Miss Wishart. So you can tell my various critics that they can set their minds at rest. All I ask is that I be allowed to manage my own affairs."

"I see," Frances murmured again.

Sensing that he was annoyed she hesitated to ask him his reason for fencing off Five Acre Wood. He would, she realised, have every right to regard such a question as impertinence on her part.

"Well, I must be going," she said suddenly with a glance at her wrist-watch. "I had no idea it was so late—mother will think I'm lost."

"I'll walk down the hill with you, if I may," he said. "There are a great many things I want to know about the district, so it would be a kindness if you would take pity on me and fill in the gaps."

"What do you wish to know, Mr. Stirling?" she asked as they started off, the dog bounding in front.

"Well, who are all my neighbours, for one thing," he said. "Who lives at that farm there, for instance,"—he indicated the farm which lay to the west of the Grange.

"Mr. and Mrs. Emmett," Frances told him. "Mr. Emmett farms all the way down to the river. Dulcie Emmett, who went to the same school as I did, is engaged to my brother."

"Oh, really. Go on," he said encouragingly.

"Let me see." Frances paused and looked round. "That is Totase Farm over there—it belongs to some people called Fox—they are comparative newcomers. Mr. Fox is a widower and his daughter keeps house for him. There are two other children both at school. Over there," she indicated a gracious, red-brick house—"is Runcton Priory. It belongs to Colonel Winstanley, who lives there with his sister. Mrs. Winstanley died a year ago and Miss Winstanley came to keep house for her brother. It's a lovely old place—Queen Anne, I believe. The ruins of the original priory are in the grounds but you can't see them from here. Colonel Winstanley is very nice and does a great deal for the village. He gave the church school a playing field not so very long ago, in memory of his wife."

She went on to describe other people and places, to all of which Peter Stirling listened with interest.

Then he indicated the farm they were approaching and which, with its neatly trimmed hedges and orderly farm buildings, lay spread out before them.

"And that, of course, is Rosemead Farm," he said smilingly. "I am told that you are a very united family, Miss Wishart, and that your motto might well be 'All for one and one for all'. Is that so?" His eyes twinkled.

"I don't know who told you that, but—well, I suppose it is true, in a way," she smiled. "We don't boast a family motto, but it would probably be that if we had one!"

"How many are there in the family?" he asked.

"Five, counting mother and father," she said. "Mervyn, my eldest brother, is twenty-six and Derek sixteen."

"Do you all work on the farm?" he enquired.

"We all do our bit," she said. "I divide my time between helping mother in the house and keeping the farm books."

They came to where the path divided, not far from the boundary of the farm. Peter Stirling had no excuse to go further nor did he seem to wish to make one.

After chatting for a few moments longer he bade her a courteous "Good evening" and turned away, calling his dog to heel, and soon disappeared into the encroaching dusk.

Looking back, Frances could not remember all that had been said. But one thing was certain in her mind—Peter Stirling was no longer a stranger to her.

TALK FOR IDLE TONGUES.

IN the days that followed, new and unaccountable emotions came to disturb Frances. For the first time in her life she became restless and unsure of herself.

"I say, what's the matter with you, Fran?" demanded Derek resentfully one afternoon, when she had snapped at him over something. "You're as touchy as a bad-tempered dog. I've done nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Derek." She sighed heavily and pushed back the hair from her temples. "I didn't mean to snap your head off like that. I just felt irritable for some reason."

Her brother grinned amiably. "That's all right, old girl. No bones broken." He went out whistling, and Frances turned back to her ironing, wondering what had got into her.

Everything seemed to irritate her these days, she thought, with another sigh.

Only the previous evening she had been quite short with poor Tom, whose only crime had been to ask her to go to the pictures with him as she had promised she would.

Thinking of Tom inevitably brought Peter Stirling to mind, and though she shrank from making comparisons it seemed impossible to think of the one without the other. Both stood high in her esteem, for she and Peter had travelled far along the road of friendship since the evening they had first met on the Downs.

And friendship is a seed which, when it falls on fertile soil, comes to flowering rapidly. Hitherto she had not sought to analyse her emotions, content to accept things as they were, but lately she had come to realise that her feelings, where Peter were concerned, went far deeper than she had realised.

Yet, when she thought over the events that had followed that first meeting, Frances could find nothing of outstanding importance to which she could point as the actual beginning of a relationship that had about it a dream-like quality that was different from anything she had ever previously experienced.

And yet it might have started when she had been returning from Ambledean in the shooting-brake with Tom, after an evening at the pictures a week ago.

They had turned into the lane past the entrance to Five Acre Wood and had there seen a group of men clustered about the burly figure of Jed Harmsworth, the local blacksmith.

Facing the men had been her father, his voice raised in protest.

"Now you listen to me, Jed. This isn't going to get you anywhere," Mr. Wishart had said. "We all know how you feel about the path being closed but you are going the wrong way about things. This is a matter for the local council and you'll only put yourselves in the wrong if you pull down that fence."

There had been a low growl of disapproval from the men facing him around a storm lantern on the ground.

Frances had felt sick with apprehension as she had got out of the car and had followed Tom to where her father was standing.

"I reckon as how we knows our own business best, Mr. Wishart," the blacksmith had answered sullenly. "This path's bin used by the village folk for nigh on a hundred years an' no one is a-going to close it. Not while my name's Jed Harmsworth."

"Hear, hear," someone had agreed. "We ain't got nuthin' agin you, Mr. Wishart—you just leave us to settle this our own way."

"You'll settle nothing this way," Mr. Wishart had replied patiently. "It is quite possible that Mr. Stirling doesn't understand how strongly everyone feels about the path being closed, so why not give him the chance to meet you half way? If you take my advice you'll all of you go home and sleep on this. Then, if you're of a mind to do as I say I'll go with you to-morrow to discuss the matter with him. How will that do?"

For a moment they had seemed undecided, then the burly blacksmith had nodded.

"All right," he had said slowly. "If so as you'll head a deputation to tell Mr. Stirling how we feel about this 'ere"—he had waved to where the barbed wire across the path had gleamed in the light of the lantern—"we'll do as you say. But if he says the path is to be kept closed, then you can tell him to look out."

On their way home her father had explained how he had come to be present when the villagers had arrived with the firm intention of pulling down the fence.

"Luckily Derek heard Jem, the cowman, telling one of the hands what was in the wind," he had said. "I hold no brief for either side, but I know the bad blood that can be created by an incident of this kind, so I considered it my duty to persuade them to think again."

"They were certainly in an ugly mood," Tom had agreed. "I only hope you can persuade Mr. Stirling to think things over or there is no knowing where the affair will end."

PETER had not proved obstinate. Two days later he had received a deputation consisting of Mr. Wishart, Jed Harmsworth and Sam Raikes, and had listened attentively to what they had said.

Mr. Wishart had returned well pleased with the success of his diplomacy and over dinner had told them all about it.

"It was as I thought," he had said. "It is quite clear from the title deeds of the Grange that the use of the path through the woods is a privilege, and not a right. Mr. Stirling had not realised the importance of the short cut, but when we explained that the bus only ran along the main road between Ambledean and Batemans, and that it meant a two mile walk for people unless they could go through the wood, he said at once that the path could be used again."

"What is he going to do—take the fence down?" Mervyn had asked.

"No," Mr. Wishart had said. "He is having a gate put in at each end of the path with spring catches, so that they automatically close themselves. That ought to satisfy everybody."

"But what did he want to put the fence round the wood for in the first place?" Mervyn had wanted to know. "As I said before it's not a game preserve any longer and there is no danger of cattle straying into it."

"He wants to turn the wood into a bird

sanctuary," Mr. Wishart had told them. "The idea of the fence was to keep out undesirables who might do harm. However he is going to take down the warning notices and put up one at each end of the path saying that the wood is a sanctuary for wild birds. We all promised to respect the notices and stop children from bird's-nesting or anything like that. So all's well that ends well."

The incident had been a mere ripple on the calm surface of their daily lives, but it was not without its significance. Very soon the villagers were more ready to look kindly on the stranger within their gates.

Meantime, Frances was faced with another and more pressing problem.

Tom grudgingly admitted that Peter had behaved very well over the matter, but he had made it quite clear that, as far as he was concerned, there would be no love lost between them. For he had come to look upon Peter as a rival.

Not only that, but Tom allowed his jealousy to trap him into saying things about the other which, although he regretted them afterwards, brought him and Frances to the verge of quarrels.

On one such occasion Tom had gone off in a huff and Dulcie had quietly chided Frances for her treatment of him.

"Poor Tom," she had said. "He's madly in love with you, Frances! Why don't you make up your mind to marry him? He's clever and he has a very good job. He would make you a very good husband."

"Marriage isn't merely a question of a home and security," Frances had retorted, somewhat irritably. "I know there are hundreds of girls who would marry a man for no better reason, but I don't happen to be one of them. Would you marry Mervyn if you didn't love him?"

"No, I suppose not," Dulcie had conceded. "But I thought you were quite keen on Tom. At least you were until a certain man came to live at Morton Grange!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Frances had snapped, going pink. "Peter Stirling has nothing whatever to do with it."

"Nothing?" Dulcie had smiled. "You'll tell me next that you talk about nothing but the weather when you go out for long walks with him! I'm not blind, my dear, and neither is poor Tom! Personally, I'd want to know a very great deal more about a man before I allowed him to live in my pocket. Frankly I think you are treating Tom pretty badly indeed."

Frances had recoiled inwardly from the crude way in which the other girl had analysed the situation.

"I have been completely honest with Tom," she had said stiffly. "I can't make myself fall in love with him to order, unfortunately. As for what you suggest about Peter, that's ridiculous. Even if it were true, I should not discuss the matter with you, or anyone else."

Dulcie had flushed hotly. It was the first time Frances had ever spoken to her like that and she had been too taken aback to reply.

THE annual church fete was held in the grounds of Runcton Priory at the end of August. Despite the death of his wife, a year previously, Colonel Winstanley had given his permission for it to be held there again this year, saying that it was what his wife would have wished.

The fete had a delightful setting, with the lovely old house standing on the far side of the spacious lawn, a formal garden on the other.

Dulcie shared a "White Elephant" stall with Frances, and when Mervyn jokingly asked his fiancée how she had the nerve to sell a lot of useless junk to her friends, he

was told that the true art of salesmanship was to persuade people to buy things they did not want and could not really afford.

"You've no conscience," he had said, having just paid two shillings for a garishly striped tie someone had donated.

Altogether, it was a gay, colourful scene, with the Ambledean Town Band playing in one corner of the grounds and a fair-ground in another.

Frances had hoped that Peter might put in an appearance, but he had earlier said he was going to London for a few days and might be away until the middle of next week.

She knew by now that he was a partner in a firm of architects, with offices in the City, so that he drove up to Town fairly frequently.

He had converted a room in the north wing of the Grange into a drawing office. At the moment he was working on a scheme for rebuilding London's many bombed areas.

Dulcie, who had gone off with Mervyn to the refreshment tent, eventually came back to relieve Frances, bringing Tom with her.

"You seem to have been doing very well, my dear," he remarked, taking in the half empty stall. "I wish I could sell houses as easily as you two girls get rid of all this rubbish."

"A White Elephant stall is *supposed* to sell rubbish, Tom," said Dulcie. "It's fun, really. Believe it or not, Frances actually got rid of a knitted antimacassar for a shilling! Trade's slackening off now, though—nearly everybody is heading for the refreshment tent, so you can run along, children, I'll look after the stall."

The refreshment tent was crowded and very hot, but Tom managed to find a corner where there was room to turn round and, leaving Frances, dived into what he called "the scrum".

He returned a few minutes later with two cups of tea and a plate of cakes.

"Phew!" he said, putting them down on a table. "One needs to be a juggler to move round here without spilling the lot. Judging by the crowd the church funds ought to benefit. I noticed the vicar just now, beaming all over." He handed her one of the cups of tea. "But I haven't seen your friend, Stirling, though. I suppose he considers a mere church fete beneath his notice?"

Frances felt herself flushing.

"He had to go to London on a business conference," she said, a trifle shortly. She hesitated a moment, then added: "But I happen to know that he gave the vicar a cheque for twenty-five pounds before he went."

"Did he, by Jove!" Tom raised his eyebrows. "What was that—conscience money?"

"Oh, don't be so mean, Tom!" she chided him. "It's not like you."

"Isn't it?" he said challengingly, a hint of mockery in his gaze.

Frances remembered the taunt that Dulcie had flung at her and wondered, somewhat desperately, if it were true that she was treating Tom badly.

Yet what was she to do? She did not love him. If she had been uncertain of her feelings then, she was certain of them now.

They strolled outside after she had said she did not want a second cup of tea.

There was a path which led between trees to a sunken garden with an ornamental lily pond in the centre, and towards this they made their way. Various walks branched off, leading to other and even more secluded parts of the grounds.

"It must cost the earth to keep this place up," Tom remarked, as they came to a place where the path forked.

Nearby a small stream trickled over some rocks into a pool, on the edge of which was a bronze figure of the Greek god, Pan, complete with pipes.

"It is very beautiful," Frances murmured, stopping to watch the goldfish darting about in the pool. They could hear the band in the distance, but otherwise they might have been in the heart of a forest.

"Look," Tom said suddenly. "I'm sorry for that remark I made about Stirling just now, Frances. You were quite right, it was mean of me. I suppose the truth is, I'm jealous."

She turned to him and placed a hand on his arm.

"Oh, Tom dear, don't!" she begged wistfully. "We've had all this out before and it doesn't do any good. I wish—I wish you didn't feel as you do about me," she added, with a sigh.

He laughed almost angrily.

"Wishing doesn't help, my dear Frances," he said, drawing a deep breath. "I can no more help being in love with you than—"

He broke off as the sound of a tinkling laugh came to their ears. Someone was approaching along another path which was separated from the one where they stood by a screen of clipped yew-trees.

A girl's voice reached them from the other side.

"If you mean the great Peter Stirling, I hardly imagine that frivolities of this kind would appeal to him. He really is the most insufferable person I have ever met!"

A man's voice replied—

"You sound as if you haven't much use for him, my dear. What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. I just don't like secretive types, that's all."

"It's just as well, then," the man said, with a chuckle. "From what I hear, Frances Wishart seems to be making all the running in that direction. Dolly tells me they're as thick as thieves—she's seen them twice having tea in the Blue Cafe at Ambledean, and I know for a fact—"

The voices drifted out of earshot, and there was an embarrassed silence, broken at last by Tom.

"I'm sorry you heard that," he remarked grimly. "I recognised Valerie Armitage's voice but I don't know who the fellow was. Not that it matters. No one with any grain of sense would take any notice of what they said."

"Then I haven't a grain of sense," murmured Frances, with a wry smile. "For I can't help taking notice. It isn't very pleasant to know that one is being talked about in—in that way."

Tom shrugged.

"Well, the remedy is in your own hands, my dear," he said. Few men could have resisted the temptation to turn the situation to their own advantage and he was only human. "All you have to do is to allow me to announce our engagement to put an end to idle gossip of that kind."

Frances sighed.

"It's nice of you to want to protect me, Tom," she said unsteadily. "If it is any consolation to you, I can truthfully say that there is no one I would rather be engaged to than you, but as I have told you so often, it is impossible to feel what is not there! You—you deserve the best, my dear, and—and that is just what I couldn't give you."

"Have it your own way, my dear girl," he said, with a shrug. "I understand—at least, I hope I do. But please remember that I am always there when you want me."

"Thank you, Tom," she murmured chokily, thinking how easy everything would be if only she could have fallen in love with him instead of with a man who,

a few weeks earlier, had not existed for her and who regarded her merely as a friend.

For Frances no longer attempted to deceive herself. She faced with characteristic courage, the fact that she had lost her heart to Peter Stirling and she knew that, whatever happened, now or in the future, there would never be anyone else.

No matter what lay behind his curious reserve, his obvious reluctance to talk about the past, she would go on loving him as long as she lived.

Standing there, looking down at the little bronze statue, she faced her destiny, knowing, with the intrinsic certainty that comes of a real and abiding emotion, that it had been mapped out for her since the day she had been born.

Tom's voice broke into the thread of her thoughts.

"Tell me—are you in love with Stirling?" he said quietly. "You don't *have* to answer, of course, but in the circumstances, don't you think I am entitled to know?"

She stared down at the water, her eyes troubled. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, she raised her eyes.

"I think you have guessed, haven't you?" she asked, and made a diffident gesture. "I—I'm sorry, Tom, but—"

"Don't worry about me, my dear," he interrupted, smiling wryly. "As you say, I guessed some time ago that I was out of the running. It is just one of those things and there is nothing I can do about it. The answer you gave me a few moments ago confirmed what I have been thinking for a long time. Well, I only hope Stirling appreciates his good fortune," he added bitterly.

Frances crimsoned again.

"Peter looks on me as a friend, nothing more, Tom," she said, in a pathetic attempt to cling fast to the remnants of her pride. "I—he doesn't know that I—"

She broke off in confusion.

Tom took her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"Don't worry," he said gently. "Your secret is safe with me. Possibly I had no right to ask the question I did, but we can afford to be honest with each other. When you love someone as I love you, their happiness comes before everything—that is why I had to know. Now that I do, I hope you'll count on me as a friend. All I ask in return is that if things don't work out for you, you'll grant me the privilege of making you happy, in so far as it lies in my power to do so."

It was, for Tom, a long speech, and Frances was deeply moved.

She smiled, blinking back her tears.

"I—I won't forget, Tom," she whispered tremulously.

PETER'S SECRET.

PETER STIRLING drove rapidly out of London on his way back to Runc-ton. It had been a trying three days in more ways than one, and he was thankful to leave the traffic-laden streets behind and breathe the cool, clean air of the countryside.

As he sped along the Hastings road, the clocks were striking eleven. Rain had fallen a little earlier, turning the wet macadam into a dark mirror to reflect the rays of his headlamps.

He drove carefully but without awareness, his hands and feet responding to the promptings of his subconscious mind.

His thoughts were elsewhere, having gone back five years to the days when he had been a young captain in the Royal Armoured Corps, with all his life before him to make or mar as he willed.

It had been just such a night as this when he had first met Helen, he remembered.

The occasion had been a regimental dance and Helen Wainwright, who had been spending a few days in the neighbourhood, had come with her host and hostess, who were friends of his commanding officer.

That first meeting had been followed by others and at the end of a month they were engaged.

They must have been in love—at least he supposed it was love of a kind, though now he wondered how it was possible to make a mistake about a thing like that.

They had married six months after he had come out of the army and for a time they had been happy enough.

He had bought a house near Barnet, where they made a small circle of friends and entertained in a modest fashion.

He moved restlessly in his seat, the grip of his hands tightening on the steering wheel. Only a blind, trusting fool could have shut his eyes to the truth for so long, he reflected bitterly.

Even the somewhat doubtful friends he used to find drinking cocktails when, as he sometimes did, he came home early, he dismissed as unimportant. Helen loved to think of herself as a patron of the arts and if she liked to surround herself with pseudo-intellectuals, artists and musicians, that was her affair.

"Have a good time—you only live once", had been her pet saying, sometimes in defiance of convention or as an excuse for some wilful extravagance.

She had been like a child in some respects, grasping at enjoyment without weighing the possible consequences, asking nothing more of life than to have what she called "a good time".

And he, blind in his faith, his trust, had smiled indulgently, the rebuke he had been about to utter dying stillborn on his lips.

Oh, he had been blind all right—blind to the calculating streak in her, the inherent selfishness which in the end had made havoc of his dreams and wrecked their marriage beyond all hope of repair.

Even now, at this distance of time, he could feel again the dull, bewildered pain which had racked him when he had come home to an empty house—to find her note propped up against the mirror of the hall-stair.

Helen's mother had never liked him and had never wanted her daughter to marry him. But for her it might have been possible—just possible—to have saved Helen from the worst results of her folly. But when he had got into his car and driven down into Surrey, he had been coldly received by Mrs. Wainwright.

"I have no idea where Helen has gone or what she intends to do," she had told him icily. "It is obvious to me that the poor child must have been driven to it to run away, so you are quite the last person to whom I would disclose her whereabouts—even if I knew." The hostility which had looked out of her eyes had been like a cold fury and he had turned away, sickened.

Where some men might have given up the search in despair, he had employed every means in his power to find her.

Eventually he had run her to earth in America, at the Long Island home of a so-called film-producer.

"What good do you think you will do following me around like this?" she had greeted him. "If you were a man you would give me my freedom instead of playing dog-in-the-manger. I heard how you tried to bully my mother into telling you where I had gone."

"So your mother *did* know, and yet she refused to tell me," he had said, his eyes blazing with contempt.

"Of course she knew, but I made her promise not to tell you," she had cried stormily. "Now get out and leave me alone!

I wouldn't come back to you if you were the last man on earth. I hate you, hate you, hate you!"

"Helen, listen to me!" he had pleaded desperately. "I've followed you round, as you put it, because I want to take you back with me—whatever has happened in the meantime. I couldn't do that if I didn't love you. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She had laughed. If she had struck him a blow it could not have hurt him more.

"You fool!" she had cried. "You talk about love! You don't know the meaning of the word. All you want is someone to entertain your stodgy friends and run around making herself pleasant to a lot of nit-wits whose idea of a good time is a game of bridge! Someone who can be useful to you and who you can make love to when you are in the mood. Well, I'm tired of being at your beck and call—I'm going to live my own life in the way I want to live it. Now you know!"

"Yes," he had said quietly. "Now I know. I'm sorry. Evidently I have been living in a fool's paradise, but that's the penalty one pays for *being* a fool. What do you wish me to do?"

"I've already told you. I want my freedom. If you must know, when I get it I'm going to marry Gerry Anstruther."

He had looked at her in amazement.

"Are you mad? That fellow is an out and out rotter. Apart from that, I don't suppose he's ever done an honest day's work in his life. If you had to fall in love with someone you might have picked a real *man*." He had then left her.

For a long time after that he had stood alone amid the ruins of his married life, only his work and a high sense of duty keeping him sane.

Then his firm had secured a contract for the erection of a large, modern hospital in the West Indies and he had spent the next three years out there, striving to forget.

He had heard of Helen from time to time through his solicitors. She had gone to Hollywood, where she had secured a film contract with one of the lesser known producing companies using her maiden name.

Later she had returned to England and from there had gone to live in the South of France.

It had been his sister, Betty, who had been mainly responsible for his purchase of Morton Grange. On his return from the West Indies he had stayed with her and her husband in their lovely home in West Wickham, and Betty had shown him the advertisement in a country journal to which she subscribed.

"What on earth would I want with a place that size, my dear girl?" he had enquired, in bewildered amusement. It had been Betty who had closed the house in Barnet for him and had arranged for it to be sold. It had been Betty who had stood by him through the trying time after Helen had left him.

"It would give you something to do," she had said promptly, her blue eyes alight. "It's a lovely old place. Dick and I saw it when we were driving through Sussex on our way back from Hastings. We both said at the time that we would like it for ourselves, only Dick can't live so far away from London. You can!"

At first he had not taken her seriously, but the idea had persisted and in the end he had decided to go and have a look at the house. He had taken Betty with him and she had waxed enthusiastic over the question of restoring it.

"Apart from being a labour of love, it's good business, Peter," she had urged. "You'll get it quite cheaply in the state it

is in now and when you restore it you'll be able to sell it for treble the price."

"If I restored it I wouldn't want to sell it," he had argued.

"All the better," she had replied. She had hesitated a moment, as if afraid of rushing in where angels feared to tread. Then she had said abruptly: "Why don't you divorce Helen and marry again, Peter? You're only thirty-one and it all seems such a waste."

He had stared in front of him without replying for a moment. Then he had said quietly—

"I vowed to cherish Helen for better or worse until death us do part, or words to that effect. The fact that it has turned out worse rather than better does not absolve me from some of the blame."

"Yes, I know, Peter," she had argued. "All the same, I don't think it is fair to either of you to go on as you are doing."

"I have no wish to marry again," he had said. "Once bitten twice shy."

"You ought not to judge all women by Helen, Peter," she had said. "She was unnaturally selfish and shallow. Some of those so-called friends of hers were little better than hangers-on. That frightful Gerry Anstruther was a case in point. He probably poisoned her mind until she really believed the things she said about you."

"You may be right—you generally are, my dear Betty," he had replied heavily. "but what you say doesn't affect the situation as I see it. In any case, it would take more than the remote possibility of putting my hand in the fire again to make me forgo my principles."

After he had bought the place Betty had seen to everything. One part of the house was to be kept shut up for the time being and only certain rooms used. The furniture from his bachelor flat was sent down from London and more bought by Betty.

At first it had just seemed like another job. The village and its people meant nothing to him at all. The married couple Betty had engaged catered for all his wants.

They were quiet, decent and respectable and the man had been in the Navy. It was Sims who had engaged the additional labour required to begin putting the grounds in order. Sims had not thought it necessary, to mention to Peter that the men had protested when given the task of erecting the wire fence round Five Acre Wood. So it had been something of a shock to discover that, in seeking to ensure the privacy he sought, he had unwittingly uncovered a hornet's nest.

Here he had come to live resigned to living out his days as a bachelor.

Then he had met Frances!

And since meeting her he had faced the issue squarely.

Whatever it had been that he had felt for Helen, he loved Frances with the deep and ardent tenderness that comes to a man but once in a lifetime.

Whether she returned his love or not he could not say; nor did he seek to find out. It was sufficient to know that he was not free to declare his love and that the uncompromising stand he had taken, when Helen had begged for her freedom, had recoiled upon his own head.

With a groan he now pressed his foot down on the accelerator and sent the car racing along at double the speed.

Frances must never know what the hours he had spent in her company had come to mean to him!

He stared ahead with troubled eyes, the headlamps cutting a wide swathe in the darkness. Destiny—the uneasy destiny which had dogged his footsteps for so many weary years—had given the skeins another twist, setting in motion forces he no longer had the strength to fight against.

Between him and the gates of Paradise stood an angel with a flaming sword.

It was sunset when Peter reached the top of the hill, and a warm red glow lay over the Downs, so that they stood out in bold relief against the saffron coloured clouds which piled up on the horizon.

Since arriving back two days ago, he had wrestled with the temptation to seek Frances out, telling himself that he was in no fit state to reason that he must first decide upon his future course before he saw her again.

For one thing was quite clear in his mind: he valued her friendship too much to continue sailing under false colours. His desire to hear her voice, see the welcoming smile in her eyes, warred with his reluctance to take what he knew, deep down, would be an irrevocable step.

She was seated where he had seen her that first time, listening to the nightingale, her chin propped on her hands, staring towards the distant line of the sea. But now there were no birds singing.

She turned her head at his approach, her eyes deeply introspective.

"Hullo, Peter," she said. "Did you have a nice trip?"

She didn't mention that she had heard that he had come back two days ago.

He sat down beside her and thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"As nice as a business trip to London can ever be," he said, with a faint smile, thinking how lovely she looked. "It's nice to be back, though," he went on. "After London this is like something out of another world."

Frances nodded.

"It's always nice to come home," she said. "I used to think that every time I came back from boarding school. But then, Runcton is my home."

Peter did not follow up the lead she had deliberately given him: as she had hoped he would. There was so much she wanted to ask, so many things she wished to know. Whom he had met in London; who were his friends, and why he never mentioned that side of his life.

Above all she wanted to know *why* he had come to live in this quiet part of Sussex, in a house that was far too large for one person and yet, having done so, cut himself off from all social activities and appeared content to remain apart. Except for the two occasions when he had come to tea at the farm, she doubted if he had entered another house in the district.

As she sat there, the questions she dared not ask racing through her mind, she heard his voice, charged with emotion.

"I hoped you would be here, Frances," he said. "I badly wanted to talk to you. There is something I wish to tell you—something I ought to have told you before this." He paused a moment, then went on: "Frankly, I wish it wasn't necessary, but since you have honoured me with your friendship I have very little choice in the matter."

She caught her breath. There was something almost pathetic in his attempt to reach her understanding.

"I—I rather guessed there was something, Peter," she murmured, smiling faintly. "I'm a woman, when all's said and done, and I sensed, long ago, that there was a part of your life you keep shut away. But, before you tell me, I want to know something." She hesitated making a little gesture. "Are you telling me because you want to or—because you only think you should?"

"You've got to know—it is your right," he said harshly.

Now that it had come to it: now that he had surrendered to the need to tell her every-

thing; he was revolted by the knowledge that he must hurt her.

Frances looked questioningly at him.

"Tell me, then, Peter," she said. "It—it won't make any difference as far as I am concerned."

He dug his hands into his pockets again and stared moodily before him.

"I made a mistake," he said with a shrug. "It's the kind of mistake that is being made every day, more's the pity. Wasn't it Kipling who wrote about 'A rag and a bone and a hank of hair'? Well, I was the fool who 'called her his ladye fayre'. In short, while I was in the Army I met and fell in love with a girl who was as selfish as she was beautiful and as shallow and self-seeking as she was unscrupulous. I—she is still my wife, though for the past three years I haven't set eyes on her. She is living in the South of France at the moment, I believe."

Frances stiffened. she couldn't help herself. Then her expression changed and she threw him a half-frightened glance. Only with his confession did she realise how much she had dreaded the disclosure. how she had prayed that it might be anything else.

Her mind seemed to be running round in circles, one half struggling to retain the fact that Peter must have been driven by some powerful compulsion to bare his soul to her in this way; the other striving to grapple with the knowledge that the man she loved was not free.

"I am not going to attempt to excuse my folly," he went on, after a moment. "I fell in love, as thousands of others have done, and I thought that Helen loved me. She was an only child and lived with her mother in Surrey, not far from where I was stationed at the time. Her father had died and left them very well off, so that they wanted for nothing."

"In fact"—with a bitter laugh—"but for one thing you can say that the path of true love for once ran smoothly. The only fly in the ointment was the fact that her mother did not approve of me. I still had my way to make in those days and Mrs. Wainwright had other ideas for Helen. I blame her as much for what happened as I blame Helen or myself. However, all that is beside the point. Six months after I left the Army Helen and I were married and went to live in a house near Barnet."

