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FAMILY JOURNAL

STARDOM'S FOOL

By Kitty Carey

IN SEARCH OF FAME

CHRISTINA GRANT'S mother had been on the stage practically all her life and had learnt her profession and gained her experience the hard way. Deserted by her actor husband, soon after Christina's birth, she had been forced to support both herself and her child until Christina became old enough to go out into the world. All that the girl knew about acting. her mother had taught her.

Of course her good looks helped. Age twenty, Christina had bright golden hair, falling in waves to her shoulders, iris-blue eyes set in a small oval face, delicate features and a figure any woman would have envied,

Now. as she sat in front of the dressing-table mirror in her bed-sitter, Christina was wondering whether or not, having danced with her last night after the show, Max Thornton would have forgotten all about her.

Although tall, dark and handsome, what was far more important, from Christina's point of view, was the fact that Max was the son of Julian Thornton who owned several Midland and London theatres, which were known as the "Thornton Group".

It was a common saying in the "Profession" that to be with the Thornton Group was almost as good as having a job for life. Nobody was ever sacked unless they did something very bad.

To have been with Thornton's was a reference and a testimonial all in one.

And last night she had danced with Max Thornton who, had he chose could have got her into one of his father's shows as easy as winking.

At present she was merely a "bit actress" playing small parts in a second-rate company touring The Midlands. There was, she well knew. little future to it. It was just a case of earning one's bread and butter and hoping you might be spotted by a theatrical talent scout sometime or other.

It had been by the merest of chances that she had met Max Thornton.

Her particular friend, Mavis Glynn, had persuaded her to go to a theatrical night-club, in the big Midland town, after the show, and it was there that they had been introduced to Max.

He had immediately asked Christina to dance with him and had practically monopolised her company for the rest of the evening.

Now, as she put down her hair-brush, the door opened and a girl's voice said: "May I come in?"

"Of course, Mavis," answered Christina, swinging round. "Don't tell me," she added in some alarm, "that there's a rehearsal call for this morning!"

"Not that I know of, darling," answered Mavis, sitting on the edge of the bed. "But tell me," she went on, "how do you feel after last night?"

"If you mean, have I a hangover—no," said Christina. "My strongest drink was fruit-cup."

"I don't mean that," said Mavis a little impatiently.

Christina knew she wanted to know what she thought of Max Thornton and whether she had made a date with him. It was possible, she thought, that Mavis might have had an eye on him herself.

"Oh, you mean Max," she said casually, picking up her lipstick. "I rather liked him. He certainly is handsome and knows how to dance."

"You ought to know, dearie, he danced with you practically all evening," said Mavis.

"Darling, how could I help it?" said Christina in a pained tone. "I couldn't pretend I wanted to sit out, could I? But tell me," she added, suddenly remembering, "who was the fair boy with you?"

"His name's Alec Wade—he seems to be a friend of Max's," supplied Mavis. "He's nice."

Christina nodded, recalling that Alec had been about to ask her for a dance, when Max had taken her on the floor. All the same, in that short moment she had experienced an odd little thrill as her eyes had encountered Alec's eager grey ones.

"Is he in a show?" she asked.

"I don't think he's even in the profession," Mavis replied. "Anyway, he didn't talk 'shop'."

"That's something in his favour—actors never make good husbands," said Christina as she went to the wardrobe. "Not only that, but they are nearly always hard-up or out of work or away on tour. Any actor's wife has a pretty thin time, if you ask me."

"Actor or no actor, I wasn't thinking of trying to hook Alec, if that's what you mean," said Mavis a trifle sarcastically.

Christina laughed outright.

"Darling, do girls ever discuss men without having the thought of marriage somewhere in the back of their minds?" she said, her voice muffled because she was struggling into a frock.

"My reason for calling was to ask if you'd come for coffee at The Medina," said Mavis, ignoring the last remark. "Alec or Max might be there."

"Then I'd love to, darling," answered Christina speeding up her dressing.

The Medina Cafe was a recognised rendezvous in Brumbridge for people connected with the stage. There was a dance-floor and a small orchestra.

Five minutes later they entered the cafe and stood for a moment searching for a vacant table. And as they did so. a deep voice sounded behind them.

"Anything wrong with this one?"

Christina gave a theatrical little start. She had pretended not to see Max Thornton sitting near the door as they had entered, though actually she had seen him at once. With his thick black hair, tanned face and sparkling eyes. he looked even handsomer than when she had seen him last night.

With smiling acceptance they took the two chairs which he pulled out for them.

And as they sat down. Alec Wade entered through the swing doors.

"Why, hello, Alec!" greeted Max. "Room for a small one here. You know Miss Grant, don't you? And Miss Glynn, of course, since you danced with her most of last night."

"That," grinned Alec "is because you didn't give me a chance to dance with Miss Grant."

"H'm, that sounds to me rather tactless," complained Mavis with a little pout.

"One of those great thoughts better left unsaid, eh?" grinned Max.

"You are both mistaken," returned Alec, equal to the occasion. "It was a subtle way of commiserating with Mavis for having danced with the same man practically all the evening. I felt some sort of apology was called for."

"How clever of you," laughed Mavis. "I'd never have thought of wriggling out of it that way."

The waitress appeared and while she was setting out the cups, Christina took the opportunity of observing Alec more closely.

He was certainly good-looking with his fair hair and laughing grey eyes. There was something fascinating, too, about that boyish grin of his.

Yet in spite of this there was a suggestion of stern masterfulness about him—almost of ruthlessness, perhaps—which she found very puzzling.

"How long are you staying here?" he asked her, offering the sugar bowl.

"We shall be here for the rest of the week, then we'll rest a week," she said.

"Will you spend that vacant week here?" he asked.

"We don't know yet. Mr. Bentley—our producer—may decide to go on to Dudley if we're to be followed here by another company," said Christina.

He still puzzled her. What was he exactly? Not an actor, she felt sure. Of course he could be a producer or a manager. That would account for him being on such friendly terms with Max.

"Have you seen our show?" Mavis put in.

"As a matter of fact, no," he confessed. "But I've promised myself to come and see it to-night."

"I have exactly three lines to say in each act," said Christina with a little shrug as she accepted a cigarette from Max on her other side.

"They gave her that part," he said, snapping shut his case, "because she's so lovely that the audience gaze at her instead of listening to what she's saying."

"Thank you, kind sir. It would be gratifying to be able to believe that," said Christina ruefully.

"Have you a matinee to-day?" Alec asked.

"No," she answered. "Not till the day after to-morrow——"

"Good! Then what about coming for a

little spin in my car?" he put in eagerly.

"Hi, steady on old man, that's the very question I was going to ask her myself," protested Max.

"Too late, Max," grinned Alec. "First come, first served."

"And after I introduced you both and all," grumbled Max. "Talk about that for gratitude. Never introduce your donah to a pal, is what I say."

"Didn't know she was your donah," laughed Alec.

"Remember me—I'm still here!" said Mavis tartly at this juncture.

Both men turned to her, aware that they had been very ungallant in urging one girl to make a date with them while ignoring the other.

As usual, Alec proved equal to the occasion.

"My dear, I thought you'd had enough of me already," he said. "You complained just now that last night I didn't give you a chance to dance with any other man. I didn't want to force myself on you again, you know."

In the end it was agreed that Mavis and Max should go off on their own after lunch, leaving Christina and Alec to do the same.

Though somewhat flattered that two men should have come near to quarrelling over her, Christina was not sure that victory had not gone to Mavis. After all, she would be going out with Max who, if he chose could do big things for her in the theatre world—and doubtless would if she played her cards properly.

On the other hand, while she liked Alec she did not know much about him or what an outing with him might lead to.

WHEN she met Alec later on Christina was a little disappointed to see that his car, though big and powerful, was old-fashioned.

Guessing what was in her mind, he laughed.

"Not what you'd call posh, I admit," he said. "All the same she's a goer and about twice as strongly built as the latest models. I bought her second-hand."

"Oh, yes," murmured Christina, trying to show interest.

"I prefer a second-hand car if I know it has been treated well," he said. "It means the engine and gears have been tried and tested. No running-in, no undiscovered weakness and no need to worry if you scratch the paint."

With that he assisted her into the seat beside the driver, got in himself and pressed the self-starter.

Meanwhile Christina was thinking: Was his so-called preference for second-hand cars merely a fad, or did it mean that he could not afford to buy a modern one? If the latter were so, then he must be comparatively poor and she had no time to waste on poor men.

"I'm taking you up to Brandon Beacon," he said, breaking in on her thoughts. "One gets a marvellous view from there. Know it? It's in the Peak District."

"No, I've never been there," she admitted, wondering whether she had been a fool to come with this man and let Mavis go with Max.

Then she decided she had been a fool, especially as she could have manœuvred it the other way about and let Mavis go with Alec. It looked as if the laugh was on her!

And to think that she, with her determination to "make good" at all costs, had allowed herself to be beguiled by a pair of laughing grey eyes and a fascinating grin. Why hadn't she remembered her mother's advice—whilst you remain on the stage only make friends with people who have money or influence. From now on that must be her creed.

And yet, one had to admit that there was something irresistible about Alec, something which affected her as nothing else had ever done. She could not name it, but it was there.

Just then, as the car slewed round a corner, she was thrown against him, and she experienced a delicious little thrill as their shoulders touched.

But this was all wrong, she sternly told herself. She must snap out of it. One could not take risks when one's career was at stake. That kind of sentiment was for those who could afford it; she was not one of them.

"Lovely country, isn't it?" he said as they drew nearer their destination.

"M'm, lovely," she agreed, looking round at hilly vistas.

"Not," he went on, "that there isn't country I like better. There is a touch of wildness about all this—hills and moors. But delightful as it is, I still prefer something gentler, more domestic, more rural."

"Where would you find that?" she asked, not because she was interested, but because some remark seemed called for.

"Where my home is," he answered, changing down as they started to climb a steep hill. "Nothing awe-inspiring, just little hills and cosy valleys with small, unspoilt villages nuzzling into them."

At last they reached Brandon Beacon and he stopped the car and helped her out.

"There!" he exclaimed, waving his arm to indicate the rolling spread of country.

"It—it's wonderful!" she breathed, and meant it.

"Yes, but in my view too grim," he said. "Imagine what it's like up here in the winter. Not so good, I fancy. The country I like best is, as I said, soft and gentle and heart-warming. Something suggesting happiness and homeliness."

Christina looked at him, puzzled. She had never before met a man who talked like this, and supposed he had a streak of poetry in him.

"What queer things you say," she said. "Well, not queer perhaps, but poetic."

"And is it queer to be poetic?" he asked, quizzically.

"Some people might think so," she said.

By now she had forgotten what the argument was about, for an odd feeling, half-fear, half-joy, had taken possession of her. They were alone on a hill-top. So alone that she could have cried out at the top of her voice, and not a soul would have heard her but him.

"I am absolutely in his power," she told herself with a delicious little thrill.

"Well," he murmured, breaking a silence, "what do you think about it, Christina?"

She looked up at him blankly and tried to bring her thoughts back to what they had been talking about. He must have read the inquiry in her eyes for he laughed.

"We were talking about poetry," he said. "But let's forget about that, one doesn't need to discuss poetry when it's all around one," and again he waved an arm to indicate the scenery. "Shall we sit down for a few moments?" he added.

"If you like," she agreed, and they sat down on the springy turf near a clump of flowering furze.

"Do you know what they say about furze?" he asked, nodding towards the flaming yellow bush.

"No," she said, rather taken off her guard. "What do they say?"

"That when furze is not in bloom, kissing is out of favour," he answered. "The point of that is," he added, drawing closer to her, "furze blooms more or less all the year round."

"Oh," she murmured, feeling her heart beat faster.

His arm stole round her waist and she knew that if she wanted to escape, now was the time to do it.

She had only to spring to her feet, utter some exclamation about it getting late, and he would have to get back into the car and take her home.

Yet somehow neither the effort nor the words would come to her. She felt as if some invisible force were chaining her to this spot, depriving her of all power to move.

Now his arm had tightened about her and he was drawing her closer to him, so close that she felt the roughness of his jacket.

"Kiss me, darling," he whispered gently.

She made no sound, no movement but lay still in his arms, aware that his eyes were peering deep into her own, hypnotising her with their intensity so that she could only stare back.

She was trembling, but whether from fear or happiness, she did not know, and her heart was pounding. But most of all she was aware of the nearness of his lips.

And then they were on hers, delivering fierce, passionate kisses that took her breath away, filling her with a joy so complete that it was almost an agony. She did not move in his arms, but surrendered her lips to his, drowned in the surging tide of bliss which swept over her, engulfing her in their sweet darkness.

At last he raised his head, breathless and shaken. At the same moment Christina's tide of bliss receded and she felt a faint anger both with him and with herself.

Wrenching herself free of his embrace she sat up. A passing cloud had obscured the sun and the air had gone chill.

"What's the matter?" Alec inquired, and she trembled slightly.

"It's getting late," she murmured.

"For what?" he queried, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at her.

She shrugged, without answering, and started to brush fragments of grass from her skirt.

Once more she was her cool, calculating self with her eyes fixed on the goal of success and the means of reaching it. After all, she told herself, with a mental shrug, this was only an episode. By to-morrow she would have forgotten all about it and would be thinking of Max.

"All right, let's go," Alec said rising.

He went to the car and opened the door for her, grinning in that boyish way he had.

"Bit of an anti-climax, isn't it?" he continued. "Still, one can't stay in Paradise for ever, I suppose."

He got in beside her, pressed the self-starter and steered back on to the winding road leading down the hill.

"Do you ride?" he asked her after a while.

"You mean—a bicycle?" she queried, startled out of her secret thoughts.

"Of course not," he laughed. "A horse."

"Oh, I've had lessons, but I don't think I'm what you'd call a good horsewoman," she said.

"I asked because I was wondering whether you'd care to have a canter with me in the morning," he suggested.

Once more he had taken her by surprise. A man who owned horses, Christina told herself, could not be poor. On the other hand, they need not be his own horses, he could hire them from a local riding school.

"Well?" he prompted.

"I'm not quite sure," she answered, unable to make up her mind. "There

might be a rehearsal to-morrow morning. There often is when we have no matinee in the afternoon."

"Anyway, I'll come round and see." he promised.

When the car stopped outside her lodgings she jumped out before he could open the door for her.

"Thanks for the trip," she said over her shoulder. "It—it was very pleasant."

"The pleasure was entirely mine," he called back, and she didn't know whether he meant it, or was just being sarcastic.

Anyway, it did not matter, she told herself as she ran upstairs to her room. It had been rather fun, but it must not happen again.

In future it would be Max who took her out. for with Max was her only hope of achieving stardom.

She had just changed her frock when Mavis came into the room holding two tickets.

"Free tickets for the circus," she said joyfully.

"Circus?" repeated Christina. Then remembering. "Oh, that one just outside the town."

"Yes," said Mavis. "The advance agent gave them to me at The Medina this morning. I haven't been to a circus since I was so high."

"Nor I," admitted Christina. "It might be rather fun."

SOON after breakfast next morning, Christina was told by her landlady that a gentleman had called to see her.

"I couldn't ask him in, miss," she added, "because he's got a couple of horses with him."

Smiling. Christina went to the front door and stepped out. There was Alec in immaculate riding kit astride a handsome chestnut mare, and holding a lovely bay.

"Coming?" he called eagerly.

"I can't, Alec," she answered, with genuine disappointment, "there's a rehearsl this morning."

This was true; before leaving the theatre after the performance last night, the girls had been warned for a rehearsal at ten o'clock this morning.

She heard him say something which sounded suspiciously like "Damn!". Then:

"What about to-morrow morning?"

He looked so handsome as he sat his somewhat restive mount, that Christina felt her heart soften dangerously.

"I can't promise," she said. "There may be another rehearsal to-morrow morning as we have a matinee in the afternoon."

"Anyway, I'll chance it and come round about the same time to-morrow," he said.

He saluted with his riding-crop, turned the horses, and trotted off down the road.

Christina watched till they were out of sight then, with a little sigh, returned to her own room, puzzled and uneasy.

She would have loved a canter, especially with such a debonair escort. The horses were beautiful, too, and not the sort of hacks that would have been let out by a stable. Could it be that they really belonged to him? And if they did——

She resolutely put the thought from her mind and told herself that she must not lose sight of the fact that Max was the man she must cultivate if she were to achieve her ambition. Love was a luxury that a girl in her position simply could not afford.

But that was her head talking, her heart said that she loved Alec.

But her head told her to fight this down, forget it, kill it. She must remember her ambition, her promise to her mother, that one day her name would appear in Neon lights above a West End theatre.

That afternoon, after rehearsal, she went with Mavis to the circus just outside the town. They were conducted to their seats close to the ring, and after a couple of clowns had set the spectators laughing, the ring-master, wearing pink hunting costume, entered followed by a number of horses and riders.

With a little gasp of outraged dismay, Christina recognised who he was. It was Alec Wade!

DISILLUSIONMENT

CHRISTINA scarcely saw the performance, for she was too furious with herself, and more so with Alec. He had deliberately deceived her, letting her think that he was well off, while all the time he was the ring-master of a small. travelling circus.

And those horses. Obviously they belonged to the circus and he had borrowed them, probably without asking permission. She would never forgive him—never!

Max was to blame, too, she told herself. He obviously knew Alec Wade, yet he had not even so much as hinted at his real occupation. And now, she supposed. he was laughing up his sleeve at her. He was bound to have heard about her trip to Brandon Beacon with Alec: also about that kissing episode.

Christina blushed with anger and humiliation as she thought of it.

"Doesn't he look handsome?" whispered Mavis. who was not a bit outraged by the discovery.

"Handsome!" pouted Christina. "A glorified stable boy, that's all he is."

She tried hard to think of him as that, but had to admit that even if he was not a gentleman, he looked and had the manners of one.

All the same, she must somehow stop him from coming round to-morrow as he had threatened. She did not want it spread around that she was keeping company with a circus-hand.

So she scribbled a note saying she would not be able to go riding, and addressed it to "Mr. Alec Wade, C/o Gifford's Circus", posting it on her way to the theatre.

That, she thought, should dispose of him if he were sensitive enough to take the hint. Anyway, she assured herself, she never wanted to see him again.

But when next she and Mavis entered the Medina, for their usual cup of coffee, there were Max and Alec seated at the same table, and it was impossible to snub them—at least, not Max.

"So here you are," he said with a grin.

Max drew out a chair for Mavis, and Alec pulled one out for Christina.

Without thanking him. she sat down.

"Well, Christina, how about a date for to-morrow?" suggested Max, leaning over the table towards her.

"But I was going to fix a date with her, Max." growled Alec. "In fact I did—only she didn't keep it. We were going riding."

"Well, as you didn't that washes that out," remarked Max cheerfully. "Now it's my turn to suggest something."

"It is to be neither of you," said Christina. "I'm going to lie down and study to-morrow."

"Study what?" asked Alec.

"My part in the next show, of course," she answered.

"But you said you'd be resting all next week, which means that you've got all the ime in the world in which to study," said Max. "That being so, it's my turn to take you out. Alec—stand down."

Christina was not sure that she liked it being taken for granted that she would go out with a man just because he said she must. Max, she told herself, was a little too sure of himself.

"No, I'm going to study my part," she repeated determinedly. "So I'm not going out with anybody."

Max scowled, and Alec beamed.

"But you'll come riding with me in the morning, won't you?" he said. "You promised."

"I promised nothing," Christina retorted shortly.

"Well, that disposes of us both, I think," laughed Max, pleased at the other's discomfiture.

"Then I won't bother to bring the horses round," said Alec, rising.

"I shouldn't, especially if you don't want to get into trouble with your boss " Christina flung at him.

She saw him colour, saw also the look of startled amusement on Max's face, and just for a second felt ashamed of herself. That had been hitting below the belt, especially as she was not supposed to know Alec's real job.

"How do you know," asked Max, evidently enioying the situation. "that Alec didn't have his boss's permission to take out the horses—since that, I suppose, is what you had in mind?"

"Did you?" Christina asked Alec.

"I should not have brought them otherwise," he answered quietly. "Still, if the date's off——"

"It is," interrupted Max. "You have promised to come with me, haven't you, Christina?"

Christina, now confused, could not remember whether she had or not. Anyway, she decided, it was Max's turn.

"Have I?" she murmured vaguely stirring her coffee.

She noticed that Mavis had left them and was now sitting beside Joe Stanton, their stage-manager, a few tables away. Neither two men at her own table appeared to have noticed her absence.

"Well, who is it to be?" asked Alec a trifle brusquely. "You said you'd come for a ride with me, now you say you've promised Max to go with him."

"I'm afraid it must be Max," said Christina, deciding she would have to be brutal.

"Okay." returned Alec, rising. "Hope you have a nice time."

He vanished through the cafe door and Max turned laughingly to her.

"How about running over to Saltcove?" he suggested.

"Where you like, Max," she answered thoughtfully.

MAX had his smart new car waiting outside the cafe—a long. sleek machine that looked as if it cost the earth. He opened the door for her and she got in. Then he squeezed in under the steering-wheel and next moment they were off.

But Christina was far from happy. She could not disguise the fact that she had treated Alec badly. Yesterday he had gone to the trouble of fetching horses so that they might have a canter together, but she had been prevented from accompanying him because of the rehearsal. This morning, she had refused to go with him even though she was free.

Suddenly she pulled up her thoughts. Why on earth was she worrying herself about Alec and whether or not she had treated him fairly? What did it matter, anyway? He could do nothing for her. whereas Max could do everything. If she were wise she would forget about Alec and concentrate everything on the theatre-owner's son.

This she decided to do, but when she made an attempt to talk "shop" he skilfully side-tracked it.

"We're on holiday, my dear," he said, "so let's forget the theatre for a while."

Half-an-hour later, they came to the sea,

and followed a coastal road for several miles. It was an exhilarating drive with the wind in their faces and the tang of salt in the air.

"We'll pull up here," said Max, slowing down as they reached Saltcove. "It's a bit early for lunch," he added, glancing at his watch. "You're not hungry, are you?"

"No, of course not," she laughed, with genuine enjoyment.

They walked through the village till they reached the tiny harbour. Two or three fishing boats lay at anchor, and on the stone jetty a few men were mending their nets or crab-pots, but otherwise the place seemed deserted, for it was the end of the holiday season.

As soon as they were seated in a beach shelter, Max reached out and took her hand.

"Enjoying it?" he asked.

"It's lovely," she murmured, making no effort to free herself.

"I've been waiting for us to be alone like this," he said, edging nearer.

"Oh, and why?" she asked, and at once regretted having said that.

"This is why," he answered, and before she knew what was happening she was in his arms and his lips were on hers.

But though she did not struggle or push him off, she did not return his kisses.

All she knew was that they did not affect her as Alec's had done. Alec's had been the kisses of a man stirred by uncontrolled emotions. Max's were those of a man practised in the art—smooth, calculated, fastidiously applied. Rather than thrilling her they made her shudder.

"You shouldn't have done that, Max," she said coolly when at last he drew back his head.

"Why not?" he asked, feeling for his cigarette case and offering it to her. "That was merely the *hors d'oeuvre*, my darling."

Something warned her they were on dangerous ground, and when he had lit her cigarette she got up.

"Let's take a stroll," she said. "I feel chilly sitting down."

Shrugging, he stood up, and they started to walk round the harbour.

As they went, Christina was wondering: Was he just playing with her, knowing what she really wanted, but keeping her hope dangling before her like a carrot on a donkey's nose?

While Max was wondering: she had let him kiss her, but had made no warm response. Probably a dozen or more men had kisssed her in just the same way, and with just the same result. She was the sort to let him go so far but no farther. Or was she?

"Have you anything settled for when your tour ends?" he asked, following a little silence.

Christina became alert. Was he at last opening the subject she was aching to discuss?

"I've nothing fixed," she answered casually. "This tour has been pretty strenuous—I thought I'd take a short rest."

"You have an agent, I suppose?"

"Yes."

It seemed he was coming much more quickly to the point than she had dared hope. Maybe the proposal that she should join one of his father's shows would come at any moment? And if it did what would be the price he would demand?

His next remark took her aback.

"You know," he said, "Alec can do nothing for you. He's only interested in circus acts."

"Really! Do you imagine I am friendly with Alec—or you—in order to try and fix a job for myself?" she demanded, putting on a show of annoyance.

Max was unmoved by her indignation. A faintly cynical smile played about his lips as he threw away his cigarette.

"When you're back in Town," he said, "maybe we could have lunch together. Yes?"

"That would be nice," she returned a trifle stiffly.

"And maybe talk over a possible engagement with one of father's companies," he went on.

"Maybe we could," she said, trying not to sound eager.

"Good!" he agreed, slightly triumphant. "And we could go on being friends—good friends. Yes?"

She knew what he meant and felt as if an icy hand had been laid against her heart.

Before her, practically within her grasp, was the thing she had worked and schemed for. It was as good as hers if she were prepared to pay the price!

NEXT day on her way from the theatre to snatch a cup of tea between the matinee and the evening performance, Christina ran into Alec. She had intended to give him the cold shoulder when next they met, but instead she stopped.

Why she changed her mind she could not have said, but perhaps it was the appealing look in his eyes that made her do so.

"As you won't come riding with me I was wondering if you would come and have tea with me instead?" he began. "Tomorrow, if convenient."

"Tea? At a restaurant, you mean?" she asked.

"No, in my caravan. My sister will be there to act as hostess," he added quickly.

Christina hesitated for a moment, thinking it would be rather interesting to see what sort of girl his sister was.

"Thank you," she said. "I'd love to."

"That's fine," he smiled. "Half-past four suit you? Will that give you plenty of time to get to the theatre if I drive you back?"

"Oh, plenty," she answered.

She hoped she did not sound too keen for she did not want to give him any wrong ideas. As Max had pointed out, Alec could do nothing for her. One didn't achieve one's ambition by allowing one's heart to rule one's head.

WHEN she arrived at the caravan the following afternoon, Christina had a surprise. She had expected a sort of gypsy affair, all shining brass and gaudy paint. But this one was a modern, stream-lined caravan that must have cost something like a thousand pounds. It was, she discovered later, fitted with every possible modern convenience.

"Thora," called Alec as he ushered Christina into the living-room, "here is our guest—Miss Grant."

A very attractive girl with fair hair and nice grey eyes came forward smilingly to be introduced.

Christina noticed that the table was already laid for tea, but instead of enamel or plastic cups and saucers, such as she had expected to find in a caravan, there was a dainty and expensive china set of charming design.

"You see, we're really quite civilized," said Alec laughingly, noticing Christina's surprised look.

"Well, I didn't think you weren't," she returned, blushing a little.

"Of course you didn't! I was just trying to be funny," he assured her. "Thora," he added, turning to his sister, "is the kettle on, my dear?"

"It will be boiling in a minute or two," she answered smilingly.

There was a slight pause in the conversation and Christina hastened to fill it.

"Do you perform in the circus, Miss Wade?" she enquired.

Brother and sister exchanged glances and then the girl said—

"I'm afraid I don't. But I do join up with it whenever I can snatch a few days off from my practice."

"Thora is a veterinary surgeon by profession," explained Alec.

"Hullo," said his sister rising, "I can hear the kettle whistling. Excuse me while I go and make the tea," she added.

"You see," Alec said when his sister had disappeared into the little kitchenette. "Thora being a qualified vet makes her very useful to us. There is always some animal or other needing expert attention."

"Do you like this life?" Christina asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Well yes, it offers plenty of change and variety," he admitted. "I certainly should not care to work in an office."

Christina wondered if being a ring-master meant that Alec had reached the top of his profession, just as an actor-manager might claim to have reached the top of his, and supposed he had.

Thora returned with the teapot and started to pour out.

She had just finished, when the door of the caravan was opened a few inches. And it was closing again hurriedly when Alec called out—

"Don't go, Queenie, you're just in time for a cup of tea!"

The door opened wide to admit a beautiful dark haired girl wearing pink tights and spangles. On her feet were heelless shoes like those worn by ballet dancers.

"Christina," said Alec, "this is Queenie Alton, our star equestrian. She rides two horses at once and jumps through flaming hoops. Queenie, this is Christina Grant now playing at the Royal Theatre."

"Oh, so you're an actress," said Queenie in an impressed voice as she shook hands.

"Only a 'bit actress', I'm afraid," smiled Christina. "I saw your performance the other afternoon," she added. "You were wonderful."

"I'd much rather be an actress," sighed Queenie as she sat down. "Only you need to be so clever, don't you? I'd never be able to learn my lines let alone remember them."

"I should say you needed to be far cleverer in order to ride two horses at once and jump through flaming hoops," remarked Christina.

"Not when you've been born to it," said Queenie. "Actually the success of the act largely depends on Alec."

"Oh, and how?" asked Christina.

"The ring-master is to a circus what the conductor is to an orchestra," Queenie explained as she sipped her tea. "He controls the timing with his whip. We have to watch out for that all the time."

"Queenie's flattering me," laughed Alec. "As a matter of fact, the ring-master is an ornament as much as anything."

All the time Christina had to remind herself that Alec was, after all, only a paid employee of the circus. Even the caravan probably belonged to the circus, she decided.

"I suppose you live in a caravan, too, Miss Alton?" she said.

"Oh, yes, we all do, Miss Grant," said Queenie. "But mine is not nearly so nice as this."

"Look here, it sounds so silly calling each other 'Miss Alton' and 'Miss Grant'," put in Alec. "Let's get down to Christian names. Anybody against that? No? Then carried unanimously."

During the laughter that followed it became clear to Christina that Queenie adored Alec, for it showed in her face every time she looked at him. It was equally clear that Alec was very fond of her, also.

As this thought came into her mind, Christina felt a faint stab of jealousy, although she felt ashamed of herself for it.

After all, fancy being jealous of a circus performer because she was in love with the ring-master! "I must be crazy," she told herself sternly.

Presently Queenie left to prepare for the evening performance, and she was shortly followed by Thora who wanted to look at a sick lion.

"I'm glad you've met my sister," Alec said after a while. "I think she likes you."

"That's very nice of her," murmured Christina, adding: "I like her, too."

There was an uncomfortable pause as if each had something to say, but felt too embarrassed to say it.

But with an effort, Christina decided to break it.

"What a delightful caravan you have here," she said. "They are wonderful affairs these days aren't they?"

"They are, indeed," Alec agreed. "Thora loves it."

"Do you live in it during the winter as well?" she asked, hoping to keep the conversation from other topics.

"No," he answered. "We have winter quarters in South Devon, where the weather is nearly always mild, and the scenery gentle and rural."

Christina rose suddenly.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be going now," she said. "Thanks so much for a nice tea."

It was a harmless enough remark, a polite excuse for getting away from him while she still had her emotions under control.

With an impulsive gesture she held out her hand, but that was her mistake. He took it in his own and drew her slowly but firmly towards him, his eyes never leaving her face, then huskily, he said—

"Christina, I love you, my darling."

Next moment his lips had sought and found hers, while she lay unresisting and trembling in his fierce embrace.

Suddenly Christina realised that she was in danger of complete surrender, that in another moment his love would be too strong for her, so with a tremendous effort of will power she tugged herself free.

"You—you shouldn't have done that," she said breathlessly.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because—because—oh, because it's all quite impossible! Surely you must see that?" she panted. "Please let me go."

She was turning away, but he seized her almost roughly by the shoulders.

"You know I love you, and I believe you love me," he said hoarsely. "I know you're playing up to Max Thornton because you think he can help you with your career. But don't you understand that even if he does, you'll have to pay a price—his price?

"No, no, please don't interrupt," he went on as she would have spoken, "for once you've got to listen to the truth. Max doesn't care two hoots for you except as a plaything. In his eyes, girls only exist for his enjoyment. He doesn't know what love means, not like you and I do. Isn't that true?"

Instinct warned Christina that unless she tore herself free from him now she would end up as the wife of a circus employee, a man who probably earned far less than a third rate clown.

"Please, let me go, Alec," she begged, her eyes misty with tears.

"Say you love me first," he commanded, his lips brushing hers.

"What difference does it make whether I do or not?" she whispered shakily. "I have worked hard and suffered much to get on in my profession. Now that I seem to have a chance of getting my foot on the first rung of the ladder, I daren't—I can't throw it away."

"Not even for love," he breathed, and she shook her head.

"No, Alec, not even for love," she said. "I'm ambitious. Success is all I want, no matter how I get it."

He released her sharply, and for a moment they stared at each other in speechless silence. Then—

"I never thought you were that kind of girl" he murmured slowly. "It never struck me that you were the sort who measure their friendships in terms of what they can get out of them."

"Alec, you have no right——" she was beginning, when he turned and threw open the door.

"No," he went on, "I have no right to blame you. We are as we are, and there is little we can do about it. Good-bye and good luck."

He stood aside while she descended the steps of the caravan and she heard the door close quietly behind her.

ALL FOR STARDOM

CHRISTINA did not see Alec again before the circus departed for its winter quarters in Devon. All she knew was that on the Saturday it had been there and by Monday it had vanished.

That week her company spent "resting". Nobody drew any money, and nobody worked.

Max had gone to London after promising her that he would see what he could do about getting her into one of his father's shows. But accustomed to disappointments and broken promises, she did not place much reliance on this.

To occupy their time, she and Mavis went for walks in the morning, and spent the afternoons mending or knitting.

"By the way," remarked Mavis one morning, "I saw in the papers that Julian Thornton Max's father, has gone into hospital for a major operation."

"Really, I had no idea!" exclaimed Christina. "I suppose," she added musingly, "Max will take over control until his father is better."

"Very likely," agreed Mavis. "In that case you stand rather a good chance of getting places, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know" answered Christina with a little shrug. "People make promises when they can't keep them, and then forget all about them when they can."

"Darling, what a cynical remark coming from you," commented Mavis as she poured herself out more coffee.

"Well, it's true, isn't it, especially in our profession?" said Christina bitterly. "Think of all the promises that have been made to you, for instance, and never kept. 'I'll bear you in mind for a leading part, Miss Glynn, when my next company goes out on tour'. Or, 'My dear Miss Grant, I have a part absolutely up your street. I'll let you know all about it within a few days'. But one never hears another word from them."

"Yes, I'm afraid that's true," sighed Mavis. "So you don't expect to hear from Max, then?"

"I think it will be a case of out of sight out of mind," Christina shrugged.

TWO days later, despite her gloomy prediction she received a letter from Max asking her to call at his office in Charing Cross Road in London.

"Sounds like a job." said Mavis as she read the letter. "Aren't you excited?"

"A job's never a job until the contract's signed," returned Christina remembering one of her mother's well-tried maxims. "I'll wait until I see him before I indulge in self-congratulations."

Oddly enough she had been looking forward more eagerly to hearing something of Alec rather than of Max.

The memory of his lips on hers was still so vivid that she felt a little thrill whenever she thought of it. In fact there were moments when he seemed so close that she could almost believe he was standing at her side.