As Frances listened to his story, a story of slow awakening and disillusionment, one phrase kept recurring in the recesses of her mind. Like some maddening jingle it smote her brain:—

Helen and I were married!

PETER'S face was like hewn granite when he came to the end. He had omitted nothing, seeking neither to excuse nor blame himself. But to a girl in love the facts were all sufficient.

She looked up at last, her eyes moist. "Why have you told me all this, Peter? I—it wasn't just because you thought it was my right to know, was it?"

He hesitated a moment his eyes charged with pain. Then—

"I had to tell you," he said simply. "When I first came to live here I had made up my mind that happiness of any kind had passed me by, but since I met you, life has taken on a different meaning. You—you became the one person to whom I could not pretend, you see."

Frances drew a quivering breath. Though his lips were sealed in honour, he had told her as plainly as if he had uttered the words that he loved her. It was all she wanted to know.

"I—I think it is silly to pretend," she

said breathlessly. She got up suddenly, slim and straight, vulnerable as never before in her pride. She flung out her hand in a little gesture. "I'm not going to pretend, either, Peter. I know why you had to tell me and I am very proud. If you hadn't done so, I should have gone on wondering and in the end that would have broken my heart."

He took a pace forward, going white. Then he stopped, his outstretched hands dropping to his sides.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, what have I done?" he breathed.

She shook her head.

"You have done nothing, Peter except prove that you really love me. I've wondered and hoped, for, you see,"—with a sad little smile—"I love you too! We can never be anything to each other, I know, but it will help us to know—the truth."

She put out her hands and his fingers closed over them, tense and compelling. For a moment she swayed, shaken by the intensity of the emotions which overwhelmed her.

"Oh, my dearest," he whispered brokenly. "How can I bear to see you suffer like this?"

She raised her eyes to his and blinked back her blinding tears.

"I won't suffer, Peter," she said pitifully.

"Not—not now that I know you love me. But we must decide—quickly—what we are going to do."

"What can we do?" he muttered helplessly. "I refused to divorce Helen when she wanted me to because it was against all my principles." He laughed bitterly. "I can hardly throw them overboard now simply because it happens to suit my books. I would forfeit the respect of every decent man and woman if I did."

"I know, Peter," she nodded.

He released her hands and walked away, staring at the sky, his mouth a thin, tight line. It was as if the fires of bitterness and remorse were consuming his soul and that very soon there would be only the burned out shell left.

"I've tried to think how I could save you from all this," he said heavily. "Quite truthfully, I would have kept it from you if that had been possible. Not because I was afraid of what you would think, but because I would rather die than hurt you. Now—"

He turned and looked at her, his eyes sombre.

"Now we're up against the fact that we love each other. That being the case, it would be asking more than human flesh and blood can stand to—carry on. You realise that, don't you, my dearest?"

Frances went white and half closed her eyes.

"Yes, Peter," she murmured chokily. "I—I do realise that. We—we couldn't go on as if nothing had happened." She swayed again and put her hands to her face. With a quick stride he caught her in his arms.

"Frances—darling," he muttered thickly, holding her tight. "My dearest love! Can you forgive me?"

She clung to him for a moment, her body trembling. Then she drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"I—there's nothing to forgive, my dearest," she said, in a quick, gasping whisper. She held the lapels of his coat for a moment, her knuckles tense. Then she pushed him away. "Please go quickly, Peter darling. I don't—want—to let you—down."

She had reached breaking point and, mercifully, he understood. The fact that he did so was the measure of his love. He held her for a second longer, his lips just brushing her hair, and then he was gone,

striding down the hill into the gathering dusk. Nor did he look back!

INTO THE LIGHT

"WELL, all I can say is, I would have thought more of Peter if he had kept his feelings to himself," said Dulcie, in her usual outspoken manner. "I don't want to criticise—it's not my business, anyway—but surely it would have been kinder to have gone away in the first place and not said anything."

Frances gave a weary sigh and brushed a hand across her eyes.

"It would have been worse for me if he had done, for then I should have been left to wonder what had gone wrong," she said. "Peter realised that, I think, otherwise he would never have told me about his past. He knew I would understand."

The two girls were in the living-room. Dulcie occupying the arm of a large settee and swinging one leg, her young face thoughtful. Frances was curled up in a chair staring out at the September sunset.

A week had passed since she and Peter had said good-bye to their dreams, and Dulcie had not been slow to put two and two together. If she had needed confirmation of her suspicions, she had received it the previous day when Tom Merri-man had brought the news that Morton Grange had been put into the market once again.

"You mean Stirling has gone away without saying anything?" Mervyn had demanded incredulously. Frances had not been there. "You *did* say he had closed the place up, didn't you?"

"Yes," Tom had said. "As far as I know he paid Sims and his wife three months wages and told them he was going abroad. He left instructions with us, and with the firm who negotiated the original purchase, to accept any reasonable offer, subject to the provision that the path through Five Acre Wood is kept open."

"Well, I'm bothered!" had exclaimed Mervyn. "There must be something rotten in the state of Denmark to make a man behave in that extraordinary fashion. Even if he has had to go abroad on business you'd think he could find time to say good-bye to us, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know," had said Tom off-handedly. "He had no one to consider but himself, when all's said and done. His whole attitude, ever since he has been here, has been a pretty self-centred one, you must admit."

"That hardly fits in with the cheque he gave to the vicar and the way he acted over Five Acre Wood," had said Dulcie.

"Those things don't excuse his failure to observe the ordinary decencies," had said Mervyn. "Apart from the fact that he and Frances were pretty good friends, or so it seemed, he has been received as a guest here. On those grounds alone he owed it to us to tell us he was going, surely?" He shrugged disdainfully. "If you ask me, there's more to this than meets the eye."

"He may be in trouble of some kind, Mervyn," had said Mrs. Wishart, turning from the sink to join in the conversation. "I am not often mistaken in people, as you know, and I am sure that Mr. Stirling isn't the kind of man to behave badly unless circumstances were too much for him."

"Oh, all mother's geese are swans," had said Mervyn a little impatiently. "I still think that the least Stirling could have done was to walk over and say good-bye."

"Perhaps he's wanted for some crime or other and the police—"

"Don't be silly, Derek," his mother rebuked the boy sharply. "I know you don't mean it, but a remark like that can

lead to a great deal of trouble."

Derek had grinned.

"I was only joking, mum," he had said. "It's queer, all the same, as Mervyn says. You remember that night—Tuesday, it was!—when Frances came in looking all white and you asked her what was wrong?" He had glanced round expectantly. "Well, a few minutes before then I was coming up from the village and I saw Mr. Stirling walking towards the Grange by the path that leads to Runtown Down. I bet he and Frances had had a whacking great row and that's—"

"That's not true!"

They had all turned sharply to see Frances standing in the doorway, her eyes unnaturally dark in her pale face. She had been holding the door handle for support.

"Frances!" had exclaimed her mother anxiously.

The girl had ignored her.

"Derek is quite mistaken," she had said, in an exhausted voice. "Peter hasn't gone away because we have quarrelled or for any of the reasons that have been mentioned. He has gone away because it was the only thing to do. When I came in the other night we had just said—good-bye. I knew—then—that I would never see him again."

Mervyn had been the first to speak.

"I'm sorry, Fran dear," he had said awkwardly. "I—we didn't know you were about. I mean, we were discussing the news that Stirling has put Morton Grange up for sale again and—well—we're all a bit puzzled. You don't have to take any notice of the kind of nonsense Derek talks."

Frances had looked around the little circle.

"You might as well all know the truth," she had said stonily. "Peter has gone away because, as I have just told you, it was the only thing to do. You see—a bitter little smile had touched her lips—"we love each other but—we can never marry."

Enlightenment had come to Dulcie like a thunderclap.

"You mean—Peter Stirling is already married?" she had gasped.

"Yes," Frances had compressed her lips. "His wife left him some years ago for—another man. She wanted Peter to divorce her but—he doesn't believe in divorce, so he refused. He told me because he thought it was my right to know."

She had continued:

"He married a girl who was utterly spoiled and egotistical. All she wanted was a good time—her kind of good time. Her mother hadn't wanted her to marry Peter and so helped to poison her daughter's mind. In the end Peter's wife ran away with another man and went to America. It took Peter a year to find her, but when he did it was no use. She said she had finished with him—that she hated him and never wanted to see him again. His sister persuaded him to buy Morton Grange. She thought it would give him something to do—to restore it, I mean—"

Tom had stepped forward and taken her hand, holding it tightly.

"Don't go on," he had said sympathetically. "Don't, Frances dear. You don't have to. We all understand and you are only hurting yourself. Please."

She had pulled her hands away from him and pressed them to her face.

Then, with a little convulsive sob, she had turned and walked blindly from the room, leaving behind a silence that could have been felt.

Dulcie had been the first to recover.

"I'll go up to her," she had offered. "Poor Frances! She—"

"No, my dear," had said Mrs. Wishart. "Tis her mother a girl needs at a time like this."

Now it was the first time the subject had

been mentioned since, and Dulcie knew she must tread warily. Frances was in a state of abnormal sensitivity and the wrong word would drive her into retreat so that no one could help her.

She broke the little silence that had fallen at last.

"What will Peter do, Frances, do you know?" she enquired. Anything to get Frances to talk, to relieve her pent-up emotions, she thought. "Will he go abroad?"

"I don't know," Frances sighed, finding it was easier to talk about Peter than she had thought. "He may do so, but I can't really say. I shouldn't think he would wish to remain in England."

It was not necessary to add that the temptation to see her might prove too strong for him.

Dulcie understood and nodded thoughtfully.

"I'm terribly sorry for you both," she said feelingly. "I mean, it's simply frightful—it makes me realise how lucky I am. But it's no use crying for the moon, my dear. I mean,"—she was beginning to flounder and knew she was putting it badly—"you've got to look forward, haven't you?"

Frances looked startled.

"Look forward?" she repeated, in a tone which showed she had failed to grasp Dulcie's meaning. "Why, what do you mean, Dulcie? Look forward to what?"

"I mean," said Dulcie, hopelessly committed now, "there's Tom to be considered. He's head over heels in love with you and—well—you can't spend the rest of your life worshipping a memory, can you?"

Frances turned her head away, going paler than she had been.

"Oh, don't!" she begged, a break in her voice. "What kind of a wife do you think I would be to Tom, knowing that I love Peter?"

"You could give Tom happiness and in doing so find it yourself," Dulcie replied. "I daresay you think I'm trampling all over your feelings, but I don't mean to, honestly I don't. It's only that I can't bear to see you grieving for something that can never be. And poor Tom has been very patient, I think. He deserves a break. You don't have to make up your mind all at once—no one would expect you to—but it's worth thinking about."

"I am not going to marry anyone," Frances said desperately. "I've already told you. It is Peter I love."

W^HEN Dulcie had gone, Frances went into the garden, seeking a respite from her thoughts.

But the other girl's words kept tormenting her and she knew that Dulcie had spoken no more than the truth when she had said that, in giving Tom happiness, she might find it herself. In that sense, one could not fail, but was it enough?

With the question she knew the answer. She could never become Tom's wife feeling as she did now. How could she, when every fibre of her being cried out for another man? It would be a betrayal, nothing less. A betrayal of all that was meant by the word love, a betrayal of Tom's faith in her and her own self-respect.

She wondered what Peter was doing at that moment. Was he thinking of her as she was thinking of him? Was there some kind of telepathy which bridged the emptiness he had left behind so that, however great the distance which separated them, they were yet acutely aware of each other?

Was that why she felt as if he were there in the garden with her, telling her not to lose heart and that one day, perhaps, they would meet again and that everything would be gay and sweet, the years between forgotten?

In the house someone had switched on the radio. The programme was *Family Favourites* and, as the set warmed up, the rich, liquid voice of a famous tenor floated out through the open window. By some irony of chance the song he sang was *Parted*.

*"Dearest, our day is over,
Endeth a dream divine,
You must go back to your life,
I must go back to mine—"*

With a sob Frances turned away, unable to bear more. She hurried down the path in an attempt to escape out of earshot. Like a moth fluttering in the dusk she turned a corner and blundered into Tom.

"Frances, my dear, is anything wrong?" he cried, as for a moment she clung to him, shuddering.

He looked down at her in alarm, his arm going around her in an instinctive gesture of protection.

Numbly she shook her head, unable to speak for a moment. Then—

"It—it's all right, Tom," she murmured shakily at last, drawing back from him. "I—I wasn't looking where I was going, that's all. You—you startled me."

"I'm sorry, my dearest," he said apologetically. "As a matter of fact I was on my way up to the house in the hope of seeing you. Are you—I mean, how do you feel now?"

"You talk as if I had a bad cold," she said, almost irritably. "I suppose you are all counting the days until I get over it. That's the correct term, I believe."

"Oh, come, my dear, we're not as bad as all that," he protested, with a slight laugh. "Speaking for myself, I can't tell you how deeply sorry I am about it all, but there's nothing one can do about it, is there? Time is a great healer, though, thank goodness and perhaps, one day, you may feel like picking up the threads again. I pray so, at any rate," he added simply.

"You're a dear, Tom," she said, smiling wanly. "I've told you that before, haven't I?" She sighed. "No one can see into the future, so I am not going to say whether I shall ever feel like picking up the threads again or not. At the moment I just don't want to talk about it."

"Naturally," he said gently. "You can be quite sure I won't mention the subject unless you do, my dear Frances. All I want is the chance to help you forget, if that is possible."

Frances looked away, her expression hidden. She was still suffering from reaction brought about by the necessity for baring her wounds as she had done, and shrank from the pity she saw in everyone's eyes.

If only she could have kept her secret inviolate it might have been easier to bear, but she had been unable to stand aside and hear Peter unjustly condemned. As a result, everyone knew, so that anything they said or did was coloured by their knowledge.

"Aren't you coming in, Tom?" she asked, when they reached the house.

He hesitated on the doorstep, as if unsure of his welcome.

"Are you sure you want me to?" he asked humbly. "I mean, I quite understand if you would rather I didn't."

From the other side of the yard came the comfortable homely sound of cows in their stalls; the clank of a bucket, the rattle of a chain. They seemed to be telling Frances that whatever happened, life went on, with its daily quota of tasks to be fulfilled, of duties to be done. Empires might fall and hearts might break, but the cows would still come in at sunset to be milked and bedded down for the night.

She drew in her breath sharply and pushed open the door, letting out a stream of light.

"Of course I want you to come in, Tom," she said impatiently. "After all, what difference does it make?"

AND so the days turned to weeks, the weeks to months. The golden-rod bloomed and the summer died, bringing in its train a wet, blustery autumn that preceded a long, hard winter.

During all this time Tom Merrimen was a frequent visitor to the house, his visits slyly encouraged by Mrs. Wishart, who saw in him an answer to her prayers, where Frances was concerned.

She did not believe, as Mervyn did, that her daughter had merely been infatuated with Peter. No one who held the sobbing girl in her arms, as she had done that night, could have believed that. But she hoped and prayed that as the agony of parting became dulled, so Frances would come to realise that life could still hold its meed of happiness for her.

"It stands to reason she'll get over it in time," she confided to Dulcie one day. "Then if she has any sense, she'll marry Tom and forget there was ever such a person as Peter Stirling."

"I'm not so sure that she'll ever forget him," Dulcie remarked thoughtfully. "I have a feeling that Frances feels the separation as much as ever."

"More's the pity, then," said Mrs. Wishart, with a sigh. "I've nothing against Peter, mind you. He was always very polite and considerate when he came here, which wasn't often and I am sure it wasn't his fault that his wife turned out as she did. But I can't help wishing he had picked some other place to find a house, then he and Frances would never have met."

Dulcie nodded. She and Mervyn were to be married in the spring and the cottage that was being prepared for them was almost ready. She was so brim full of the sheer joy of living that she wished with all her heart that things would come right for Frances, too.

"Have you heard whether the Grange has been sold yet, Aunt Kate?" she enquired, one thought leading to another.

Mrs. Wishart shook her head.

"According to Tom it's still on his firm's books," she said. "It's a bad time of the year for selling houses, especially big places like the Grange. But it will probably go when the summer comes round again. Why do you ask, my dear?" she added curiously.

Dulcie hesitated. Then—

"I shall be glad when it's sold," she said pensively. "I have an idea that Frances spends more time there than is good for her. She doesn't know I know, but often when I have been coming through Five Acre Wood I've seen her walking down the path which leads to the Grange!"

THE spring came at last, almost timidly, as if afraid of trespassing upon winter's reluctant passing. Even when the sun shone brightly there was a nip in the air and a keen north wind blew for several weeks.

It was a sunny afternoon in March yet Frances shivered despite the thick wool cardigan she wore, when she let herself into the Grange grounds by the wicket gate in the hedge.

Here she often came when seeking a refuge and wanting to be alone. Although it was up for sale Peter had arranged for the lawns to be kept cut and the beds to be weeded. The house itself was shuttered and barred, and Frances avoided looking at it as she walked towards the old, sunken garden where an overgrown lily pond sparkled in the watery sunshine.

It hardly seemed possible that Peter had

been gone seven weary months, she reflected seating herself on the edge of the pond and looking down into the cloudy water.

Only the conviction that they had acted in the one way that would leave them with their self-respect intact had given her the strength to go on.

If she had loved Peter less she might easily have yielded to the longing to write to him, if only to learn that he was well. As it was, she resolutely clung to the standards by which she had been brought up and which Peter had respected as well as she.

From the others, who could only stand aside, helpless, while she fought her battle alone she had received a love and sympathy that, perversely enough, seemed to render her sense of loss more poignant, reminding her of the sorrow which gave it birth.

But now, at long last, she had come to the point when she must make a decision, one that would affect her whole life. As Dulcie had forthrightly said quite recently, it wasn't fair to Tom to keep him dangling on a string. No one can remain on tiptoes or ever and Tom was no exception.

"As long as he thinks there is the remotest chance that you will marry him, he'll keep on waiting," Dulcie had said.

That was the crux of the matter, Frances reflected sadly. Tom had infinite patience and she believed him when he said he would wait all his life if necessary.

Yet, what could she do? Short of going away herself there was nothing she *could* do. Wherever she turned, Tom was there, patient, uncomplaining, a true friend.

She was sure that if he could have brought Peter back to her, in some miraculous fashion, he would have done so. As he could not he had taken up the role of guide, counsellor and friend, one who would be grateful for the reward she had it in her power to bestow, but who would not grumble if she withheld it.

It was really ridiculous, she thought with a little spurt of anger. By his very patience, his uncomplaining humility, Tom was driving her along a road she was reluctant to travel. She felt as if she were caught in a trap one from which, however much she struggled, she could not get free. "Frances!"

The sound of her name seemed to hang in the air like a voice on a cloud. Slowly and wonderingly she turned her head, the colour draining from her cheeks.

Peter was standing at the bottom of the steps leading down to the lily pond, an unfathomable expression in his tired eyes. He looked thinner and fine-drawn, and there was a look of strain about him that caught at her heart.

"Peter!" she whispered. "Peter! You—you have come back?"

He nodded and stepped towards her. She had risen to her feet as she spoke and put out her hands. He took and held them.

"Yes" he said quietly. "I have come back Frances. I—there was something I had to find out. Something very important."

She felt herself tremble.

"What is it, Peter?" she whispered.

"I had to find out if—if you still loved me," he said.

"Can you doubt it?" she asked, in a low voice. Tears stood on her lashes but she met his gaze steadily. "I shall always love you Peter! You are the only man I have ever loved or,"—she raised her head proudly—"ever shall!"

He drew in his breath sharply.

"That's all right, then," he said, and raised her fingers to his lips. "You see I was half afraid that you might have become engaged to Tom Merriman. After all, who

could blame you? He is a very decent steady fellow and he's very much in love with you. You might have sought escape from your memories in his arms."

"What difference would it have made, Peter?" she asked, steadying her voice with an effort.

"All the difference in the world," he said, and there was a ring in his voice which caused her to look curiously at him. He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. "Oh, my darling, can't you guess what I'm trying to tell you?"

A frightened expression came into her eyes and she made a little wordless gesture.

"You mean——" she faltered, going white.

"I mean that there is no longer a barrier between us, my love. No, it isn't what you think,"—as he saw the protest that came into her eyes. "Helen is—dead. She died is the result of a motor accident in Italy nearly twelve months ago! I only learned the truth by chance shortly after Christmas and it has taken me all this time to get the necessary proofs of her death."

She raised her eyes to his, a question in their slumbering depths.

"Oh, Peter!" she breathed. "Then that means——"

"It means that when I told you the whole sordid history of my marriage, that night so long ago, I was free then," he said quietly, when her voice broke. "Naturally, no one connected with Helen thought fit to notify me of the tragedy and her mother took every possible step to see that I was kept in the dark. It was her way of being revenged upon me for refusing to give Helen her freedom, I suppose. However, the truth has come to light at last and I can hold my head up once again."

Frances leaned against him, feeling his arm go around her, feeling his heartbeats through the material of his jacket.

She stood like that for a few moments, relaxed, her mind running down like a top that has been spinning for a long time and then ceases, all the misery and sorrow and heartbreak draining from her, leaving only a deep sense of peace and contentment behind.

And Peter was wise enough to say nothing, but held her close, while the peace of the garden stole into their hearts. Behind them, the latticed windows of the old house reflected the sun from each separate pane, so that they looked like a row of friendly, winking eyes.

Presently Frances looked up, her cheeks wet.

"Peter darling," she murmured tremulously. "Oh, Peter, tell me it is true—that you are really here and that it isn't a dream?"

"It is no dream, my sweet," he said softly, smiling down at her. "Rather is it the waking up from a nightmare that together we can strive to forget. It may be wrong or selfish of me—I can't say—but I am unable to pretend to a sorrow I don't feel. Helen's death was brought on by her own recklessness and was an indirect result of the life she had been leading. She didn't suffer, I am glad to say, and I know her well enough to be quite certain that she would have chosen that way out rather than be an invalid, or disfigured for life. She was like a butterfly, dancing for a few bright moments in the sun and we should think of her in that way."

"Yes," Frances nodded. "I—it's all too big for me to grasp at the moment. You—you will have to be terribly patient with me, Peter. I—it will take a little time to get over things."

"I know, my sweet," he said quietly. "When I came here to-day, I hesitated at

first, wondering whether to walk across to the farm or not. Then I thought it might be kinder to write to you. I was standing at the junction of the path, trying to make up my mind when Dulcie came along. She told me where to find you."

"Dulcie did?"

"Yes." He smiled. "She saw me and stopped, of course. She was evidently surprised to see me, but she seemed to guess I would not have come if something hadn't happened to alter the situation. I told her briefly and asked after you. It was then that she said I would in all probability find you here—she said you came nearly every afternoon when it was fine. Did you, Frances?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I liked coming. Peter. The garden became my private refuge from the world. I was dreading the time when someone would come and buy the place." She looked up at him as trustfully as a child knowing that he would not laugh. "It was the only place where I could feel that you were near me, dearest," she added.

"My darling!"

He drew her close and bent his head his lips seeking hers in a kiss that gave liberty to the emotions Frances had kept locked in her heart.

With a little gasp she surrendered to his embrace, clinging to him as if she would never let him go.

"Oh, Peter, Peter," she choked. "Hold me tight, my dearest one. I—I'm going to make an awful fool of myself in a minute."

"No, you are not," he said gently, kissing her again. "You are going to put your arms round my neck and say, 'I love you, Peter, darling, and I will marry you whenever you wish.'"

Blushing, she did so, and then drew back, laughing shakily.

"And to think that I came here this afternoon to try to make up my mind what to do about Tom!" she said.

"I don't think you need worry about Tom," he said. "He won't be long before he consoles himself, mark my words. He's the kind of chap who has got to have a lodestar and if one is removed from his range of vision, his eyes will light on those he hadn't previously seen."

They laughed together and moved towards the house. This was life as it was meant to be, moments like this when there was no past and no future, but only the present. Hand in hand they crossed the lawn, catching up with each other in all that had happened since they had parted seven months before the assurances and reassurances that would never grow old.

And then Frances gripped his fingers and drew him forward.

"Come, darling," she said. "We must go back or the family will think I'm lost. Besides, I want to tell them our wonderful news."

"You told me once before that the family would think you were lost," he said, teasingly. "That was the first time we met remember?"

"So I did. Oh, Peter, I never dreamed then that I would fall in love with you, but I must have done, right from that moment."

"I know I fell in love with you," he said. "I realised, then, what a fool I had been. Oh, Frances darling, are you quite sure you don't mind about—her?"

She became serious in an instant, knowing what her answer could mean.

"Would you mind if there had been another man in my life, Peter?" she asked.

"Not if I knew that you really loved me," he said.

"Then there's your answer," she murmured with a swift rush of colour. She looked in front of her. "I'm not going to pretend that I don't wish there hadn't been anybody," she went on. "I suppose every girl wants to be—the first. But I'm not going to think about it like that. I know you made a mistake and that this is real. Nothing else matters."

"Do you know what I am thinking?" he asked, holding her close and looking down into her eyes.

She shook her head.

"I am thinking that you and you alone are my true and only love," he said gravely. "Only sometimes is it given to a man to be born again—but that is what has happened to me, my darling. There never was anyone but you!"

Presently as they came to the gate that would let them out of the grounds, Frances asked a question that had been on her lips for some moments.

"How did you find out what had happened to Helen, Peter?" she asked.

"My solicitors became suspicious when the allowance I made her wasn't claimed," he said. "They wrote to her lawyers and learned about the car smash. Even then they didn't know she was dead. Her own lawyers didn't. All old Mrs. Wainwright had told them was that her daughter had been injured. She guessed I would hear in due course, you see so she prepared the ground for her deception. She had to tell Helen's lawyers *something* to prevent them from writing to their client when the allowance wasn't claimed."

"Naturally, as soon as I heard, I took the first plane to Italy," he continued. "I didn't know what had really happened or where she was. She might have been ill, in need of help—anything. It was not until I got to the place where the accident had occurred that I learned the truth from the Italian police. It appeared that Helen had been staying with some wealthy landowner at his place in the mountains and that they were on their way back from a party. According to the police all the four people in the car were intoxicated—at any rate they crashed headlong into a lorry going in the opposite direction. All four were killed."

Frances shuddered.

"Poor Peter," she murmured pressing against him. "It must have been an awful shock."

"It was, in a way and yet, you know, I seemed to have been expecting something of the kind. I didn't realise, at first what it meant to us. But now it's behind us—we need not think of it again."

Frances smiled through her tears.

"We shall have so many other things to think about, my dearest," she murmured. "Oh, darling, let us pray that we may be worthy of what we have been given."

"We will my darling" he said tenderly.

THE END.

FIRST AND LAST.

A Cockney went for a trip in an aeroplane. When he came down he said to the pilot: "Thanks for them two rides." "But you've only had one," replied the pilot. "Listen to me," continued the Cockney earnestly. "I've 'ad two—the first and the larst."

THE RETORT.

Two new boys met at school for the first time. Said the small Yankee: "Say, my father's a big fellow! 'Twas he that dug the Mississippi, threw the earth out, and made the Rocky Mountains." "Is zat zo?" retorted little Isaac Isaacstein. "Vell, my fader kill ze Dead Sea!"

TAKEN ON TRUST

By Malcolm Trevor

A DISTURBING DISCOVERY

JILL dropped the book into her lap, and sighed. It was too dark to read any longer and the standard lamp was just out of her reach. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and watched the second hand for a moment to make sure that it was still going.

"Only five minutes to nine," she muttered aloud, and at the sound of her voice, Jess, the spaniel, prised herself up from the hearthrug and came over expectantly. Jill laughed ruefully as she reached out and pulled the dog's ear. "No, you needn't stretch yourself yet, old girl," she said. "Hewon't be back for at least another hour."

Jess' stump of a tail wagged blithely, and she trotted across the room to the open french window and stood sniffing at the cool evening air as it came to her across the lawn outside. Then she ran off to the kitchen and came back with her lead which she dumped in Jill's lap and then sat back expectantly.

"Well, what about you and me having a romp on our own?" her liquid eyes asked as plainly as any words could have done.

"Oh, all right, darling," Jill said. "We'll walk down the lane and back, shall we? It will help to fill in the time, at any rate."

She rose as she spoke—a tall, graceful girl, with frank, clean-cut features, widely spaced blue eyes, and a mass of naturally curly copper-coloured hair. As she stepped through the french window and stood for a moment looking across the shadowed lawn to the garden beyond, there was a listlessness about her movements and a weariness in her eyes that would have startled those who had known her only a short twelve months before.

Then, Jill had been a stranger to the art of filling in time. Her one complaint had always been that no day was long enough for all she wanted to do in it. She had spent her days in the Ideas Department of a London Advertising Agency and her evenings in a whirl of tennis and dances, dining out and theatre parties galore.

Now she had nothing except a home to look after in the country—and Bob.

A jet plane screamed overhead as she crossed the lawn to the side gate leading into the lane outside, but she did not look up at it. She had not looked up at a plane since that dreadful evening, more than six months ago now, when she had run out on to the lawn to wave at Bob as he flew over in the new machine he was testing—only to see it crumple in the air and hurtle down and explode somewhere beyond the trees.

And that's where Bob had found her, nearly half-an-hour later, when, getting no response to his frantic calls on the telephone, he had seized someone's motor cycle and raced home.

"Darling, I'm quite all right!" Jill had heard him repeating in a frenzy of alarm. "I wasn't flying the thing—it was John! It's me, Jill—Bob! I—I'm here, Jill,—here with you! Look at me, darling."

He had carried her indoors, laid her on the settee, then telephoned for the doctor.

"It's me, Jill!" he kept saying, kneeling beside her, his arms round her tightly, his face close to her own. "I wasn't flying the thing. John took over at the last minute. Look at me, darling!"

At last, the clouds cleared from her brain. She opened her eyes and touched him, and knew that it was no dream.

Then, after the doctor had arrived, she found herself in bed, and still Bob was with her.

"Hold me tightly, darling!" she murmured brokenly. "Oh, Bob, never again—never again, my dearest!"

But there was an again, for as a test pilot, that was Bob's business. Within a week he had taken John Mayne's position with the company. Instead of Chief Assistant Test Pilot he had become Chief Test Pilot—"And soon I'll be able to buy that car you want, my dearest," he had laughingly told Jill.

John Mayne had been Bob's most intimate friend. They had flown in the war together, gone into commercial flying together, and when John had been appointed test pilot to the Crichton-Lane Aeroplane Company, within three months he had found Bob a similar job with the same company. A little later on, Bob had been best man at John's wedding; John had returned the compliment by being best man at Bob's wedding.

It had taken Jill weeks to get over the shock of John's death, but Bob had taken it in his stride—in spite of the years of the closest friendship between the two men. It seemed not to have affected him in the slightest degree, and Jill had been amazed at her husband's apparent indifference.

"It's a great pity, of course," he had said on one occasion. "But it's just one of those things, darling, and there's nothing anybody can do about it. Some go, some stay."

His casualness appalled her—but Jill had not been a bomber-pilot in the war where men learned to count life in terms of hours only, and often enough only in minutes. Nor did she see the sudden tightening of his lips whenever he spoke of John or her ears catch the slightly louder note in his laughter.

He would even laugh with Alice Mayne—John's widow—and what was even worse, Alice would laugh with him as though it were all a joke.

"She couldn't have loved him very much," Jill had remarked bluntly. "Had it been me I would have died—and certainly I couldn't have stayed on here, hearing those planes every day and—remembering."

"Oh, I don't know, my dear girl," Bob had said. "Alice has to live, you know. Matter of fact, the company have offered her a job in the office and I've persuaded her to take it. Nothing like work when you have to keep sorrow at bay—and dear old John wouldn't want her to grieve. He was too big a man for that."

Alice Mayne had gone into the office to work, and Bob had taken over her dead husband's job. How she could bear the sight and sound of those planes on test all day, Jill could never understand.

"Really, Bob, the girl must be made of wood!" Jill commented, when she heard of it. Bob laughed and shook his head.

"No, darling," he said, "that X7 was John's baby. A lot of his own ideas had gone into its making, and its success meant more to him than anything. We're bringing it to success now, and when it finally goes into world service—under whatever name they give it—that machine will be John Mayne's final monument. That's what Alice knows."

"Well, I'm afraid I shouldn't think that way," Jill said. "If the thing had killed you, instead of John, I should never have wanted to see or hear of it again. It would have been like looking at your murderer. But

you don't think of it that way, do you, Bob? You've always told me that testing new machines is just a job of work, and that there's nothing in it except routine."

Bob smiled. He had told her that in the beginning, when she had been so frightened for him. And, as a matter of fact, to the men on the job, it was. There was neither honour in it nor anything else—save a decent living, and the satisfaction that comes of bringing a new design through its teething troubles and making it a safe machine for other men to fly.

But the X7 was different. The X7 was John Mayne's pride and joy—and with John gone, Bob told himself, it was up to him to take over where his friend had left off and bring the new machine triumphantly through its trials. He saw it, as he had said, as John's memorial—the finest he could give him, and the one he was determined to give him, if brains and skill and care and hard work could achieve it.

"All the same, Bob, I don't look at it the way you do," Jill said, as they walked towards their bungalow. "For if the thing has killed one expert test pilot it could easily kill another."

Bob laughed.

"I'm not dedicated, if that's what you mean, my dear," he told her lightly. "You see, darling, the work must go on—just as in the war the mission had to be completed, no matter what happened. We're all like links in a chain, each of us carrying a step farther the work of those immediately preceding us. That's the whole pattern of life, Jill, and has been from the beginning."

"Each of us starts away from somebody else's footmarks—as I am starting away from John's, and as somebody will doubtless, one day, start away from mine. That's how life progresses. Each of us picks up the torch and carries it a step farther. No man has ever yet started, and finished, anything—When one man starts, it is left for posterity to finish—and no man can see its end."

"Look where we've gone in my own line, for instance," Bob went on, warming to his subject, "since the Wright brothers staggered into the air for a few yards scarcely fifty years ago. They had vision, all right—and imagination. They were bringing to a practical reality what had been no more than a dream since men first saw birds flying. But I doubt if they would recognise our X7, for example, as being even a child of their original contraption!"

"The men that followed them have achieved that—just as the men who follow us, building their space ships, will soon be laughing their heads off at such pettifoggish little jobs as our X7! Oh yes, we must go forward, Jill, as best we can in our time and in our day. That's what John was doing, and I must do, now that he has gone," Bob added thoughtfully.

But Jill was not to be comforted.

"Oh, I know all that, Bob dear," she said, "and in theory it sounds fine, no doubt. But you do have a life separate from your work, you know, like every other man, and I for one don't see why you should have to work night and day on this wretched thing any more than John ever did. I thought, when they made you chief test pilot, that you'd have an easier time—anyway, you gave me to understand you would, as well as more money. But instead of coming home earlier than you used to, you come home later, and it's very lonely for me with nobody to talk to but Jess."

"I know—and I'm sorry, sweetheart," Bob said. "But it won't be for much longer, and then we'll go off on a long holiday together. Once this X7 is off our hands, I expect you'll be complaining that I'm under your feet all day," he added, laughingly. "Because then there'll be nothing for me to do but just flip the machines round as they come off the production belt."

"Yes, but when will the X7 be finished? That's the point, Bob."

"Oh, quite soon now, darling," he assured her smilingly. "She's only got to complete her night tests and course trials—and then you'll hear her hailed as the world's finest aircraft. And won't that please dear old John. I bet he'll have a hand on the controls again that day!"

Jill shuddered.

"Oh, don't be ghastly, Bob," she said.

"I'm not," he protested stooping to kiss her, and for a while Jill was comforted, thinking that soon she would have him to herself again, and that when the X7 was finally through her tests, they would go away for a long holiday together.

But as the days and weeks passed, and still she scarcely saw her husband from dawn to dark, Jill's faith wavered and she began to lose heart. First it was one thing, then another, until it seemed to her that the X7 never would be right.

And always at back of her mind was the memory of John Mayne's tragic end, and the growing conviction that there was something radically wrong in the plane's design.

"It's a killer!" she told herself, recalling a phrase she had heard Bob use when speaking of one of his wartime planes. "It's never been right from the beginning."

Jill was thinking of that now as she walked slowly down the lane with Jess nuzzling along the ditch beside her and pretending to find a rat and a rabbit behind every tuft of grass. It had been months now since she and her husband had spoken of that holiday, much less made any arrangements nor had the little car Bob had spoken of so glibly made its appearance in the empty garage of the bungalow.

Night after night it was gone ten o'clock before he returned from the aerodrome, and always—when they spoke of it at all—his excuse was the same.

"We're having a spot of trouble with the retractor gear, darling," he would say.

Time was, and not so long ago, when Bob and she had strolled together down that lane.

In those days Bob had come tearing home at five o'clock at the very latest, and often soon after four, according to how he was flying. She realised, of course, that with his promotion to chief test pilot he was now shouldering far greater responsibilities, but even so John Mayne had always managed to get home at a reasonable hour when he held the position.

Even admitting that, as a new broom, Bob wanted to sweep particularly clean, Jill still could not see that he needed to hang about the test ground every night.

"If you wanted to come home, you could come!" she had flung out angrily one night, but Bob had only shaken his head.

"Darling, you don't understand," she remembered him telling her in that patient fashion of his. "This crate has got to be made to fly to specification. The prototype has already cost close on two million pounds, and now that she's built, it's my job to see that she functions at the earliest possible moment—and functions in every least detail."

"Yes, every gimmick and gadget, my dear Jill—and there are hundreds of them in this new plane—has not only to function perfectly on its own, but its function has to be perfectly co-ordinated with the functioning of every other gadget and gimmick, to the one end that the machine

as a whole can fly to specification."

Well, maybe she did not understand, Jill reflected, but the fact remained that John Mayne had always managed to get home at a reasonable hour every evening! That was the yardstick by which she measured all Bob's explanations and excuses and the yardstick by which she came slowly to the realisation that she was no longer the be-all and end-all of her husband's life.

It was now obvious to her that Bob was far more concerned for the success of the X7 than for the happiness of his wife. So long as X7 needed his care and attention and thought, there would be nothing left for her! Of course, a man had to work—she knew that, just as she knew the old tag about love being a woman's sole existence and for a man something apart.

But, like every other girl, she supposed, she had never believed that it would be her lot to find it out. Up to now, Bob had always seemed so different from other men, and other lovers. He had always cared for the things she cared for, and been interested in what she said and thought.

And after only one short year of marriage! Less, really, because all this indifference had started six months ago when he had been appointed chief test pilot after John Mayne's death. So that actually, the first fine careless rapture of her marriage had lasted a bare six months.

Six short months—and already she was an aviation widow! It was incredible. It was heart-breaking, for, to her, Bob meant infinitely more now than he had ever done. He was, in fact, her entire world, for without him she had nothing. Without him, her world was as empty as the countryside in which he had brought her to live; as empty as the garden she had made when he was not there to walk in it beside her and note how everything was growing.

"By jingo, Jill darling! That's a triumph, you clever girl!" she remembered him exclaiming one day when she had taken him out to see a cyclamen she had replanted, and which, to her immense surprise, had taken root and flowered again.

Only a little thing—but she had been so proud of it. And thereafter, day after day, his very first pilgrimage had been to see how the cyclamen was looking.

Now, however, he scarcely went into the garden at all. He never had time even to mow the lawn. He had promised her a small motor-mower, but it had never eventuated. He could not afford one, he had said, in spite of the four hundred a year rise they had given him when he took over John Mayne's position.

At the bend of the lane, Jill paused for a moment and gazed towards the village. From where she stood one could see the tower of the old church, two miles away, but the road lay empty between so that it was no use waiting.

In a vague kind of way she noted the lights shining from the windows of the staff bungalows farther along, and she envied the women whose men folk would be sitting down to supper with them after being at home all evening.

Suddenly the thought occurred to her, as she picked out the light of one particular bungalow, that really she was in little better case than Alice Mayne whose husband would never come home again.

"Come on, Jess!" she called to the only companion she had. "Home, darling."

It was almost dark by the time she reached the bungalow, and as she was opening the gate, a sharp bark from Jess brought her quickly round in time to see someone dismounting from a bicycle.

"Hullo, Mrs. Craddock!" a man's voice called, and she recognised it on the instant as belonging to Tom Robson, the firm's accountant, who lived farther along the

lane. "Hope I didn't startle you? Is Bob about?" he added wheeling his cycle towards her.

"I'm afraid he's not, Mr. Robson," she answered. "He's not back from the works yet."

"Isn't he?" Jill caught the faint note of surprise in his voice. "I suppose he must have gone back again then, for I saw him leaving with Mrs. Mayne just before seven o'clock. Thought I might pick him up at the George, but I had no luck," Tom Robson went on. "Anyway, perhaps you'll tell him for me. We want Bob to turn out for the cricket team on Saturday afternoon. He promised he would if we were stuck for an opening bat—and we are. So would you mind telling him, Mrs. Craddock? I said I'd give him as long a notice as I could."

"Yes, Mr. Robson, I'll tell Bob as soon as he comes in," Jill replied.

"Thanks, Mrs. Craddock," he said. "And now I'll be getting along or I'll find myself in trouble with my better half. Betty hates me working late, even at audit time. And I can't say I take kindly to it myself. Well, good night, Mrs. Craddock—and many thanks."

"Good night, Mr. Robson."

Jill watched him mount his bicycle and, with a wave of his hand, he rode off down the lane. She stood staring after the little red rearlight until it disappeared round the bend.

Then, in a mechanical fashion, she turned and walked along the garden path and into the house. Jill switched on the light and crossing to the hearth, stood gazing at the photograph of a tall, loosely built young man with laughing eyes and a mop of unruly yellow hair. He was wearing an old tweed jacket and creased flannel bags, and holding Jess in his arms—the spaniel was frantically licking Bob's face.

It was an enlargement of a snapshot Jill had taken on the lawn upon the first day they had taken possession of the bungalow.

"We must have Jess in the picture, darling," she could remember him saying laughingly. And on the opposite side of the mantelpiece was a similar enlargement of the snapshot Bob had taken of her and Jess at the same time.

That had been just a year ago, and the clock in the centre of the mantelpiece showed ten minutes past ten.

"I suppose he must have gone back again then," Tom Robson had said, "for I saw him leaving with Mrs. Mayne just before seven o'clock."

Jill was still standing there when the click of the garden gate warned her that he was coming at last. Next moment, Bob came in through the open french window, glanced automatically at the clock, and made the same excuse she had been hearing almost every night since he had taken over John Mayne's job.

"Sorry I'm late, darling, but it can't be helped," he said apologetically. "There's something radically wrong with the design of that cursed retractor gear. It just won't go right. We've been bashing away at it since six o'clock this evening, and I'm getting thoroughly sick of it all."

He kissed her, and even if he did notice the coldness of the response of her lips, Bob gave no sign of it.

"Tom Robson called here a few minutes ago," she said, "and he wants you to turn out for cricket on Saturday afternoon."

"Oh, damn!" Bob muttered. "I don't think I can spare the time."

"But are you going to work Saturday afternoons now as well as half the night?" Jill asked sarcastically.

"I'm afraid I've no option, darling," he said. "Time's getting very short, you know. Anyway, I'll see what I can do about it. I'll have a talk with Robson to-morrow—

"Surely there's somebody else round the place who can play?"

"Have you had supper?"

"Gosh, no!" Bob exclaimed irritably. "I haven't had time to breathe, let alone eat."

"Very well, I'll get you something," Jill said, as she entered the kitchen. Tom Robson's words were ringing in her ears—"I saw him leaving with Mrs. Mayne just before seven o'clock!"

SUSPICION BECOMES A CERTAINTY

JILL was looking very pale the next morning, and it was plain that she had not slept well.

"I've got a bad headache," she told Bob, when he commented that she was not eating any breakfast.

"That's too bad, darling," he sympathized, smiling at her across the table. "How come?"

"The heat, I expect," she lied. "I was out in the garden most of yesterday without my sunhat."

He considered her appraisingly for a moment. Then—

"I thought last night you weren't quite your usual self, my dear. In fact, I've thought so for some little time past, come to that. It's pretty thin for you being alone in this place all day and half the night, isn't it, Jill? Don't you think a change would do you good?"

"You—you mean that we have a holiday together?" she asked, a little startled by his suggestion.

"Well, no, not I, darling," he answered, with a sad smile that momentarily deceived her. "I only wish we could go away together, but I'm afraid that will have to wait for X7. All the same, there's no reason why you shouldn't go off for a week or two, you know. Why not go home and have a good rest, Jill? I could put up at the George while you're away; I'd be quite all right there. I realise, of course, that I'm not much company for you as things are at the moment."

Jill could scarcely believe the evidence of her own ears. Was this indeed Bob Craddock speaking—and to her? She looked into that frank, open face across the breakfast table—the face that had filled her dreams for so long, and which stood for her as the very hall-mark of all that was good, and true, and kind.

Was that really the man she loved suggesting that she should go away for a week or two so that he might spend more time still with another woman? Had it come to this—so soon—that he wanted to be rid of her and go his own way?

From flushed anger, her face changed slowly to an ashen pallor.

"Jill, darling, is—is anything wrong?" he asked urgently, staring at her in sudden alarm.

With a great effort she forced herself to calmness. After all, she did not know for certain. Maybe she was all wrong. Maybe she was making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Maybe Tom Robson had been mistaken. Maybe it was not Bob he had seen at all!

"No, Bob, nothing in particular," she answered, smiling wanly, and putting a hand to her forehead. "I think I'll take some aspirin and lie down for half an hour. I shall be all right again in an hour or so."

"But it may be a touch of sunstroke, darling," he suggested. "Don't you think I had better phone for the doctor?"

"Oh, nonsense!" she laughed him off. "Anyway, it's time you were going, Bob. It's gone nine, you know."

"Well, I'll come back for lunch, my dear," he said.

Jill shook her head.

"No, please don't," she protested. "I think I would rather not bother with lunch to-day."

"Very well, darling, then I shall ring you!" he said.

Jill could stand no more. The obvious falseness of his sympathy scorched her—this display of concern over a mere headache when night after night he could leave her alone, eating out her heart, while he was evidently dancing attendance upon some other woman!

"Though this certainly does point the sense of what I was saying just now, darling—I mean, about your having a change," Bob went on. "You do altogether too much in the garden—especially in this heat. What were you doing yesterday—mowing that wretched lawn again?"

"Somebody has to mow it," she countered more sharply than she realised. "And it would be easier with a motor-mower—if we had one, of course."

"Yes, I know, and we will have one just as soon as I can afford it, my dear Jill. In any event, please don't do it again—I'll send a man over from the works to see to it until such time as I can attend to it myself again."

Bob was on his feet now, anxious to be gone. It was always the same whenever she spoke of money, Jill told herself. She supposed that, too, was going on Alice Mayne!

He kissed her good-bye—a duty kiss on her cheek.

"I'll ring you at lunch time, Jill," he said. "In the meantime, take it easy, my dear, and think over what I have said about going home for a week or two. I feel sure the change would do you good."

As he mounted his bicycle and rode away, Jill knew a wild desire to run after him and demand to know the truth. She felt she could not go on with this dreadful suspicion hanging over her head. But caution prevailed. Before she acted she must be sure of her facts. She must find out for certain if he really were spending all his evenings with Alice Mayne.

Her mind went back to the old days when John had been alive. Jill had always liked him, but had never really cared much for his wife. Alice Mayne was short and fluffy—she always reminded Jill of a kitten, ready to play, but with claws. But John had adored her, and in those days, Bob had agreed that Alice Mayne, though quite pretty, in the wax-doll style, was not much to "write home about."

In the George Hotel, she was more popular with the men than Jill, or any of the other women. She was that kind. She drank more and was less inhibited, and therefore a better mixer. About the other women, as with Jill herself, there was a certain reserve. They went to the hotel with their husbands, and if their men bunched together to talk shop, then the wives bunched together to talk of more feminine affairs.

Alice Mayne, on the other hand, was always prepared to talk to anybody, whether she knew them or not. Being a crack darts player, she would join in any game that was going—and inevitably it would be a noisy game from then onwards. There was an idea abroad that she had once been on the stage, but John had never mentioned anything about it, nor had his wife.

It had always been a source of curiosity to Jill—and indeed to most other women on the station—just what John Mayne saw in her, for he was not only exceptionally clever, but a very modest and quiet man. But, of course, you could never tell with men—some of the most brilliant of them married the stupidest of women, and continued to the end to adore them.

Jill supposed it was the doctrine of oppo-

sites, in the same way that tall men almost invariably are attracted by small women. But that Bob could ever be attracted by a woman like Alice Mayne, was something she could never understand.

She was not his type, nor was Bob Alice Mayne's type. Bob was gay, and even a little reckless in some ways. But he was never a loose liver. If Jill had been asked to name her husband's chief characteristics, she would have answered without hesitation—loyalty.

Bob's word was always his bond. He would die rather than let down a friend or a colleague—John Mayne had told her that, in speaking of their war days together.

"If you had Bob on your wing tip, above you or beneath you, Jill, you knew you were all right from that quarter," John had told her one day, as they sat having tea in the garden. "If the whole German air force were on your tail, dear old Bob would continue to cover you at all costs. That's what he got his 'gongs' for, and no man ever earned the bawbees more. And I should know, for he got one of them for looking after me," John had added, grinning. "In fact, I wouldn't be here sprawled at my ease now but for my old pal Bob Craddock."

D.F.C. and two bars were the "gongs" John had spoken of—and it was only then that Jill heard of the decorations; and it was not until several months later, when rummaging round in a drawer of odds and ends, that she found something else lying stuffed in a corner—a D.S.O.

"Oh, that bawbee!" Bob had laughed when she confronted him with the decoration. "We keep that quiet, darling. You see, they happened to have one left over at the 'Fly House', and since everybody else had one—including the doorkeeper—they didn't know what to do with it. So they tied it up neatly and sent it to our wing to get rid of, and one night, when we were all pretty tight, we played a knock-out snooker tournament using the wrong end of the cues—the winner to have the bawbee. So now you know, darling."

Later, in her pride, Jill had related the story to John Mayne, and he had laughed.

"Well, it wasn't quite like that, Jill," he had said. "But it's a dashed good story, all the same."

And that was that. Still later on, Jill had planned to have the "gongs" mounted in a case and hung on the wall, but Bob had been adamant.

"Not on your sweet life, my dear girl!" he had said emphatically. "Great heavens above, I suppose you'll be wanting me to go out wearing Jess' dog-collar next! Have a heart, darling—have a heart!"

She had been so very proud of him—and now this!

Jill stood at the open window staring with unseeing eyes across the garden. She did not know what to do, but of one thing she was certain—she was not going home, as Bob had suggested. She was worried sick as it was, and if she went away she would go crazy not knowing from one minute to the next what was happening.

As the morning wore on, however, she grew calmer. She must not panic now, she told herself; she must use her head. And the first thing she must find out was if the conclusion she had drawn from what Tom Robson said on the previous night was the true conclusion—because, of course, it was quite possible that Bob really had actually gone back to the works.

True, he had said that he had not left the sheds after six o'clock, whereas Tom Robson asserted that he had seen him leaving with Mrs. Mayne just before seven o'clock, but there might quite easily be an explanation for that.

The thing she could not understand, and could not credit, was that Bob would

endanger not only his own home but his new job—and possibly his whole career with the Crichton-Lane Aeroplane Company—for no better reason than a stupid infatuation for Alice Mayne.

Bob was much too clever and level-headed for that, Jill told herself, and far and away too proud of his new position. Flying was his life, and his determination to make X7 the plane of the year in memory of his best friend, was too overwhelming an ambition to be put aside for any reason whatever—even herself, in fact.

That being so, then why would he risk it for Alice Mayne—and doubly so if, as he himself had said, it was her overriding ambition, too? That did not make sense to Jill.

But nothing did make sense, and the more she thought over everything the less it seemed to make. In fact, she told herself that she was making a mountain out of a molehill and imagining all kinds of things that couldn't possibly be true, and as mid-day drew near, she was quite certain of it—and ready to tell Bob as much when he rang through to inquire about her headache. She even composed in her mind the very words she would say to him.

"I'm sorry to have been so stupid, darling," she would tell him. "It's all my own fault, I know, but I love you so very much, Bob, and I couldn't bear to think that you no longer wanted me!"

She would tell him everything, bare her heart completely, just as she always had done. It was their proud boast that they had no secrets from each other. As Bob always said, they were one; their hearts had recognised each other, had been whispering to each other right from the very first moment of their meeting.

At twelve o'clock, Jill went into the lounge and with an expectant little smile stood close to the telephone waiting for it to ring. Almost she wished now that she had acquiesced in his suggestion that he should come home to lunch; but perhaps it would be better if she asked him to come home early, instead.

Her smile became more mischievous at that. Supposing she told him that she was feeling really ill and would like him to come home when the works closed down at half-past five? And when she rushed out to meet him, and confessed her little strategy he would be too relieved to be angry with her. In any event, she had never seen Bob angry—nor John Mayne.

"An angry man in a plane is a sitter," John had told her on one occasion. "He has already jettisoned half his thinking machinery."

As the minutes passed, Jill was aware of a growing excitement. Dare she ask him to come home at three? she wondered. At any moment now he would ring and she wanted to be ready with all that she was going to tell him. It would be lovely to have him home at three o'clock—as he used to be before he had taken over John's position.

She was never quite certain at just what time it dawned upon her that Bob was not going to ring—that he had forgotten all about her and his promise. At one moment she was hurriedly debating with herself just how much she dare ask, and the next it was borne in upon her that she was not going to be given the chance to ask anything at all!

Suddenly her heart fell like a plummet within her. The clock showed half-past twelve and there was no longer any hope. Yes, Bob had forgotten her; he did not care whether she was sick or well.

Then the unexpected happened—the bell rang. For several seconds Jill stared at the instrument incredulously. She stood like a small bird paralysed by the fascination of a snake. She had been so sure—so ridicu-

lously sure that he would not ring, and that he did not want to ring.

Impulsively she grabbed the receiver and clamped it to her ear.

"Yes?" she muttered breathlessly. "Is that you, Jill?" a woman's voice asked. "Alice Mayne speaking. Bob has asked me to ring and find out if you're better. He is hard at work on X7 and can't come to the phone himself. So I'm ringing instead and will send any message you have for him across to the sheds."

Jill tried to answer, but no words came. "Are you there, Jill?"

Jill steadied herself and forced herself to speak.

"Yes, I—I'm quite all right now," she heard herself saying. "I'm going shopping this afternoon. Tell Bob he need not hurry back to-night."

"What was it, my dear—a sick head?" the other asked.

"Yes, a sick head," Jill repeated mechanically. "Good-bye."

She rang off, and sat down heavily in a nearby chair. It was now nearly a quarter to one. So Bob had forgotten all about it until the last minute, and had then asked Alice Mayne to phone for him!

Alice Mayne! Was Bob quite mad? Had he no more thought for his wife, no more respect than to ask *that* woman to ring up for him? Was he deliberately trying to insult her?

Jill's thoughts went round and round, chaotically, but after a time, one thought emerged and took possession of her whole being. This was the last straw. For months past those two had been laughing at her behind her back, conspiring against her. Now they were coming out into the open, and she was not standing for it any longer.

If Bob was determined to have done with her, and break himself over a woman like Alice Mayne—the widow of the best friend he had ever had and to whom he owed his position with the firm—then let him do it.

"But first I'll make quite sure that Tom Robson was right," Jill decided. "I'll keep a good look-out with my own eyes, and then I'll act."

All that afternoon she steeled herself to the task. She knew exactly what she was going to do. If she were wrong she would apologise, but she was certain she was not wrong. Two and two could only add up to four, no matter how one juggled with the figures.

At five o'clock, Jill had tea and cleared away. The thought in her mind was that Bob might make an effort to throw dust in her eyes and come home at six. For she felt sure her voice could not have sounded normal over the telephone, and Alice Mayne would have her suspicions—being a woman—even if Bob did not.

Six o'clock came and went, and Bob did not return. Seven o'clock came, then eight, and there was no call from him over the telephone. Plainly they did not care whether she suspected anything or not. They were as completely indifferent to her as to the rest of the people living in the station. With their heads deep in the sands of infatuation, they evidently believed that no one noticed their intimate association, or had any thoughts whatever about them.

At nine o'clock, wearing a dark coat over her summer dress, Jill left the bungalow by the side gate and looked up and down the lane. Then, climbing the stile on the far side, she started to walk across the fields. There was a small spinney running alongside the Mayne bungalow, and in that spinney Jill was determined to keep watch.

On arriving there, she stepped in among the sheltering trees, and slowly made her way through the undergrowth towards the other side, with Jess snuffing at her heels in a state of ecstatic bliss at this unusual

procedure.

It was dark in the spinney, but still light enough, when she reached the edge of the trees on the other side for her to see the Mayne bungalow less than thirty yards away.

There was a light in the front window, and she could see the vague outline of a bicycle propped against the side wall in the shadow of the veranda. Jill guessed at once that it must be Bob's.

She knew a wild impulse to bang on the front door and demand an instant explanation, but pride held her back. Whatever had to be done now must be done with dignity and restraint. Jill reflected. She would not lower herself to make a scene, nor to plead with Bob for the love she had lost. That would be not only to degrade herself, but the love that once she had known and placed high above all things.

Jill stood there, certain of what she was going to find, yet knowing that she must go through with it, at all costs. And almost immediately after the village church clock had struck the half-hour, the door of the bungalow opened and two figures stepped out on to the shadowed veranda.

Jess was now on the lead, and instinctively Jill leaned down and laid a hand over her muzzle in case she should bark. The light in the hall had been switched off before the door was opened, so that it was impossible even now to be quite sure who were the two people standing there in the gloom. That one must be Alice Mayne herself was obvious—but was the other Bob?

Jill waited motionless, her heart beating wildly, her eyes straining through the gloom. They were standing talking together in low murmurs, and all she could see of them was a confused blur against the dark background of the veranda.

Suddenly, one of them broke away and stepped towards the parked bicycle. A moment later it was wheeled beneath the shadowed veranda out on to the gravel drive—and then Jill knew.

It was Bob! And she could now see Alice Mayne as clearly as she could see Bob himself.

"Well, good night, my dear Alice," she heard Bob say. "Don't forget all that I have told you, because to-morrow night I shall expect your answer."

And Alice Mayne said—
"I'll do my best, you know that, don't you? Good night, Bob—and God bless you. I feel I shall never be able to thank you sufficiently."

"Don't try, my dear girl," Bob returned lightly. "Leave that to the future. Au 'voir, Alice!"

He then wheeled his bicycle out into the lane, but without switching on either his front or rear lamps. Obviously he did not want to attract attention as he left the bungalow, Jill told herself. She watched him close the gate silently behind him, saw him turn and wave his hand, and Alice Mayne waved back.

It was the sound of the bungalow door being closed and bolted that roused Jill from the paralysed horror in which she had stood watching what, to her, could only mean the end of her world. She still had her hand on Jess' muzzle, and she suddenly became aware of the dog's quivering excitement, for the spaniel, too, had caught the sound of Bob's voice and recognised it.

"Quiet, Jess! Quiet!" Jill whispered, with suppressed excitement, as she removed her hand from the dog's muzzle and started back through the spinney.

The lane took a wide curve, and by cutting across the fields, Jill knew she could reach home before Bob arrived, and she managed to do so.

Leaving the light on in the hall, she

crossed to the spare room, undressed quickly and got into bed. By the time the click of the side gate warned her of Bob's arrival, she had regained her breath and was lying with her eyes closed in the dim light from the bedside lamp.

She heard him come in.

"Jill!" he called

"I'm in here," she called back.

Then, entering the spare room, he stood for a moment looking down at her.