But there was no word from him. His good-bye that day, when she had left his caravan, had evidently been final.

Maybe he had forgotten all about her by now. After all, there were doubtless plenty of girls at his beck and call—Queenie Alton, for instance. She was young and pretty and obviously adored him.

IN London, three days later she went to the Thornton Group's offices and sent in her card.

A few moments later she was ushered into a well furnished room where Max sat behind an imposing desk.

All business-like he motioned her to a chair and she sat down.

"As my father is in hospital I have taken charge of the business," he began, without so much as a greeting. "The first thing I am going to do is to put a show on at the Regent," he went on, before she could speak. "The present play there is coming off and I want something else to take its place right away."

He broke off and offered her his cigarette case, but Christina shook her head.

"By the way, have you heard from Alec Wade?" he asked unexpectedly as he lit his cigarette.

"Not since the circus left Brumbridge," she answered. "We were just friends, that's all. I never expected to hear from him."

"Well," Max went on, returning to business, "we're going to put on Sheridan's 'School for Scandal'. It's always a pretty safe stand-by and the public never seems to get tired of it. Do you know it, by the way?"

"Oh, yes, but I've never played in it," said Christina.

"I've been thinking of you as Maria," he said. "A clever little actress could make quite a lot of that part."

"It would be wonderful!" breathed Christina, already seeing her name in Neon lights.

"You must understand that if I give you the part I shall be taking a bit of a risk," he said. "It's not usual for an unknown provincial actress to step straight into a London production."

"Really, Max, need you be quite so frank," she said frowningly.

"I'm sorry," he said smiling, "but you can't mix sentiment with show business."

"No, of course not," she agreed not wanting to spoil everything.

"Well, the part is yours as far as I am concerned" he said. "I've been in touch with your agent and he's drawing up a contract ready for signing."

"Oh, Max," she exclaimed excitedly. "This is my big chance. It's just what I've always wanted."

"Good," he smiled, rising from his chair. "Is it worth a little kiss?"

Worth a kiss! To appear on the West End stage with well-known stars, to see her name in Neon lights outside a theatre, to have notices in the London newspapers! It was the chance every young actress dreamed about.

What did a few cheap kisses matter when he had placed her feet on the first rung of the ladder of success?

"You didn't kiss me like that at Saltcove," Max said reproachfully, as at last,

he withdrew his lips from her red ones.

"Well, we hardly knew each other then, Max," she said, going over to a mirror to repair her make-up.

"But we do now, of course?" he suggested.

"Oh yes, much better," she said artlessly.

"Good!" he grinned, moving back to his desk. "Rehearsals start on Monday. Report to Mr. Dalky, the Regent's stage manager at ten o'clock."

"I don't know how to thank you, Max," she said unthinkingly.

He grinned meaningly.

"Your kisses were a good first instalment," he said, "or shall we say an 'appetizer'?"

Christina hid a flush and tried to pretend that she did not understand. But in her heart of hearts she knew only too well.

Alec had said that Max would demand his price for favours? He hadn't yet stated what that price would be but she could well guess. It was up to her to put off the time of paying as long as possible.

He crossed to the door and opened it for her as she prepared to go.

"What about lunching with me tomorrow, my dear?" he invited.

"Thank you," she accepted smilingly.

"One o'clock then—at the Evergreen Restaurant," he said.

Christina nodded and hurried down the stairs as though someone were pursuing her. But reaching the hall, she pulled up, a little ashamed of her panic.

"My nerves must be in a shocking state," she sighed.

At the next bookshop she bought a cheap edition of "The School for Scandal", intending to start learning her part that evening. It would, she thought, help to take her mind off the dark shadow which seemed to hang over her; a shadow that had not been there when she had walked into Max's office.

Next day she met him at the Evergreen Restaurant and a waiter conducted them to a reserved table.

"Well, my dear," Max said when he had ordered lunch, "have you studied your part?"

"Yes, and I like it," she answered. "I'm eager to start."

"It will need a lot of rehearsing," he said, "especially if you haven't acted in a costume play before. Have you?" he added.

"No, I'm afraid not," she admitted frankly.

He looked somewhat worried.

"I was afraid of that," he said. "You see, it's not just a matter of wearing period clothes, but of carrying them, and moving about in them as easily and as naturally as you do in your own. For instance, an eighteenth century woman walked quite differently from a modern one."

"But any actress can adapt her movements to the costume she is wearing," agreed Christina, wondering if he were trying to find some excuse for taking away the part.

"Quite," he agreed, "but one can't take risks with a production that's going to cost thousands. That's why I want you to take a few lessons from a friend of mine in deportment."

"But my dear Max——" she was beginning, but he cut her short. She was going to say that she had been through all that ears ago.

"You can't throw yourself about a stage in the heavy, brocaded dresses of Sheridan's time, like you can in modern dress," he said. "The movements are slow and stately, and the graceful manipulation of the draperies worn by a fashionable woman of the period, need skilful managing."

Christina got the impression that he was already regretting his choice. And she was in two minds about flinging the part back at him. Then she remembered her promise to her dead mother.

"All right, Max," she agreed. "I'll take lessons if you think them necessary. Where will I find this friend of yours?"

"She has a place in the Vauxhall Road. Calls herself Madam Delorney," he said. "She was quite a good actress in her time."

"By the way, Max, what about the contract? I thought you said it was all drawn up ready," Christina reminded him.

"Oh, you shall have it in a day or two," he replied airily. "I just haven't got round to it yet."

Yes, there was no doubt about it, Christina told herself, he was certainly regretting having offered her the part. Why? she wondered.

"By the way," he said as they were finishing their meal, "I'm having a few friends up to my flat for cocktails this evening. Care to drop in?"

The invitation was so elaborately casual, that Christina knew it was premeditated; that, in fact, this was probably the reason why he had asked her to lunch.

Moreover she thought it more than likely that, those so-called "few friends" would send excuses for not turning up and she would find herself alone with him.

It seemed that Max wanted to be paid his price before he delivered the goods.

"I'd love to come, Max, but I also want to learn that part," she said sweetly. "What shall I do?"

"It's not a difficult part," he said, toying with his wine glass.

"Not as far as learning the words are concerned, perhaps," she conceded, "but as you've just said, there's more to it than that. The correct deportment, for one thing," she added, using his own arguments against him.

With a grunt he tossed back the rest of his wine.

"Well, I'll have to be getting back to the office," he said, rising. "Sorry you can't come up to my flat—should be some interesting people there."

"It's awfully kind of you, Max but it wouldn't be fair to you if I neglected my part, would it?" she said.

He hunched his shoulders and as there was nothing more to be said they parted outside the restaurant, each aware that the meeting had ended in something like an anti-climax.

FOR the next fortnight Christina worked hard at rehearsals and also at Madam Delorney's "Academy of Deportment". And not only did she refuse all Max's invitations to lunch and to cocktail parties, but also forgot that her contract had not yet been signed.

At last came the day of the dress rehearsal, when everyone's nerves were on edge, when the producer seemed in despair and Max sat with his head buried in his hands in the empty stalls.

Christina, her heart in her shoes, was almost praying that the stage would collapse under her, thus letting her sink into merciful oblivion.

It was only when the curtain went up that she realised the price she would have to pay if the play was a success!

MAX DEMANDS PAYMENT.

IT was a success! Just before the curtain came down on the first night of "The School for Scandal" at the Regent Theatre, the leading actresses, including Christina all received bouquets of gorgeous carnations.

When Christina at last found herself back in her dressing-room she collapsed exhausted in a chair. She did not imagine that she had given an outstanding performance, but she knew she had acquitted herself more than well

As the dresser started to disrobe her there came a tap on the door.

"Come in," called Christina.

Max entered carrying a huge bouquet that was bigger than any of the others on her dressing-table.

"I thought I'd give this to you personally, darling," he said smilingly.

"Max!" she cried burying her face in the fragrant blossoms. "How lovely of you."

"We're having a celebration at The Cheshire Cat," he said, referring to a night-club. "Can you be ready in half-an-hour?"

"I'll try," she answered, although she would have been glad not to go.

"Okay. My car will be at the stage door," he said "Miss Crampton will be coming with us, but we'll soon lose her," he added and departed.

Janet Crampton was the leading lady—a tall, attractive blonde—she and Christina had hardly spoken to each other except in the play.

Dressed in her own clothes, Christina was about to leave the dressing-room when she remembered the flowers and asked the dresser to put them in water.

"I'll see to them, miss," said the woman and added: "Did you notice this one," and she indicated a bouquet of lovely red roses—"it has a card on it."

"No, I hadn't noticed," answered Christina and bending over the bouquet read the words on the card—

"*Congratulations and good wishes. Alec.*"

She stared fascinated, her heart beating wildly.

Alec had been in front all evening!

But why hadn't he brought the bouquet round himself? Or had he merely ordered some florist to deliver it for him?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the dresser.

"Excuse me, miss—Mr. Max will be waiting for you."

"Oh yes, of course," muttered Christina. and left.

Outside a small crowd of young first-nighters stood holding out autograph books for Janet Crampton, but none of them pushed a book towards Christina who, with Max, had to wait until they had all been satisfied before Janet stepped into the car, taking her seat next to Max in the front.

Christina sat in the back, and as the car moved off she saw a man standing near the stage door staring after them—it was Alec Wade!

Once again questions tumbled into Christina's mind faster than she could answer them. Why had he sent her the flowers, why hadn't he brought them round himself? And why had he sent them at all?

AS Max had foreseen, they soon lost Janet Crampton after reaching the night club. She quickly joined a crowd round the bar.

Dancing was in progress and Max soon asked Christina to dance with him. He was a good dancer and she might have enjoyed herself had she not been troubled with thoughts of Alec, wondering if Max had seen him outside the stage door.

"You were splendid, my dear," he told her as he piloted her among the other

dancers. "I can soon see your name in Neon lights outside some West End theatre."

"Do you really think so, Max?" she asked eagerly.

"That is if you let yourself be guided by me," he answered, smiling down at her possessively. "I'm in a position to pull a good many strings, you know."

Yes, Christina told herself a trifle bitterly, that was how one made good on the stage—by pulling strings!

"Of course I'll be guided by you, Max," she said, returning his smile.

"Good girl—then you are as good as there," he said.

The dance ended and as he led her to one of the small tables, he beckoned a waiter and ordered a bottle of champagne.

When it arrived, and their glasses had been filled, Max raised his.

"Here's to Neon lights, my sweet," he said, and drank.

It was getting on for two o'clock in the morning when Janet Crampton, who seemed a little the worse for drink, approached their table.

"I'm tired, Max," she said, slurring her words. "Take me home."

"So soon?" he frowned. "Why, the night is still young, my dear."

But when he saw that she could scarcely stand he went on:

"All right. I'll go and fetch my car."

Janet collapsed heavily into his vacant seat and stared glassy-eyed at Christina.

"You didn't do so badly to-night, child," she said condescendingly.

"Thank you, Miss Crampton," smiled Christina agreeably, for this was about the first time the other had spoken to her.

"Don't thank me, thank Max," the star went on. "Still, my dear, remember he never gives a girl a big chance for nothing."

Christina knew what lay behind the other's words, but she made no reply. Fortunately Max returned after a while and saved her from further insult and embarrassment.

Janet got shakily to her feet as he came up.

"Come, my dear, let me take your arm, Janet——"

"I'm all right—I'm not drunk," said the star thickly.

Nevertheless she allowed him to escort her to his car and Christina came behind carrying the other's handbag and gloves.

TEN minutes later, having seen Janet up to her flat, Max returned to the car, grinning.

"Poor little Janet—she never could carry her liquor," he said as he slid into the driver's seat.

He turned the car at the next crossing and set off in the opposite direction to the one Christina expected.

"Where are you going, Max?" she asked suspiciously.

"Home, of course, my dear," he said blandly.

"Home?" she questioned. "You mean—your flat?"

"Where else?" he said as if surprised at the question. "You live in lodgings, don't you? What will your landlady say if you wake her up at this hour in the morning?"

"That's my affair," she answered, trying to keep her nerves steady. "Please drop me off at my place at once."

She had known all along that this moment was bound to come, but now that it had come she was in a panic.

"What are you afraid of?" he said smoothly. "My sister will be at the flat, so you needn't fear for your honour, my dear."

Christina knew that he had no sister, and began to feel still more frightened.

"Besides," he went on when she did not speak, "you owe me something, don't you, my dear? But for me you'd have had no more chance of playing in a West End theatre than of having a trip to the moon. You admit that, don't you?"

"Well, yes," she conceded, "and I'm more than grateful——"

"Gratitude, my dear child, costs nothing," he said cynically. "Did you think I would be satisfied with a few cheap kisses? You surely must have known my price would be higher than that."

He was right, of course, Christina told herself. She had known all along the sort of sacrifice she would be expected to make, but she had resolutely closed her eyes to it, telling herself that somehow she could evade it when the time came.

And now the time had come! Her success or failure as an actress depended on the decision she now must make.

"So that's that," he said, as he stopped near his flat. "Now you're going to be a sensible little girl and be kind to your Max."

But for the sight of Alec that night, and the memory of the roses he had sent her, she might have succumbed to his mingled blandishments and threats. As it was she became suddenly filled with a loathing contempt for the man who sat beside her. All at once he became something vile—like a serpent. Unless she struggled from his grip there would be nothing decent left in her.

"You've had all you are going to get from me," she said, her loathing causing her to be crude.

"What do you mean?" he asked, in surprise.

"Just what I say," she answered with some spirit. "I don't see that I'm under any more obligation to you than is any other actress in the play."

"Oh, so that's the way it is, is it?" he gritted. "You think you can make use of me and then send me about my business." He laughed roughly. "You're not going to get away with it as easy as that. To-morrow you'll find something waiting for you at the stage-door that won't be very pleasant."

"My notice, I suppose," she said, amazed at her calm.

"Exactly, a week's notice," he agreed.

"But I have my contract," she pointed out.

"The one you signed, yes, but not the one I should have signed" he said with a triumphant chuckle. "Your agent has been a bit remiss there. I never got round to signing it."

Oddly enough this admission did not affect her as she supposed it should have done. In fact she felt somehow relieved.

"Then there's nothing more to be said, is there?" she shrugged, and began to get out of the car.

But by this time, Max had regained his temper. The fact that he appeared to be losing her made him want her all the more. Her very refusal to gratify him made her all the more desirable in his eyes.

"Look, Christina," he said, suddenly changing his tone, "don't let's quarrel. I'll drive you back to your place. After all, I realise you've had a pretty tiring night and I should have made allowances. I'll drop you home and we'll forget all about it to-night."

She said nothing and he began to drive in the direction of her lodgings in Chelsea. Too weary even to think, she closed her eyes.

Presently she was awakened by Max saying:

"Hope your landlady won't be annoyed at being awakened at this hour."

"Oh there's no need to wake her," said Christina reaching in her handbag, "I have a key."

"Oh, I didn't know," he said, "well, that'll make things easier another time."

"Another time?" she asked.

"Don't be silly, darling, you know perfectly well what I mean," he replied.

"But I thought I'd given you your answer," she said, going forward to the door of her flat.

Suddenly he caught her arm.

"Let's get this straight," he said sharply. "I'm trying to make allowances for you being tired, and for the fact that you've been under some strain for the past few days—first-night nerves and all that. In other words, we'll forget about to-night, but there will be other nights."

So he wasn't relinquishing his claim on her, merely putting off the evil day because she was tired. But to-morrow night or the night after, he would renew his demands until he wore down her resistance.

But while she had been sleeping in the car she had been fortified by a vision of Alec and now her mind was made up.

"It's very considerate of you, Max," she said quietly, "but you've had my answer, and I shall never give you any other."

"Is that final?" he demanded hoarsely, anger rising.

"Final, Max," she said.

"Then I warn you, my dear girl, that if you open that door you'll never see—or be seen—in the West End again."

"I'll take the risk," she retorted, and jerking free her arm inserted the key in the lock and pushed open the door.

Next moment she had stepped into the darkened hall and quickly closed the door behind her.

Listening, she heard the sound of Max's car being driven away, and with it, she well knew, went her hopes of ever becoming a star.

Later, in bed, she asked herself what had made her ruin all her chances, kick away success from under her and make an enemy of the one influential man she knew.

The answer was always the same—Alec Wade!

For now she knew that she loved him, always had and always would!

A note was handed to her when she arrived at the theatre next day. In it she read that her services would no longer be required after the curtain had fallen on Saturday night.

Next week, she would have to set out for another job. Her stage ambitions were over!

"POT of tea and a toasted tea cake, miss, please."

The waitress fetched the order on a tray, placed the things on the table in front of the customer, then turned to another table where others were trying to attract her attention.

"Three teas and bread-and-butter, miss. And do, please, hurry."

All day long Christina trotted between the serving counter and her group of tables taking orders, delivering them and making out bills.

Sometimes she found a small tip under a plate, but this happened only rarely since the establishment was one of those where gratuities were discouraged.

She had been in her new job for about two months, since leaving the theatre. Fortunately there had been no difficulty in getting one and she had soon settled down after a little training.

In her off-time she had plenty of time to think, and mostly, because she was lonely, her thoughts turned to Alec Wade. What was he doing now? Had he and Max met?

If they had. she could easily imagine the sort of story Max would have told him—that he had given her a chance to make good, that she had failed and he had been forced to find another girl to take her place. How much of it would Alec believe?

One afternoon a smartly dressed young woman entered the cafe and sat down at one of her tables. Christina came forward to take her order and then stopped dead.

The customer was Alec's sister!

The other girl recognised her at the same time.

"Miss Grant!" she said in astonishment.