"Aren't you well, darling?" he asked.

She opened her eyes and was vaguely startled to see that he looked just as he always looked. Somehow she had expected him to look different. Any man who was acting as he was doing, couldn't help but look different—at least, Jill would have thought not.

"Darling, is it the—the head again?" he asked.

"Yes," she murmured. "I'm feeling very restless, and I don't expect I'll sleep much to-night. So I—so I came in here, as there is no point in disturbing you."

"Oh, but I don't mind that, Jill dear," he replied, leaning over and laying the back of his hand against her brow. "You have a temperature, you know, and I wish you had let me call in the doctor this morning. How long have you been like this, darling? I thought you were all right again from what Alice told me when she rang through to you at midday."

Mention of the other woman's name was like a stab in Jill's heart.

"Oh, don't fuss!" she muttered irritably. "I shall be quite all right in the morning. I'm sorry you were too busy to ring yourself—not that it mattered, of course."

She then closed her eyes, and wished he would go away, but instead, he remained gazing down at her.

"I would have come back earlier had I known you were not well, my dearest," he said. "And I would have rung you myself at midday, as I promised, had I been able to do so."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said wearily, hating to have him lie to her in such a way. "Leave me alone now—please," she begged.

But still he hesitated—he was evidently feeling very uneasy, she told herself.

"I—I was airborne at midday, Jill," he said slowly. "That's why I couldn't ring."

"I—I understood Alice Mayne to say that you were in the sheds," Jill retorted.

"Yes, I know, darling. I told Alice to say that, as I didn't want you to be worried about me. And I know how you do worry about me, my dear Jill, when I'm up in X7. I had to take her up to test some new gear we've been putting into her. I took off just before eleven o'clock this morning, and I didn't land again until it had gone three."

Jill's heart had quickened to his explanation. So he actually remembered his promise to her! was the thought that flashed through her awareness. He never did want her to know that he was flying X7 until he was safely down again. He always tried to save her that worry.

But swiftly as her heart had leapt to this evidence of his solicitude for her, it sank more swiftly still when she remembered that his failure to telephone was only a minor incident in the long day's agony—and he could easily be lying about it, anyway.

Steadying herself, she managed to say—

"And you—you've been working on X7 to-night?"

He hesitated a moment. Then nodded.

"Now is there anything I can get you, darling?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she answered. "Just turn out the light and leave me alone," she added, and turned her face to the wall.

A VISITOR FROM THE PAST

CONTRARY to expectation, Jill slept soundly that night, and awakening at seven the next morning, she got up and dressed and went into the garden.

It was a lovely morning with the sun already quite hot and promising another wonderful day. She lingered among the rose bushes, every one of which she had planted with her own hands—as indeed she had planted everything else in the garden, for Bob was not much of a hand as a gardener.

"Oh, Jill's the one with the green fingers," he would say, a broad grin on his face whenever an admiring visitor congratulated him upon the setting and display of the various flowers. "If I planted a dandelion it would die on me. Oh yes, Jill's the gardener—not me."

He came out now, wearing his dressing-gown and slippers, his fair hair tousled.

"Hullo, darling! This is fine!" he said, with a cheerful smile. "I crept into the spare room just to see how you were, but found the bird flown. Are you feeling really fit again, my dear?"

Jill nodded.

"Yes, I'm perfectly all right this morning, thanks," she said, her hands busy with the plant and her head bent low. "I believe Jess has been nibbling round here, and—"

Jill broke off as a click at the side gate heralded the arrival of the postman. It also reminded her of the time, and while Bob went across the lawn to meet the postman, Jill took the opportunity of escaping into the bungalow.

A minute or two later, Bob found her in the kitchen starting to prepare breakfast. He had an open letter in his hand.

"Look at this, Jill," he grinned. "From Charles Lacy—the silly old ass!"

Jill took the single sheet of notepaper and read what was written there. Charles Lacy was ex-Wing Commander Lacy, Bob's old commander.

"*Dear Love-birds,*" the note read. "*Being on holiday and in your district, may I alight like a cuckoo in your nest and beg tea to-morrow? Charles.*"

"Which means to-day, of course, my dear," Bob said. "Just like old Lacy to give us no opportunity to put him off. Can you cope, do you think, darling? Do you really feel up to it?"

Jill shrugged.

"We have no option, apparently," she answered. "Still, I suppose it will be all right—after all, it is only tea," she added. "Though naturally he'll want to see you."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Bob agreed. "But I don't know if I'll be able to manage to get home for tea."

"It would be a help if you could," Jill said. "I've only met the man once, you know, and then only for an hour or so."

"Yes, I know darling. Anyway, I'll try to be here—and if I'm out, set the old bouncer mowing the lawn, Jill. That'll get rid of him, if I know anything of Charles. He never did like work."

Bob grinned, reminiscently, and then went off to dress—not noticing, apparently, that for the first time since they were married he had not kissed his wife good morning. It seemed incredible to Jill.

She glanced at Charles Lacy's note where it lay on the table, and her eyes misted as she picked it up and read again the superscription—"Dear Love-birds". He had called them that when he met them in London, soon after their marriage, and she had smiled, shyly. But now the words were like a sharp knife thrust into her heart.

She prepared breakfast mechanically, thrusting all other thoughts to the back of

her mind. Later on, she would have to decide what she was going to do, but it could wait for the moment.

In the full light of day the whole thing seemed strangely unreal—as though it was something she had dreamed and from which she would presently awake to find herself laughing away her horror of it all in Bob's arms.

"I'll ring you about getting home for tea, darling," Bob said, when he was ready to leave for the works. "Depends upon the results of those tests we made yesterday. But, in any event, you won't be bored with Charles Lacy—I'll say that much for him, for he was never a dull dog!"

"And if you can't get back for tea?" Jill asked.

"Oh, I'll come as soon as I can, Jill," he promised. "Six-ish, anyway."

Jill popped a piece of toast and marmalade into her mouth so that when he leaned over to kiss her, she had an excuse for offering him her cheek only. For she could not bear the thought of him kissing her on the lips, after he had kissed Alice Mayne.

As she watched him stride along the garden path and through the gate into the lane, it seemed incredible that, after one short year of marriage, Bob should have tired of her to such an extent.

All that morning Jill mooned about in the garden, trying to make up her mind what to do for the best. One moment she was all for challenging Bob outright, demanding to know what was in his mind and what he intended to do about it; but the next moment both her pride and her heart revolted at the thought.

Far better, she told herself, to pack her bags and go. She would not, could not, bring herself to plead with him; to beg for what had up to now been so freely and joyously given.

Another thought that filled her with bitterness was the reflection that Bob could try to come home for tea, anyway by six-ish, in order to meet Charles Lacy—but he could not make a similar effort to come home to her, not even when she was ill. He could forgo the company of Alice Mayne for his friend, but not for his wife!

Charles Lacy turned up at the bungalow earlier than Jill had expected him. She was out in the garden cutting a few flowers for the table when the click of the gate brought her round inquiringly—and there he was!

"Don't move! Don't stir!" he called out, grinning at her. "By Jove, what a lovely picture you make, Jill! If you have a sister, I'm going to marry her. Oh, if only I were an artist and had the necessary doings with me, I'd immortalize you—and myself as well."

He strode across the lawn—a tall, slim man, hatless and wearing a sports jacket and grey flannels. There were laughter lines at the corners of his eyes and his wide, generous mouth. Good temper was written largely all over him.

"Well, well, Jill," he said, reaching out for her hands, "you're sweeter even than ever. Hope I'm not too early, though I'd have got here earlier if I could—said he, speaking the truth and shaming the devil!"

Jill laughed.

"What on earth are you talking about, Charles?" she asked.

"Heaven knows, darlin'—I don't," he returned cheerfully. "I was dropped on my head as a baby and I've never stopped babbling since. Did something to me—don't know what it was save that it's quite incurable. Where's the sky pilot?"

"Working," Jill replied, "if you mean Bob."

"Dis—gusting!" pronounced Charles. "What's he want to do that for. Is that your bungalow I see dimly on the far horizon?" he added, peering towards the house.

Jill nodded.

"What a smasher!" he exclaimed. "What d'you call it Jill? 'The Nest'? 'Chez Moi'? 'Dunroamin'?"

"Number Seventeen," she said.

He shuddered.

"No imagination," he muttered. "I shall have to think of something myself before I go. I'm rather hot on names. What about 'Rapturous Corner'?"

"Awful!" Jill replied laughingly. "Anyway, it isn't a corner bungalow."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," he assured her, with a cheerful grin. "Can't have everything, you know. You can't have 'Rapturous Straight'—it doesn't make sense, does it?"

"I think I'd better give you some tea," Jill said with a sad little shake of her head. "I'm afraid the sun must have got at you."

"Jealous, eh?" he retorted, with mock seriousness. "You envy me my powers of imagination—is that it?"

"No, I'm merely sorry for them," Jill said. "Would you like tea indoors or outside, may I ask? If you have it outside, you'll have to carry the table and chairs out here for me."

"Outside it is, then!" he declared blithely. "You probably don't know that I've taken a Correspondence Course in the art of carrying tables and chairs. I hold a diploma for it—yes, and a gold medal. We'll have tea under that tree over there, shall we? I'm always at my best under a tree—or didn't you know that Robin Hood was an ancestor of mine?"

"No, I certainly didn't," Jill replied.

"Oh, yes, it's all in the book," he said. "Seems he used to walk around with the laces of his shoon always undone, so they called him 'Lacey Hood', and the 'Lacey' stuck. Hence my name. The 'Charles' part of it I'm not so sure about, but I expect there's an explanation of that if only we could get around to it."

"Well, if there isn't, there soon will be if we go on at this rate," Jill said, and led the way into the bungalow.

Charles Lacy was certainly a tonic. She was thinking, coming at this particular moment of her life.

Having carried out the table and three chairs, he invited Jill to come and have a look at his "barrow" standing outside the gate.

"A thing of beauty and a joy for ever!" he declaimed, as she stood admiring the car.

"It certainly is," Jill agreed. It was one of the new "Sapphires"—a lovely thing, all silver and chromium and red leather upholstery, and must have cost a small fortune. "Are you a rajah in disguise, Charles?" she asked. "Or have you won a football pool or something?"

He grinned.

"Well, I'll admit that I had to get all the sixpences out of my moneybox," he said. "But she's worth it, Jill—she's a real lady. Hop inside and look at the gimmicks."

He opened the door, and Jill climbed in and sat down. It was like sinking into a feather bed. Then, getting into the driving seat, Charles began enthusiastically to point out the car's various notable features.

"Listen to this, Jill," he said, pressing the self-starter, and she could barely tell that the engine was running. "Soft as a whisper and smooth as silk," he enthused. "After we've had tea, I'll show you what she can do, if you like?"

"Oh yes, I'd love to," she said, her eyes lighting up. "We might even run down and have a look at the sea if Bob is back in time."

"Yes, of course," he agreed delightfully. "What time are you expecting your hubby?"

Jill came back to earth with a jolt.

"Well, he said he would try to return in time for tea," she said. "Otherwise, it will be about six o'clock. I suppose."

"Six o'clock?" Charles echoed. "I've never heard such a thing. I thought they'd made him chief test pilot after dear old John Mayne cashed in."

"So they did Charles. But I think they're having trouble with this X7—I mean, the new plane they're bringing out." Then, almost without thinking, Jill added—"It's generally ten o'clock before Bob gets home nowadays."

"Is—is that so?" Charles Lacy muttered.

He appeared to be about to add something, then thought better of it. Instead, he threw her a curious glance and began to explain the instruments on the fascia. It was nearly half an hour before they returned to the bungalow, and since Bob was obviously held up again, Jill set about preparing tea.

As they sat having it under the tree at the far end of the lawn, Charles explained that after leaving the RAF, at the end of the war, he had gone into his father's business on the London Stock Exchange and was no longer interested in flying.

"Never been off the ground since I was demobilized," he told Jill. "Completely lost my enthusiasm for the game—in fact, it would need ten men and a boy even to get me into a plane in these days. No money in it worth speaking of that I can see, my dear girl. No future either, come to that, as we used to say in the old days. What's dear old Bob pulling down for these positively Herculean labours of his. What do they pay a chief test pilot?"

"Fifteen hundred a year they're paying Bob—and various allowances, I believe," Jill replied.

"Dis—gusting!" Charles pronounced, emphatically—using what was obviously his favourite expression of disagreement. "Why, an unskilled workman can pull that much down, with overtime—and you say Bob's working until ten o'clock every night?"

"Well, yes, apparently," Jill murmured, hoping to edge away from the subject.

"What do you mean by 'apparently', Jill?" he asked. "Either Bob is at the works or he's here. Surely that's logic—unless he's swanning around in the middle distance somewhere!"

Jill gave a forced little laugh.

"And you took a correspondence course in logic?" she teased, determined to head him off so dangerous a topic.

Charles grinned.

"Bang on, my dear girl!" he said. "I was up at Cambridge and about to take my finals when the war broke out, and you never saw anybody run faster to enlist than I did! Talk about burning patriotism! Anyway, I should have failed for a certainty, and by missing the exams. I've been able to mourn ever since how the outbreak of hostilities ruined my brilliant scholastic career!"

"Really, Charles, you're the limit!" Jill told him laughingly.

"Cunning, darlin'—that's me!" he grinned. He glanced at his watch, and went on—"Well, it's six o'clock now, and, if that sky-pilot of yours isn't home very soon, I suggest that you and I take the barrow down to the coast and leave a note for him. In fact, I'll write it myself."

He did, and it read as follows:

"Dear Bob. Since apparently you don't know where your home is, I have commandeered your spouse, and together we have adjourned to the sea. What's more, we don't know when we shall be back—and what's more still, we don't care!—Charles."

"That'll shake the old boy a bit I guess," he told Jill laughingly, when he read the note to her.

"I doubt it," she said.

Charles noticed the faint touch of bitterness in her voice, and again appeared to be about to say something when the click of the gate swivelled their heads in that direction—and there was Bob himself wheeling in his bicycle.

"My gosh!" he called across the lawn. "Does this little affair standing at the gate, belong to you, Charles?"

Lacy laughed.

"Yes, and I've got a stamped receipt for it, my dear chap," he replied. "You're entertaining a member of the upper class this afternoon, my boy."

"The upper tax-dodgers, you mean!" retorted Bob, as he set his bicycle against the hedge and came over to where they were sitting.

Charles had risen, and the two old friends grinned at each other as they shook hands. They were from the same stable, had gone through the war together, and understood each other perfectly.

"Well, and what are you doing round here, anyway?" Bob asked after he had explained that he had had tea and Jill began to clear away.

"Just swanning around," Charles replied, in a casual tone "and as I had a bit of free time on my hands. I thought I'd just swan around for a bit and have a look at the countryside."

"I see. And where are you staying?" Bob asked.

"Wherever night finds me, old chap."

"Then you haven't booked anywhere?"

"Well, no, I haven't yet."

"Good!" Bob said. "I don't know if that monster of yours outside will fit into my garage, Charles, but you yourself will fit into our spare room. Jill, dear. We've got a lodger—and one from the upper class at that!" Bob cried laughingly. "So we'd better dress for dinner to-night."

Charles grinned.

"Oh no, as a matter of fact, dear boy, I've arranged to take Jill down to the coast this evening, and we were going to dine there, and make whoopee," he said. "Bit of a nuisance having to take you with us as well of course. Jill," he added, "your spouse has asked me to honour the ancestral roof for the night. Do you think you can put up with me, darlin'? I've got quite nice manners and am completely house-trained."

"I wonder!" cut in Bob darkly. "Can't say I've ever noticed either detail myself, Charles."

Neither of them was aware of the reason for the slight flush that mantled Jill's cheeks. Actually, she had intended to use the spare room herself, but she could scarcely insist on doing so now.

"Oh, that will be fun," she said, forcing a smile to her lips. "But what about your things, Charles? Have you—"

"Never mind about that, my dear," Bob broke in jestingly. "The question is—has he brought his money? Ours is an expensive hotel, ours is!"

"Like the snail," Charles said loftily, "I usually travel with my belongin's on my back. But I happen for once to have brought a little baggage with me. It is outside in the boot of my car, so you'd better come along and help bring it in, Bob."

The two men then went out to the car, and Jill hurried into the spare room and started stripping the bed. This was something she had not expected, but in the circumstances she could see no help for it. In any case, she told herself, it was only for one night, and in the meantime, she would have to think things out again.

For the moment, however, it was her duty as hostess to make Charles' stay as pleasant as possible, and be careful not to let him see that all was not well between Bob and herself. Besides, he was Bob's friend, and his sympathy would automatically rest with Bob, for men always did stick together in matters of this kind.

By the time she had tidied the room and gone into the kitchen to wash-up the tea-things, she found the two men were doing it for her, and Charles was protesting laughingly that, as an honoured guest, he ought to be sitting in the drawing-room and not be forced into doing menial labour.

Presently, when they set off for the drive to the coast, Jill was surprised to find that, in spite of the way the two old friends jollied each other, Charles allowed Bob to take his seat at the wheel and drive such an expensive car.

"But is—but is he safe with it?" she whispered to Charles, "you see, we haven't a car of our own, and Bob—"

"He is quite the best man I've ever known behind a wheel," Charles whispered back. "Now you and I for the rear seat, Jill," he said aloud. "We get better protection here, in case that spouse of yours should bump into a lamp-post."

"We've got to get to a lamp post first," retorted Bob. "What this old bus of yours needs, my boy, is a pair of shafts and a horse between 'em. Then we could get somewhere," he added, as the car sped smoothly along. "It's probably got a basket of fruit under its bonnet instead of an engine—but you wouldn't know that, of course."

"Oh yes, I do," beamed Charles. "And the fruits in the basket are sour grapes, my son. Can you taste 'em?"

He turned to Jill and grinned.

"That was a hot one!" he said. "Bob doesn't happen to know that I've taken a correspondence course in the art of repartee."

They were like a couple of schoolboys, Jill reflected, smiling to herself, each trying to outsmart the other. She was not to know that air-crews over Germany had learned that such verbal sparring was the best means of reducing nervous tension, and that Charles and Bob were delighting in the old game.

It was lovely down by the sea, and after they had hired costumes and gone in for a swim, they repaired to a large hotel on the front where Charles ordered the most exquisite meal Jill had eaten in months. Afterwards, they danced to the strains of a first-class orchestra.

Save for the gnawing pain at her heart whenever she looked at her husband, it would have been a night to remember for Jill. But even as she ate and drank champagne, even as Charles whirled her round the floor and talked the most utter nonsense in her ear always there was the never-ending thought—

"Bob can do all this for his friend—but not for me. He can even give up Alice Mayne for one night for Charles Lacy—but never for me."

They were late getting back to the bungalow, and Jill went in alone while they manœuvred the car into the garage. As Bob closed and locked the double doors, he turned to his friend, and said—

"Why not stick around here for a while, Charles, if you've nothing better to do?"

It would be company for Jill. She's having a pretty thin time of it with me working all hours every night—and I can't get out of it just yet."

Charles eyed him closely for a moment or two. Then—

"Tell me, Bob, what's the trouble over there?" he asked. "Nothing seriously wrong, is there—with the job, I mean?"

Bob shrugged.

"Nothing beyond the usual this and that," he muttered. "You know how it is, old chap when you get a completely new design off the drawing-board—what looks fine and dandy on paper seldom does what it's supposed to do when you get the job in the air. It's the old story, Charles. You know how it goes."

The ex-Wing Commander nodded.

"What killed dear old John?" he asked. "You've never told me, have you, Bob? There must have been something radically wrong to have grounded a first-rate flier of his calibre."

Bob Craddock shrugged again.

"I don't know," he said, his voice suddenly hard and harsh. "We never found out. All that's certain is that his port wing disintegrated at eight hundred feet as he was coming in to land. The dear old chap hadn't a chance."

And when Charles remained silent—

"I think we'd better go in," Bob said. "Jill will be wondering what has happened to us and what we're talking about."

"Your wife doesn't like your flying, does she?" Charles remarked.

"Not this X7, anyway," Bob answered—"not after the fate that befell dear old John. Unfortunately, Jill saw it happen, and she thought I was in the plane. Naturally, it shook her pretty badly, and now she's got the idea it's a killer!"

"And what is your opinion about it?" Charles asked bluntly.

Bob hesitated for a moment. Then—

"You can take it from me, Charles, that it's going to be the world's best plane by the time we've finished with her—yes, and the world's safest, as well!"

A FRIEND IN NEED

SO Charles Lacey was going to stay with them for a few days!

That was Jill's first thought when she awoke the next morning, and she did not quite know whether she was more glad than sorry. They had asked her on the previous night if it would be all right, and having no option in the matter, she had said that it would be. Actually, however, she had been too tired and too unhappy at the time to care.

Now, as she glanced at the back of the tousled head which was all that was visible of her husband in the twin bed, she realised that whatever action she had intended to take with regard to his affair with Alice Mayne would have to be postponed until Charles Lacy had gone.

That was inevitable. For her very pride's sake she would not allow their guest to gather even the faintest idea that all was not well between Bob and herself.

Fortunately, that would not be difficult, Jill decided, for Charles was by no means an introspective man. He was gay and bright and an amusing companion; he never appeared to think overmuch about anything—largely, she supposed, since he did not have to. Son of a rich father, and still a bachelor, Charles ambled through life—according to Bob—doing no more than he had to. Life, to him, was one long red carpet, and he walked it joyously.

The clock on the bedside table showed half-past seven, and rising quietly, Jill slipped on her dressing-gown and went

to put on the kettle and turn on her bath.

She was already dressed and pouring out three cups of tea when Charles, in a brocade silk dressing-gown and scarlet slippers, came tiptoeing conspiratorially into the kitchen. He came to a helpless stop when he saw Jill already there.

"Foiled again!" he groaned. "Pipped on the post. I was going to make tea. Jill, and bring it round in style. I've been awake for hours, waiting for what I thought would be a proper time to start the ball rolling. What on earth time do you reckon to start the day round here?"

"Half-past seven," she told him, smiling in spite of herself as she handed him a cup of tea. "You can take the other cup in to Bob while you're about it," she added. "He isn't awake yet."

"Not awake yet?" Charles exclaimed. "Dis—gusting!" he added, as he stalked off along the passage.

"You lazy bounder!" Jill heard him cry when he entered the bedroom. "What do you think you are—a sultan or something with slaves to wait on your pleasure? Come out of it, you—you apology for a husband! Now where do you hide your cigarettes?"

When, a few moments later, he returned to the kitchen, Charles was smoking a cigarette, and there was a beaming smile on his face.

"He's up, Jill!" he said. "We can't have the only wage-earner in the house slacking around, can we?"

All through breakfast Charles and Bob kept up the same badinage. But when Charles rose to get out his car with the intention of driving his host over to the works, Bob stopped him.

"No, I'll go on my bicycle, old chap," he said. "I shall be late to-night, I expect—I can't take every night off, you know."

"Well, what's that got to do with it—we can fetch you, can't we?" Charles suggested.

"But I don't know when I'll be finished," Bob countered.

"What does that matter?" Charles protested. "You know how to ring up, don't you? All you've got to do is tell us when you're ready and we'll be over there in a brace of shakes."

Bob shook his head.

"Thanks, Charles, but I'd rather use my bike, if you don't mind," he said.

"Okay, brother! Have it your own way. But don't be surprised if we're out when you come back," Charles added.

Bob grinned.

"Knowing you, as I do, I'd be surprised to find you in," he said. "But if you're thinking of using the car, do get somebody safe to drive it, old man. I haven't the least objection to you breaking your own neck, but I'd hate like sin for you to break Jill's."

Jill's eyes blurred with tears, and she rose from the breakfast table and began fumbling for a cigarette from a packet on the mantelshelf.

"Well, I'll be getting off now, darling," Bob was saying. "I'll be back as soon as I can this evening, but you won't be lonely with Charles around, will you?"

He stooped to kiss her, and again she offered her cheek. Then, with a cheery wave of his hand, he was gone. Through the window, she watched Charles walking to the garden gate with him, and saw that they were laughing over something.

But Charles did not come back into the bungalow after Bob had gone. Instead, he went to the garage and fetched out his car, and for half an hour or so, he pretended to be busy polishing it.

Jill was not deceived, however, Charles had evidently noticed those tears that had

come to her eyes, and was keeping out of her way until she had had time to recover her self-possession. Possibly he thought that Bob and she had quarrelled over something, and that tact demanded he should appear unaware of the fact.

When at last he entered the kitchen she was sure of it, for his assumption of cheerfulness was a little overdone.

"Well, having despatched the worker to his labours, what shall the drones do, darlin'?" he asked. "Please don't tell me I've got to work?"

"Yes, you can dry up the breakfast things for me, Charles," she said. "That's the cloth on the line there!"

And when that was done, Jill gave him a broom and sent him to sweep along the passage.

"By the way, what would you like for lunch, Charles?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll decide that when I've seen the menu," he replied, propping himself wearily on the handle of the broom. "I'm on diet, Jill. I'm a sick man, you know."

"So I've noticed," she retorted laughingly. "But, unfortunately, we don't run to menus in this establishment."

"Ah! Then that settles it," he beamed. "We shall have to go out to lunch, for I simply cannot eat without a menu, Jill. Now let's down tools, call it a day, and push off into the blue, shall we? As a hostess, it's your plain duty to show your guest round the countryside—and any work that has to be done we can do when we come back. Never do now what you can leave until later on—that's my motto."

Half an hour later they set off. Charles drove through the quiet country lanes, and they chattered easily and lazily of this and that. He told her about his work in his father's office, and recalled some amusing story of Bob and himself in their war days.

"Strange how some of us went on with the game, while others were only too glad to have done with it," he said. "Most of us were pretty sick of it at the time, and I, for one, felt I never wanted to fly a plane again—and still do."

Jill nodded understandingly.

"But others were not so lucky as you, Charles," she remarked. "For some of them flying was the only thing they could do, and they had to keep on with it—or starve."

"True enough," he agreed. "But that doesn't apply to Bob, you know. He's a trained accountant—he was already qualified when war broke out. He could have gone back to that, and, incidentally, have made twice the money he's making now. Matter of fact, he could have joined our business—my father made him an offer, but Bob elected to come here and go on flying with John Mayne."

Charles paused, then added—

"I'm afraid, dear old John was responsible for that. John always was crazy on flying. I don't think I've ever known such a man for the air; he'd take anybody's turn rather than be left on the ground. By the way, Jill," he added, "what happened to that wife of his?"

For a moment Jill was silent. Then, doing her best to control her voice, she answered—

"The firm gave her a job in the office."

"And she's still there?"

"Yes."

Charles considered for a moment. Then—"I suppose I ought to look her up while I'm here," he said. "Is she a friend of yours, Jill?"

"Well, I know her, of course."

Charles grinned.

"Then obviously she isn't," he said. "Well, I can't say I ever cottoned to her much myself. Not my type. But John adored her, and if only for his sake. I think I'd better call in and say 'how-do'

to her. Is she all right for money, I wonder?"

"I—I don't know," Jill murmured. "I really know nothing whatever about her, Charles beyond the fact that she was John's wife. But—but she and I were never really friends."

Charles evidently caught the note of restraint in her voice, for he said no more on the subject. Jill broke the short silence that followed.

"I didn't know your father had offered Bob a job as an accountant in your office," she remarked.

"Didn't you, Jill? Well, that was before you were married," Charles said. "I guess if it had been after, you'd have had a word or two to say in the matter, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "I'm not happy when Bob is flying—I've never pretended that I am. But it's his life, and if he feels that test flying is his real metier, it's not for me to attempt to dissuade him from it. I don't think I have the right, do you, Charles?"

"Frankly—no, Jill," he answered. "A man must always follow his destiny—star—or whatever you like to call it, if he's ever to achieve happiness within himself. And it always seems to me that unless a chap is happy within himself, he stands a thin chance of being happy with anyone else—or for that matter, making anyone else happy."

Jill looked at him in surprise.

"Really, Charles, you're quite a philosopher, aren't you?" she said laughingly.

"Oh, well, I'm really a very bright boy when you get to know me," he grinned. "Full of wise saws and all the rest of it. As I told you yesterday, if it hadn't been for the war, I should undoubtedly have had a brilliant academic career. There can be no doubt whatever that I should have taken an Honours Degree, received the Gold Medal of the—"

"Huh-huh!" Jill laughed, wagging an admonitory finger at him. "Steady, Charles, steady!"

"Anyway, I might have done, Jill," he insisted. "After all, you suggested a moment ago that I was a born philosopher, with the seeds of great wisdom in me."

"I never said anything of the kind, Charles Lacy!" she protested laughingly. "You said that."

"Well, somebody's got to say it," he grumbled, "and I thought it was you, Jill. In fact, I was thinking of standing you a lunch on the strength of it. Now I shall buy you only a sandwich—a stale one, by preference—and a bottle of ginger pop!"

"Oh, I really think you are wonderful, Charles!" she said, still laughing. "And I'm quite sure that, but for the war, you would have had a really brilliant career as a scholar, been elected a fellow of your college, achieved a doctorate in all the subjects you took and have been hailed as the Brain of the Century!"

"Well, yes, that's better, my dear," Charles agreed, his eyes twinkling, "and for that small appreciation of my ability, I'm prepared to cancel the stale sandwich and order a fresh one for you."

They lunched at a 16th Century inn in a picturesque little village—and not on sandwiches! Afterwards, they drove on to the coast and had tea at a hotel on the seafront.

It was while they were sitting on the lawn smoking a cigarette and watching a fishing boat making for the harbour that Jill involuntarily sighed.

"Tired?" Charles asked, smiling at her.

Jill shook her head.

"I was just thinking how lovely it would be if Bob and I could take a day off like this, occasionally, and just float around doing nothing," she murmured.

Charles stroked his cheek.

"Well, I certainly can't see why you don't, Jill," he said.

"For one thing we haven't a car, Charles. And for another, Bob doesn't—"

Jill stopped dead, suddenly remembering the crisis that had come crashing into her life. But if Charles noticed anything amiss, he gave no sign.

"I can't think why Bob hasn't a car," he said. "In all the years I have known him, I don't remember him ever being without one. He's now in a better position, financially, then ever he was, and he's always so keen on cars, too."

"He still is, Charles."

"Then why doesn't he get one?"

"He says he can't afford a car."

Charles sniffed.

"Nonsense, my dear Jill," he said. "Of course he could afford a car on his income. And he certainly ought to have one, going to and fro to the works in all weathers and at all times of the day and night. I'd insist, if I were you."

Jill gave a bitter little smile, and rose to her feet. Not even to Bob's oldest friend would she speak of the disaster that had come upon her, nor discuss where his money was actually going.

"I think, Charles, we ought to be moving," she said. "It's gone six o'clock, you know, and we have a long way to go."

"But we haven't to be home before ten," Charles reminded her. He stuffed his cigarette in an ash-tray and prised his long length upright from his chair. "We're not going to be home before the boss arrives," he added, grinning. "Bob said we shouldn't, and I'd hate to prove him wrong."

So they stayed at the hotel for dinner, Jill hadn't the heart to refuse, as Charles was so obviously bent upon making the day enjoyable for her. Added to which, Jill was in two minds about everything herself. One half of her was aching to get back to Bob and her home, and the other half was afraid—afraid that something else might have happened in her absence, afraid lest someone else found out what she herself had only discovered a couple of nights ago.

For someone in the village must surely have seen Bob going to Alice Mayne's bungalow night after night; there must be plenty of people who knew that he was not staying late at the works every night. Was that, she wondered, why Tom Robson had spoken the way he had when he had seen her the night before last? Had he, in his oblique fashion, been trying to put her on her guard?

It was a horrible thought, and Jill tried to thrust it from her. Yet it was common knowledge that in nine cases out of ten the wife was the last to hear of her husband's unfaithfulness. And it would not have been done in malice, for Tom Robson was a very kindly sort of man.

They had set out on the homeward journey, and Charles noticed her shudder at the very thought of it all. Thinking she was feeling cold, he slowed down the car and reached over for a rug from the back seat.

"You're cold, aren't you, Jill?" he said. "So pop this rug over your knees," and she meekly obeyed.

On the arterial road, Charles let the car out, and at one point called her attention to the speedometer needle which was quivering over the 83 mark.

"Please don't tell Bob about it, or he'll never forgive me!" he said, and then eased her down again to just over 60.

Jill had forgotten that, by the route he had taken, they would come into the village, past the works of the Crichton-Lane Aeroplane Company, but Charles had not. He slowed down as they approached the

building, and pulled up outside the big gates.

"It's twenty to ten," he said, nodding towards the facia clock, "and about time our lad packed up for the night. So let's send word that we're waiting for him, shall we, Jill?"

He had already opened the door upon his side of the car before Jill woke up to what was in his mind. Then she acted quickly.

"No, Charles!" she said, a little breathlessly. "Let's drive on to the bungalow."

He looked at her in surprise.

"But, Jill, we're here, and Bob must be about ready to leave by this time."

"Oh no, I don't think he'll be ready yet, Charles," she said. "Besides, Bob hates people calling here for him. So please let's drive on," she urged.

Charles hesitated a moment. Then—

"Very well, if you say so, Jill," he muttered. "Though I'm hanged if I see why—"

"But I do, Charles," she cut in. "So please do as I suggest and drive on."

He gestured helplessly with his hand, and started the car. He had never thought of Jill Craddock as a creature of moods, Charles was thinking. She had always seemed an eminently sane girl to him. It was not until they were nearing the village that he suddenly remembered the tears that came to her eyes when Bob was speaking to him after breakfast that morning, and it set him wondering afresh.

"I think what we need is a little liquid refreshment, after our long drive," Charles was saying, as he stopped the car outside the George Hotel. "A pint of beer for me, and a short sharp one for you, my dear Jill."

Next moment he was round to her side of the car and had opened the door for her.

"Doctor's orders!" he told her laughingly, when she raised an objection and said she would rather go straight home. "I must always have a pint of beer last thing at night or risk the dreadful consequences!"

Jill thought rapidly. If they stayed for a drink, it would give Bob time to get home from Alice Mayne's bungalow, and Charles would probably think he had passed them while they were in the George Hotel.

"All right, Charles," she said, at last. "Lead on!"

Most of the people in the saloon bar were employees of the aeroplane company and lived in the bungalows along the lane. They called out cheery greetings to Jill and her companion when they entered. It was inevitable that they should be interested in Charles, since he was a stranger to them and too late, Jill realised that if any of them came over to join her, she would have to introduce Charles and explain that he was an old friend of Bob's and was staying with them for a few days.

And this, in turn, would almost certainly invite the question as to why Bob was not with them, and she would have to explain that he was working late. But supposing someone—as Tom Robson had done the other night—piped up with the information that he had seen Bob leaving the works at the usual time with Alice Mayne?

So, when Charles had ordered their drinks, Jill drew him back near the door and as far as possible from the others, murmuring vaguely about wishing to get out of the crowd.

"And we mustn't stay here long," she said, "as I have to get Bob's supper."

Charles eyed her curiously for a moment, not understanding what had come over her ever since he had suggested stopping at the works to collect Bob and she had become almost hysterical in her pleadings with him

to drive on.

"Tell me, Jill," he said, "doesn't Bob approve of your coming to this pub?"

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, with forced brightness, "of course he does. We often come here. But, as I have told you, I don't like to be late with Bob's supper when he comes home."

"Lucky man!" grinned Charles, as he clinked glasses with her.

But Jill knew that, in her efforts to hide the truth from Charles, she was making him still more curious and even suspicious. In her haste to be gone, she drank her gin and lime quickly, and Charles was just finishing his drink when it happened!

THE SHOWDOWN—AND AFTER

A YOUNG man came bouncing in through the door and almost knocked Charles' tankard out of his hand.

"Oh, heavens! I'm awfully sorry, sir," he apologised. "I didn't notice you standing there."

"Okay! No damage done," said Charles.

"All the same, I'm terribly sorry," the young man began, then stopped short and gazed at Charles in amazement. "My stars, if it isn't the dear old Wing Com!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's years since I saw you last, sir. Reynold's name. Flight lieutenant, Thunder jet Squadron."

"As if I didn't know!" beamed Charles, taking the young man's outstretched hand and shaking it warmly. He then turned to Jill. "I say, Jill," he said, "this is another of those utterly useless flyers my wretched destiny ordained that I should have under my command. He rejoices—or otherwise—in the name of Montague. Montague Reynolds, which is surely enough to crash anybody. Monte, this is—"

"Charles, you're too late," cut in Reynolds. "Six months too late—as usual. Jill and I have known each other for ages. I happen to live here, and work here, you see," he added, grinning.

"Oh, no!" laughed Charles. "Please don't tell me that Crichton-Lane have been so sufficiently misguided as to give you a flying job, Monte?"

"Oh yes they have—and Bob got it for me," Monte said. "After dear old John Mayne came to grief, Bob reorganised the test team and sent for me. He wanted the best men in the country, you see, and—"

"Oh, quite!" Charles broke in laughingly. "And they were all engaged elsewhere, so in desperation he sent for you! Poor Bob! I must have a word in private with him about this. Meanwhile, I'll stand you a drink, Monte. What is it to be, dear boy?"

"With you, my dear old Money-Bags, a large brandy and—"

Monte was beginning, when Jill interrupted him.

"Listen, Charles, I really can't stay," she said. "You will excuse us, Monte, won't you?" she went on. "Charles is staying with us, and we've been out all day. So I really must hurry home and get Bob's supper."

Monte frowned.

"Oh, come, have a heart, Jill," he pleaded. "Another minute or two won't make any difference, you know. Anyway, I should imagine it more likely that Bob will have got your supper ready by now."

"Don't you believe it, dear boy!" Charles put in before Jill could speak. "Chief Test Pilots work for their livings; they're not like you small fry who leave work when the whistle blows."

Jill sighed.

"Oh, Charles, do please come on!" she cried in desperation. "We shall be awfully late, you know," she took hold of his arm and forced him towards the door. "Do please forgive us, Monte," she added. "You know how it is. don't you?"

"Yes, of course I do, Jill," Monte said, "but Bob's been home for hours—he left the works after tea, leaving me to finish the job he was on."

Charles laughed.

"There, now, Jill," he said, "what do you think of that? I'll bet you anything you like the dear old chap came home early with the idea of grabbing the car. Won't he be furious! I guess he'll want to boot me out for a certainty!"

"Well, if you are kicked out, Charles, I can always lower myself to have you in my place for the night," Monte said jestingly. "So since you're both in the soup, anyway, what about that drink you were going to buy me, Charles?"

"Oh no, we really must go, Charles," Jill pleaded. "So do please come on."

For a moment the eyes of the two men met and held in mutual questioning, but it was plain that Monte was as much in the dark as Charles himself concerning Jill's extraordinary urgency in wanting to get home.

"Oh, well, Jill, if you really must," Monte murmured dejectedly.

"Very well, come on, then!" Charles said, and led the way to the car. "Seems to me, Jill, these Crichton-Lane people have got half my old wing flying for 'em, one way or another," he remarked, as he started the car. "D'you think they'd allow me a small commission if I breezed round and asked them one day?"

Jill pretended not to have heard. She was sitting with her eyes on the facia clock, for now another danger had suddenly occurred to her. Supposing Bob happened to be leaving Alice Mayne's bungalow as they were passing?

She smothered a gasp as the car's powerful beams lit up the road ahead, and the bungalows upon either side of it.

"Oh, Charles, please switch off the lights," she urged, as they drew near to Alice Mayne's bungalow and thought she saw someone standing there. "They will blind passers-by."

Obediently, he reached over and snapped up the switch. Then, when they were safely past the Mayne bungalow Jill gave a sigh of relief.

"I realise now that I should have brought you straight home instead of stopping at the George," Charles remarked. "Oh yes, Bobs' evidently home," he added, as he drew up outside the bungalow and saw that the lights were on.

He blew a blast on the car's horn, and next moment Bob stepped from the garden gate where he had evidently been awaiting their arrival.

"This is a nice time to come crawling home, you pair of peripatetic joy-riders!" he exclaimed, with mock concern. "Out enjoying yourselves while the poor down-trodden wretched breadwinner—"

"Don't you swear at us, you—you low-down flying man!" Charles warned him loftily. "What we want to know is if you've laid the table and cooked supper for us because if you haven't you're in for it, my boy."

"Charles," whispered Jill urgently, "be a darling and give me five minutes alone

with Bob before you come in," and without waiting for his answer, she ran towards Bob. "Come—come inside," she stammered breathlessly. "I have something to say to you before—before Charles comes in."

Bob gazed at her in surprise.

"But—but why, Jill—" he began.

"Charles wanted to call for you at the works, but I—but I managed to head him off," she stammered on. "It was a few minutes to ten, and he had the bright idea of bringing you home. He wanted to go in and fetch you and—"

"I've only just arrived here," Bob broke in mechanically.

"I know, and that's what you would have told him, but he knows differently, Bob. We called in at the George, and Monte Reynolds came in, recognised Charles, and wanted to celebrate with him. I told them that I must get back to see about your supper, and Monte said you would probably have ours ready by this time because you'd hurried away from the works just after tea.

"That's why I had to see you first," Jill raced on. "I knew that you would tell him that you had been working until ten o'clock, and I didn't want Charles to find you out in a—in a lie, Bob. It doesn't matter about me, but it does matter about Charles."

She paused, then continued.

"I've done the best I could, Bob, and I'm afraid Charles will think I'm a bit crazy. But it can't be helped. You can hint to him that I'm apt to get rather hysterical at times. But the main thing is to say that you left the works early because you wanted to drive us out in the car. You—you can say you've been here all the evening, can't you, Bob?"

She waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. Only his pallor and the thin line of his mouth told her that he understood the inference of what she had told him.

"I—I'll call Charles in now," she added. "Or he'll be wondering what's wrong."

"No, wait," Bob said, as she turned away to the door. "Where do you think I've been, if not here, Jill?" he asked tautly.

For one long moment she stood staring at him. Her mouth went pitifully square like a child's who is about to cry.

"Where do you think I've been?" he repeated harshly.

Then she spoke.

"Where you have been before, Bob. when—you've told me you have been working late," she murmured unsteadily. "With—with Alice Mayne—in her bungalow!"

A dead silence followed. Just what she had expected Bob to say when faced with the fact that she had found him out in his liason with Alice Mayne, she did not know. It was something Jill had never thought of, a scene she had never pictured. Yet when suddenly Bob sat down heavily in the nearest chair and buried his face in his hands, she had the extraordinary feeling that she had lived through exactly this moment before.

Mechanically she reached out and touched his rumpled hair. And as she stood gazing down at him, her heart was flooded with a great and understanding tenderness for the man she loved—and always would love.

"Never mind, Bob dear," she said softly.

"I—I know these things can't be helped. I shan't try to hold you, if you love Alice Mayne better than—better than you love me!"

"Are you—are you stark crazy?" he

muttered. "Tell me—how long have you been thinking this damnable nonsense. How long have you known that I've been going to Alice Mayne's bungalow?"

"Since—since last Tuesday night, Bob," she answered tremulously.

"And who told you?"

"No one told me. I—I just guessed—and then proved it. It was something Tom Robson said that night when he came to see you about that cricket match. He had expected to find you at home—since he had seen you leave the works with Alice Mayne early that evening. Then—then when you came in it had gone ten o'clock, and you told me the same old story about having to work late on X7.

"That's what aroused my suspicions," Jill continued. "So the next night, I walked across the fields and saw you leaving the wretched woman's bungalow at ten o'clock. I heard what you said to her, and her reply. You—you told her you would come for her answer the following night, and she said she'd never be able to thank you sufficiently.

"Then—then when you reached home," Jill stammered on, "you told me you had been working late on X7, didn't you. And the following night—in spite of the fact that you thought me ill—you went to her again, Bob, having no thought for me."

"My God!" Bob muttered, and with that old familiar gesture of his, he impatiently pushed back the hair from his forehead.

"Crazy, my dear girl—absolutely crazy!" he mumbled. "And how much of this does Charles Lacy know, may I ask?"

"None of it," Jill replied. "That's why I wouldn't let Charles call for you at the works to-night, and why I left him out there so that I could warn you before you had a chance to tell him that you had been working late. And now I suppose I'd better fetch him in. Heaven knows what Charles must be thinking of us!" she added, turning to the door.

"We'll fetch him in together," Bob said glumly. "But before we do so, please remember, Jill, that you're my wife—and the only girl in the world I've ever loved or ever shall love. Alice Mayne means nothing whatever to me, and if you don't know it, she does!"

Jill's heart gave a sudden bound.

"But, Bob—" she began, staring at him incredulously.

"I—I must have been crazy ever to agree to keep the thing secret, my dear Jill," he broke in. "But there was a reason for that, and it was Alice Mayne's secret, anyway. In any case, I felt it was up to me to help her in every way I could."

"But—but, why?" Jill breathed.

He looked down at her, and in his eyes, she read a dark, brooding pain.

"I'll tell you, Jill—Charles as well," he answered. "The matter has been on my conscience quite long enough, and it'll be a relief to get it off. I lied to Charles about it the other day, and I'm pretty sure that he suspected something. Anyway, let's fetch him in."

When Jill would have turned, he took her hand, and added—

"Before I explain the whole of this stupid business, my dear Jill, do you believe me when I say that Alice Mayne means less than nothing to me—while you mean everything? And that none of this would ever have happened had she not been John Mayne's widow and badly in need of a friend?"

"You—you mean she needed money?" Jill asked.

"Would you believe me, darling?" he asked, ignoring her question.

For what seemed an age, Jill stood looking into his eyes. Then, impulsively, she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Whatever you tell me, Bob dear, I know it will be the truth," she whispered, her eyes shining, her heart beating out a paean of happiness.

"Good, darling!" Bob said delightedly. "And now we'll bring Charles in," he added, and taking her hand, they went out together.

IT was an extremely apprehensive-looking man who, a few minutes later, followed his host and hostess into the lounge of the bungalow, for Charles guessed there was something radically wrong.

"Now sit down and let's light up, dear boy," Bob said, handing Charles a cigarette. "I want to have a little pow-wow with you. From what Jill has been telling me, I suppose you must have thought it pretty strange when she prevented you from calling for me at the works to-night? The truth is, she knew I was not there."

Charles grinned.

"But, my dear fellow, you said—" he began, when Bob cut him short.

"Yes, I know," he conceded, "and I've been making the same excuse ever since dear old John's crash, but actually I wasn't staying late at all. As a matter of fact, I was spending the evenings with Alice Mayne, and Jill happened to find out about it."

Charles shrugged.

"Anyway, Bob," he said, "it's nothing to do with me, is it?"

"Well, no," Bob agreed, "but it stems from something you asked me the other day about our old friend John. You asked me what caused the tragedy and I put you off."

"You gave me to understand that you didn't know, Bob."

"Yes, Charles, because I was afraid to speak the truth," Bob hesitated, then went on—"To be quite candid with you, Charles, it was my carelessness that killed John—at any rate, the accident might never have happened but for my carelessness."

"Oh!" Jill cried involuntarily, but Bob's eyes were on Charles Lacy, and it seemed to him that his old Wing-Commander, who was rising from his chair, was once again in uniform and was about to sit in judgment upon him.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded tautly, for John Wayne and Charles had been as brothers in the RAF.

Instinctively Bob stiffened, and although what he said was too technical for Jill to understand, she gathered that on a flight the day before the fatal accident, Bob had noticed something that was not quite right with the plane but had forgotten to mention it to Wayne when he came down.

"What was the deflection?" Charles asked, when Bob had finished his story.

"About a degree and a half on either side of the normal," Bob replied. "I wasn't really checking the gauges at all at that time. I was coming back from watching the tail action, but I happened to glance at them as I passed and distinctly saw the needle of the wing gauge flicker to and fro over about a degree and a half. The plane was banking at the time,

and when I turned back, the needle was perfectly steady again. I watched it for a moment or two, but when it remained steady, I went on again into the cockpit.

"I took over the controls and sent Wentworth back to check," Bob continued, "and while he was there, I banked her steeply to port and starboard. Ten minutes later, Wentworth came back and reported everything okay, so I put the momentary flicker of the needle down to vibration. Later in the flight, I went back myself and watched it again, but it was perfectly steady, and I began to wonder if I had been right in thinking it had ever flickered at all, because it was only a casual glance over my shoulder as I passed that gave me the impression that it was."

"And you made no note of the occurrence in your log?"

"No," Bob said. "I wasn't sufficiently sure. And when I flew her again in the afternoon, although both I and Wentworth checked on it several times, everything was perfectly in order."

"But it was on your mind, I suppose?" Charles asked.

"Well—yes and no," Bob replied. "Back of my mind was the intention to mention it to John when I reported—but only as a kind of oddity. Never for one moment did I think that momentary flicker suggested that anything was wrong, particularly after I'd watched it through the rest of the testing flight and found everything perfectly normal. But the fact remains that I did forget to mention it, and next day that same wing disintegrated in flight—well, you know what happened."

Charles nodded gravely, a grim expression on his face.

"And since then you've had this thing on your mind," he suggested. "You think you were responsible for John's death—and making his wife a widow!"

"I think my carelessness—my forgetfulness—might have contributed to John's death," Bob answered.

A short silence followed. Then—

"I doubt it, my dear chap," Charles said. "From what you've told me, you ought to have mentioned the matter, of course. But against that is the fact that you checked the occurrence and decided that everything was okay. Had this happened in the wing, my verdict would be one of not guilty, Bob. It is my verdict now, after what you have told me, and my advice to you, if you want it, is—forget it!"

Bob drew a long breath.

"You—you are being very generous to me, Charles," he said.

Charles shrugged.

"Generous?" he echoed. "You should know me better than that, Bob. No, my boy, to you I am giving justice—no more and no less. In the strictest letter of the test profession you might, perhaps, have mentioned it. But knowing John as I did, I'm quite sure he would have taken the machine off to see how it handled with himself at the controls—and the accident would have happened just the same. But I still don't see what it had to do with John's widow."

Bob hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, that's a bit more complicated, Charles," he said. "though it arose from the same sense of guilt. Somehow, I couldn't rid myself of the conviction that her sad plight was due to my carelessness, and I felt impelled to do anything and everything I possibly could to ease her lot.

So I went to see her and asked how she was fixed financially."

"But she would have received her husband's insurance money, of course," Charles said.

"Yes, I know, Charles, but it wasn't enough. She told me that John hadn't saved a ha'penny—as you know, he was never the saving kind—and the interest on the six thousand pounds of his insurance would not be enough to keep her."

"Why not?" Charles asked.

"Well, she had a reason, Charles—and one that I am sworn never to reveal. But Alice Mayne had a reason, and a good one—you must take my word for that. She told me she would have to get a job for herself, but the trouble was she had never been trained for anything. So I managed to get her a job as a telephonist at the works, and thus enabled her to keep on at the bungalow.

"Then, one day," Bob continued, "Tom Robson, our chief accountant, mentioned to me that Mrs. Sefton, the book-keeper would soon be leaving to go out to Australia to her son. He asked me if Alice Mayne knew anything about book-keeping, and in a flash I saw my opportunity."

"Your—your opportunity!" Jill echoed. "You—you mean teach her, Bob?"

Bob nodded.

"Yes, darling—teach her," he said. "I had five months to do it in, and I believed she could learn enough in that time to take on the job. So I told Tom Robson that she was fully qualified to take on the job, and knowing exactly what sort of questions he was likely to put to her, I primed her in the answers. Then, when she saw him a few days later, Robson was satisfied and offered her the job when Mrs. Sefton went.

"Naturally," Bob added, "Alice was petrified with fear, for she didn't know one end of a ledger from the other, or debits from credits. But it meant a difference of seven pounds a week in her wages, and I was determined that when the time came she should be proficient."

He paused, and spread his hands to indicate his difficulty.

"Snag was," he went on, "Robson knew I had been a trained accountant, and he had taken my word that Mrs. Mayne knew her stuff. Therefore, I dare not disclose the fact that the girl didn't know a thing about book-keeping, and that I was intending to train her. I dare not let anyone know, for a secret shared is a secret lost."

Bob turned to Jill and smiled.

"All the same, darling, I would have told you about it," he said, "but for the fact that to have done so would have meant explaining why the girl could not live on John's insurance, which, in turn, would have meant explaining the reason for it. And that was Alice Mayne's own secret—and one I had given her my promise not to divulge to anyone."

"And so you started the myth of working late?" Jill said, smiling wanly.

"Yes, that is so, darling," Bob admitted shamefacedly. "I didn't like the little deception, I can assure you, but it seemed to me the only way in which I could pay off the appalling debt I considered, rightly or wrongly, I owed Alice Mayne for being responsible for the tragic fate that befell her husband. I could not get this out of my mind nor off my conscience.

"What you heard me saying to Alice

the other night, about calling again for her answer, meant just what I said, Jill. I had set her a paper, and the following evening she was to have it ready for my scrutiny. Well, it was ready, and a first-class job she had made of it too, the result being that she will now be able to take over from Mrs. Sefton with every hope of success."

Bob paused again, then added

"The plight of Alice Mayne gave me seriously to think of what you would have done, my dear Jill, had it been me instead of dear old John, and the thought of it so scared me that I straightway insured my life for a further six thousand. That's where my money has gone, in the premiums."

"Oh, Bob dear!" Jill murmured remorsefully. "and I—and I thought you were spending your money on Alice Mayne!"

Charles cleared his throat and looked vastly embarrassed as Bob gathered her in his arms and kissed her, again and again.

"Well, that's that," Charles said, "and if you're still wondering about Alice Mayne's secret, Jill, I can tell you what it is because I'm under no oath of secrecy. Dear old John himself told me about it before he married her, although she never knew that he had found out. As a matter of fact, she had a son, of which John was not the father, and she was secretly paying for the upkeep of the child. You didn't know that, did you, Bob?"

"No, I certainly didn't," Bob replied.

Looking from one to the other, Jill understood everything.

"I realise now that I ought to have taken you into my confidence right from the first, Jill darling," Bob remarked, "and I would have done but for the fact that I was afraid you would worry even more than you do now when I am flying if you thought that such a comparatively small error of judgment could cause such a disaster. If I had explained all the circumstances, you would have understood why I felt it my bounden duty to do anything I possibly could for John's widow, wouldn't you, Jill?"

"Yes, Bob, but the fault was mine," she murmured brokenly. "I—I should have had absolute faith in you and—"

"No, no, darling, I alone am to blame," Bob broke in, taking her in his arms and giving her a warm embrace.

Charles grinned, and tactfully disappeared. As the door closed behind him, Jill and Bob smiled into each other's eyes.

With everything now explained, they were back again to where they had started. With the need for secrecy past, their hearts could come together again in the old closeness and confidence. The crooked road had been made straight, the barriers of silence and suspicion removed.

With a contented sigh, Jill closed her eyes to the ecstasy of her husband's passionate kisses.

THE END.

WHY THE CHAUFFEUR LEFT.

Uncle John, who had come from a distant county in his new motor-car, told of his interview with a young man who answered his advertisement for a chauffeur. "Why did you leave your last post?" he asked. "Because my gov'nor and his wife fell out." "But that's no reason for leaving, is it?" "Well, sir, if you must know, they fell out of the car!" He did not get the job.

The Case and the Circumstance

MRS. PHILIP SELBY'S house-parties were always delightful; everybody said so. So different from her sister-in-law's! These were monotonous affairs. Charles Selby's wife was a colourless person, her guests were colourless also, eminently decorous in their behaviour, and for the most part of one way of thinking. You might calculate to a nicety what they would say and how they would say it, what they would wear and how they would wear it.

Mrs. Selby and her guests took life easily. The weather was good, the food was good, the drinks were good so were Philip's cigars and Honoria's cigarettes; there was really nothing to complain of.

Nobody did complain. Yet there were, even in this hospitable country house, two women who certainly seemed to be rather out of it. One was Elizabeth Faraday, wife of the clever playwright whose latest production had taken all London by storm; the other was Doris Wilton. Mrs. Faraday was well known on account of the interest she took in social questions and the work she did for women; but most of all for a series of articles written recently and much discussed, on the marriage question. These were distinguished by their bold treatment of a delicate and intricate subject.

Elizabeth Faraday was a tall woman with grave eyes and a quiet dignity of manner; and Doris Wilton may be briefly described as a remarkably pretty girl, dressed expensively, and in excellent taste. She had attracted Mrs. Faraday from the first, capturing her attention because there was not a man at "The Towers" who did not at once make himself her willing slave. Elizabeth sought for the cause.

Elizabeth Faraday and Doris Wilton had arrived at "The Towers" together more than a week since, and, at the commencement of their visit, it had done the elder woman good to watch the girl. Doris was so innocently gay and amusing, so charming and irresponsible, such a pretty, bright-coloured, butterfly creature. Elizabeth had felt real delight in noting all this, until she came gradually to the conviction that she was deceiving herself. In spite of appearances, the girl was not happy; she had something on her mind. More than once Mrs. Faraday discovered her sitting apart, evidently brooding.

It was on a lovely afternoon when Mrs. Selby's guests had all—at least, so Elizabeth believed—gone on an excursion together that she found her way to her favourite spot by the river side, and took her seat on a convenient log. She made for the log with the air of undisputed ownership, but halted midway, finding herself forestalled. A girl sat there already, making a telling spot of colour, for she wore a blue dress, and a bunch of scarlet poppies lay on her lap. Her face was shaded by a wide-brimmed white hat, but Mrs. Faraday managed to get a glimpse of it, recognised Doris Wilton. She paused for the space of a few seconds to gaze at her, became aware of a

diminutive pocket-handkerchief that was being used to dab tearful eyes, and decided to go forward, find out what was amiss, and if possible set it straight.

"Why, my dear," she said, "you are crying!"

"Oh, no, I am not!" Miss Wilton replied quickly. "Why should I?"

"That is just what I want to know, and I hope you will tell me."

"Why should you wish to know?" Doris asked.

"Not out of curiosity, believe me. Only because I should so like to be of use to you if I possibly could."

"I'd love to tell someone," Doris admitted, "but I positively can't."

"Why not?"

"Because—oh, I'm in a terrible difficulty. Sometimes I think that I am the wickedest girl in the world, and sometimes I think that if I do what I suppose I shall do in the end, I shall be acting rightly. People will call it wrong, of course; people always call everything that is not—not orthodox wrong. But is it wrong? That's what I want to know. I wonder what you would think. You are so broad-minded and—and, well, they say you've written a book, an awfully clever book about—about marriage."

Mrs. Faraday smiled.

"You are thinking of being married then?" she asked.

Doris shook her head; Mrs. Faraday disregarded this, and began to talk. She had a good deal to say about the popular idea of right and wrong, in regard to marriage, being entirely incorrect. The world set up fetishes, she declared, and worshipped them.

"Come now, my dear!" she urged. "You'll tell me, won't you? I am a good many years older than you are. Besides, I've been a married woman for five years. That makes an immense difference, doesn't it?"

Doris Wilton supposed that it did. Suddenly, she turned her pretty face to Elizabeth Faraday.

"I believe I will tell you," she said defiantly. "And if you hate and despise me, and don't ever want to speak to me again, it will be your own fault for forcing me to speak."

"I can't fancy myself despising another woman, and I took a fancy to you directly I saw you," she said. "You are so pretty and so young and innocent that you seem to be made for happiness. It has been a joy to me to watch you enjoying yourself, and being petted and admired. When I made up my mind that you were not so happy as you seemed, I got worried about you. But now you are going to tell me all about it; the clouds will roll away, and you will be yourself again!"

Doris said a good deal in reply to this about having so many selves that she did not know which was her real one, and about how she was not sure whether it

would not be best for her to jump into the water and drown herself. And yet she had discovered quite recently that the world was far more wonderful and beautiful than she had ever imagined it to be before. She came to a halt here, her face suddenly took on a lovely flush, and her blue eyes darkened.