"And you're Thora Wade, aren't you?" said Christina.

"Yes, but what on earth are you doing ——?" Thora was beginning when she was interrupted by a woman's voice just behind:

"When you've quite finished your little conversation, miss, I'll trouble you for my pot of tea and beans on toast."

Thankful for the interruption, Christina hurried off to the serving counter, a prey to conflicting emotions, the chief of which was a feeling of humiliation that Thora should have discovered her in a waitress's job.

Not because of the job itself, but because it must seem quite clear to the other girl that she had been a failure as an actress.

Worst of all. Thora would be bound to tell Alec; Alec who had seen her last in a West End production, and no doubt imagined she was still in it.

What would he think of her when he learnt that she was now a waitress?

She fetched the impatient young woman's order and then turned to Thora.

"What can I get you, madam?" she began.

"But, Christina, I understood you were playing at The Regent. Alec told me," said the other, mystified. "What happened, my dear?"

"I left," said Christina shortly.

She saw that Thora was hurt by the curtness of her reply, but wished she would not ask embarrassing questions.

"I'm sorry," said Thora. "I suppose you're not allowed to converse with customers. I'd like a pot of tea and some pastries, please."

Pale and shaken, Christina went to the serving counter in a state of near-panic.

Almost certainly Thora would tell her brother of this meeting and quite likely he would come and seek her out.

Christina knew she could not face him. For if he discovered the truth it might lead to him having a row with Max. On the other hand, he might regard her with contempt for doing what she had done in spite of his warnings.

Fetching the order, she placed it in front of Thora, then turned away swiftly in answer to a summons from another table.

After that, she contrived to be busy until Thora called for her bill. Then—

"Couldn't we arrange to meet somewhere, Christina?" said Alec's sister in a low voice. "I should so like to have a little chat with you about everything."

For a moment Christina wavered. She liked Thora and hated having to snub her. But a meeting between them was out of the question.

Thora, like Alec, belonged to the past, they had no place in her present scheme of things. The old life—the life of the theatre, of gay companionship, of hard times alternating with good—was over and done with. The sooner she got down to living a new kind of life, the better.

"I'm sorry," she said coldly, "but I'm afraid it can't be managed."

A hurt look came into Thora's eyes, then she took up her bill and went to the cash-desk.

"Well," mused Christina, "if Alec does come here he won't find me. I'm going to hand in my notice and get another job."

REACHING her lodgings that evening, she found a letter on the mat.

To her astonishment it was from her agent asking her to call round to his office next morning.

Surely he could not have found her a stage-job after her dismissal from The Regent? Still, she had better go and see him, she decided.

Next morning, she put on her prettiest frock and set off. She did not have to be at the cafe until midday, as she was on late turns.

Mr. Benfink, her agent, greeted her smilingly, and asked her if she was in or out of a job.

Christina told him what she was doing and said that she had decided to look for other work, although she gave no reason for wanting to change.

"Well, my dear," he said. "I've had an inquiry for a dance hostess at a night club called The Roundabout just off Shaftesbury Avenue. I immediately thought of you and dropped you a line. What about it? You can dance, can't you?"

"Yes, but I know nothing about the duties of a dance hostess," said Christina doubtfully.

"I don't expect they're very hard," he said. "Not nearly as difficult as walking on the stage and saying a few lines. Well, what about it?"

"I could try," she said.

"Good, here's the address," he said, scribbling on a piece of paper. "Ask for Mr. Delvani—Mike Delvani—and tell him I sent you."

Christina found The Roundabout in a back street near Piccadilly Circus, and was directed to the manager's office by a porter.

Mike Delvani was a short, dark man with piercing black eyes and a deceptively sauve manner. He might have been of any Latin nationality.

"Any previous experience, Miss Grant?" he inquired, looking her figure up and down.

"Not as a dance hostess," she admitted.

"But you can dance?"

"Yes."

He nodded as if satisfied.

"You got dance frocks?"

She nodded.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you a week's trial. Your job will be to dance with any of the club's patrons who ask you. If your partner suggests a drink you'll say champagne. And if he wants more drinks, you won't discourage him—get that? The drunker they get the better for business."

"I see," said Christina, catching on.

"The salary's three quid a week, but you'll get three times that amount in tips if you play your cards properly."

"When do I start?" she asked.

"To-night at eight," he said. "It'll be too early for any of our regulars, but you'll need to get to know the waiters and become sort of familiar with surroundings. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Delvani."

"Oh, and just one other thing, Miss Grant. This is a private club and what goes on here is private, too. We don't do anything against the Law, but we don't like outside gossip, see? It doesn't do a club any good. Get it?"

"I understand, Mr. Delvani," she said.

CHRISTINA arrived at The Roundabout at eight o'clock and was taken aside by Antonio, the head waiter. He put into plain words what Mike Delvani had merely hinted at. Her job was not only to dance with those who asked her, but to encourage them to order the more expensive drinks—especially the Americans.

"That is our profit," he explained. "The subscription fee, it is nothing. And then for ourselves, of course, there are the tips. So you must be very nice to the gentlemen who dance with you. The American boys pay well, yes."

Antonio seemed to guess that this side of her job did not sound very appealing.

"You are not here to be a little mother, no," he said. "If some of our patrons make of themselves fools, it is their own affair. But if they become a nuisance, we put them out. This is a respectable club."

About ten o'clock several people began to drift in. Most of them looked bored and not in the least as if they expected to enjoy themselves.

"It will liven up presently, you'll see," one of the waiters confided to Christina, who was feeling uneasy at having taken on the job.

About eleven o'clock when the theatres were emptying, the place began to fill up.

Dancing was now in full swing and soon Christina had her first "customer", a stout, middle-aged man who struck her as having had several drinks too many.

"Let's have a drink now," he said thickly when the dance ended.

Christina saw Antonio watching her and suggested champagne, but left the man to drink it alone when other men came to dance with her.

Presently she noticed that some of the customers were going upstairs, but not coming down again.

Puzzled, she asked Antonio about this, but he just shrugged.

"It is the little ball," he said, and clicked his fingers.

Christina guessed what he meant—they had gone to play roulette in some room upstairs.

When she asked if the police might raid the place Antonio laughed.

"The cops do not know everything, and when they do it is usually too late," he said. "I tell you all this because sooner or later you will have to know."

There was something in his voice which warned her that she had better be careful not to mention it for her own sake.

ABOUT a fortnight later, close on midnight, she saw Max Thornton enter the club accompanied by Aida Reece, the girl who had replaced her as Maria, at The Regent.

When he saw her he gave a little whistle of astonishment.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded.

"Is that any business of yours, Mr. Thornton?" she asked, resenting both his tone and manner.

"I'll pretty soon make it my business," he said roughly.

"Please yourself," she murmured and was turning away when he caught her by the arm.

"I want the next dance with you," he said.

Unable to refuse, she let him put his arms about her and lead her to the floor.

"You know," he said, after a few moments, "you were a little fool, Christina, to treat me as you did. Aida isn't a patch on you. What about making things up?"

"That," she answered, "depends on the conditions—I suppose there are some."

"Only that you're nice to me," Max said coaxingly.

"Meaning?"

"Now don't be obstructive, darling, or we shall end up as we did before," he returned, half-threatening, half-pleading. "Look what it cost you."

"You needn't remind me," she said bitterly.

"It's up to you, then," he said.

"What about the girl you've brought here to-night?" she asked.

"Leave her to me, my dear. I can soon get her packed off to the place she came from," he said.

"And wreck all her hopes as you did mine?"

"Don't be sentimental, darling," he protested. "You know ours is one of the most cut-throat professions in the world. It's a case of everyone for himself. Besides, she didn't hesitate to step into your shoes when the opportunity came—quite the reverse."

"And has she paid—the price?" Christina asked tartly. And added as he went pink. "I can see Miss Reece watching us. She doesn't look pleased, Max."

"Who the devil cares what she looks? You haven't answered me, Christina."

"If your terms are the same, then so is my answer," she told him.

"I see," he gritted. "All right, if that's how you want it, you must take the consequences."

She laughed.

"You forget that you are no longer my employer," she reminded him.

After he had left her somewhat abruptly, Christina had a mild feeling of elation at the thought that she had got her own back on him.

When the place was empty and time to close, Mr. Delvani appeared out of his office and thrust an envelope into Christina's hand.

"What's this, Mr. Delvani?" she asked.

"A week's notice and your money, Miss Grant," he answered.

"You—you mean I'm sacked?" she stammered.

He nodded and turned back to his office, Christina staring after him in bewilderment.

She could not understand it. There had been no complaints about her as far as she knew.

Yet now she had been dismissed without a word of explanation, and for no apparent reason.

At that moment Antonio came up.

"I've been sacked, Toni," she said, still looking bewildered. "But I don't know what for. Do you?"

"I could guess," he answered with a faint shrug.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You were dancing with Mr. Max. You did not please him," he answered.

"But surely I'm not to be sacked just because one member disliked me?" she protested.

"If that member is part-owner of the club, it could happen," he said.

Christina gave a little gasp.

"You mean—Mr. Thornton is a part-owner of The Roundabout?" she breathed, and Antonio nodded.

"Well, that accounts for a lot," mused Christina understandingly.

Two mornings later she read the following headlines in her paper—

WEST END NIGHT CLUB RAIDED.
GAMBLING APPARATUS SEIZED
BY POLICE.

"*Last night*," read the report, "*the police raided the night club known as The Roundabout and took possession of a gambling apparatus, including a roulette wheel. Staff and guests at the club will appear in court this morning.*"

The paper dropped from her hands. The raid had occurred on the very night following her dismissal. Had she not been sacked, she would have been among those due to appear before a magistrate this morning.

It seemed that Max Thornton had unwittingly saved her from public humiliation and disgrace.

Next morning, when she arrived back at her lodgings, after going after a job, her landlady said that someone was waiting to see her in the parlour.

Wondering who her visitor could be, Christina entered the room and stood as if frozen.

"You!" she whispered shakily.

"Are you angry with me for coming?" Alec asked.

She shook her head dazedly.

"Thora told me how she had met you," he said. "As soon as I could I came to Town and went to the cafe. The manageress said you'd left without giving notice, but I persuaded her to let me have your last address."

"Why have you come, Alec?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Need you ask?" he said gently.

"But when we parted——"

"I know, my dear," he said. "You had bigger things on your mind than me at the time. You had your career, your ambition—and then something went wrong, didn't it?"

She nodded, aware of the fast beating of her heart, of the resurgence of that love for him which she had never been able to forget.

"It must have, or you wouldn't have been working in that tea-shop," he went on. "I felt somehow that it might give us a second chance. Has it, Christina?"

"Yes, Alec," she breathed and then she was in his arms, his lips seeking hers and her own responding, warmly and lovingly.

Presently, she asked him if, when he resumed his job as ring-master with the circus, she could travel round with him as they would be husband and wife.

He stared at her curiously for a moment, then grinned.

"But of course, my darling, who's to stop us?" he asked.

"Well, the owner might object," she suggested.

"The owner?" he echoed, taking her in his arms again. "Why, *I'm* the owner, you silly little goose! Didn't you know that?"

Christina's eyes began to mist with tears.

"Oh, Alec, say you'll never let me out of your sight again," she begged.

"Not even for a moment, my dearest," he said gently.

THE END.

THE LIGHT IN YOUR EYES

By Sheila Storm

MID-AIR MEETING.

THE giant air-liner had finally come to rest after a frightening series of bumps and lurches, its nose a few feet from the hedge bordering the field.

A thick mist softened the shadowy forms of the trees beyond and lent a ghostly appearance to the figures of those who moved around near the wrecked machine.

Norma Wainwright sat on her upturned suitcase, thankful to be alive and wondering what was going to happen next.

The air-liner had run into a fog soon after leaving Paris on the last stage of the homeward journey. Then one of the engines had cut out, somewhere between the coast and London, and the pilot had decided on an emergency landing.

Calmly, and without the least sign of panic, the pretty young air-hostess had passed down the 'plane telling everybody to fasten their safety belts in readiness for the landing.

A young Frenchwoman, with a little boy, had threatened to become hysterical, and Norma had marvelled at the cool way in which the air-hostess had handled the situation.

Through a break in the fog the pilot had spotted a huge field and thereafter he had made what is known as a "crash-landing", without using the wheels.

The young man seated next to Norma had explained what this meant as the giant machine had circled the field twice to use up more of its petrol in order to prevent fire.

"It means landing with the undercarriage up," he had said. "Otherwise, if the ground is rough, or if there is a ditch, the machine will pitch forward on to its nose and become a total wreck. This way the pilot will land on the fuselage and the under part of the machine will act as a brake."

A few minutes later the nose of the aircraft had dipped alarmingly. The Frenchwoman had screamed and then the aircraft had levelled off and the pilot had cut out his remaining engines.

In a tense silence, broken only by the whistle of the wind past the leading edges of the wings, they had glided down to the field. Then had followed a series of bumps, a nerve-shattering lurch, and then they had stopped within a few feet of the hedge.

"Good show!" had commented the young man smilingly, helping Norma to unfasten her safety belt.

Miraculously, no one had been hurt and they had been helped out by the crew of the 'plane. The handsome young pilot had come amongst them, apologising for what had happened and saying that arrangements would be made to get them to London as soon as possible.

"I managed to get a radio message off to airfield control just before we landed," he had said. "So they know all about us. It just means waiting a while."

The young man who had been seated beside Norma had upended her suitcase and made a seat for her.

"I'll go and have a look round," he had then said.

After a time people from the nearest village had arrived, including the local constable. Then had come the fire engine and an ambulance, mercifully not needed, Norma reflected thankfully.

Now she shivered a little, partly from cold. The autumn left little mist droplets of moisture on the tendrils of auburn

hair which escaped from beneath her hat.

She supposed they had landed somewhere in Kent, but she did not know the name of the village which the pilot had said was two miles away—not far from Maidstone.

Well, it was one way of arriving back in England, she thought, with a little quirk of amusement.

After nearly two years spent travelling around the Continent—following the sun, as her aunt would say—she had looked forward eagerly to her first returning glimpse of England. Now all she could see was the shadowy outline of some trees, part of a field, and the huge bulk of the air-liner.

She wondered if her father knew what had happened yet? If he had been at the airport to meet her he would have been informed of the mishap. Doubtless by now he would have been told that they were all safe.

A form loomed up out of the mist, and a cheerful voice addressed her. It was the young man.

"I've got all the news," he said smilingly. "They are laying on cars to take us to the village—it's called Abingford. Someone has gone ahead to organise food at the local inn, and two coaches are coming from Maidstone to take those of us who wish to go to London. Let me take your case. Is that all you have?"

"There is also a small trunk in the luggage compartment," Norma said.

"That's registered luggage, so the air-line people will see that it is delivered for you," he said. "I suppose," he added, "taking it all round, we got off quite lightly."

"We did indeed," said Norma fervently. She allowed him to take her suitcase. "Which way do we go?"

"This way," he said. "There's a gate in the field a bit lower down. They couldn't bring the cars any nearer, you see."

HALF-AN-HOUR later he faced her across a table in the village inn.

The place was crowded, for news of the mishap had aroused nearly everyone for miles around, including several newspaper reporters.

Norma had not wanted a meal, but her companion had insisted.

"You've had quite an experience of the wrong kind and you are bound to feel some kind of reaction, so I think coffee and sandwiches are indicated."

Seated near a log fire she nibbled at a sandwich and was grateful for the hot coffee.

And as she did this she could not help wondering about him, who he was and why he had been on the aircraft.

His good-looking face was lean and suntanned, and there was an air of strength and purpose about the firm set of his mouth.

Then there was something about his way of speaking that caused her to wonder if he were a colonial, but whether he was Canadian, Australian or South African she was not sure.

But wherever he came from, he certainly knew how to deal with people and get what he wanted. The emergency had found him cool and unruffled and he chatted as easily and as impersonally as if he had known her all his life.

Unwittingly Norma found herself making comparisons as she thought of Ludvic di Vallardo. But she pushed him firmly into the background.

"What is going to happen next?" she asked, during a slight pause.

The young man glanced at his wrist-watch.

"They said that the coaches from Maidstone would be here at ten," he said. "Say they get away by ten-thirty—we'd be in London before lunch. How will you manage after that?"

"I haven't far to go—Park Lane. I can get a taxi," she said.

"What about your people? Do you think you should telephone?"

"It wouldn't be much good telephoning, as my father may still be at the airport," she said.

There was a movement near the door, and a young man with a notebook and camera elbowed his way towards them.

He looked enquiringly at Norma.

"Excuse me, but you are Miss Wainwright, aren't you?" he asked. "I'm from the 'Daily Echo'. I've just seen the passenger list and learnt you were on board the 'plane. I suppose you have come back for the wedding, Miss Wainwright?"

The hand which held her coffee spoon shook slightly, and she spoke in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Yes. You can say I have come home for the wedding," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Wainwright," said the reporter, writing busily. "Nasty experience—were you frightened?"

"I suppose I was," Norma said, with a faint smile. "I can't remember exactly. It all happened so quickly, you see."

"Thank you, Miss Wainwright. Do you mind if we have a picture?" he asked.

Norma's companion was about to protest, but she smiled at him. From past experience she knew that it was useless to try and evade the press.

"Must you?" She shrugged.

The reporter laughed.

"We sure must, Miss Wainwright," he said.

When the camera's flashbulb went off several heads were turned in their direction, but the interest shifted almost immediately, leaving Norma and her companion isolated in a blur of sound.

He looked quizzically at her.