"Don't be alarmed! I am not going to ask his name" said Elizabeth smilingly. "I am sure you will feel better when you have spoken to some one about your trouble. It is not as if you had a mother to go to."

The girl was an orphan; Mrs. Faraday had learned this from her hostess the day before. Doris Wilton's pretty face hardened, she raised her round chin, and again looked defiant.

"You've brought it on yourself!" she said. "You'll cast up your eyes and look shocked when you hear. Never mind! You asked for information, and you shall have it. Just listen. A married man is in love with me, and I am in love with a married man. Now then!"

It was not a pleasant statement to make, and it was not made pleasantly. The girl's blue eyes looked dangerous; her lips were set in a straight line; she was quite unlike the gay, bright creature who had fascinated Elizabeth.

"That is nothing unusual, my dear, though it is a matter for regret," she went on. "The question is how much farther has it gone?"

"I don't know what you mean," Doris replied.

"So much the better. I'll try again. How much farther do you mean it to go?"

Doris then told her tale. Shorn of all embellishments, it amounted to this. Some months ago she had met a man who charmed her at first sight. According to her account, he was wonderfully handsome and wonderfully "clever"—that was the word she used; it meant very little to her listener, who drew her own conclusions as to what the girl intended to convey by it. This admirer of hers was apparently a person of intellect, probably literary in tastes and occupation; she would find that out later. His conversation was brilliant. He had dazzled his inexperienced hearer, who had just wit enough to see that he was head and shoulders above her mentally. And she had completely fascinated him because she was young and pretty.

When Doris paused to see what effect her narrative had produced, and looked still defiantly at Mrs. Faraday, the latter spoke, without so much as the quiver of an eyelid—

"And he wished you to run away with him?"

Doris was a trifle disappointed, for even when one is in terrible grief or perplexity one does not like one's surprises to fall flat.

"Yes," she answered, rather snappily. "Now what are you going to call me? And

what do you think of me and what do you think of him?" she added. "That's what I want to know."

Mrs. Faraday chose this particular moment for giving her views on the marriage question and the marriage laws with great frankness. She had not a good word for them; they were all wrong; they should be so framed as to make the separation easy of two persons who, after a fair trial, found they were unsuited for each other. It should be possible, even desirable, that a man should leave his wife, or a woman her husband, if either could not love or had ceased to love the other!

Elizabeth had mounted, so to speak, her hobby-horse, and rode it with the ease of practice. Again, her eloquence was something of the platform order. She was still speaking very earnestly when Doris interposed.

"Oh, everything that you say is so true, so beautifully true!" she exclaimed. "It is exactly what he says!"

Mrs. Faraday drew herself up. Was it possible that she felt annoyed that a mere man should forestall her?

"Then you think it would be my duty to——" proceeded Doris.

"My dear," Mrs. Faraday broke in, "you must remember that, as the law now stands, there is something else to be considered. One would shrink from bringing shame on innocent creatures. And, again, if this man is already a father, what then?"

She was again on her hobby-horse. Miss Wilton dragged her off it by means of a quick reply.

"Yes, yes," she said, "of course. But there are no children."

Mrs. Faraday glanced at the girl's eager face and was switched off suddenly from the abstract to the individual. She found herself no longer concerned with the marriage laws as they affected women in general; her warm heart, her sympathies were with pretty, fluffy-haired Doris Wilton.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "I am so sorry for you! I do wish that this man you have given your love to was not married. If you go with him, as things stand, it means social ostracism, and that can be very terrible. Do you love him enough for that?"

"I love him enough for anything," the girl cried, with clasped hands, unconsciously dramatic. "I worship the very ground he treads on. Oh, if you could see him, if you could know him! I think I would rather die in his arms now than live without him!"

Mrs. Faraday looked at her intently.

"If you feel like that, my dear," she said "I do not believe that the great god Convention will hold you back. I don't believe that you would listen to me or any one else who tried to hinder you. I am not even sure that I have a right to do so. But there is one thing that may. His wife—what of her?"

"He does not think that she ever cared for him very much. And lately they have drifted farther and farther apart. She is grave and serious—a woman who does good work, he tells me, but is quite absorbed in it. He is gay and full of life; he has the artists temperament. He is just as full of fun as I am; we like the same things—music, dancing, the theatre. If you saw us together you would think him as young as I am; he has such good spirits, he makes such jokes, and the droll stories he can tell!"

The speaker's face dimpled, her eyes twinkled, she smiled.

"But that is not surprising," she went

on, "for I told you how clever he is, didn't I? He writes plays, Mrs. Faraday. Think of that—wonderful plays that every one goes to see! But no—I must not tell you his name though I should be proud to do so."

Elizabeth Faraday was silent for a moment or so. A new expression had crept into her eyes.

"Are you quite sure that his wife does not care for him?" she asked. "Is he a middle-aged man?"

"Oh, no! He would be about your age, I should think."

"About my age? I am thirty-two. And this wife of his—don't you know anything more about her?"

"She is very cold. She does not love him. But I told you that before, didn't I? They have no children; I told you that, too. The house is very dull, so he is not much in it. He loves gaiety and laughter; he wants to enjoy life. That is his temperament. It is natural; he is so handsome and so brilliant. He has dark eyes and hair, and such a wonderful smile. When he talks he uses his hands as if he were a foreigner. If I dared I would show you his photo, but I mustn't."

The girl had made play with her hands to illustrate the gestures of her lover. Her companion had noted this. She had a paper on her lap that she had brought with her to read. She opened it at the third page, where there was a review of a new play, headed by a portrait of the popular playwright who had written it, known to the general public as John Desmond. Elizabeth pointed to the picture.

"There is no need to show me his photo," she said. "I have it here."

Her glance was keen and searching; it read the girl's face as if it were a book. How it flushed! How the blue eyes shone! What a pretty pride there was in them as she gazed!

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "However did you guess? Isn't it a good likeness?"

She stretched out her hand to take the paper, then withdrew it hastily.

"I am so awfully sorry!" she cried. "How foolish I am! I never meant to give myself away like that. Promise you won't tell anybody!"

"I promise I will not. It was not fair of me to take you by surprise."

Doris had taken possession of the paper, and her face was eloquent of love and admiration as she studied it.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she said, after a while. "Have you ever seen him? If you have you won't be surprised that I am willing to do anything in the whole world, even to die for him."

"But that is not what you will have to do if you carry out your plans," Mrs. Faraday said slowly. Her voice was thin and strained but her hearer was not in an observant mood. "You would have to live for him. That would be much more difficult."

"Difficult! To live for John Desmond!"

"That is his *nom de plume*. He did not chance to mention his real name to you then?"

"I did not know that it was not his real name. But what does it signify?"

The query was flung out defiantly; it was disregarded. Mrs. Faraday went on quietly.

"Yes," she said, "to live for John Desmond is not easy. At first you might find it so. It would be rapture to serve him, to love him, to receive the caresses he showered on you, to hold his heart in your keeping."

"Yes, yes."

"You would believe yourself the happiest woman in the world until——"

"Until what?"

"Until the bee grew weary of sipping honey from one flower, and flew to another."

"You mean that he would get tired of me?"

"Yes, very soon."

"I don't believe it!"

"No, I suppose that is hardly to be expected of you."

As she spoke, Elizabeth was twirling the wedding-ring on her finger absently.

"I don't want to press the point," she continued quietly. "I have only one thing to say. I want you to know that what he tells you about his wife is false. It is not true that she never cared for him. She loved him passionately. It is not true that she does not care for him now. It is not true that she is cold. She has given him herself, her all; she cannot take it back. It would be better for her if she could cease to love him. But she cannot, Heaven help her—she cannot. She is perhaps too grave and serious, too intense for a nature like his, but——"

"But what? Oh, please go on! Why should you hesitate! Why do you look so strange?"

"But if he stays with her, she will—oh, she will try her very hardest to win him back, to be gay, to please him, indeed she will! Poor, sorrowful, foolish wife!"

The quiet voice had gathered volume and intensity, the capable hands locked and unlocked themselves nervously, the grey eyes were dark and deep with feeling.

"Mrs. Faraday how do you know all this?" asked Doris. "What are you saying? I don't understand."

The girl had let the paper fall from her knee; she was gazing into the other's face.

Elizabeth Faraday wore a closed locket hung about her neck by a slender gold chain. She opened it quickly. All her life afterwards Doris Wilton remembered the click of the little hinge, and coupled it with the look of entreaty in a woman's eyes. Yet, at the moment she had no thought except for the miniature within the locket; it was exquisitely painted.

"Why do you wear his portrait?" she cried. "How dare you?"

"Because of this," Elizabeth answered and she touched her wedding-ring.

Then she covered her face with her hands and wept.

The girl watched her; her blue eyes were dazed, her lips began to quiver.

"Your husband?" she cried. "Oh, I didn't know—I didn't understand!"

"No, you didn't understand, that is just it," replied the other woman. "Now that you do——" She broke off, and looked at her companion.

"Now that I understand, I want to think," said Doris.

Elizabeth's face brightened.

"If you will only do that," she said, "you will——"

She did not finish her sentence; she would only have addressed the empty air. Instead, she stood watching the retreating figure of Doris Wilton. The light of hope was in her eyes.

"If she gives me the chance I shall win him yet!" she murmured, "and I believe in my heart that she will."

The future—happy for all of them—justified her belief.

L. E. T.

SECRET TEARS

By Hester Lane

HOME IS THE WANDERER.

PAT MERRILEES jumped off her bicycle outside the double-fronted seaside villa where she lived, and wheeling it over the pavement, unfastened the wrought iron gate, a well-filled shopping bag balanced precariously on the handle-bars.

Just as she did so she was greeted by a laughing voice.

"You ought to do that balancing act on the stage, my dear Pat! You'd make a fortune."

She nearly dropped her bicycle in surprise as she turned to see a tall young man in sports coat and grey flannels just behind.

"Len!" she gasped. "Is—is it really you?"

"Well, that's what I thought when I looked in my shaving mirror this morning," Leonard Blake said smilingly, feasting his eyes on the charming picture she made framed against a background of rose-trees.

Bareheaded, her short, coppery-coloured hair gleamed in the morning sunshine. Her eyes were large and grey, and her skin was lightly dusted with freckles.

"I didn't know you were expected back so soon, Len," she said having got over her first surprise. "I saw Madge yesterday and she never said anything."

"My sister didn't know," he explained. "And I wasn't sure of my movements myself up to the very last moment." He took her bicycle and wheeled it up the drive. "Glad to see me, Pat?" he added whimsically.

"Yes—yes, of course, Len," she blushed slightly, her eyes shining. "Are you on leave or home for keeps?"

"For keeps—I hope," he replied, with a faint grin. "That ultimately depends upon a great many things outside my control, though, Pat. I'll tell you about it later. At the moment I want to know everything that has happened to you since I went away."

"That's asking a lot," she said frowning. "Not that anything special has happened, though," she added. "I've come to the conclusion that nothing ever will, as far as life in Trevannion Cove is concerned."

Len looked sideways at her.

"Don't speak too soon, Pat," he said humorously. "That's what we would call sticking your neck out in the R.A.F. I never did believe in tempting Providence. But tell me, how's Dinah? And your father, of course?"

"Very much the same, thank you, Len. Dinah is still teaching small children and I am head cook and bottle-washer for the family. Daddy works too hard—he seems to have more patients than ever. I always think it a pity you didn't accept his offer of a partnership when you first qualified—it would have made such a difference to everybody."

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about, Pat," he said, propping her bicycle against a wall. "There's time enough for that later, though."

"You'll come in, won't you, Len?" she invited. "Dinah will be here in a few minutes—it's half term so she has the day off and went out to take Buster for a walk.

I daresay daddy will be back soon, too. He hadn't many calls this morning, thank goodness."

As she spoke an Aberdeen terrier bounded through some bushes and came rushing up to Len, barking furiously. Then Dinah Merrilees came round the corner of the house, swinging a dog lead in her hand.

"Len!" she exclaimed, in much the same tone that Pat had used. "How nice to see you again. When did you get back?"

She did not resemble her sister in the least. If Pat was unusually attractive, Dinah possessed an almost classical beauty that was like some exotic flower. Taller than her sister, she had fair hair drawn into a knot at the nape of the neck, and her eyes were a vivid blue.

"Last night," Len replied, taking the hand she extended. "It's nice to see you again, Dinah. I must say you are both looking very well."

"Is that speaking as a doctor?" Dinah enquired teasingly. Then: "Actually one can't be anything else in a place like this! The air is so good for one's nerves, you know."

They all laughed. Trevannion Cove was very much off the beaten track and had not yet been spoilt by trippers. From many points of view it was too quiet, if not actually dull. At least, Dinah maintained that it was.

"Let's go in," said Pat. "It's cold lunch to-day, so I haven't any cooking to do. Can you stay to lunch, Len? Daddy will want to hear all your news."

"Thank you, I'd love to," he accepted smilingly. "It's been a long time since I had the pleasure of talking shop with Doctor Merrilees."

"Two years, four months and eleven days to be exact," Pat declared readily.

There was something in the way she spoke that caused Dinah to glance at her sharply.

Pat coloured a little and a curious expression came into her eyes. Then she turned her back on the others as if afraid of giving away some secret.

"It doesn't seem as long as that," Len remarked, following the sisters into the house. He glanced around the comfortably furnished sitting room appreciatively. "There's one nice thing about coming home—nothing has changed, apparently."

"We've changed," said Dinah. "We're older, for one thing."

"Maybe," Len agreed and laughed. "But we're still the same people."

Dinah shrugged.

"I suppose so," she said, as if it were a matter of indifference. "Make yourself comfortable for a few minutes, Len," she added following her sister into the kitchen. "We'll make some coffee and then we can talk. Help yourself to a cigarette—they're in the box on the radiogram."

"Thank you."

He watched her go out, slim and graceful, yet strangely aloof. But then, he recalled, Dinah had always been like that.

Smoking a cigarette he went to the window and stood looking out.

Beyond the garden of the doctor's house

he could see a part of the fishing harbour, flanked by the frowning headland up which he and the two sisters had climbed as children.

In those days Pat had been a curly-headed, rather jolly child, with a love of wild-flowers; Dinah, on the other hand, had been a trifle more serious and less talkative.

The younger girl had desired, above all else, to become an artist and had trained at a well-known art school, where she had done very well.

But she had been wise enough to realise her own limitations with the result that she had given up her ambition and become art mistress at the local primary school.

Altogether he had known the two girls for about fourteen or so years, the friendship which had grown up between them being founded on mutual trust and respect.

Dr. Merrilees, who had come to Trevannion Cove from London, had quickly carved a place for himself in the community of Devonshire farmers and fishermen who comprised most of his patients.

Len's father had once been the local vicar, but he had died leaving a widow and two children—Len and his older sister Madge.

The girls' mother had died exactly a year after Len's father and for a time it had been feared that the doctor and his two pretty young daughters would turn their backs on Trevannion Cove.

But he had stayed on, for at the time doctors had been very scarce and difficult to find. Even to-day his same old car could still be heard noisily climbing the steep hill out of the port, responding to some call from a lonely cottage or other on the moors.

Looking back now, Len wondered how much of his early ambition to become a doctor had been rooted in his admiration for Dr. Merrilees. Quite a big part of it, he supposed.

Possessing a natural flair for research, he had earned high commendation from those who had taught him at the medical training school. Then the chance to combine his National Service with his profession had taken him to Hong-Kong as medical officer to an R.A.F. Air-Sea Rescue unit.

His period of service over he was home again, facing up to the many problems which release brought in its train.

He sighed, thinking of the future as well as of the past.

All the way down from London he had gazed out of the train windows at the green pastures, at the little villages nestling amid rolling hills, at cottages with gardens gay with flowers. The two years he had spent abroad had been amongst the most interesting of his life, but he knew that he was glad to be back.

The door behind him opened and Pat entered, bearing a tray with coffee cups, followed by Dinah carrying a biscuit tin.

TWO hours later Len took his departure telling Pat that he had promised to drive his mother and sister into Seabay, the nearest large town. He also asked her if she would take a walk with him to the

top of the headland after she had finished some of her domestic duties.

Soon after six that evening Pat waited for him at the stile at the bottom of the path just outside the village.

When she saw him hurrying towards her, her heart gave a funny little leap.

Ever since lunch-time she had been hoping that the young doctor would give up his ambition to go to London in order to specialise.

Her father was not getting any younger so that the time when he would be compelled to take on an assistant was not far distant. She knew that he had only kept on the practice in order to be able to let it pass to Len when he returned from the Far East.

"Len is a born doctor and a clever one, too," her father had said on one occasion. "The experience he has gained abroad will be invaluable, so that I cannot think of anyone I would prefer to come in partnership with me. Eventually he could take it on altogether."

But she knew that to Len the wider horizons of a hospital position must prove well nigh irresistible.

After having been away so long it seemed as if they could not really expect him to settle down to the humdrum life of a general practitioner in a small place like Trevannion Cove. So she could only wait and see what he thought about it.

"Have I kept you waiting, Pat? I'm terribly sorry, but we were held up all along the line. Even the cafe where I took mother and Madge to tea was crowded. I've never seen Seabay so packed."

"I know," she said, slipping down from the stile. "It gets worse every year. I dare say it sounds selfish but I'm glad Trevannion Cove is so far out of the world. Even so, you'd be surprised at the number of coaches we get."

"Oh, I can quite believe it," he said, falling in step at her side.

He stole an appreciative glance at her, taking in the slim grace of her poise, the attractive way her wide print skirt flared out from a broad, black belt, the gleam of the late afternoon sunlight in her hair.

"I suppose it is selfish to want to hug one's own particular Eden to oneself, but the trouble is, the more trippers you get the less like an Eden it becomes. Look at Seabay. It used to be a pleasant little harbour town, with quaint old streets and gracious houses. Now it has a Marine Parade, with fancy lighting and all the fun of the fair!"

"Well, we've escaped that so far," said Pat, as they breasted the steep slope to the coastguard station on the headland. "It's very much the same as when you left it, Len."

"Thank goodness for that, then," he smiled. "I don't know what I should have done if it hadn't been. It was the thought of Trevannion and all that it represented which kept me going when things got a bit grim out East."

She glanced at him in surprise.

"I wonder you found time to be homesick, Len," she said mischievously. "You certainly hadn't time to write very often, had you?"

"So that's where the shoe pinches?" He burst out laughing. "No, Pat, I admit I was a very poor correspondent. Actually I was kept pretty busy, what with running the unit's medical department and looking after the health of nearly a thousand men. On top of that I put in a fair amount of study. But even if I didn't write much I

missed you, Pat."

"We missed you, too, Len," she said quietly.

If Len noticed the "we" he made no reference to her choice of words. In any case, he was not in the mood to search for hidden meanings just then. He was content to be back, to stand there on the familiar headland, absorbing the sights and sounds he had known from childhood.

A crimson sun was nearing the western horizon, casting a golden light over everything, so that the atmosphere seemed to have a translucent quality about it that lent an air of enchantment to the brown-sailed boat beating up towards the harbour.

"Isn't that Jake Tregelly's ketch?" he asked, pointing. "I'd know it by that white patch on the sail. The *Daydream*, isn't it?"

"I never told you—Jake died last year," said Pat. "Tom Moon runs the boat now."

"Tom Moon? He was Jake's son-in-law, wasn't he? He married Esther, surely?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Mrs. Tregelly moved into Seabay. She has a sister there who runs a small boarding house. Dulcie, the other girl, got a job with a solicitor in the town."

Len said nothing for a moment. Then—

"How did he die? Jake, I mean?"

"He had a stroke," she explained. "Daddy warned him several times but you know what these old fishermen are like. Jake used to say he wasn't going to spend the rest of his days draped over the harbour walls and so he continued to take the *Daydream* out as he had always done. One day he collapsed and Tom Moon brought him in. He died a week later."

"Poor old Jake," mused Len. "I can remember so well how we used to go out with him when he visited his lobster pots! Many a time he gave us a lobster to take home for supper. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember," Pat sighed. "It was a long time ago, though. Such a lot has happened since!"

"I thought you were complaining a little while ago that nothing ever happens in Trevannion Cove," he smilingly reminded her.

"Oh, I didn't mean in that way," she said. "After all, life can't stand still. It doesn't seem so very long ago that Dinah and I were going to school together and that you were fighting Jackie McDermott because he threw sand at Dinah and spoilt her dress!"

"Fancy you remembering that!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Miss Henderson said that I had bullied him—that little horror was rather a favourite of hers. Does Jackie still live in the white house at the top of Keere Lane?"

"Yes. He works for an estate agent in Cullavon. Dinah can't stand the sight of him. He's always at the tennis club and makes a dead set at her as soon as she appears."

Len smiled.

"Unless Dinah has changed I am quite sure she can be trusted to keep Jackie in his place," he said. "Madge told me that there are some new people in old Colonel Davidson's house," he added. "A family called Bennett. Have you met them yet?"

"I've met Jill Bennett," Pat replied guardedly. "Her father is a retired book publisher from London. They seem to be very well off, and Jill has her own car. She joined the tennis club soon after they came here."

"Mother seems quite impressed by

them," he said. "But that, of course, is nothing to go by. I always tell her she is a born parson's wife because *all* her geese, without exception, are swans. I'm not nearly so charitably minded, I am afraid."

During the little silence that followed Pat seated herself on the turf and plucked a blade of grass, her eyes pensive.

Len sat down beside her and gave her an enquiring glance.

Pat said abruptly—

"Is it too soon to ask what you plan to do, Len?"

"Well, it is, rather?" he said. "I've got quite a lot of things to sort out one way and another before I can really decide. I know what I *want* to do, of course, but whether it is going to be possible is another question. Mother and Madge, of course, are keen for me to stay in Trevannion. But as I explained, it has become their little world. Unfortunately, it is not mine."

"I see." Pat looked down at the blade of grass, twirling it round and round in her fingers. "That means you won't think about daddy's offer to take you into partnership, I suppose?"

"I don't see how I can," he replied a little awkwardly. "I am greatly flattered by your father's confidence in my abilities, of course, but—well—Trevannion doesn't offer very much scope, does it?"

"Maybe not," she said. "Even so I should have thought you would want to work amongst people you know and who know you. It probably sounds dreadfully insular but I don't think I could ever be really happy away from here."

"It isn't insular at all, but the two cases aren't quite the same, are they?" he said thoughtfully. "For one thing, I want to specialise and to do that I must be free to work in one of the big hospitals in order to gain the necessary experience. After all, any competent man would do in a place like this. There are plenty of doctors who like the quiet life."

Pat did not reply. The discussion left her feeling saddened in some queer way she could not explain. So much had happened since those carefree days when she and Dinah had played barefooted on the sands with Len and his friends. Sometimes it made her sick with longing for them to return again.

Len had always been ambitious. It was not to be expected that he would lightly renounce the glittering prize that a hospital post held out to him merely in order to devote himself to the needs of a place where he had been born.

"It's like this, Pat," he said when she did not speak again. "I believe that every one of us has a duty to make the best possible use of the talents with which he or she is endowed. That sounds pretty smug, I know, but I don't mean it that way. The fact remains, it's the way I feel and therefore, if I accepted your father's partnership, I would always have the knowledge that I might have done so much more."

Pat pulled at another blade of grass.

"I see that, of course, Len," she murmured, her eyes pensive. "But aren't you thinking of yourself and what you would like to become rather than—well—others?"

"In short, I have a duty to Trevannion Cove? Is that what you mean?" he challenged.

"Well, haven't you?" She turned her head and looked directly at him.

Len stuck out his jaw obstinately.

"From one point of view you may be right," he admitted. "No man is capable of being a judge of his own case, and that is what you are asking me to be. But there is more than one way of looking at it, my dear girl. As I said, any competent man could become your father's partner. So it's not a case of letting anybody down, is it?"

He smiled as he waited for her to reply.

"I wouldn't like to pronounce judgment on that, Len," she said quietly. "After all, it's for you to decide. I know that if you became daddy's partner the bulk of the work would eventually fall on you, so that in one sense at least, you would be taking his place. From the point of view of those concerned I imagine they would prefer someone who belongs here rather than a stranger, however competent he might be."

Len grinned.

"A case of 'Better a beggar you know than a beggar you don't,' I suppose," he exclaimed, in tones of amusement. "As an example of feminine logic that takes a lot of beating. You quite ignore the fact that I might be able to do a very great deal *more* for humanity at a hospital than I could by staying here."

"Well, what else do you expect? I'm a woman," said Pat defensively. "But my argument isn't so illogical as you seem to make out. Devon people are notoriously clannish—you ought to know that. Daddy often talks of his early days here and of how the local fishermen would do almost anything rather than call him in. In the first place they resented him because he was 'a foreigner.'"

"And then he went out in the lifeboat to help a young fisherman who had been badly injured during a storm, didn't he?" said Len.

"Yes," said Pat. "After that they thawed a little and now, as you know, they look on him as one of themselves."

Len lit a cigarette, shielding the flame of his lighter with two hands and shielding his expression at the same time.

"I made some pretty useful friends when I was in Hong-Kong," he said, seeming to change the subject. "You will meet one of them this week-end—his name is Dick Randall and he's coming to stay with us for a few days. Dick was a squadron leader in the unit I was attached to but, what is far more important, as far as I am concerned, is that his mother is a cousin of Professor Cass, one of the greatest brain surgeons in the world."

"I see," said Pat drily.

Len grinned and waved his cigarette.

"You don't see," he said. "But the point is that on my way home via New York I managed to stop off in Pennsylvania and was granted an interview with the great man himself. In the end, he was kind enough to say that if I cared to return to the United States he would get me a place in the Institute of Nervous Diseases, of which he is the senior consultant. I leave it to your own imagination to decide what that offer could mean to me?"

Pat knew enough of the difficulties which lay in his path to realise just what the famous American neurologist's offer *did* mean.

"I suppose it would be foolish not to take advantage of such an opportunity," she said, at length. "Have you told your mother that you may be going away again?"

"No," he said shortly, and flung away his cigarette. "To tell you the truth I

don't know that I *am* going away yet. As you say, it would be foolish to miss the chance, but there are other things involved that will take a bit of sorting out. There's plenty of time, fortunately. I've got twenty eight days leave due to me before the period of my National Service actually expires and so I haven't to come to an immediate decision."

He put out a hand and pulled Pat to her feet.

"Come on," he said playfully. "Let's take the old path down to the foreshore. We can then walk round the foot of the headland and call at Mrs. Emmett's sweet shop. I want to taste her famous humbugs again."

A HAPPY MEETING.

DINAH MERRILEES was walking along the sands a few days later when she came upon a young man in grey flannels throwing sticks into the water for an excited collie to retrieve. As she came up the dog recognised her and dashed forward, shaking water all over her.

"Down, Laddie! You're disgustingly wet," she said backing away.

The young man came up and hooked a lead on to the dog's collar.

"That was my fault, I am afraid," he apologised, with a quick glance of appreciation at the picture she made.

Dinah saw that he was good-looking in a rugged, blunt-featured fashion, and that he was deeply sun-tanned. From the fact that he was with Len Blake's dog she guessed who he was.

"It doesn't matter," she said, with a little smile. "Laddie and I are old friends. You, I suppose, must be Squadron Leader Randall?"

"At your service, madam," he acknowledged, with a slight bow. "I'm spending a few days with the Blakes. Len and I were in Hong-Kong together."

"Yes, he told us all about you," said Dinah, her smile deepening. "I'm Dinah Merrilees. I expect Len has told you that my sister and I are old friends of his."

He nodded.

"He must certainly did," he said. "I got to know you and your sister quite well during our talks. Not only that, but I am quite sure I could have found my way about Trevannion Cove blindfold from how he described it."

"I had no idea Len had talked about us as much as that," she said demurely. "I suppose it was only natural, though. We've lived here nearly all our lives, and we used to play together as children."

"So I gathered," he said. "I believe we are coming to your place to tea to-morrow," he added. "Len had to go up to London to-day, and won't be back until this evening. I was at a loose end, so I thought I'd take Laddie for a walk."

"It is very pleasant here when the tide is out," said Dinah.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what Madge Blake was doing but she refrained.

Madge was several years older than Len and devoted herself to looking after her mother, who was anything but strong. They lived in a big old house on the hill overlooking the harbour, where Madge seemed content to spend her days, her time divided between her mother, the garden and the

social duties she performed so dutifully and well.

She had never revealed the slightest inclination to marry and Dinah, who knew her better than most, was prepared to believe that the older woman regarded the advent of a young man like Squadron Leader Randall as an intrusion into her privacy.

"Are you stationed in England now, Mr. Randall?" she enquired, more for something to say than because she was interested.

He laughed.

"At the moment I am enjoying my leave," he said. "After that anything can happen. As I've just spent three years in the Far East I don't suppose they'll send me abroad immediately, but one never knows with the Air Ministry. I'm a regular airman, you see."

"So Len told us," she said.

"Did he, now! Evidently you know quite a lot about me, then. What else did Len tell you, Miss Merrilees?" he added.

Dinah's eyes twinkled.

"That you are a born pilot and that you have won the D.F.C.," she said. "Oh, and that all the girls fall for you in rows!"

"Well, of all the libellous nonsense!" he exclaimed, going red. Then he burst out laughing and Dinah joined in. Just you wait till I get hold of him," he said threateningly.

"I wouldn't take it too much to heart, if I were you," said Dinah. "Besides,"—demurely—"it must be rather nice to know that one is so completely irresistible."

"That's not fair," he protested, going redder. "I've never thought—that is—I mean to say—oh, confound it, I only seem to make matters worse. I assure you, though, that—"

"It's all right, Mr. Randall," Dinah waved aside his protests. "It was just a little bit of fun on Len's part and no one took it seriously. You must forgive me—I couldn't resist the temptation to tease."

"I'll forgive you on one condition, Miss Merrilees," he said quickly. "That is that you have tea with me somewhere. Len's sister has taken her mother to a meeting of the Church Guild, or something, and won't be back until half past six. So if you are free—?"

Dinah hesitated only for an instant. She was free, having chosen to come home this way because there were things she wanted to sort out. Pat would be expecting her back, but she could easily telephone from the call box at the corner of the harbour.

She glanced at Dick Randall with a gleam of humour creeping into her eyes.

"I suppose," she said, "that it is my duty to take pity on you, seeing you have been left to your own devices for a whole afternoon. The point is, where would you like to go, Mr. Randall?"

"Well, I happen to have my car here—it won't take more than two minutes to fetch it. Perhaps we could drive along the coast as far as Cullavon. We could stick Laddie in the back."

"All right," she said breathlessly, gripped by a sudden feeling of recklessness. "I'll just 'phone my sister to say I won't be in to tea. There's a call box over near the harbour. If you'd like to fetch your car I'll be waiting for you there."

TWO hours later they came out of the Mitre Hotel at Cullavon and crossed the road to where Dick had left his car.

Dinah, still wondering at herself for having accepted his invitation, got in.

"Are you in a tearing hurry to get back, or shall we take a roundabout way home?" he asked, slipping into the driving seat. "It struck me that it might be nice to go over the moors and down the valley as far as Lyneham. What do you think?"

"Oh, do you know the moors?" she asked.

"I visited the place once," he told her. "Three years ago my sister and her husband spent the summer in a caravan at Lyneham and I stayed with them just before going abroad. Once, I remember, I walked within a mile of this place. To think that had I carried on we might have met all that time ago!"

Dinah gave him a startled glance, a faint flush stealing up under her skin. She did not know yet how seriously to take a great deal of what he said.

But one thing was certain, however, there was nothing small or mean about him.

When she had enquired how he had gained his D.F.C. he had blushed like a schoolboy and stammered something about it being "a piece of cake", a typical R.A.F. expression.

He evidently took her consent for granted, for he started the car without further argument and drove out of town.

Half-an-hour later he stopped the car and let the dog out for a run before joining Dinah, who had strolled over to a small hillock to watch the sunset.

"Just look at the light on those hills," she exclaimed, as he came up to her side. "Oh, how I wish I could paint. Really paint, I mean."

"Can't you? Len tells me you teach art at the local school or something," he said. "Surely that means you must know quite a lot about the subject?"

Dinah gave him a glance full of humour and self-deprecation.

"One doesn't have to be an artist to teach infants to draw cubes and circles," she said. "Once I thought I was going to become an artist, but that, I am afraid, was wishful thinking." She hesitated a moment, then added shyly: "I'll show you some of my sketches if you like. But only if you promise to say what you really and truly think about them."

"I wouldn't dream of doing otherwise," he said promptly. "I shall take it as a very great compliment if you allow me to see them. But I warn you before-hand, that I'm no judge. What I mean is, I know when I like a thing, and when I don't, but I can't talk about line and form and all that part of it."

"I don't think that is necessary," she said thoughtfully, her face serious. She followed the flight of a hovering bird. "It's rather like listening to good music," she went on. "You can learn to appreciate the finer points of a symphony—to wait for and listen to the airs out of which it is formed—without knowing anything about theory and counterpoint."

"Oh, I quite agree," he declared.

They stood for a time in companionable silence, watching the light change on the hills, Dick thinking that he had never enjoyed an afternoon more and thanked his lucky stars that he had decided to walk down to the beach when he had.

Otherwise he would not have met Dinah until tea the next day and then they might not have got to know one another half so quickly.

Dinah was thinking—he is about thirty, brave and very likeable.

What little Dick spoke about the flying he had done gave Dinah some idea of the long, lonely missions he had undertaken over the jungle—hunting for terrorists in Malaya, for instance.

She said suddenly—

"Aren't you ever afraid when you are flying, Mr. Randall?"

Instead of laughing at her as some men might have done, or looking embarrassed, he replied with simple directness.

"Very often. But then, who isn't afraid at times? There is one thing about flying jets, though—you haven't a lot of time to think. When you are posted to flying a new type you go through a long period of training known as cockpit drill, so that in an emergency you become part of the aircraft, doing certain things in a certain order because it has become instinctive. After all," he added, "if you know how to fly your particular aircraft and don't take unnecessary chances, there isn't very much that *can* go wrong."

"But still they do," she murmured, thinking of some recent crashes that had been in the news.

"Granted. But nine times out of ten it is the human element—the pilot—who has failed—not the aircraft."

"Have you had any narrow escapes?" she wanted to know.

Dick laughed.

"Several," he said, his eyes twinkling. "One I shall never forget happened over the front line in Korea. I was flying American Thunderjets at the time—we had been temporarily attached to a unit of the American Air Force—and were on patrol.

"Quite suddenly four enemy Migs—they're jet fighters rather like the American Sabre—jumped on us out of the sun. I managed to roll away in time to avoid a burst from one which dived on my tail and got another in my gun-sights. I pressed the firing button and nothing happened! The next second I was taking violent evasive action with two planes after me. Luckily, some more of our chaps arrived and drove them off and it was only then that I realised I still had the firing switch in the 'Safe' position!" He chuckled. "The human element, you see!"

She smiled and then looked surprised as he said suddenly:

"Tell me about yourself, Dinah. You don't mind me calling you Dinah, I hope? Apart from being a friend of Len's, I think it is such a lovely name. It reminds me of a song I used to know as a child—*Dinah, Dinah, Sweet as apple cider*. It certainly fits you."

"Now, now," she said warningly. "Don't tell me you are trying to live up to the reputation Len gave you! You know, about girls falling for you."

"Heaven forbid," he said solemnly. "Joking apart, though, there's such a lot I want to know about you. After all, we're going to be friends, aren't we?"

"Maybe." She looked pensive. "But you are *only* here for the week-end, remember."

"There will be other week-ends," he said meaningly. "Come on," he urged. "I want to know everything."

"That's rather a tall order—Dick!" she said meekly. "Where shall I start?"

"Where you like. What, for example, makes you content to teach art to a lot of

small children here in Trevannion Cove?"

"I teach them other things beside art," she said. "But I've already told you the reason—I wanted to be an artist, but I'm not good enough."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Quite sure," she said, hunching. "If I were not, the art teacher where I studied left me under no illusions about myself. He said I might do well as a commercial artist, but anything else—"

"And so you came back to Trevannion Cove!" he said. "That was probably wise of you. I can't somehow see you drawing pictures of Blanks Bedding in order to satisfy your creative urge. Still, you might have met some interesting people."

"There are lots in Trevannion Cove," she said.

He looked down at her inquiringly.

"Anyone in particular?" he said.

Dinah caught her breath. That was the second time he had startled her, and yet she had known him a bare three hours! She dropped her eyes, hoping that her blushes would not betray her.

"No, there is no one in particular," she said, with a slight catch of her breath. Nor, she added to herself, was there likely to be. But she could not tell him that!

She made a little gesture and turned away.

"It's getting late," she went on, before he could speak. "I think it is time we started back."

For a moment it seemed as if he were about to say something else, but evidently he thought better of it.

Then he glanced at his wrist watch, surprised to discover that it was nearly seven o'clock.

"Yes, you are right," he said cheerfully. "Besides, I promised to meet Len at the station—he's coming down on the train which gets here at nine-fifteen. He had to go up to the Air Ministry in connection with a report on an airman. Len had recommended the fellow for a medical board, and was instrumental in getting him posted home on compassionate grounds. Anyhow, as the Spaniards say, 'To-morrow is another day,' and he took her arm.

"I can't remember when I enjoyed myself so much," he said, a little later, as he put her down outside her door. "Can you say the same, Dinah?"

"Yes, indeed—it's been lovely, Dick," she replied, her mind racing ahead, asking questions to which there appeared to be no ready answers. "Thank you for taking me."

"It is I who have to thank *you*," he stressed, with such evident sincerity that she was strangely moved.

She watched him drive off, a troubled expression in her young eyes. Utterly without conceit, it never occurred to her to dissemble, and Dick had not gone to any pains to conceal the fact that he was attracted by her.

Was it fair, in the circumstances, to go on seeing him, when he so obviously liked her as much as he did? she wondered.

She had a natural aversion to sailing under false colours, yet if she were to admit Dick Randall to friendship it would mean just that.

For she could scarcely tell him that she had been in love with Len Blake ever since she had been old enough to understand the first faint stirring of the senses, or that

she had long ago resigned herself to the knowledge that her love was not returned.

Len looked on her as he would a favourite sister, someone in whom to confide and who could be trusted to understand, but that was all. If he had eyes for anyone at all it was for her sister Pat.

With a sigh she turned and went into the house. She had a shrewd idea Dick was not going to be easily put off.

A MERCY CALL

THE annual social and dance given by the local tennis club took place three weeks later. Both Pat and Dinah were on the committee and had helped to organise the affair.

A small charge was made for tickets, the proceeds going to swell the church charity fund.

Half-an-hour before it commenced the two sisters presented themselves in their father's study and announced that they were ready to leave.

Dr. Merrilees, a man of sixty, with humorous grey eyes and keen, intelligent features, looked up from his desk in admiration at the picture they made framed in the doorway.

"My word!" he exclaimed, taking off his glasses. "I can see a trail of broken hearts being left behind you to-night. Do I really possess two such lovely daughters?"

"You do, kind sir," said Dinah playfully, dropping a curtsy. Her hair, cut in the latest style, was like spun gold in the lamplight, and she wore a powder blue frock of classical simplicity.

Pat had done her hair in a new, upswept style and wore a green crinoline frock that set off her colouring to perfection.

"It really isn't fair to let you both loose on the male population of Trevannion Cove," the doctor went on teasingly. "If I know anything about young men, poor Len won't get a look in to-night. Is Squadron Leader Randall going to be there as well?"

"Wild horses wouldn't keep him away," laughed Pat, with a sly look in Dinah's direction.

Dinah blushed and looked prettier than ever as a result.

Pat went on—

"As soon as he heard about the social he made Len promise to invite him. He was to drive down from his airfield to-day."

"Well, I hope your escorts are duly appreciative of the honour you are doing them," said their father. "You look as if you had both stepped right out of the pages of a book of Paris fashions!"

"Darling daddy!" said Dinah smilingly, patting his cheek. "You're a loyal old thing, aren't you? I believe you'd say the same if we appeared in rags!"

"Of course I should," said her father, his eyes twinkling. "But don't let me hear you refer to me as being old, young woman. I would have you know that a man is as old as he feels, and I could give points to a great many of the young men you will be dancing with to-night."

He kissed them each in turn.

"Now run along and enjoy yourselves and don't, I beg of you, wake me when you come in. I've had too many disturbed nights lately to risk losing any more of my beauty sleep."

"Poor daddy," said Pat sympathetically. "It's high time you had someone to help

you. If only——"

She checked herself, but Dinah knew what she had been going to say. Len's determination to seek wider fields was a sore point with Pat whose loyalties were almost fiercely centred upon those nearest and dearest to her.

The sound of a motor horn put an end to further discussion. Dinah gathered up her frock.

"That will be Len," she declared. "Good night, daddy darling. We'll creep in like mice when we come back, I promise."

Pat followed her into the hall and paused before a mirror to put a curl into place.

There was something remote, at the same time provocative, about her manner which puzzled Dinah. If she hadn't known that such a thing was impossible, she would have said that Pat was putting on an act intended to conceal some deep and lasting hurt.

"You can be quite sure that Jill Bennett will turn up in some dazzling creation that has cost the earth," said Pat, as they went out. "She's been making eyes at Len ever since he came home, and she certainly won't miss the opportunity of impressing him to-night."

"Let her," said Dinah, with a slight curl of her lips. "I don't think Len is quite so easily impressed as all that. But if he is, then he isn't worth bothering about."

With which example of feminine philosophy she went ahead down the steps to where Len and Dick Randall were waiting.

THE parish hall where the social was taking place was a large building which boasted a stage and dressing-rooms. Here the local amateur dramatic society, of which Pat was a leading member, gave shows during the winter months. In the summer it was used for various things ranging from scouts' concerts to jumble sales.

On the present occasion it had quite a festive air, the walls draped by bunting and the stage almost hidden by masses of evergreens.

A radiogram provided the music, the records being changed by Mr. Jelks, one of the churchwardens. At one side of the hall a buffet supper had been set out on trestle tables.

The place was already full when the four arrived and a laughing group of young people swooped down on them, nearly sweeping them off their feet.

Dick Randall was in R.A.F. uniform, his appearance creating a distinct flutter amongst the teenage girls, a fact which caused Dinah to smile to herself, remembering what Len had told her about him.

Then the music started and Len took the floor with Pat, leaving Dick to partner Dinah.

"May a mere airman add his quota to the compliments I am sure you have already received to-night, Dinah?" he enquired, smiling down at her. "You look absolutely wonderful! Quite the loveliest girl in the room."

Dinah pretended to look demure.

"Beauty is only skin deep, my dear sir," she said, in mock warning. "In any case, I daresay you'll say that to every girl you dance with. It's all part of the R.A.F. technique, I suppose?"

"You know, I'd like to shake you for that," he said, grinning. "I said you are the loveliest girl in the room, and I mean it. I'm not interested in the others."

"They're interested in you, though," said Dinah, laughing up at him. "I'm beginning to see what Len meant when he said that the girls fall for you in rows. Really, it's positively blatant. Even Jill Bennett condescended to look impressed."

"And who might Jill Bennett be?" he enquired.

Dinah raised her eyebrows.

"Don't tell me you never noticed her," she said mischievously. "She's the dark girl dancing with that tallish man."

"I see. And am I supposed to be duly impressed in turn?" Dick asked.

"Quite definitely," she said promptly. "At the moment she has her eye on Len, but if you do what is expected of you, she may quite easily transfer her affections to you."

"Just like that?" Dick grinned and drew her still closer to him.

A momentary thrill went through Dinah, and her heart leapt.

But she gave herself a little mental shake-up, and soon became her usual aloof self once more.

Dick opened his lips to say something, but at that moment the dance ended and they found themselves near a group of which Jill Bennett was the centre, with Len and Pat smiling at them.

Jill Bennett was undeniably lovely and wore a flame-coloured frock that set off her dark beauty as nothing else could have done. There was something about her that always reminded Dinah of a hothouse flower, something exotic and delicate.

Jealousy was something utterly foreign to Dinah's nature, so that she did not at first recognise the little air of resentment that went through her for what it was.

It was no more than momentary, born of the languishing glance Jill had bestowed on Dick, but for the first time in her life she was experiencing that faint sensation of hostility which comes of the instinctive recognition of a rival.

Which was just silly, she told herself angrily. She was not interested in Dick in that way. At the same time she did not want to see him hurt, as hurt he would be if he permitted Jill to add his scalp to her collection.

Just then another dance started and Dinah found herself claimed by Len. He seemed unusually light-hearted and whirled her out on to the floor with reckless abandon.

"I must say you seem to have made quite a conquest where Dick is concerned, Dinah," he said teasingly. "Believe me, you could go further and fare worse. Dick's a good scout, and——"

"Thank you for nothing, Len," she interrupted, her cheeks flushing. "But, you see, I have no desire to make a conquest where Dick or anyone else is concerned! So please don't start getting ideas."

"I can't help myself when they are handed to me on a plate," he grinned. "However, only fools rush in where angels fear to tread, so I'll say no more. But watch out! Dick's one of those quiet types who are dynamite when roused! I saw him go into action once when we were together in Hong Kong, and, believe me, it was a revelation."

"Oh, and what happened?" enquired Dinah primly, though her curiosity was aroused.

Len chuckled.

"We had crossed over to Kowloon—the Chinese quarter—in one of the R.A.F.

launches," he told her. "It was more of a sightseeing trip than anything else, and we prowled around for quite a bit before it was time to go back. On the way we had to pass through a rather slummy quarter, with half-naked Chinese children playing in the gutters and the usual collection of street dogs searching amongst the garbage. Suddenly we heard the most frightful row. It sounded as if all the dogs in the place had been run over—and we went to investigate.

"The first thing we saw was a crowd gathered about a perfect giant of a man, who was beating a wretched, half-starved puppy to death with a club! We discovered afterwards that it had stolen some food from the hovel where the fellow lived, but we didn't stop to ask questions. Dick simply gave a war-cry and waded in!"

Len chuckled.

"I wish you could have seen what followed!" he went on. "I grabbed the puppy and Dick tackled the bully who had been thrashing it. The fellow transferred his attentions to Dick, club and all, but it didn't do him any good. Dick broke the club over his head, and in less time than it has taken to tell you all this he had the chap grovelling and begging for mercy. I'm quite sure that he will think twice before he thrashes a dog again."

"What a brute!" exclaimed Dinah, with some heat. "I think it was very brave of you both to go to the rescue like that."

"Nothing brave about it," Len laughed. "I told you, Dick is dynamite when he's roused."

"You might have been attacked by the crowd, though," she said.

He shook his head.

"That wasn't at all likely. The Chinese are queer people. They will look on completely unmoved at a scene of that description. It's just a side show as far as they are concerned."

"What happened to the puppy?" asked Dinah.

"We took it back to the air base with us. One of the men agreed to look after it and it became a squadron mascot."

The music stopped again, and they crossed over to join the others, who were talking to the vicar, who turned smilingly to them.

"Ah, my dear Miss Merrilees, and how are you?" he enquired. "I trust you are enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Wakefield," Dinah answered. "How very kind of you to look in!"

"Considering the very worthy object for which your social is being given, I could hardly do less, my dear," he said, his eyes twinkling.

When the vicar moved on Dick took Dinah's arm in a masterful way.

"Do you want to dance the next number, or shall we go outside for a breath of fresh air?" he enquired.

Dinah looked questioningly at him.

"Aren't you going to dance with Jill?" she asked, with a quirk of her lips. "In any case, I promised this dance to Jackie McDermott."

"You mean the well-fed young man in a jacket that looks too tight for him?" Dick queried, with a sudden grin. "Tell me, what has he got that I haven't?"

"Quite a lot of things," Dinah replied, with pretended innocence. "He's got a nice, safe job to begin with. Also, he doesn't go prowling round out of the way

places like Kowloon beating up gigantic Chinamen!"

"So Len told you about that, did he? I'll tick him off later. In the meantime I'm going outside to sulk."

"You're going to dance with Jill," said Dinah firmly. "Remember Nelson's signal, 'England expects—'"

Dick breathed hard.

"You know," he said, "I've come to the conclusion that you must have been an impossible child! No wonder your poor sister looks crushed!"

"Oh!" gasped Dinah, opening her mouth wide. "Of all the horrid—"

But Dick had gone, with an airy wave of the hand, and Jackie McDermott was standing at her side, smiling fatuously at her.

With a sigh Dinah resigned herself to the inevitable and permitted the young man to take her on to the floor.

Meanwhile, Pat heard the music start for the next dance and across the room saw Len coming in search of her.

Behind her the fire escape doors had been thrown open for the occasion, so it was the work of a moment to slip through into the concealing darkness outside. Here, she thought, it would not be necessary to appear as if one hadn't a care in the world, and that all that mattered was to cram as much fun as possible into the next few hours.

Outside, a newly-risen moon shed a gentle light over the harbour, silhouetting the fishing boats drawn up on the shingle.

It was a sight to make an artist reach instinctively for his brushes, but Pat had no eyes for its beauty. Instead she was wondering why it was that, when one's most cherished dreams seemed about to come true, something always happened to rob them of their promise?

She could not blame Len for wishing to further his ambitions. He was young and eager, with the world at his feet. Very few men in his position would voluntarily exile themselves in a place like Trevannion Cove where the most exciting prospect that offered was the change of seasons, with its inevitable crop of mumps and measles and pains in the back.

She knew that he had written to the famous American neurologist and was awaiting a reply. That it would be favourable Pat had no doubt. In that case Len would be leaving for America quite soon.

At the thought her lips tightened for it struck her suddenly that Len was taking a very great deal for granted.

But if he thought she was willing to play maid-in-waiting, to eat out her heart in loneliness while he carved a career for himself on the other side of the world, he was vastly mistaken.

Pride alone would compel her to say good-bye to her day-dreams and never let anyone suspect how much a part of her life they had become during the past few years. Len least of all—

"Hullo, Pat? Not dancing?"

Startled, she looked round, to see Dick Randall smiling at her.

"I—I wasn't very keen on this dance, Dick," she said a little confusedly. "It's a tango."

"We're two of a kind, then," he said. "Let's stroll down to the beach and console each other. I'm supposed to be sulking."

Pat frowned.

"What about?" she asked.

He laughed.

"Oh, Dinah's dancing with that overfed young man called Mac something. She suggested that I might avail myself of the chance to dance with Jill Bennett."

"Oh, you mean Jackie McDermott!" Pat gave a little smile. "He used to go to school with us when we were very young, so Dinah could hardly refuse to dance with him. But you could have danced with Jill though—I'm sure she would have been highly flattered!"

"There's no accounting for tastes, is there?" he remarked, with a twitch of his lips. "However, I'm not interested. As far as I'm concerned, there is only one girl here this evening. Present company always excepted, of course," he added quickly.

"You mean—Dinah?" Pat asked, smiling up at him.

"No other," he answered quietly. He stared in front of him for a second, then turned to look at her. "You guessed, of course?"

"That you are in love with her?" Pat nodded. "Yes, it wasn't difficult, Dick. At least, not very."

"Then we know where we stand," he said, flicking the ash off his cigarette. With rather overdone indifference he added—"I suppose you've no idea how she—er—feels about me, have you, Pat?"

"I'm afraid not, Dick." She shook her head. "Dinah and I are very good friends as well as being sisters, but she has never given me so much as a hint that she suspects you are in love with her. Perhaps that's a good sign," she added hopefully.

"Perhaps—and again, perhaps not." He laughed ruefully. "Sometimes I think I'm making a little progress but at others—well—it's anybody's guess."

"Why don't you ask her outright, Dick? She won't bite your head off."

"H'm! I'm not so sure about that!" He laughed again. "I suppose you think I'm acting like a silly schoolboy, but, you see, I've never felt this way about anyone before. The truth is, I'm afraid of rushing things."

"I don't think that matters," said Pat sagely, gazing out to where the sea broke lazily against the foot of the headland. The tide was in and the waves made little sucking noises as they lapped against the rocks. "If—if a man really cares for someone in that way, then I don't think the question of how long you have known each other is important. It may be,"—she hesitated a moment—"it may be the one thing a girl is waiting to hear, instead of wondering whether she has been living in a fool's paradise."

He glanced at her sharply, thinking he detected a strange note of bitterness in her tone. But what he might have said remained unuttered, for at that moment a figure loomed up behind them and Len's voice cut across their thoughts.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, Pat," he said, as they turned towards him. "Did you know that you dodged our dance?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Len," she murmured the warm colour stealing up into her cheeks. "It—it was so terribly hot inside—I felt I wanted a breath of fresh air."

"Well, you might have told me, my dear," he grumbled. "I couldn't think what had happened to you."

"It was really my fault," said Dick, pouring oil on troubled waters. "I was at a loose end and Pat kindly took pity on

me. Neither of us realised that the next dance had started."

Len glanced suspiciously at them. He had been searching for Pat for the best part of ten minutes and felt considerably ruffled. The excuse that they had not realised another dance had begun was really a trifle thin, he told himself. They must have been very much engrossed in one another's company if it were true.

"We'd best be getting back," he said coldly, taking her arm in a possessive manner. "They want everybody for a Paul Jones before the interval. Incidentally, I think Dinah was wondering where you are, Dick."

"You surprise me," said Dick, in a tone of bored good humour.

Pat glanced at him quickly, aware of Len's obvious displeasure as well as of the satirical amusement in Dick's eyes.

He gave her a glance as much as to say: "What are you worrying about? There's nothing like a little touch of jealousy to egg a fellow on, you know!"

The trouble was, she told herself miserably, she did not want Len to be egged on in that way. If you loved someone you trusted them. If not—

"So there you all are!" Dinah greeted them with her most brilliant smile. "Come along, you're just in time for the Paul Jones!"

THREE hours later Dinah followed Pat into the house after bidding their escorts good-night. A light had been left burning in the hall, but the rest of the house was in darkness.

Pat pulled off her wrap and flung it down on the old oak settle standing against one wall, and ran her fingers through her hair. To judge by the set of her mouth she was in a belligerent mood.

"I'm going to make some coffee," she said abruptly. "That tea at the dance was simply frightful. Would you like some?"

"Very much," said Dinah promptly. She followed her sister into the kitchen and closed the door so that their father would not be disturbed.

"What's the matter?" she enquired casually, a little later, as she sipped her coffee—Pat stood by the window, looking out—"You seem upset!"

Pat wheeled round.

"Upset?" she repeated, her cheeks flushing. "I should think I am. It was bad enough having Len coming in search of me and carting me back to the hall as if I were a naughty child, without the rest!"

Dinah smiled indulgently.

"The rest being—Jill Bennett?" she said softly. "What else did you expect? You practically quarrelled with Len, didn't you?"

"I don't care. If he thinks I am going to play second fiddle to Jill Bennett he's making a mistake." Pat said stormily. "He practically made a dead set at her for the rest of the evening and Jill was only too ready to play up!"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked the other. "You're in love with Len—don't tell me you're not!—so it's up to you. Or are you going to stand tamely by and let Jill get away with it?"

"Whether I'm in love with Len or not is beside the point," said Pat shortly. She put down her cup, her hands trembling. "If—if I knew he was in love with me then I wouldn't have to worry about Jill Bennett

or anyone else. If he isn't, then nothing I can do will make the slightest difference."

"I think you're being rather hard on Len," said Dinah, in a musing tone. "After all, you were pretty horrid to him during the interval. In fact, you snubbed him unmercifully once or twice so that I wondered what he had done to deserve it. Dick noticed it as well."

"Well, he asked for it," pouted her sister. "He—he practically accused me of going outside to flirt with Dick!"

"There you are, then," said Dinah, carrying her cup and saucer to the sink. "The fact that he became annoyed tells you all you want to know, doesn't it? Anyway, it's your affair. Only, don't say I didn't warn you. Len is as likely to go off at a tangent as the next man."

Alone in her bedroom a little later, Pat slowly undressed, a prey to a feeling of sadness and depression that weighed heavily upon her.

Up to now, both she and Dinah had lived very much in a groove and though at times she had wished she could escape, she had been, on the whole, more than content with her life. Judged from some standpoints it might have seemed a dull life, but up to now it had been brightened by her love for Len.

Up to now! A wealth of anguish was summed up in the stark little phrase. Before he came home from Hong Kong she had been so sure of Len. Too sure, perhaps. True, he had never told her openly that he loved her, but she had felt that he would do so one day.

But now it seemed as if the Len who had gone away, and the Len who had come back, were two quite different persons.

In the old days he had talked a great deal to her about himself, knowing that she would understand. Then his sole object in becoming a doctor had been to enrol himself amongst those who served their fellow men and women, often without reward and with no thought of personal advancement.

But now he seemed to have forgotten all that! His ideas had changed and with them his entire outlook, so that she felt as if they no longer spoke the same language. Beside that, what had happened at the social that night became insignificant—unimportant.

SOMETIME later she awoke from a deep, dreamless sleep to hear the urgent ring of the telephone bell in her father's bedroom.

Every night when he went to bed Dr. Merrilees switched the telephone through to the extension at his bedside table. More often than not neither of the girls would hear it ring, for he was a light sleeper and answered it at once.

Pat lay for a moment trying to make out what was wrong. For a few seconds nothing seemed to fall into place and then she sat bolt upright, the sleep banished from her brain. The telephone was still ringing! It was not being answered!

In a flash she sprang out of bed and seized a wrap.

Flinging it around her shoulders she raced across the landing to her father's room, the door of which stood open.

One glance told her what had happened, for her father's bed was empty, the covers thrown back, his slippers lying on the rug.

Dinah appeared in the open doorway behind her, wearing a pale blue dressing gown

"What's the matter, Pat?" she asked sleepily.

The bell pealed again—

Pat hurried round to the other side of the bed and picked up the receiver.

"Hullo? This is Doctor Merrilees' house. Can I help you?"

The agitated voice which came to her across the wire was one she recognised. It belonged to the wife of a farmer on the edge of the moors.

"Is that you, Miss Pat? Can I speak to the doctor, please? It's very urgent."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ruggles," Pat replied worriedly. "My father is out on a call, I'm afraid. If you can hold on for a moment I'll try to find out where he has gone. He usually puts it down on his desk pad."

"Oh, please, can you get hold of him, Miss Pat? It's my Johnny—I think he's choking to death. He's blue in the face and can't get his breath—" The words ended on a sob.

"I'll be as quick as I can," Pat said, and laid the receiver down. She turned to Dinah. "It's Mrs. Ruggles from Wayleave Farm. Johnny is very ill and she's afraid he's dying."

"What is it—convulsions?" asked Dinah.

"It can't be. He's nearly seven!"

Pat ran downstairs taking them two at a time, and switched on the surgery light. A message pad was lying on her father's desk and on it were the words, "Accident call. Seabay Crossroads. 2.13."

Pat ran back upstairs; Dinah was waiting for her on the landing.

"I don't know what to do," she said thoughtfully. "Daddy must have had an accident call—he's gone to Seabay Crossroads! It's impossible to get hold of him that I can see."

"We might try the police," suggested Dinah.

"It would take too long," replied Pat.

She went into the bedroom, and picked up the receiver again.

"Mrs. Ruggles? I'm terribly sorry but my father has gone out to an accident. I'll try to get a message to him but I couldn't say when he would get to you." She hesitated, her brain working frantically. Then: "I've just thought of something, Mrs. Ruggles. Listen! Can you give me some idea of what is wrong? Has Johnny swallowed something do you think?"

"No, it's nothing like that, Miss Pat. He's not been well—he complained of feeling bad yesterday but we thought it was a cold, like. Now he's blue in the face—"

"All right," said Pat, wasting no more time. "Prop him up on pillows as high as you can and try to get him to breathe deeply. I'll get a doctor to you as quickly as possible."