"Have I been entertaining a celebrity unawares?" he enquired, with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "If so, I think introductions are indicated. I'm Terence O'Rourke—Terry to my pals—and I come from Bennville, B.C."

"I'm Norma Wainwright." She wrinkled her eyebrows. "What does the B.C. stand for?"

"British Columbia—I was born there," he said. "I'm an engineer and I've come over to attend a conference organised by the International Development Trust."

"Then you'll probably meet my father at the conference, Mr. O'Rourke," said Norma. "He's chairman of the Anglo-American Steel Federation."

Terence whistled softly.

"So that's the Wainwright you are," he said, with a widening of his eyes. "Sorry I haven't a red carpet to spread out, but perhaps you could manage with my old raincoat!"

They burst out laughing, but when he spoke again he looked serious.

"Was that reporter saying something about your coming back for a wedding? Have you been staying abroad, Miss Wainwright?"

She answered the first part of his question only.

"It is my father's wedding," she said. "He's marrying Corinne Rivers, the singer. She's twenty-six, if you didn't know."

Something in her tone made him look at her with friendly understanding.

"So your father is marrying again," he mused softly. "And it's a pretty safe guess that you don't like the idea! What else is there to Miss Rivers besides being twenty-six?"

"She's charming."

"That all?"

"Isn't that everything?" Norma broke in impetuously.

She had not realised, up to then, how much she had kept bottled up inside her ever since her father's letter telling her of his forthcoming marriage had been delivered to her in Naples.

"My father is fifty-eight! He's a young fifty-eight, I'll admit, all the same——"

She ended, shrugging.

Terence picked up his coffee cup, deep in thought. Then he put it down.

"In other words, a girl of twenty-six is not likely to fall in love with a man old enough to be her father," he said. "Is that it?"

She looked at him steadily before replying. Then—

"Are you hinting that I might be suffering from an overdose of jealousy?" she inquired.

Terence smiled.

"I wouldn't say that," he answered quietly. "But it's only natural that you're going to feel the draught. If I've got my facts right, you're an only daughter and your mother died when you were quite young. I guess you and your father have been great friends ever since, and now this Corinne Rivers looks like stealin' your thunder."

Norma dropped her eyes to her plate, for he had put his finger unerringly on the core of her trouble.

If only, she thought, she had not succumbed to Aunt Agatha's insistence and spent the last two years travelling about the Continent with the older woman, who knows but that her present homecoming might have been very different?

"I guess those are the coaches from Maidstone," Terence said, as the sound of motors filled the narrow street outside. "Stay here while I go and book two seats."

He took the cases and went out.

Five minutes later he was back again, and made signs for her to come quickly.

Norma got up and reached for her coat.

"Here—let me help."

With an easy movement he took her coat and slipped it over her shoulders and took her arm.

A few moments later they were settled in the coach and he pulled a rug over her knees.

"There," he smiled. "No sense in not being comfortable. Now you can have forty winks or talk, just as you feel inclined."

WHERE WAS HER DESTINY?

FOR the first half-an-hour they talked. Or rather Norma listened while Terence talked.

He was, he said, the only son of parents who had emigrated to Canada from Ireland between the two World Wars.

His father had been a construction engineer and had worked for a big hydro-electric construction company building a great dam.

A fall of rock had left Mrs. O'Rourke a widow, and after her husband's death she had taken in sewing to eke out her slender means.

"Mother never spared herself," he said, speaking with deep feeling. "She knew I wanted to follow in Dad's footsteps, and though she hated the idea because of what had happened to him, she never stood in my way. When I was sixteen the same firm took me on and made it possible for me to attend night classes at the Vancouver University until I qualified."

"Is your mother still alive?" Norma asked.

"Sure," he answered, a look of almost dog-like devotion coming into his blue-grey eyes. "I guess you and she would get along like a house on fire. She lives in a little place I bought for her at the head of Marble Lake, on the outskirts of Bennville."

Afterwards, Norma told him a little about herself, of the lonely childhood between boarding school and occasional trips with her father abroad. She told him of her two years spent in Italy and the South of France, but mostly in Southern Italy. But she did not mention Ludvic.

Then she spoke of how Corinne Rivers had crossed their path.

The daughter of a country schoolmaster, Corinne had risen to fame at an early age, her contralto voice heard by millions on the radio.

Her gramophone records were best-sellers, and by the time she was twenty-three she could have counted her proposals by the hundred.

She had met Sir Loftus Wainwright at St. Moritz, where Norma's father had gone to spend a well-deserved winter sports holiday.

Corinne had been staying at the same hotel, and Norma would always remember the first time she had seen her, a graceful figure in ski-ing kit, with an infectious laugh that rang through the place.

During a little silence Norma thought of the happy days gone by, when she had been everything to her father.

It was unbearable to think that never again would she come home to meet the half-grave, half-humorous understanding look in his eyes, hear his faint chuckle when she told him of some scrape she had got into. Never again would they go for long walks beside the river, half seen through the autumn mists, walks in which they would talk to each other without seemingly a word being said.

Now there would always be Corinne. Corinne, who would come first, whose wishes would be law and who would have a right to resent it if she felt she was being left out.

Norma remembered a talk she had had with her father not long before he had become engaged to Corinne.

She had asked his advice about something—it must have been something quite trivial or she would have remembered what it was—and she could hear again his quiet tones when he had answered.

"You must do what in your judgment seems best, my dear. I have never asked you to conform to rules, especially rules of my making. Instead, I have tried to help you to gain an appreciation of essentials—of the things that really matter. Your aunt is a very worthy woman, a good Christian and, what is more, one who really lives up to her Christian beliefs. But you must be on your guard lest you find yourself pressed down into a mould and made to conform to what someone else believes constitutes 'a nice girl' but one without a scrap of individuality of her own."

Norma had laughed.

"I promise that won't happen, daddy," she had said. "But how am I to know whether my judgment is sound or not?"

"You'll know by instinct," he had said.

Then she had fallen asleep and dreamt that she and her father were in an aeroplane and that it was plunging down out of control into a lake in British Columbia.

Next thing she opened her mouth to scream, but felt a strong arm around her and Terence saying something in his quiet, reassuring way, so that she knew everything would be all right.

With a start she opened her eyes, to discover that her head was resting on his shoulder!

"We're practically there," he said. "Have a nice sleep?"

Terence removed his arm and smiled at her confusion.

"You look marvellous when you blush like that," he said teasingly. "But there's no need. You must forgive the liberty, but, you see, you were in great danger of falling off the seat every time the coach lurched. Besides, it was much more comfortable on my shoulder."

Her colour deepened, and she patted a stray hair into place with fingers that shook slightly.

Then she laughed, her sense of humour coming to her aid.

"It was I who took the liberty," she murmured. "Going to sleep on a perfect stranger's shoulder comes under that heading, I feel sure. Whatever must you think of me?"

"I thought you looked very sweet," he said, half seriously.

"Please! You're making it worse," she said self-consciously. "I feel ashamed."

"I hope you don't—not really," he said, as they swung into the coach terminal. "However, we've arrived, and the next thing is to get you home."

"I'll manage now, thank you," said Norma. "I'll take a taxi."

"I'll come along and see you safely indoors, if you don't mind," he said. Then he grinned in that singularly boyish fashion he had. "No sense in doing the job by halves, you know."

Norma laughed shakily, but made no protest.

Ten minutes later they reached her father's house in Park Lane and Terence helped her to alight and asked the taxi to wait.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. O'Rourke," said Norma. "I deeply appreciate all you have done, and I'm sure my father will like to thank you as well."

He smiled and held her hand for a moment.

"There's nothing to thank me for," he said. "But if you insist I can't think of better way than by having lunch with me to-morrow. May I telephone you in the morning and fix it up?"

For a fraction of a second she hesitated. It was not the fact that they had been formally introduced which held her back. His being in London to attend the engineering conference was introduction in itself, even if the 'plane crash had not provided a very efficient substitute. The truth was she did not want to start something that might easily get out of hand.

However, she smiled and nodded.

"Of course," she said, adding with a laugh, "But don't make it too early, will you?"

"I'll be patient until twelve o'clock to-morrow," smiled Terence.

THE CAFE REGAL was nothing if not discreet. Despite its position in the centre of London's West End, no roar of traffic penetrated beyond its closed doors. On a raised dais at the far end of the dining-hall an orchestra played softly, the music an almost unnoticed background to the quiet hum of conversation that prevailed. Waiters moved effortlessly between the tables, making no sound on the thick carpets.

Terence looked around with interest.

"Is it always like this?" he enquired, in an awed tone.

Norma smiled.

"I really couldn't say. I've only dined here once before, but that was a long time ago."

"I didn't know where to ask you to meet me, and then one of the people at the hotel where I'm staying said the Cafe Regal was a good place, so I telephoned and booked a table."

"It's very pleasant, and I think your choice an excellent one," said Norma. "I can't remember when I enjoyed a lunch more, Mr. O'Rourke. It was very kind of you to ask me."

"It was very kind of you to come," he replied promptly. "I was afraid you'd think I was trying to take advantage of the situation, but I assure you nothing was further from my thoughts."

"I know that," she said, an introspective look on her small, vivid face. "If I had thought otherwise I would not have come. And now it's my turn to invite you. Will you be free to come to dinner to-morrow night? My father is very anxious to meet you. It will be a family affair—just the four of us."

"Four? You mean——"

"Yes, Corinne will be there." Norma spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. "Afterwards, if you felt like it, we might go on somewhere. I daresay Corinne and father will have made their own plans."

Terence nodded, as if to say that he understood the situation perfectly well."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll be very pleased to come—that is, to meet your father, Miss Wainwright. Of course, I shall meet him officially in a few days' time when he welcomes the delegates to the conference, but this is different. It strikes me that my particular good luck charms were working overtime when they staged that 'plane crash." He grinned. "Talking about that, have you seen the papers?"

"I'm afraid I didn't have time," Norma replied, although Corinne had already 'phoned to tell her. "Do they mention the crash?"

"With all the trimmings," he chuckled. "The first thing I saw when I opened my morning paper was you! 'Miss Norma Wainwright, daughter of Sir Loftus Wainwright, is seen having coffee with a friend after the forced landing! The friend being me, of course," he laughed again. "I had no idea you were so important."

"I'm not in the least important," she said, shaking her head. "I'm afraid I can't help it if my father happens to be well known, so that anything his family does is considered news."

"Oh, I don't mind," he smiled. "It just struck me as being rather funny, that's all."

"In what way?" she asked.

Terence shrugged.

"Well, here am I, a backwoods hick who's never been to England in his life before, suddenly pitch-forked into society all because I happened to sit next to you on a trip over from Paris. Wait till the boys back in Bennville read about it all."

"Oh, I see." Norma smiled suddenly. "I hadn't looked at it that way. But why do you call yourself a backwoods hick, whatever that may be?"

"Because that's just what I am," he said seriously.

As if to illustrate his point, he placed his hands on the table, turning them over and looking at them.

They were good hands, Norma thought, with long, firm fingers; the hands of a worker. Looking at them, she had a stirring of respect for her companion.

A waiter came up and presented the bill on a silver salver. Terence laid two pound notes over it and turned to Norma.

"What do we do now?" he asked. "Have you any plans or can I hope to monopolise a little more of your time?"

Norma hesitated. Then—

"I'm free until five o'clock," she said. "I—we're dining out to-night, so I must be back in time to change. Apart from

that——" She paused questioningly.

Terence rose and held her chair.

"That's fine," he said. "I've got a car outside so we can take a little drive into the country. I've a hankering to see Windsor Castle and Hampton Court Palace. Would you mind?"

"I should love it," she said truthfully, surprised at her enthusiasm.

The car was parked in a side-street. It was an open-hood model which he had hired for the duration of his visit.

As she slid into her seat Norma experienced a little thrill of pleasure. There was something strangely moving about his boyish desire to share with her the fun of exploring, and for some reason that she could not fathom she felt deeply moved.

Mingled with the feeling was a strange bitterness against life for having made her what she was—the daughter of a wealthy father, a social butterfly.

All at once she was envious of the man at her side. Life, to him, meant only one thing—achievement. She wondered, half idly, what he really thought about her.

What, she wondered also, was to be the outcome of the next few days? Her father's wedding was only a month away, and after that—— Her aunt wanted her to return to Italy and on the face of it it seemed the obvious thing to do.

With that thought she realised suddenly that she might still be in love with Ludvic di Vallardo, though her trust in him was a thing of the past.

Like an echo from those Italian nights, when he had played the guitar to her on the terrace of his mother's house, she seemed once again to hear the sound of his voice, deep and pleading, vowing his love for her.

Yet, even as he had vowed that she and she alone mattered, he had been having an *affaire* with a sixteen-year-old peasant girl on the farm owned by his family, a few miles from Naples!

Now she stared through the windscreen, her eyes becoming suddenly blurred with tears.

For into her mind had come the memory of a day she had spent with Ludvic on the farm. She and her aunt had been his guests for the week-end, and they had gone out riding together.

On their way back they had overtaken a peasant girl driving some goats, who had stared insolently at them as they had passed. Young and beautiful, she had the flawless complexion of the Southern Italian and a red-lipped mouth that spoke of a fiery temper. Ludvic had ignored her completely.

It had been the girl's eyes that had remained with Norma that night, the way she had looked at Ludvic, the wave of colour that had swept up from her neck as she had stared at Norma.

"Penny for them?" Terence sounded amused.

Norma looked up with a start, and blushed.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of anything in particular," she said lamely. "Just enjoying the drive."

"You didn't seem as if you were," he said teasingly. "In fact, you looked as if you had just taken a dose of some very nasty medicine!"

Norma smiled introspectively.

"That's not very complimentary of you, Mr. O'Rourke," she murmured. And then added lightly—"But perhaps I have."

He skilfully avoided a big lorry that took up more than its fair share of the road before he replied.

"Don't we all have to do that at times?" he said. "But the thing is to get it down and ten forget about it. Life can still offer one a lot of sweets to take away the taste, you know."

"Sweets can't make you forget the medicine—or the reason one had for taking it," she said defensively.

"That means it was good for you," he said calmly. "Hullo! Did you see that signpost? It said a mile to Windsor."

A little later he drew the car into the side of the road and stopped, looking with awed wonder at the frowning battlements of the famous old castle looming over the ancient town.

Then he turned to Norma.

"That kind of thing," he said, speaking with a curious solemnity, "makes one believe in the destiny of the British peoples! One seems to know, deep down, that nothing can shake or destroy them, and that wars play no more important a part in their destiny than a passing thunderstorm. Centuries ago men built that old castle in defence of freedom. Still it stands, a monument to the beliefs for which Britons have fought and died in every corner of the world. A heritage in stone!"

Norma nodded, understanding something of the emotions which the sight of Windsor Castle had aroused in him.

It was not mere patriotism; it was something that had its roots in that centuries old belief that, however severe the trial, good must eventually come out of evil.

"Come on, let's go and look over it," he said eagerly.

IT was over tea, two hours later, that he asked the question that Norma had been asking herself ever since she had arrived back in England.

"What are you going to do after the wedding? I guess it's going to be kind of queer having a stepmother only a few years older than yourself, isn't it?"

"Very queer," said Norma drily. She rested her chin on her hands and stared into space. "To tell you the truth, Terry, I haven't quite made up my mind. Corinne wants me to carry on as I have always done, and Aunt Agatha wants me to go back to Italy. It's all very difficult."

Yet one part of her problem was solved as she uttered those words. She could not quite understand how it happened, but as she spoke she had involuntarily come to a decision, almost as if it had been forced upon her. Whatever happened, she must never see Ludvic again. She dare not. Not if she wanted peace of mind and the chance to forget.

It was strange to be talking like this, she reflected wonderingly. Just as strange as the ease with which they had dropped into the way of calling each other by their Christian names.

It was one of those things that just happened, she supposed. Occasionally you came across someone you seemed to have known all your life, someone whose innate sympathy and understanding arose from a similarity of tastes and outlook, so that you knew beforehand that it was not necessary to explain.

She stole a glance at him. He had not mentioned yesterday, almost as if he knew that her father had come in soon after she had arrived home, but he had been in complete ignorance of all that had happened.

"My dearest child!" Sir Loftus had said, giving her a fond hug. "I was sorry not to have been at the airport but Corinne wanted me to go shopping with her. Did you have a pleasant trip over from Paris?"

When Norma had told him about the forced landing he had looked very upset.

"Good heavens!" he had exclaimed, running his hand through his iron-grey hair. "I had no idea! You poor child, what a frightful experience. We must certainly have this young man to dinner and then I can thank him properly for all he did for you."

And that, as far as her father was concerned, was that, had thought Norma a little bitterly. She was all right and none the worse for her experience, so there was nothing to be gained by dwelling on it. All that remained was to round off the incident by asking Terry to dinner and then it could conveniently be forgotten.

Corinne Rivers had telephoned quite early after seeing Norma's photograph in the morning papers, her voice registering the correct shades of horror and dismay.

Norma had easily visualised her seated upright in bed, clad in an expensive *negligee*, the ivory-tinted telephone receiver held to her ear by scarlet-tipped fingers.

She had wanted Norma to lunch with her in order that she might hear all about the adventure, but Norma had replied firmly that she had another engagement. Somehow, she had not been in the mood for Corinne just then.

"What's this Aunt Agatha like, the one who wants you to go and live with her in Italy?" Terry broke in conversationally.

He stirred his tea abstractedly, a frown between his eyes, so that Norma knew that his question was by no means as casual as it sounded.

She shrugged.