She rang off and kept the receiver depressed for a moment before dialling another number.

In the doorway Dinah watched her curiously.

"What are you going to do, Pat?" she asked puzzled.

"Ring Len," answered Pat, rapidly dialling. "He's not in practise here but this is an emergency." She paused, holding the receiver to her ear, her brows knitted. "Hullo! Is that you, Madge? This is Pat—Pat Merrilees. Can I speak to Len, please? It's very urgent."

She stood for a moment, a look of im-

patience crossing her face. Then—

"I know it's late, Madge, but it's a case of sudden illness. Daddy is out on a case and we can't get hold of him. Please tell Len to hurry. Thank you."

She drew a deep breath and turned to look at Dinah, placing a hand over the mouthpiece.

"That's Madge all over," she whispered. "She started to tell me that Len was asleep and seemed to think that I was either mad or doing something frightful in ringing him up at this time of the night."

Dinah smiled.

"Madge is a stickler for convention," she said, with a slight shrug. "Still, if she calls him that's the main thing. I——"

She broke off as Pat spoke into the telephone again.

"Len? This is Pat. Daddy is out on an accident case and Mrs. Ruggles has telephoned. She says——" Rapidly she repeated what she knew, adding: "I told her I'd get someone to go out to see what was wrong. Will you go, please?"

There was another pause. Dinah could faintly hear a crackle in the earphone.

Then Pat spoke again.

"Yes, of course I'll come with you if you think it is necessary, Len," she said. "I can be ready in five minutes. Is there anything you want to take? Yes. Yes, I know where they are. I'll have them ready. Thank you, Len."

She replaced the receiver and turned to her sister.

"Len is coming at once—he's going to use Dick's car," she said, speaking rapidly. "He seems to think it might be a rare case of diphtheria and he wants me to help him. He's calling to pick up some of daddy's instruments—things he hasn't got with him—and a steriliser. Will you get one out while I put some clothes on?"

Dinah gave her a curious little smile as she turned away to the door.

"I always said you ought to marry a doctor," she said, over her shoulder.

HOPELESS YEARNING.

AS dawn came up over the moors, the trees behind the farm buildings gradually changed colour, turning from black to light grey.

Len Blake bent over the narrow bed, his long, sensitive fingers holding the unconscious child's wrist, his head bent a little as if he were trying to hear the fluttering heartbeats that would tell him his long fight had not been in vain.

In the room there was a silence that could almost be felt, a hush in which no one spoke or moved.

White-faced and distraught, Mrs. Ruggles stood beside her husband, her work-worn hands trembling. Pat was on the other side of the bed, the damp curls clinging to her brow, feeling that if the tension lasted much longer she would break down.

At length Len raised his head and looked across at her, something like a smile at the back of his eyes. He nodded, as if satisfied, and turned to Mr. and Mrs. Ruggles.

"He'll be all right," he said quietly. "The ambulance should be here in another half hour, so if you would just get a few things together, we can get him to hospital straight away."

It was like the snapping of a tense spring. The farmer, a burly, thick-set man, put out

a hand gropingly, to find it clasped by his wife, who turned to him with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Tom!" she said brokenly.

"There, there, my dear, don't take on so," he said clumsily. He looked across at Len, his eyes shining with a strange light. "No words of mine can say, 'Thank 'ee', doctor. Our eldest boy was killed in Kenya and Johnny is all we have left."

"Don't thank me. Thank Miss Merrilees here," said Len modestly. "If it hadn't been for her——" He shrugged.

"You'll be wanting a cup o' tea. I know I do," said Mrs. Ruggles, the practical side of her nature asserting itself. She dabbed her eyes and turned away. Then she stopped and looked back at Len. "You—you're *sure* he'll be all right now, doctor?"

"As sure as anyone can be in the circumstances, Mrs. Ruggles," he replied quietly. "They'll take that tube out when he gets to hospital and make him comfortable. In the meantime you don't have to worry."

A little later he stepped outside into the cool, clean air of the morning.

Pat was leaning back against a wall, her face uplifted. She turned as he approached, noticing suddenly the marks of weariness in his face.

"I've just cleared the tube and left his mother sitting with him," he said. He looked away down the road which became lost in a fold of the moors. "What time did they say the ambulance would be here when you phoned, Pat?"

"They didn't actually give a time, Len," she said. "But they promised to be here as quickly as they could."

"That's all right, then." He lit a cigarette. "I'm anxious to get him to hospital before he comes to, if that's possible." He grinned. "Taking it all round, it's been quite a night!"

Pat smiled shakily. Quite a night was a masterpiece of understatement, she reflected, with wry humour.

I had been three o'clock when she and Len had arrived at the farm, to be greeted with almost hysterical relief by the farmer and his wife.

Thereafter it had been a revelation to Pat to see the way Len had got down to work.

They had been taken into the room where the little boy was lying, his face suffused, his mind obviously wandering. Len had made the briefest of possible examinations. It was as he had suspected—a rare case of diphtheria. The boy had never been immunised.

"Pat I want the kitchen table scrubbed and covered with a clean sheet," Len had said. "Get the steriliser going first, though. I'll get out the instruments."

Pat had nodded. She was not her father's daughter for nothing.

What Len had done would have been a commonplace occurrence in a well-equipped hospital with a proper operating theatre. But in the dimly-lit farm kitchen it had been a very different matter.

Briefly he had explained to the child's parents that it was necessary to make an incision in the sick child's throat, below the choked air passages, and to insert a tube through which he could breathe.

"You'll have to help me," he had said to Pat, when they were almost ready. "We haven't brought operating gowns so we shall have to manage without. But scrub the table first—here's some soap."

He had taken it for granted that she would know what to do, or, at any rate, to carry out his instructions quickly.

They had carried the child into the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket, and laid him on the well-scrubbed table. Len had administered the anaesthetic—a mere whiff of chloroform which, he had said in a low voice to Pat, was all he had with him.

Never would she forget the tense seconds that had passed before Len had looked up and nodded. She had passed him the silver tube that had been lying in the sterilizer, holding it on some sterilised wool to cool. For a moment he had bent over the child, his fingers strong and deft as the tube had been placed in position.

It had been like watching a miracle performed before her very eyes. Instantly, it had seemed, the first whistling gasp of air drawn into the tortured little lungs had brought relief and by the time the child had been laid back in his bed, his breathing had been almost normal again!

Later, Pat had telephoned to the hospital at Seabay and, giving Len's name, had requested that an ambulance be sent to the farm to pick up the young patient.

"You'll be glad to get home and go to bed, I imagine," said Len, breaking a short silence. "You must be all in. I don't know what I would have done without you, though. You were simply splendid, Pat."

"I don't feel as tired as all that," she said, with a little sigh. She turned her head towards him. "What did daddy say when you spoke to him on the 'phone?"

"He asked if I had begun stealing his patients already," he chuckled. "Dinah had told him what happened, of course. I said I didn't think it was necessary for him to drag all the way out here, as I had done all that could be done, so he is going to see little Johnny at the hospital. He seemed relieved more than anything I think. From what little he told me I imagine he had been kept pretty busy at the scene of the road accident."

"Poor daddy!" said Pat feelingly. "According to the time he telephoned he couldn't have got back much before half past five."

"He didn't. He telephoned as soon as he got in. However, all's well that ends well. And, if I am not mistaken, here comes the ambulance!"

PAT went straight to bed as soon as Len dropped her at the house.

But she woke at eleven, washed and dressed and went downstairs, feeling decidedly better than she had done some hours earlier.

Her father was crossing the hall as she appeared.

"Hullo, my dear," he greeted her, with a twinkle in his eyes. "And how is the new nurse this morning?"

"Much better, thank you," she laughed. She linked her arm in his. "Why didn't I become a woman doctor? Then I could have become your assistant and saved you from having to get up in the middle of the night."

"Pooh! Getting up at night never harmed me yet," he replied pinching her cheek. "Hungry?"

"A little," she confessed. She glanced at the grandfather clock at the end of the hall. "Gracious! Look at the time. I must see about lunch."

"I've seen about it, dear," said Dinah.

appearing from the kitchen. "I took the day off. Miss Emmett is very kindly taking my class for me. I didn't know how long you might be going to sleep, you see," she added.

Over coffee Dr. Merrilees told her the latest news of little Johnny Ruggles.

"There's not the slightest doubt that Len saved the child's life," he said. "Not only that, but he made a remarkable job of that operation. It could not have been bettered in a first class operating theatre."

"I didn't know what to do," Pat confessed. "Mrs. Ruggles sounded so desperate, and I knew I could never get a message to you. It was then that I thought of Len."

"It's as well that you did," said her father. "Well, I must be off, my dears. I've a lot of calls to make this morning."

"Poor daddy," said Pat, when the door closed behind him. "He works far too hard. I do wish he'd get an assistant."

"He won't do that until he's literally forced to," shrugged Dinah. "He knows, you see, that nearly all his patients have confidence in him, and they might not feel the same about a stranger. If Len were sensible it would be a different matter—he belongs here. The trouble with that young man is, he's in danger of becoming swelled headed with big ideas."

"That's unfair, Dinah," protested Pat rather feebly, at the same time conscious of having thought along much the same lines. "Len feels that he can do so much more for people if he specialises, so he isn't to be blamed for having big ideas."

Dinah's lips quirked, but she said nothing. She had no intention of being drawn into an argument about Len, especially with Pat. Arguments led nowhere, and had an unhappy knack of taking the conversation into channels where it was not safe to venture.

"Help me to clear away and wash up," she said, getting to her feet. "After that I am going to take Buster for a short walk."

DINAH had gone out and Pat was in the garden cutting some flowers when Len appeared. He opened the gate and came in, an expectant smile on his handsome features.

"Good afternoon, Pat!" he greeted. "I hope you are none the worse for your adventures?"

"Oh, I'm fine, thank you, Len," she answered, the colour coming to her cheeks. She held out the basket she was filling. "Aren't these roses gorgeous? It's been a wonderful year for them."

"They are indeed," he said admiringly. Dr. Merrilees was locally famous for his roses. "As you know, they are my favourite flower. What do you call that one?" he added.

"It's a President Hoover," she said, snipping off a bud that was on the point of opening and placing it in his button-hole. "There!" she murmured. "You can have that."

He lifted his lapel and bent his head to smell the fragrance.

"Thank you, Pat," he said, with a little smile. "I shall treasure that all my life."

"Goodness," she returned lightly, looking round for her garden scissors and finding them on the seat where she had laid them. "It's only a rose."

"Only a Rose" he hummed, half under his breath, his eyes crinkling at the

corners. "My favourite flower and my favourite song! There must be a portent in all this somewhere."

"I can't imagine what it can be, then," she said, almost crossly. "You'll make me sorry I gave it to you in a minute."

"I hope I won't," he said, half jestingly. "Though sometimes the temptation to make you cross is well nigh irresistible. You look simply adorable when you are angry!"

"Really?" she said coldly.

"Yes, really!" he declared teasingly. He took the basket from her and hooked it on his arm. "But don't be cross with me now—I've come to eat humble pie."

"You have?"

"Yes. I've come to apologise for behaving like a bear with a sore head at the dance," he explained.

"Oh, that!" Pat dismissed the incident with a shrug. "I've forgotten all about it."

"Then I'm not in your bad books?" he asked, with a whimsical lift of his eyebrows. "I should hate to think that you held anything against me, Pat."

"I don't, Len," she said, with a sigh. "So shall we drop the subject? I hate post-mortems at the best of times."

He was wise enough to take her at her word, and did not, therefore, tell her the reason for the jealousy which had consumed him when he had gone in search of her and had found her with Dick. But the memory of what Jill Bennett had said still rankled with him.

They had been dancing together and quite suddenly, as Dinah had passed with Dick, Jill had glanced significantly up at him.

"Your R.A.F. friend seems very keen on Dinah, I must say, Len," she had murmured. "Rather a pity, don't you think?" "A pity?" he had repeated, frowning. "I don't understand. Why should it be a pity?"

"Oh, it takes a woman to read the signs," Jill had laughed. "You see, I've come to the conclusion that Squadron Leader Randall has fallen for the wrong sister."

The inference had been too pointed to be missed, and Len had felt a little spasm of anger shake him. He had spoken stiffly, his lips suddenly tight.

"I am quite prepared to believe that Dick has fallen for Dinah," he had said curtly, "but to suggest that Pat is keen on him—well, aren't you letting your imagination run away with you, Jill?"

"All right," she had said. "You just wait and see."

It had never occurred to Len that she had said this with the object of lessening his interest in Pat.

"I didn't come only to apologise, Pat," he said, speaking with unusual seriousness. "It was stupid of me to go around with a chip on my shoulder as I did at the social, but, as you say, post-mortem's don't get you anywhere. But what I came to tell you about is that I have had a letter from Professor Cass, in New York. He has confirmed that offer he made me."

"That is what you have been waiting for, isn't it, Len?" she asked, not a bit excited by his news.

"In a way, yes," he answered. He put the basket of roses on a seat under the spreading branches of an oak tree. "There is a vacancy at the Institute of Nervous Diseases in Pennsylvania. The thing is, I have to let him have my answer imme-

diately."

Pat seated herself suddenly, lowering her head, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Of course, you are going to accept the offer, Len?" she asked confusedly.

"That depends," he said thoughtfully. "What do you think I should do, Pat?"

"How can I answer that, Len?" She looked up at him, her eyes suspiciously bright. "You—you made up your mind long ago, as you told me, so what is there to discuss about it?"

"Quite a lot," he said, smiling. "For one thing, I've come to the conclusion that there are other things in life beside the furthering of one's private ambitions, however well-intended they may be, and for another"—his voice dropped to a lower pitch—"we're both in much the same fix. I mean, it sticks out a mile that Dick has eyes for no one but Dinah, and so—"

Pat gazed at him, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"What has that got to do with it, Len?" she exclaimed. "You are not surely suggesting that I would mind if Dick and Dinah became engaged, are you?"

"You—you mean you're not in love with him yourself?" he asked, looking nonplussed. "But I thought—"

"I know what you thought," she cut in, giving him no time to flounder. "But, you see, you are quite mistaken! I like Dick very much, and I should be very pleased if he and Dinah decided to get married." She rose suddenly and picked up the basket. "Please don't let me influence you, one way or another. Not that I flatter myself that I could," she added, with an unhappy laugh.

"Just a moment, Pat." He took the basket and put it down again, retaining his grasp of her hand. "It strikes me that I've been barking up the wrong tree. You see, I thought that the reason you have been keeping me at arms' length was because you had fallen in love with Dick! Jill Bennett hinted as much last night, and then I found you and Dick down at the harbour together! I mean to say, what was I to think?"

Pat tried to pull her hand away.

"If—if I kept you at arms' length, as you put it, it was because I was hurt," she said chokily.

"Hurt?" he repeated. "How did I hurt you?"

"Oh, it's so difficult to explain," she said, with an exasperated sigh. She hesitated a moment, then went on—"It seemed to me that you were different, in some way. There was a time when you would never have considered anything but working here, amongst the people you know and who know you. But all you could think about was becoming a great specialist with rooms in Harley Street!"

Len gave a sudden shout of laughter and drew her closer to him.

"Oh, my dearest, was that what you thought?" he asked tenderly, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Didn't you believe I was sincere when I said that I thought I had a duty to make the best possible use of my talents, such as they are? It was true, though. That is what I did think—until last night, or rather early this morning. You little goose!"

She raised a pair of wondering eyes.

"But, Len, I don't understand. If—if you mean that you have changed your mind about working here, why do you ask me what you are to do?"

"Can't you guess?" he countered gently.

For a moment she searched his face, a question deep in her eyes. Then the rich colour flooded her cheeks, rising in a slow wave from her neck to her temples.

"You—you mean?" she whispered.

"I mean that I love you, Pat darling, and that I can think of no worthier way of using my brains and my powers than to work here in Trevannion Cove, with you at my side to help and encourage me. Now do you see why the answer that I have to give to Professor Cass depends on you alone?"

She met his eyes unflinchingly.

"I have always loved you, Len," she murmured. "That—that is why I was hurt when it seemed that you had forgotten that there—that your place is here. You see, darling, it was like suddenly finding that I had fallen in love with a stranger!"

"My dearest!" he said simply.

He drew her closer to him and as he pressed his lips to hers, Pat knew that the future had a happiness for them that nothing could transcend.

"Tell me, what made you change your mind about going away, Len?" she asked a few moments later, still clasped in his arms.

"It was seeing little Johnny struggling for life when we arrived at the Ruggles place this morning," he said thoughtfully. "I realised suddenly that if I hadn't been here—if you hadn't been able to get hold of me—he might have died. I knew, then, that the scales were weighted against me, for what could outweigh the value of one human life?"

"Oh, Len! I'm so glad," she whispered, tears brimming in her eyes. But they were tears of happiness, not sorrow. She clasped his hand tightly. "You see, when you turned down daddy's offer of a partnership I thought you didn't care about us any more."

"Which merely goes to show what a comedy of errors can arise from nothing at all," he said smilingly. "I, for my part, thought you were being stand-offish because you had fallen in love with Dick. When I saw the two of you together last night I realised that I was as capable of being jealous as the next man! Then, when you snubbed me in front of the others during the interval, I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my world."

"You shouldn't have been so off-hand, then," she said, with a sudden laugh. "You positively glowered at me when I said I had to dance with Dick."

He grinned sheepishly and drew her close again.

"Well, now you know why, so say you have forgiven me, my dearest," he said.

"There's nothing to forgive, Len darling," she whispered, and held up her face for his kiss.

SOME time earlier Dinah had left the house in a black mood.

She walked quickly in the direction of the next cove, following the path along the cliffs, her head bared to the sunshine, with Buster, the dog, bounding along in front.

It was not merely the fact that Pat was so obviously unhappy, due largely to her belief that Len had fallen short of the standards with which, in her girlish romanticism, she had invested him.

There were other and more pressing problems to occupy Dinah's mind. For

instance, she could no longer shut her eyes to the fact that Dick Randall's frequent visits to Trevannion Cove were centred around her; that before long she would have to give him an answer to the questions she read in his eyes.

It was the knowledge that, strive as she might, she could not stifle the love which had come all unbidden to mock her with its futility, for with Len's return, the hopeless yearning she had fought to suppress had risen in her like an overwhelming tide, tugging at her heartstrings until the pain seemed unendurable.

Life had always seemed such a wonderful thing, every moment filled with beauty and meaning, despite her frustrated ambitions to become an artist.

There were other ways in which one could express oneself—if only she could rid herself of the intolerable sense of emptiness that made each day a burden to be endured as best she might.

But she had never felt less sure of herself than now, she reflected bitterly. As Dick's wife she would be sheltered and protected and might even find release from the unendurable heartache that was the price she must pay for loving Len at a distance.

But she could not marry Dick without telling him the truth, and, though she would not admit it, she shrank from seeing the pity creep into his eyes.

Not only that, but in doing so she would be offering a hostage to fortune, for however much they might delude themselves that the page was turned, they could never escape the knowledge that it was there, blotted by her secret tears.

She turned back at last and made her way down a path that came out at the foot of the headland.

She walked on, almost blindly, oblivious of the sea and sky, the wheeling gulls and the waves breaking on the reef.

She did not even see Dick standing where she had first met him until Buster's excited barking aroused her from her thoughts.

"Hullo, Dinah!" he said, almost casually, giving her a quick smile. "The wheel has turned full circle, it seems—you've got the dog this time."

She smiled, and never realised how much her smile gave away.

"Well, I'm not coming to Cullavon with you this time," she said. "But you can come back with me to lunch if you like."

"That's very kind of you, Dinah," he said, and gave her a whimsical glance. "As a matter of fact, I've just come from your place. I went there to ask you to come out with me. Pat told me you had gone for a walk, but she couldn't say in which direction. To tell you the truth, she seemed a little preoccupied."

"What do you mean?" Dinah enquired, with a quirk of her lips. "Pat is tired after being up most of the night, I know, but—"

"Oh, it isn't *that*," he said, when she paused. "But getting engaged is something to think about, isn't it?"

"Getting engaged?" Dinah echoed, her eyes opening to their widest. "Do stop talking nonsense, Dick, and say what you mean."

"I thought I had done so," he answered, with a sudden chuckle. "But if you want it in plain, common-or-garden language, Len and Pat have decided to get married. They told me so when I got there. Not that I needed telling," he added, grinning.

"But—I thought—are you *sure*?"

"Of course I'm sure," he said, with mock indignation. "I had it straight from the—er—horse's mouth, so to speak. Len is going into partnership with your father and wedding bells are going to celebrate the event! Personally, I think it would be a splendid idea to make a double event of it, don't you, Dinah? I mean, it would save such a lot of trouble and expense!"

"A—a double event?" She broke off and stared at him in blank astonishment. "What on earth are you talking about, Dick? You haven't got a touch of sun, have you?"

"No," he said, with another chuckle. "I'm not as mad as all that, though there are some people who would tell you I'm quite mad enough. It just happens that I thought it would be a good idea."

Dinah drew a deep breath.

"Are you proposing to me, by any chance, Dick?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes, of course I am," he replied. "I should have thought that was obvious. 'Everybody knows I'm in love with you.'"

There was a tense pause. Then Dinah uttered a satirical little laugh.

"It must be catching," she said.

"Oh, Dinah, you are the most tantalising person I have ever met," he declared, sighing in despair. "I can't see anything at all funny about it, though you appear to be highly amused. You might let me share the joke, if there is one."

"I didn't laugh for that reason," she said.

"I don't get it," He drew a deep breath. "The fact remains, I fell in love with you the moment I saw you, and if it hadn't been that I felt quite certain you would think I had taken leave of my senses, I would have told you so the time we went to Collavon for tea. If you'll marry me you'll make me the happiest man on earth. I—I'll do anything you want—give up the R.A.F. and take a safe job somewhere—it doesn't matter so long as you are content. *Will* you marry me, Dinah?"

A short silence followed. Dinah was, for once in her life, at a complete loss what to say.

Then—

"If I told you that I was in love with someone else—someone who isn't in love with me and who never will be—would you still want to marry me, Dick?" she said slowly.

"I would marry you on any terms, my dearest, and count it a privilege to be your husband," he replied gravely. He looked at her keenly. "I think I can guess what it is you are trying to tell me, Dinah. But it doesn't make the slightest difference as far as I am concerned. I love you and I believe that you will come to love me in time. At any rate, I'm prepared to take a chance."

There was another short silence. For a moment Dinah struggled with her indecision—a queer feeling of having suddenly been re-born coming to life within her. Then she raised her face to his, looking at him for a long, tense moment, her eyes aglow with shy wonderment.

Then she said breathlessly—

"If—if you really believe that I can make you happy—if you can be content with what I can give you, Dick—I will marry you, whenever you wish," she whispered breathlessly.

"My darling!" he said huskily, and took

her into his arms. "Oh, Dinah, my dearest love! Do you really mean that?"

"Yes," she answered, with a little sigh, resting her head on his shoulder. The pity she had feared to see was absent from his eyes and in them she saw only a deep and abiding tenderness. "Yes, Dick, I do mean it. I know with you at my side I will always be safe."

A YEAR later Dinah sat at the wheel of a little red sports car near the control tower of a small aerodrome belonging to a famous aircraft construction company.

Like others who were standing near, and officials in the control tower, she was watching a tiny silver speck high above as it looped and turned before plunging earthwards in a screaming power dive.

Just as it seemed inevitable that it must crash the pilot levelled off and brought the jet engined machine skimming in to land.

"Marvellous!" muttered someone near her. "Simply marvellous. You've got a wonderful aircraft there, Sir George."

The head of the firm which had made the machine glanced in Dinah's direction and smiled.

"You're quite right," he said. "A wonderful aircraft and the finest test pilot in the country. It was a good day for us when we persuaded Squadron Leader Randall to resign his commission with the R.A.F. and join the company." He nodded in the direction of the red sports car. "That's his young wife over there. A charming girl. They're both coming to dinner to-night, so you'll have an opportunity of meeting her."

"I shall look forward to it," said the first speaker, who was a highly placed official in the Ministry of Supply. "It's always a source of wonder to me how a girl like that has the courage to watch her husband take his life in his hands as your test pilot was doing just now."

"You'll understand that better when you've met Mrs. Randall," Sir George replied, as they moved away. "She has complete confidence in her husband, you see, coupled with the kind of faith that moves mountains! I look on them as a perfect example of a truly happy couple."

Unaware of being the subject of discussion Dinah waited for Dick to join her, which he did a few minutes later.

He climbed into the car and sank down beside her, dropping his flying kit on to the back seat as she drove off.

"Thank goodness that's over," he said, drawing a deep breath. "It's always a strain showing off to these Ministry blokes. How did you think it went, darling?"

"Perfectly," Dinah answered, with a little smile. "I think they had their hearts in their mouths once or twice, though. So had I, for that matter."

"Pooh, there's nothing to worry about," he said, running his fingers through his hair. "The P.2 Zero will do all that I ask it to do and more. That's *some* aircraft, believe me."

Dinah smiled at his enthusiasm and presently stopped the car outside a cream-washed country cottage standing back from the road.

"You'll never grow up, will you?" she said, as she got out.

"Not so long as you don't, darling," he

smiled.

A little later he joined her in the cool, tastefully furnished sitting room, having bathed and changed into grey flannels and blue blazer.

"Ah, tea!" he said. "That's what I've been wanting. Don't forget we're supposed to be dining with Sir George this evening. Be prepared to dazzle the Big Noises from the Ministry—I may get an additional bonus if we land the contract for supplying the P.2 Zero to the R.A.F."

"I'll do my best," said Dinah demurely, pouring out tea. "There's a letter from Pat, by the way. They want us to go down to Trevannion for the week-end if you can spare the time." She handed him his tea. "She's going to have a baby," she added.

Dick smiled.

"That's wonderful news," he exclaimed. "Pat must be very happy."

"She sounds very thrilled. I'll give you the letter to read after tea." Dinah perched herself on the arm of a chair and sipped her tea thoughtfully. "I'm thrilled, too," she went on, speaking half to herself. "It will be fun being an aunt."

Dick put down his cup and came over to her. Taking hers from her, he placed it carefully on the table and cupped her chin in his hand, looking down into her sweet face.

"It's fun being married," he said. "Or don't you think so any more?"

Dinah laughed.

"It has its points," she admitted. Then she sighed, her eyes becoming grave. "Are you sure it's fun, Dick? I know you gave up the R.A.F. for my sake, but don't you sometimes regret that you did?"

He shook his head.

"Nary a regret, as my chief mechanic used to say," he replied truthfully, a tender light coming into his eyes. "I gave up the R.A.F. because I couldn't risk being posted overseas while my wife kept the home fires burning in England. I also realised, when I was offered the job of chief test pilot here, that I could make a useful contribution to Britain's defences. That plane I was showing off this afternoon is going to put us way ahead of everyone else and that means a very great deal, not only to us, but to the generations that follow. For we have to be strong to endure, so that in the end this troubled world of ours will know the true meaning of lasting peace."

Dinah's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Dick," she murmured. "It makes me so very happy to hear you say that. I—I've worried about it quite a lot. I felt sure that there must be times when you would miss your old R.A.F. life."

"Then you worried unnecessarily, my sweet," he said, seating himself on the chair arm next to her and putting his arm around her shoulders. "Why should I regret the rather aimless existence I led before I met you, any more than Len regrets settling down to an ordinary doctor's life in Trevannion Cove? And you will admit that he and Pat are happy won't you?"

"Yes, of course," she murmured. She got up suddenly and walked to the open doorway, looking out on the pleasant garden. Then she turned. "Are you happy, Dick?"

"Of course I am, my darling," he said.

She shook her head, smiling oddly at him.

"No. I mean—really happy?"

Dick looked puzzled.

"What do you mean by that, my sweet?"

She came back to where he was seated and put her hands on his shoulders, looking down at him with eyes that were wet.

"Do you remember, when I said I would marry you, that I told you I was in love with someone else?" she asked. "You said, then, that you felt sure I would come to love you in time."

"I remember, of course," he said, still looking a little puzzled. "But——"

"It was Len," she broke in, before he could finish. "You guessed that, didn't you?"

"Yes, I guessed. But Len was in love with Pat and she with him and so——"

"And so I had to play odd-girl-out," she finished for him, a hint of laughter trembling at the corners of her mouth. "Oh, Dick, for a test pilot you can be horribly dense at times. 'Don't you know what I am trying to tell you?'"

He got up and placed his fingers on her wrists, grasping them lightly.

"You mean——" he said wonderingly, a new light coming into his eyes.

"I mean that I'm not odd-girl-out any more, darling," she murmured, with a blush. "I've learned that there are degrees of love and that whatever I felt for Len, it isn't the same at all. You see, I'm very much in love with—my husband!"

Dick caught his breath. At something he read in Dinah's eyes he found the answer to a great many things. There are hopes and joys beyond the power of human destiny to control and chief amongst them was the need for fulfilment.

He drew her into his arms, and as he bent his head and found her lips, he knew that Dinah had come into her kingdom at last—the kingdom of love in which they would dwell together for the rest of their lives.

THE END.

APT NAME.

Donald had recently bought a second-hand car. "I understand that giving pet names to cars is the fashion just now," remarked a friend. "By the way, have you bestowed a name upon yours yet?" "Yes," replied Donald. "I've decided to call my little bus 'The Guiding Star'." "A jolly good name, too," commented the other. "I suppose you call it that because it takes you everywhere you want to go?" "Well, not exactly," replied Donald. "The reason is I always seem to be underneath it!"

AMUSEMENT.

The smart young lawyer raised a laugh with his story of a police-court incident he had witnessed the previous year. The day after Boxing Day a prisoner with a black eye was brought before the magistrate, charged with various breaches of the peace. After hearing the evidence the magistrate said: "So you had a merry Christmas and ended up with a fight. Well, pay 10s. 6d." "But, sir," said the prisoner, "I don't mind paying 10s. for a good fight; but what's the odd sixpence for?" And the magistrate blandly remarked: "Oh, that's the amusement tax!"

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