"She's a dear," she said briefly. "She is my father's sister, and about two years older than he is. She was engaged to a young officer who was killed in the first World War, and she never married. Nearly two years ago she had bronchitis very badly and was advised to winter abroad, so she rented a villa near Naples and asked me to go and stay with her. Now she would like me to make my home with her for good."

"That doesn't sound much like fun," he suggested. "Still, I suppose you got to know lots of people while you were in Italy."

"Oh, yes," she said indifferently. "But it's not the same as living here. Only now——" She sighed.

He said nothing further, and a little later they drove out of the town and took the road back to London, talking little.

Reaching her father's house in Park Lane, he stood bareheaded on the pavement for a moment smiling down at her.

"Thank you for coming out with me this afternoon," he said simply. "You turned an ordinary sight-seeing trip into something mighty special! I'm looking forward to coming to dinner to-morrow night—it can't come round quickly enough for me!"

NORMA DECIDES

"I THINK your young man is perfectly divine, Norma dear," said Corinne Rivers gushingly. She gave Sir Loftus an arch glance and added laughingly—"If I weren't so hopelessly in love already with my own young man I could fall for him myself. I just adore those strong, silent types like Mr. O'Rourke."

Norma felt slightly nauseated. She was waiting for Terry to call for her a few days later, and had come downstairs to where Corinne and her husband-to-be were strolling on the terrace at the back of the house.

During lunch Norma had seen her future stepmother glancing about the tastefully furnished room with an appraising eye, and knew instinctively that she was already planning the changes that she intended to make.

"Don't let him hear you refer to him as a strong, silent type, Corinne," Norma said, with a forced little laugh. "In any case, he is a very good conversationalist. At least,

I found him so."

"He's the kind of young man who will go far," said her father indulgently. "We could do with a man of his type in our own organisation, but he seems wedded to British Columbia. I doubt very much if he would even consider an offer."

"Oh, darling, don't you ever think of anything but business?" Corinne pouted, clinging to his arm. "It's so very dull."

"It's what makes the money, my sweet,' Sir Loftus replied laughingly. "However, if we are to be at the club in time for the polo, we ought to start now. Run upstairs and powder your nose—I'll ring for the car to be brought round."

He waited till she had vanished through the open doorway, then he turned to his daughter.

"This isn't a very appropriate time to discuss the matter, my dear, but I was wondering if you had made up your mind what you want to do," he said abruptly. "As you know, both Corinne and I are anxious that you should continue to regard this house as your home, which, indeed, it is. But you may not feel the same way about it. After all, you are good friends, I trust?"

"Oh, yes, quite," replied Norma evasively.

She turned to rest her hands on the terrace balustrade and looked down into the walled garden, her eyes pensive. She was wearing a tweed suit and a sweater, with a gay little chiffon scarf tied round her throat. Terry had promised to take her out into the country and she was looking forward to the run.

She made a little gesture.

"It's all very difficult, isn't it?" she went on, when her father did not speak. "As you say, Corinne and I are quite good friends, but that isn't everything, you see."

"It's quite a lot," he answered slowly, his brow knitted. He appeared to consider for a moment, then—"You like Corinne don't you?"

"Of course." Norma hoped her laugh did not sound too forced.

"Then why can't you just carry on as you have always done? Or do you want to go back to Italy?" he asked.

Norma hesitated. Then—

"I don't want to go back to Italy," she said slowly. "At the same time I have no wish to be a third party. Corinne is very sweet and has gone out of her way to tell me that when you and she are married it won't make the least difference. But if we are honest with ourselves we must admit that it is bound to do so. Not, perhaps, in the way you mean or even in the way I mean. But it *will*."

He stared at her broodingly.

"Don't tell me you are jealous of Corinne, my dear," he said heavily. "That would be most unlike you."

"No, of course I'm not," Norma said, a little break in her voice. "I just want you to be happy, that's all. But things won't be the same as they have been—it is quite impossible that they should be."

"I don't see——"

A maid came out on to the terrace.

"Excuse me, Miss Norma, but there is a Mr. O'Rourke to see you," she announced.

"Thank you, Mary, I'll be along in a moment." Norma waited until the girl had gone, then turned to her father. "I must go," she said quickly. "We can discuss all this later. But don't worry, father. Everything will work out for the best. I'm sure of that."

She gave him an affectionate little kiss and hurried away, her eyes moist. It was stupid and childish to feel as she did, she told herself resentfully, but she could not help it.

AS soon as she saw Terry standing by the drawing-room windows, looking down at the street, she could tell that something was wrong.

He turned at her entrance, his eyes lighting up at the enchanting picture she made.

"Terry! What's the matter? Have you had bad news?" she enquired.

"Sort of," he said, with a quick breath of surprise. "How did you guess?"

"I just knew as soon as I saw you. Do you want to call this afternoon off?"

He shook his head.

"Of course not," he said. "Ready?"

"Quite ready," she said, nodding. She looked a little anxiously at him. "But are you quite sure, Terry? I would understand."

"It's all right," he said briefly. "It isn't as serious as all that. At least, I hope it isn't. Anyhow, I'll tell you all about it when we're in the car."

As the car threaded its way through the traffic, requiring all Terry's concentration for the moment, Norma stole an involuntary glance at him.

Though she had awakened that morning feeling, as she confessed to herself, like nothing on earth, she had been buoyed up by the thought of the outing that lay ahead.

If only she could put Ludvic out of her mind for ever, she thought wistfully. But it wasn't as easy as all that. She might chide herself for giving way to hopeless longings—might brace herself up and present a smiling face to the world—but it was all a hollow sham. However much she might try to forget, she would never really succeed.

They headed out of town, and soon the car was speeding along a secondary road between tall, graceful elm trees.

Coming at last to the top of a high hill, Terry stopped the car and got out.

"This seems as good a place as any to talk," he said, helping her to alight. "Let's go over there and sit on the grass. The view looks very good."

"It's famous," she said, as they walked to the edge of a plateau. "On a clear day you can see three counties—Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. Usually there is hardly parking room, but to-day we seem to have it to ourselves."

"Let's be thankful for small mercies, then," he said, with a faint grin.

He found a place for them to sit and asked if she would like a cushion. Norma shook her head. Then she took off her hat and jacket and clasped her hands around her knees.

"Now tell me all about it, Terry," she said quietly.

He gave her a quick glance. Then he took an overseas cable form from his pocket and handed it to her.

"I got that this morning," he said. "It's from Doc Sandilands. He's the doctor at Bennville and he's known me most of my life."

The cable read—

"MOTHER VERY ILL. CONSIDER ADVISABLE YOU RETURN.—SANDILANDS."

Norma looked up, her expression one of sympathy.

"What will you do, Terry?" she asked.

"I'll go back, of course," he said simply. "As soon as I got this I telephoned Canadian Airways and managed to get a seat on a 'plane leaving London Airport the night after next. That fixed, I put a 'phone call through to Doc Sandilands and told him when to expect me."

"Was he able to tell you much?" she asked.

"Enough," he said, with a sudden tightening of his lips. "He said mother wasn't in any immediate danger, but that she would require looking after when she comes out of hospital and that she'll have to take life pretty easy after this. She's been over-doing it as usual, running round helping people, and she suddenly collapsed. Luckily one of her neighbours, a Mrs. McGinty, found her and sent for Doc Sandilands. They are keeping her under observation for a time—he couldn't say for how long."

"It will help her to know that you are on your way back," said Norma gently. "I'm terribly sorry, Terry."

His hand took hers in a tight hold.

"I guess I'm sorry, too," he said, with a wry smile. "Apart from the worry about mother, there are—other things. I could have used a little more time over here. Now——" He shrugged.

Norma sat silent, staring into blue distances, her brows puckered.

It was not necessary for him to explain what he meant by that. She knew, with a queer, instinctive inner knowledge, that he was in love with her; that he was only waiting to be sure of himself.

In which case—a thought stirred inside—suppose she were to marry him? Only *she* would know that she had done so in order to escape from an intolerable situation that was not made any easier by the disillusionment she had suffered at the hands of Ludvic.

Almost she laughed aloud at the fancy. She could well imagine her father's consternation on being told that she was going to marry a man about whom they knew little beyond what he had told them himself and intended to make her home in Canada.

At the same time there would be a certain amount of satisfaction in being free of Corinne's patronage, however well meant. The alternative was to go back to Italy, to her aunt, where she was bound to meet Ludvic again.

Even her pride was not enough to protect her from the memories that came to haunt her. Ludvic standing in the garden of the house in Naples, staring down at her in perplexed amusement and anger, his lazy drawl making light of the shattering of her dreams. This was when she had found out about the peasant girl.

Terry's voice came between her and her visions, and with a start she forced herself to listen to what he was saying.

"I reckon this just about puts paid to a lot of things I aimed to do during the rest of my stay here," he remarked glumly. "It's a good thing the engineering conference only lasts another two days, so I won't have to cut much of that. There's a session to-morrow morning and one the next day that I can attend. It doesn't leave a lot of time, though."

"No," she murmured, under her breath, "it doesn't leave a lot of time. That's why we—we mustn't waste any of it." She turned to him, her eyes strangely luminous. Then—"Terry! Will—will you take me with you?"

There was a stunned silence, during which Terry stared at her as if he could not have heard aright.

Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and then closed them again, but at length—

"I don't get it," he said slowly. "Do you mean——"

He hesitated, afraid to put the thought into words.

Norma smiled tremulously, her courage a bright flame between them.

"I mean that if—if you want me to I

will marry you," she said, her voice breaking a little. She smiled, a little crooked smile that was strangely eloquent and at the same time pleading. "You—you do, don't you, Terry?"

He drew a deep breath, an expression in his eyes she had never seen before.

When he spoke there was a hint of rueful amusement in his voice.

"I guess you know the way I feel about you—the way I've felt ever since we met the night that 'plane crashed. There's never been another girl for me, neither before nor after, nor will there ever be. But when it comes to marrying—well—I reckon you ought to know just what it would mean if you married me. British Columbia is a mighty long way from England, and though I've got a good job it's not all that good. I mean, I couldn't give you the kind of things I can see you've been used to having—servants, cars, and all that."

She uttered a little sigh, and said—

"Do you think I would have come out with you as often as I have if I had cared about things like that?"

"I don't know." Terry shrugged. "You might just have been taking pity on me because I didn't know my way about, and all that. Getting married is a different proposition."

"Getting married is a very serious business, Terry," she said, half teasingly. "There is a great deal more to it than—than having servants and cars. You—you would have to be very patient with me—there is such a lot I don't know—but your mother would teach me. And"—laughter trembled on her lips—"I'm quite intelligent."

He drew her into his arms.

"Gosh," he said, in awed tones. "I thought the end of the world had come when I got that cable this morning. But now——" He laughed in an exultant fashion, and bending his head, kissed her tenderly.

For a moment Norma did not respond, in her heart a nostalgic regret for the things that might have been. Then, with a quick, indrawn breath she thrust the past resolutely behind her and putting up her hands, linked them behind his neck and kissed him in return.

Some time later they stood hand in hand, taking a last look over the smiling countryside before going back to the car.

Terry smiled down at her.

"Happy?"

Norma nodded.

"Very." She blushed and laughed at the same time. "As long as you don't think I am utterly shameless."

"Shameless—*you?*" He put his hands on her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. "Do you know what you have done to me, Norma darling? You've given me something that no one can ever take from me—something that will shine like a guiding star through any darkness for all the days of my life. If ever I feel faint-hearted and weary I shall only have to remember your courage to find the strength to go on."

She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder, a dreamy look in her eyes.

"I seem to remember having done this before," she murmured.

"Yes, but on that occasion you were asleep, and it was in a coach," he laughed. "This time I can do what I badly wanted to do then."

"Oh?" she enquired innocently. "And what was that?"

"This!" And he kissed her again.

SEVEN months later Norma stood in the open doorway of what she had learned to call a frame house, looking over the garden towards the lake. Somewhere in the forest at the back a deer barked. But it was so still that she could hear the murmur of a waterfall over six miles away.

This, she thought, was what she had always wanted; a stillness so marked that even the splash of a leaping salmon became an intrusion.

She turned away and went indoors to the living-room. The recently-installed electric light had put an end to the drudgery of lamp filling and wick trimming. All the same, she missed the soft, amber glow of the big paraffin lamp which had stood behind Terry's chair.

There was something strangely intimate about lamplight, something in the way the shadows built up in odd corners, so that it was easy to retreat behind the facade of one's thoughts without even so perceptive a person as Terry being any the wiser.

She paused just inside the room, a slender figure in a cretonne overall, her hair curling rebelliously at the nape of the neck, her eyes misting with sudden tears.

After a moment she moved slowly towards the big fireplace and put a fresh log on the embers; the nights were cold and Terry liked a good fire when he came in.

It was a pleasant room, from the skin rugs on the floor to the Satsuma vase that had been Corinne's wedding present. It was a room that was lived in and which reflected something of the individuality of its owners. There was a wireless cabinet in one corner, and the fireplace was flanked by comfortable armchairs.

Through the open window she could see the light in the front room of the little house where Terry's mother lived. They had lived there with her for the first three months until their present home had been built. It was largely due to Mrs. O'Rourke's insistence that it had been.

"Young folk want a home of their own," she had said firmly, when Terry and Norma had argued that she ought to live with them. "Besides, I like my own little place. I'm happy here and I can do as I please. When you get to my time of life you want your own bits and pieces around you, not somebody else's."

Sturdily independent, she had smiled at them both, but there had been a note in her voice which had told Norma that her mind was made up.

Norma had a great respect and affection for her mother-in-law. Going by some of the things that had been let fall she judged that the news of her son's marriage had been as great a surprise to Mrs. O'Rourke as it had been to Norma's father.

Yet no one could have been kinder or given her a warmer welcome.

When they had landed at Quebec aerodrome, after crossing the Atlantic and then flown from one side of Canada to the other, the older woman had still been in hospital.

Before going to see her Terry had sought out the doctor, who had given them a more detailed account of what had happened.

"I've been warning your mother about her heart for years," he had said. He was a short, spare, sandy-haired man with an almost aggressive manner. "She hadn't been well—got a bad cold sitting up with Axel Quidding's wife, who was having trouble with her third child. Luckily for your mother old Mrs. McGinty went across later to borrow something and found your mother lying on her own hearthrug unconscious."

"Just how bad is she, doc?" Terry had asked.

Doctor Sandilands had shrugged.

"Some people go on for years while others——"

"You mean," had said Terry, "she may die at any——"

"Who said anything about dying?" the doctor had said testily. "If your mother's sensible,—but *only* if she's sensible, mind!—there's no reason why she shouldn't live to be a hundred. But you'll have to see to it that she takes reasonable care of herself in the future."

Terry had grinned.

"That's easier said than done, and you know it, doc," he had remarked.

"Well, you've got someone to help you look after her now," had said the doctor, smiling at Norma. "When I had your second cable telling me you were married and that your wife was coming with you, I waited for an appropriate moment and then broke the news to your mother. Man!"—he had put a hand on Terry's shoulder—"it did her more good than all the medicine I could put into her."

Looking back now, it seemed to Norma that so much had been crowded into a few hours that she still found it difficult to sort out her impressions.

She recalled her father's hurt bewilderment when she had told him that she and Terry wanted to be married so that she could fly back to Canada with him.

At first he had refused to take her seriously and, but for Corinne, it was more than possible that he might have refused to give his consent, for she had been under twenty-one at the time.

Corinne, of course, had an axe to grind. Though she had never hinted as much, Norma knew that she herself was an embarrassment, for when one was young and pretty and famous, one did not want a step-daughter, little short of one's own age, sharing the limelight.

Besides, to a girl like Corinne the whole thing was superbly romantic and the next best thing to an elopement.

When a special marriage licence was in Terry's hands there had followed a feverish orgy of shopping in which, with Corinne's help, she had got together the things she needed to complete her simple trousseau.

"You know you've done yourself out of a stack of wedding presents," Terry had said, with a grin. "You ought to have been married at St. George's, with umpteen bridesmaids, and a huge reception afterwards. As it is——"

"Thanks very much, but that is the last thing I want," Norma had interrupted. "As it is, it is going to be quite bad enough, thanks to Corinne! Just wait until you see what is in store for us when we come out of church to-morrow!"

Her young step-mother-to-be had helped with the last-minute packing.

"It's quite the most thrilling thing that has happened in ages," she had said, glancing round Norma's disordered room. "The only disappointment is that you won't be here for *my* wedding."

"You'll manage quite well without me," Norma had said, somewhat drily. "I'll think of you on the day and send you a cable."

"Don't you mind going so far away from England?" Corinne had asked.

"No," Norma had answered. "Why should I? I'm going with Terry."

Corinne had laughed.

"You know, I honestly believe you're in love with him," she had said.

"Naturally I'm in love with Terry. I wouldn't be marrying him otherwise."

Well, it was true, she told herself. It might not be the same kind of love that Ludvic had aroused in her, but it was still love.

Hadn't it been said by some famous person that marriage was the ultimate perfection of friendship? She remembered the look which had come into Terry's eyes when she had asked him to take her back to British Columbia with him, and thought how inadequately the word "love" expressed what she really felt.

If her conscience smote her, she stifled its prickings with all sorts of arguments. Terry needed her, and in him she would find a refuge from her memories. Why, then, couldn't she make him a loving, faithful wife? In a new country, where there was so much to do and learn, she would be able to wipe out the memories which haunted her dreams, and in doing so, solve her father's and Corinne's problems as well.

If anything had been needed to harden her determination it was the knowledge that, when he had recovered from the first shock of her announcement, her father had seemed more relieved than anything else. June and September might marry, she thought a little scornfully, but they did not want a daughter of twenty-one to remind them of the difference in their ages.

When she said as much to Terry he threw back his head and laughed—and she did not know this—called upon Heaven to witness his good fortune in finding a girl who was not only beautiful and intelligent, but one who possessed a sense of humour as well.

On the way to their new home Terry had pointed out various landmarks—peaks he had climbed as a boy, lakes where he had fished for salmon, rivers down which he had paddled his first canoe.

"You're going to love it here, my darling," he had said. "I know it is going to seem rough—even primitive—after London, but you live much nearer to the heart of things in a country of this kind. Neighbours *are* neighbours, not just people you say good morning to over a fence."

Many times after that she had forced herself to look into the future.

In marrying Terry she should have discovered a new and tender meaning to life, so that in time the bitterness of regret should have become merged in a new and splendid awareness of what was, instead of what might have been.

But somehow a loneliness of spirit had gained the upper hand, so that she had difficulty in maintaining even the facile pretence of being happy.

Meanwhile Terry, too proud to beg for what was not freely offered, and bewildered by a turn of events he could neither foresee nor prevent, had taken refuge behind a reserve that was slowly but surely building itself up into an impassable barrier between them.

Now Norma looked down at her roughened hands, her lips curving in an odd little smile. She could well imagine what Corinne would say if she could see her now.

Still, at least she could look back with satisfaction on her material accomplishments, if nothing else.

The house was spotless; she had done most of the staining of the woodwork and the polishing of the floors.

The neighbours had given them a housewarming when the curtains had been put up, each bringing a gift of some kind.

Norma had always liked cooking, so that it had only been a matter of learning to use a wood-burning stove in order to turn out dainty meals and even Terry's mother had nodded approval when her young daughter-in-law had made her first cranberry tart.

"Someone once said that anybody could cook if they had a recipe book and the right ingredients," she had remarked. "But there's more to it than that, my dear—much more. Terry's luckier than he knows."

Norma had blushed. Praise from Mrs. O'Rourke was praise indeed.

Despite everything she had managed to carve a niche for herself in the little community.

Cut off from the usual amenities of the larger towns, the people of Bennville had to make their own amusements, so that any excuse for a party or a dance was eagerly seized upon. Barbecues and moonlight picnics took place with great frequency during the summer months, and Norma played her part in full in helping to provide the enormous quantities of food and drink that were consumed on such occasions. With the children she was a prime favourite, for she was young enough to be a child at heart when the occasion demanded.

Nevertheless she was conscious of having failed in her task.

Terry had taught her to ride and to hold a salmon rod; to paddle a canoe and to make a fire of dried twigs and leaves.

He worked at the hydro-electric plant, where he was deputy to the senior construction engineer, and in the beginning he would often discuss his work with her, telling her about the many problems that cropped up in throwing a dam across the headwaters of the creek.

Now he scarcely spoke about his work, except to answer her questions, as if he suspected that her interest was only assumed.

With the coming of winter the long, dark days would have proved a severe testing time for any young couple thrown back on their own resources. But in their case it made little or no difference, for by now their estrangement had reached a stage when only the ordinary courtesies of life were left.

Even Mrs. O'Rourke began to sense that something was wrong, for on more than one occasion Norma had surprised the older woman darting a puzzled, uneasy glance in her son's direction, as if there was something happening that she could not understand.

Had it not been for her mother-in-law Norma doubted very much if she could have stayed the course. Plump and good-natured, she made light of her illness and pooh-poohed any suggestion that she ought to have someone to live with her.

"I never had much schooling," she had once told Norma, "and because of that I've never been much of a reader. But I've learnt other things that aren't in books. Maybe I'm a sight too independent, but I couldn't abide being treated like an invalid. If I get ill again you can come and look after me, but until I do, just let me go on my own way and I'll be happy."

"It seems to me that going your own way means mothering everybody in Bennville," Norma had said smilingly.

"And why not? Everyone's glad of a helping hand at times, and what's the good o' being neighbours if you can't do a good turn once in a while?" The older woman had snipped a piece of thread off the garment she was mending. Norma recognised it as a shirt belonging to the young man who boarded at the McGinty's, next door. "As the Reverend Jones said in his sermon last Sunday—'We only pass this way once, so it's up to us to make the most of our opportunities'."

On another occasion she had asked Norma if she were happy.

"You see, my dear, I worried about it when I heard that you and Terry had got married. He's a good lad and they say he'll go far—the Hydro-Electric Company think the world of him, but—well, you've been brought up different. I daresay you could have had your pick of those who could give you a great deal more than my Terry."

"I couldn't have more," Norma had said softly, her eyes misting.

Mrs. O'Rourke had smiled.

"You're made of the right stuff," she had said. "I knew as soon as I set eyes on you that Terry hadn't made a mistake. They say that a son's a son till he takes him a wife, but in this case it's different. I've found a daughter—the one I never had."

Norma had risen abruptly to her feet and gone to the window.

"I hope you will always think that," she had said shakily. "I—I worried, too, when I was on my way out here. I was afraid I might not—measure up."

Mrs. O'Rourke had smiled again.

"You measure up all right, my dear," she had said quietly. "I said it once and I'll say it again. Terry is luckier than he knows."

NORMA was in the bedroom when she heard the sound of Terry's car. She went out into the living-room as he entered and gave him a quick smile.

He took off his coat and dropped it over the back of the settee.

"There's some mail for you," she said. "I put it on your desk."

"Thanks. Did you have any?"

"A letter from Corinne," she said.

"Good. I'll just see what's what and then I'll wash," he said, crossing to his desk.

"Don't forget that we promised to go over to the McGinty's to-night. It's Lucy's birthday," Norma reminded him.

He nodded, and she went into the kitchen to dish up the meal, leaving him to read his mail.

A little later, at the table, he glanced up and said casually—

"What did Corinne have to say? Anything special?"

"Nothing much. She and daddy are going on a cruise and calling at Naples on their way back. She has made a new recording of the 'Dream Song', the piece that is so popular in England just now."

"Good for her," he said. "It would be silly to hide her light under a bushel merely because she is married."

Was it imagination or did she detect bitterness in his tone? Norma wondered.

She felt suddenly weary, as though she could no longer maintain the sham of appearances, to live out the farce which went by the name of marriage.

It seemed as if her spirit had become maimed so that she was no longer capable of seeing things in their right proportions.

Alarmed, she looked up to find him watching her and spoke without thinking, without stopping to consider the effect of her words.

"Terry! I want you to let me go away for—for a time. I feel as if I need a change. It—I can't explain, only——" She stopped abruptly, searching for words.

He laughed shortly.

"I've been wondering when this was coming," he said.

She drew a deep breath.

"It—it's not what you evidently think," she said painfully. "I—I don't mean I want to go away—for good. Only we—we can't go on—like this. I don't know what has happened, but——" Again she stopped, her lips trembling.

Terry spoke quietly, without any suggestion of anger.

"I'm glad this has come up, my dear. It would be senseless to deny that I know —that I have known for some time that you are unhappy. You're not to blame—it's all a question of what one expects out of life. Unfortunately, I can't compete with trips to Naples and so on."

Norma flushed warmly and looked away. The dark shadows beneath her eyes made her in some curious way more beautiful and at the same time more remote than he had known her before.

A sudden, savage anger shook him, though he could not have said at whom it was directed. Possibly it was the realisation that she was no longer his to claim.

He laid down his table napkin and rose to his feet.

"What would you like to do?" His voice sounded hard and indifferent.

"I don't know," she said. "I thought of taking a trip to England."

He walked to the fireplace and opened a box of cigarettes. The search for matches gave him a moment in which to collect his thoughts.

"I think I get the idea," he said grimly. "All the same, I prefer to call a spade a spade, so why not say straight out that you realise you made a mistake, and that you are seeking the only way out? We're not children, Norma, and quite apart from any question of principles, we both know that these things *can* be sorted out."

She picked at a loose thread in the checked table cloth.

"If I thought that I would say so," she remarked quietly. "All I am asking you is to allow me to go away for a time." She smiled faintly. "As your mother would say, I can't see the forest for the trees."

Terry laughed mirthlessly.

"That's not surprising," he rejoined. "Unfortunately, no one can make themselves feel what isn't there. That fact alone cramps one's style."

Norma bowed her head.

"I—I have tried to be a good wife," she said pathetically. "If I have failed it isn't because—because of anything I could help."

"I know that." He hunched his shoulders. "That's the whole trouble. I don't want to be brutal, or to throw your generosity in your face, but one thing has got to be made clear. *I want no favours.*" He paused and stared at her like a man on the brink of despair. "You see, it is not a question of whether you are a wife to me or not, my dear Norma—it's whether you want to be!"

The silence that followed this was all-engulfing; the sound of the clock seemed to swell and fill the room. Norma felt as if she were suffocating. And the words of the marriage service came back to her—*"To love and to cherish. . ."*

She could have laughed aloud at the cruel irony of it all. When she had married Terry she had sought to pay her dues in false coin, but he had detected the sham! Therein, and nowhere else, lay the reason for his coldness, the reserve which had slowly but surely raised itself into a wall between them.

In another moment she might have attempted to bridge the gap, but the moment was not to be granted to her.

As she raised her head and looked at him, her eyes wide and dark, the sudden peal of the telephone bell cut across their thoughts.

With a quick stride Terry crossed to his desk and picked up the receiver.

"O'Rourke speaking," he said crisply.

Norma could hear a faint crackle of sound, and then she saw him stiffen.

"When was she last seen? Great Scot, Bill, that was two hours ago. Yes?" There was another pause. Then—"I'll be right over. You'd better notify the police. Yes, of course—there's no time to be lost. What? Okay, I'll see to that."

He put down the receiver and turned to Norma.

"That was Bill Long," he said tersely. "The Karminsky child is missing—young Debbie. She had gone into the forest at the back of their cottage to pick flowers, taking her young brother with her, and when Mrs. Karminsky went to look for them she found the boy wandering along the path by himself, crying. All they can get out of him is 'Debbie's gone'."

"Oh, Terry!"

Norma sprang to her feet, wide-eyed with dismay, her own problem forgotten in the face of something which affected every member of the little community.

She knew Debbie well, for she was one of her favourites. Six years old, she was a bright, intelligent little girl with a mop of fair, curly hair and gentian blue eyes. Her mother was a Glasgow girl who had married a Polish airman during the war, and had emigrated to British Columbia at the end of it.

"What do you think can have happened to her?" she asked, as Terry opened a drawer in his desk and took out a powerful electric torch.

"It's impossible to say." He spoke absently, as if his mind was running ahead. "Bill Long is organising a search party, but they've left it a bit late. Mrs. Karminsky lost a lot of time looking for the kid herself before she raised the alarm. You can't blame her for that, of course, but it will be dark before long."

"I'll come with you," Norma said quietly.

She went into the bedroom and came out a few seconds later wearing a short beaver-skin coat with wide pockets. By the time she appeared Terry had got out the car, and Norma saw that he had put a coil of rope and several crowbars on the back seat.

She glanced from them to him.

"You don't think——" she began, but he did not give her time to finish.

"We must be prepared for anything," he said. "It's less than half a mile from the Karminsky's place to the lip of the gorge. A child wandering about in the woods picking flowers could easily take one step too many!"

Norma shuddered. She knew the gorge, a rocky defile through which the river cascaded before entering the lake. In parts it was several hundreds of feet deep, with steep sides clothed with straggling timber.

She got into the car without saying anything further, a little prayer going up from her heart for the missing child's safety as Terry drove rapidly to where half a dozen pin-points of light showed that the search party was beginning to assemble.

DAWN OF UNDERSTANDING.

DAWN broke over the forest with something stealthy in its approach. As if, Norma thought a little hysterically, it was ashamed to usher in the daylight that might reveal all that the night had kept hidden.

All through the long hours of darkness search parties had systematically combed the woods which lay between the township and the high banks of the gorge. Terry had gone to the hydro-electric plant and returned with a truck fitted with powerful floodlights. The police at Beaver Gap had joined in the search, bringing with them an old Indian tracker.

Every able-bodied man in the place had joined in the search and a great many women besides. Others, tied to their houses, because they could not leave their smaller children, stayed up all night in case they were needed, making coffee and cutting sandwiches for the searchers.

It was a demonstration of neighbourliness that brought tears to Norma's eyes. She stood beside a truck that had come up from the township, driven by young Anderson, the factor's son, and sipped scalding hot coffee from the flash he handed her.

Next to her Mrs. Karminsky, pale and subdued, her eyes red with weeping, stood listening to words of comfort uttered by Terry's mother.

"Now don't you fret, my dear," the latter was saying. "We'll find her, never fear."

"But what can have happened to her?" the distressed young mother begged. "There are no wolves at this time of the year, and in any case we would have seen tracks! She can't just vanish!"

"I heard the police say that it was difficult to find the tracks in the dark," said Norma, turning to them. "The ground is so awfully dry. But they hope the Indian tracker will do better as soon as it is light."

"They've crossed the river lower down and some of the men are working up the gorge on the other side," said Mrs. McGinty, who had come up.

"What's the good of that?" Her daughter Lucy, whose birthday it had been the previous day, spoke almost sharply. She was a fine-looking girl of seventeen, and had done as much as any of the men during the night. "Debbie couldn't have crossed the river."

"I know, dearie, but they can see the cliffs on this side better that way, now it's getting light," said Mrs. McGinty. "If——"

She was interrupted by a shout. A moment later a young lad came running through the trees to where the truck had been drawn up.

"They've found her!" he shrieked, his freckled face alight with excitement.

"They've found her! She's on a rock in the bend of the river just below the rapids! Mr. O'Rourke says to bring the truck to the head of the falls and to get ropes."

There was a chorus of exclamations drowned by the roar of the truck starting up.

Young Mrs. Jessica Karminsky got in next to the driver, white as a sheet, her lips trembling uncontrollably, Mrs. O'Rourke next to her.

Norma and Lucy hurried through the neck of the woods led by the lad whose name was Jimmy. A message was sent to the other search parties, while one of the men who had come up the path hastened back to the township for ropes and climbing gear.

"How on earth did she get there?" Lucy demanded, when she and Norma reached the spot where some of the search party were standing.

Her tone registered dismay, as well it might. Far below, nearly in the centre of the river, a few jagged rocks thrust themselves above the raging torrent that boiled through the narrow defile.

On either side the red sandstone cliffs went sheer down to the water's edge, where they were slightly undermined by the constant drag of the current. A few hundred yards lower down the river plunged over a fall into a maelstrom of frothing water.

Terry came over to join them, his lumber jacket torn and his face scratched. He looked despondent and weary, and Norma felt a quick stirring of pity.

"She's alive," he said, speaking with the quiet of restrained emotion. "We've seen her move. But she may be badly hurt. We have sent for ropes and climbing gear

and some of the men are driving crowbars into the rock. All being well we should be able to reach her in about an hour's time."

"How did she get there, Terry?" Norma repeated Lucy's enquiry, her voice shaking as she stared down at the pathetic little bundle of clothing that seemed, at that distance, to be wedged in a crevice in the rock, half hidden at times by the leaping spray.

"We think she went over the lip of the gorge higher up—there's a place where some bushes have been broken and the earth disturbed," he said. "If she did, she must have fallen plumb into the river and been carried to where she is now."

A jeep roared up to them and Doctor Sandilands got out.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Terry pointed to the rock in mid-stream. The doctor whistled softly under his breath.

"Great Heavens!" he muttered. "How on earth are we going to reach her?"

Terry explained what had been decided, and by the time he had finished two more trucks had arrived, filled with the remainder of the search parties carrying ropes and climbing gear. They got out and clustered around Terry and Norma realised, with a funny little thrill of pride, that they looked naturally to him as their leader.

No time was lost. Terry gave orders that were carried out instantly and without question.

The sound of hammers striking on steel rang through the trees as heavy crowbars were driven into place, while others uncoiled long lengths of rope and tested each strand before fastening them into the blocks through which they would be paid out. Terry removed his jacket and laid it on the grass.

"What are you going to do, Terry?" Norma asked tremulously.

He glanced at her as if the question surprised him.

"Get her up, of course," he said simply.

In a very few minutes they were ready to start. Terry was to work his way down the cliff face, roped to the child's father, whose part it was to pay out the rope at the foot of the cliff while Terry tried to reach the rock in mid-stream.

By this time there were over a hundred people present, and at least twenty cars and trucks. Yet there was scarcely a word spoken. Grim and silent they watched the preparations, knowing the risks involved, knowing too that what Terry proposed to achieve would be something in the nature of a miracle.

There came a final check, a few low-voiced orders, and then Terry came to where Norma was standing with her arm around her mother-in-law.

"We'll try to reach the bottom of the cliff and work our way along to a point a little above where Debbie is lying," he said. "A party has gone down above the rapids to try and snake a rope across to us there. If anything goes wrong McGinty is going to try from the other side."

He smiled briefly and turned away, but Norma put out her hand quickly.

"No, Terry," she said. "Not—not like that."

She put her hands on his shoulders, raised herself on tip-toe and kissed him.

"Good luck, my darling," she added softly, and was rewarded by the sudden light which blazed in his eyes.

An age followed, though it must have been less than half an hour when a shout from one of the men at the top told them that the two climbers had reached the foot of the gorge.

Norma had made her mother-in-law comfortable on a truck seat she had placed on the grass, where they were joined by the little girl's mother and Lucy McGinty helpless to do anything but watch and pray.

They saw the other party working across the cataract, and another shout told them that they had succeeded in getting a rope to where Terry and Mr. Karminsky waited.

Mrs. O'Rourke closed her eyes and Norma looked at her anxiously, afraid of the possible effects of all that had happened upon the older woman. She got up and went to where Dr. Sandilands was watching the proceedings.

"Doctor," she said, "I'm worried about Terry's mother. She looks terribly pale, and I'm afraid——" She broke off, biting her lip.

"She's no right to be here, but you might as well try to dam the river up as keep her at home at a time like this," he said. "Wait! I'll just get my case and then I'll have a look at her." He paused and turned to look down into the gorge. Then he smiled at Norma again. "You must be very proud of that husband of yours," he added.

IN the meantime Terry was clinging to a narrow ledge of rock a few feet above the water, almost deafened by the noise.

It seemed to sap his ability to think calmly, tightening his muscles and making the movements of his hands seem strangely clumsy. A few feet above him the child's father drove a short crowbar into the rock with quick, savage strokes.

With his free hand Terry managed to secure the end of the rope that was lowered from the rim of the cascade and saw the other end carried back towards the opposite bank, thus forming a triangle of which he was at the apex.

When he received the signal that it was made fast he looked up at the man above him and raised a hand. Then, with a quick intake of breath, he bunched his muscles and launched himself into space.

For one terrifying moment he thought he was not going to reach his objective. And then he was on his hands and knees, clinging to the wet rock, bemused and dazed by the roar of the water, his body numbed by shock, blood streaming down from a gash on his temple.

With an effort he pulled himself together and climbed to where the child was lying. As he reached her she lifted her head, her eyes wide with terror, and he saw that she was clinging to the rock with hands that were torn and scratched and blue with cold. From somewhere in the frozen depths within him he summoned up a smile and said—"Debbie! You're all right now!"

Next moment she was in his arms, clinging to him, her cheeks wet with tears, her breath coming in convulsive sobs that racked her little body.

IT was dim and quiet in the bedroom, for after getting her mother-in-law to bed Norma had drawn the blinds. Mrs. O'Rourke was lying with closed eyes, breathing slowly and evenly, and, the girl noticed, the colour was coming back to her cheeks.

She went softly out and into the kitchen. The fire was low, but she quickly raked the ashes and fetched kindling wood from the wood-store.

She had no idea whether Terry was safe or not, whether he had saved the child, or what had happened since the left the lip of the gorge. For Dr. Sandilands had taken one look at Mrs. O'Rourke and then ordered her to bed at once.

"You ought to have more sense than to go gallivanting about the woods at your time of life," he had said with mock severity, as he had given the older woman a soothing injection.

To Norma he had added privately—

"She's not come to much harm, surprisingly enough, but keep her quiet for a day or so—that is, if you can! I'll call in later to see how she is, but I must get back now—that poor child will be in urgent need of attention, I'm thinking."

Norma made herself a cup of tea and stood in the middle of the kitchen drinking it.

She was weary in mind and body, and felt that she did not want to think about anything. All that mattered was to put herself right with Terry. For it had taken the ghastly events of the night, culminating in the hideous risk Terry was undertaking, to open her eyes to the truth.

She drank a second cup of tea and then went to the window, staring upwards to where the woods shut off her view. Duty kept her chained to the house, but her heart was up there beyond the trees—with Terry. She did not know that she prayed, but it was a prayer that went up from her heart as she thought of the man who was taking his life in his hands to save a small child.

A truck came down the road and passed the house, followed by another. The second one stopped for a moment, and she heard voices.

Then, as she ran to the door, it opened to reveal Terry framed in the opening. There was blood on his cheek and his shirt was slashed to ribbons.

But he was safe!

When she ran to meet him he looked at her and smiled.

"Terry—oh, Terry!" she gasped.

He put his arms around her and held her close.

"It's all right, Norma darling. Debbie's safe. They've taken her to the hospital, where she can be properly looked after—Doc Sandilands is afraid of pneumonia following on shock and exposure, but she's tough and full of grit. Poor kiddie, she had been clinging to that rock ever since she was washed on to it, too terrified to move."

Norma tried to pull herself together. She did not know it, but the tears were running down her cheeks. She stammered something about his mother—about getting him a bath—making coffee—anything, in fact, that would prevent her from going to pieces in front of him. All she wanted was to touch him, to know that he was there, really there with her in the house, and then to go somewhere quiet, where she could kneel down and thank God for His infinite goodness.

"Steady, my sweet," Terry said gently, as she choked back a sob. "I'm all right. It was a bit risky, I know, but we pulled it off." He grinned suddenly in a half-shamed, half-embarrassed fashion. "The worst part of it was when we finally got to the top. Jessica Karminsky insisted on kissing me. Can you beat it?"

Norma swallowed hard, shaking all over with the force of the emotion that swept through her.

"You—you had better go and change—you're wet through," she said unsteadily. "By the time you have done I will have something ready for you to eat. Only, don't make a noise—your mother is asleep in the spare room."

THAT night, when the sun had gone to rest behind the hills, Norma walked with her husband along the shore of the lake.

But for a piece of sticking plaster on his temple, he looked none the worse for his experience, and to the many who came to congratulate him on his brave exploit, insisted on making light of the matter.

"How did Debbie come to be where you found her, Terry?" Norma asked, breaking a little silence.

"Apparently the Indian tracker's reconstruction of what happened was fairly accurate," he said. "She was picking wild flowers and wandered as far as the edge of the gorge. Evidently she saw something she wanted to pick growing right on the edge, and overbalanced. We found traces of her clothing in some bushes half way down, and conclude that these broke her fall, otherwise she would have been killed."

"Poor child! I can't bear to think of how frightened she must have been," murmured Norma sympathetically.

"Yes," he agreed. "It doesn't bear thinking about. I don't think I shall ever forget feeling her arms go around my neck when I picked her up and told her that I was going to take her to her mother. There's something about a child's touch that sort of gets you."

"Yes," said Norma softly. She said nothing for a moment, then she stopped and turned to face him. "Terry!"

"Yes, my love?"

"There—there is something I want to tell you." She flushed in the gloom. "I—I wanted to tell you before—oh, lots of times, but I never had the courage. Then, this morning, I knew that if—if anything happened to you I would never forgive myself."

Terry smiled crookedly.

"It's all right, my sweet. Nothing did happen."

"I know, but that doesn't make any difference. I—I've learnt my lesson, Terry."

"What lesson?" he asked curiously.

Norma looked away, hesitating a moment. Then—

"Do you know why I married you?" she asked quietly.

"I hoped—and believed—that it was because you loved me," he said.

"No," she answered. "It—it wasn't that. I married you because I was running away."

"Who were you running away from?" he asked, knowing there was more to come. "Yourself?"

"I think so." She paused thoughtfully. "I thought I was running away from the past, but I know, now, that it never had the power to hurt me."

Quietly, and without sparing herself, she told him the story of her infatuation, and of what those few minutes on the cliff top that morning had meant to her.

"Ludvic was rich and belonged to a very good family," she said. "He was good-looking and accomplished and my aunt liked him. I suppose I did what thousands of other girls have done before—I imagined I was madly in love with him and wanted nothing so much as to become his wife. When he told me that he loved me and wanted to marry me, it was like being admitted into Paradise." She laughed shortly. "What a self-deluding fool I must have been!"

"You mean——"

"I mean that he wasn't worthy of any girl's love," Norma said scornfully. "Less than a week after he proposed to me I discovered that he was having an *affaire* with another girl. When I taxed him with it he—he just laughed."

"I see," Terry remarked thoughtfully. "That must have been a bit of a jolt. Still, it's behind you now—or isn't it?"

"It's behind me," she said, with a little sigh. "The trouble was, I didn't know it. It—it took what happened this morning to show me how little Ludvic had ever really counted. Do you believe that, Terry?"

He smiled and took her into his arms.

"Of course I believe it," he said gently, stroking her hair. "I knew there was something, of course—that became painfully obvious after a time. I began to wonder if you had merely married me in order to escape from Park Lane and all that it represented and then, later on, it seemed to me that you were regretting the step you had taken. Now I know that I needn't have worried."

Norma drew in her breath sharply.

"How—I mean——"

He put a hand under her chin and tilted her face.

"I saw the light in your eyes when you kissed me on the edge of the cliff this morning," he said. "I knew, then, that whatever it was that had come between us, it wasn't there any longer. That's true, isn't it, Norma darling?"

"Yes," she whispered, her lips trembling, her eyes suspiciously bright. "Quite true, Terry. I know now that it is you that I love—that deep down I must have loved you from the first, because, otherwise, I could never have trusted myself to you. Only I"—a quirk of laughter stilled the trembling of her lips—"I couldn't see the forest for the trees."

"God bless Mrs. McGinty," he said humorously, bending his head to kiss her.

Hitherto Norma had accepted his kisses rather than returned them. But to-night it was different. It seemed that they had emerged on the threshold of a new life, a new understanding. It had taken disillusionment and danger to point out the way and though she had stumbled once or twice, she had come to the end of the road. There was no longer any room in her heart for wounded pride or regret.

She drew away from him at last.

"We mustn't be long, darling," she whispered softly. "Your mother will be wondering what has happened to us."

"I know." He tucked her arm through his. "Besides, it's getting late and it's been quite a day. "I've a yearning for my own fireside, with my wife. I may be old-fashioned but I've come to the conclusion that there's no place like home."

Norma clung to him for a moment, her body trembling.

"Oh, Terry! So you have forgiven me!"

"I can't," he said. "There's nothing to forgive. All that matters is we've found each other." He smiled and looked down at her with a teasing light in his eyes. "Do you still want to go back to England?"

She vigorously shook her head.

"No," she said. "I never did want to go. It was only because I thought I had failed you and that you were regretting you had married me. But this is where I belong—here in Bennville—with you."

And, with the words, Norma felt she had entered her kingdom at last, for the light which came into Terry's eyes was like a cloak of radiance about her, shutting her away from all pain and sorrow and lighting the way to the future that was theirs and theirs alone.

THE END.

HEART TO HEART

By Mary Sumner

AN UNCLE COMES HOME

SANDRA WAYNE let herself into her basement flat and gave a sigh of relief.

It had been an almost tropically hot day and although it was now after six o'clock the temperature was still very high, so that for once living in a rather dark basement had its advantages.

For into her tiny home the sun never penetrated and it was a rare occasion indeed when she could do without artificial light, even in broad daylight.

As some small compensation for this drawback the rent was considerably lower than that of the others flats in the tall, old house, not far from the centre of London. As this arrangement suited Sandra's slender means she did not grumble too much at the lack of sunshine.

Just now, she found the little room into which she entered delightfully cool after the dust and heat of the streets, through which she had struggled home after a tiring day at the office, where she worked as a typist.

The unusual heat had frayed everyone's tempers. Elderly Miss Bronson, Sandra's immediate head, had done nothing but find fault all day long; Irene Taylor, who worked for the Managing Director, had twice emerged from his office with tear-stained eyes after having been severely censured by him for careless typing.

Even the bus conductor, to whom Sandra was known by sight, and who was usually so good-tempered, had been morose and snappy.

Having put on the kettle, Sandra removed her shoes—which seemed all at once to have turned themselves into instruments of torture—and sank thankfully into a comfortable chair.

She knew what she was going to do, for she had been planning it out all the way home in the crowded bus.

She was going to have a nice cup of tea, a tepid bath, and then spend the rest of the evening reading her latest love story magazine before the open window.

Her supper would consist of salad and some cherries; for it was certainly too hot for anything solid.

Sandra was very fond of cherries, for

at her old home in Kent there had been a big cherry tree which she and her brother had early learnt to climb to gather the lovely fruit.

Nowadays, however, she did not encourage herself to think of the old home, where she had spent such happy days.

Her brother, Philip, had married and gone to live in Canada, her father and mother were dead, and for Sandra the word "home" now comprised a couple of rooms in the basement of an old London house.

Had it not been for Graham Watson she would have had no links left with her former life, for Graham's people had been their nearest neighbours in Kent. He and Sandra's brother had been to the same school together and had played in the same village cricket team.

When his term of National Service had finished, Graham had come to London to take a course of electrical engineering, and gradually their childhood friendship had been resumed, although on a more sentimental basis.

Graham took her to the pictures most Friday evenings, and often during a week-end they went for long walks into the country; or rides on his scooter-cycle.

Philip, in Canada, was glad to know that his friend and sister kept up their old companionship. It was a relief for him to know that she had someone to keep an eye on her, and he hoped that before long their friendship might lead to marriage.

Ten minutes later, she had just finished her second cup of tea, when she heard footsteps descending from the upper floor. Next moment her electric bell buzzed noisily.

Hastily patting her ruffled hair into place, Sandra went to open the front door, to be confronted by a tall, attractive young woman who lived on the first floor with her husband and year-old baby.

Her name was Rita Fellowes and Sandra was very fond of her. Despite the difference in their ages—Sandra was nineteen while Rita was eight years older—they had many things in common.

"Why, hello, Rita, I never thought it could be you," Sandra exclaimed, standing aside to let the other girl in. "Isn't this the time you start getting Fred's meal ready?"

"Well, yes, it is as a rule, but I've come to ask you a special favour, Sandra." said Rita. "Would you baby-sit for us again to-night? There's a concert at the Festival Hall for which Fred has been given two tickets—you know how mad he is about music. But he says he won't go without me and I just can't bear for him to be disappointed, although I know it's only the night before last that you looked after Sonny when we went to that show."

"Oh, that's all right, Rita," Sandra said readily. "I'm not doing anything in particular this evening. You needn't look so apologetic, my dear. I told you always to ask me to look after Sonny if you and Fred wanted to go out together."

"I know you've always been very sweet about it," said the other, "and, really, I feel it's awful cheek of us to ask you more than once a week at the very most, Sandra. But Fred does so miss having me to go about with. It's a real problem for young married couples when the children begin to arrive, and although there are many professional baby-sitters to be hired, we neither of us feel as if we could trust a stranger where Sonny is concerned."

"I'll be ready whenever you want me," Sandra said, trying to stifle the memory of that long, lazy evening she had mapped out for herself.

Sonny had just reached the age when he noticed the absence of his mother, and when last Sandra had looked after him he had stayed awake for hours crying for her, so that she did not expect that she would have as peaceful a time as if she were to stay in her own flat.

"Then I'll fly and get ready," Rita said joyfully, "you are an angel, Sandra darling."

Sandra had just changed into something fresh and cool when once again she heard footsteps running down the basement stairs, and with an exclamation of pleased surprise she opened the door to Graham Watson.

"How soon can you be ready, Sandra?" he asked excitedly as he entered the living-room. "I've got a surprise for you, something you'll really like. A friend of mine has been lent a car, and he and his fiancee want us to join them in a moonlight picnic on the Hog's Back. Won't it be absolutely wonderful?"

His good-looking face beamed with boyish excitement as he continued—

"Bert has laid on a hamper of food, for our share of which, of course, I shall pay, and the weather just couldn't be more ideal." He frowned and added: "I must say you don't look, any too pleased about it, Sandra? What's up? I thought you'd be off your head with delight."

For Sandra was looking at him with consternation in every line of her attractive face.

"Oh, Graham," she murmured. "Why didn't I know sooner? I can't come—it's too late—I've already promised."

"Promised? What have you promised?" he asked with the irritability of suspense. "Of course you can come, you've got to."

"Graham, if only I'd known sooner," she almost groaned, her grey eyes dark with disappointment. "there might have been time then for them to have found someone else."

"How could I let you know sooner? I've only just been on the 'phone to Bert myself," he declared. "Besides, I haven't a notion what you're talking about," he added peevishly.

"Graham, I've promised the Fellowes that I'd baby-sit for them this evening," she said.

"Then you'll jolly well have to tell them that you can't," was his curt reply. "They must go to the cinema another night, that's all."

"But it isn't that—Fred has been given some tickets for the Festival Hall concert," she said. "I can't possibly let them down now, Graham, it would be too cruel, I couldn't do it."

"Yet you don't mind letting me down," he said resentfully. "You don't mind making me look a fool in the eyes of Bert and his girl when I tell them that you can't come because you're baby-sitting? They would think us a fine pair."

"How can I help it, Graham? I can't go back on my word to Rita," Sandra murmured distressfully. "I'm, so sorry—I should have loved it of all things, you know that."

She looked at him pleadingly, her lips quivering, filled with sympathy for his disappointment and pity for herself. Surely, surely, he must understand that she could not break her word to Rita now?

But apparently Graham did not understand. But when he finally realised that Sandra did not intend to come with him he lost his temper. Not with any violent outburst of rage, but with a cold, icy anger which chilled her heart.

"Right!" he said. "Say no more. I quite understand that you wish to put your friends upstairs before me. It doesn't matter in the very least. I shall just ask someone else—I won't have far to look either. Don't let me keep you another minute from your charming entertainment. Good evening."

Before she could utter the protests trembling on her lips he had banged out of the flat and a few seconds later she heard the engine of his scooter-cycle splutter into action.

"Poor Graham," she thought dismally, "how terribly upset he is. But what could I have done?"

She was bitterly disappointed herself. A ride in a car at night, followed by a moonlight picnic was exactly the kind of entertainment to appeal to most on a hot summer's evening. How lovely it would have been, she thought regretfully, no wonder Graham was upset, such a chance was not likely to occur again in all probability.

She sighed regretfully as she heard Rita's voice from the head of the basement stairs calling that she and Fred were ready and were about to start.

"There's some coffee you can warm up, Sandra dear, in the enamel saucepan, and cucumber and tomato sandwiches on the larder shelf," Rita said as she let the younger girl into her flat. "I'm afraid Sonny may cry a bit when he finds out that I've gone, but let's hope he falls asleep before that happens."

The little boy was soon aware that his mother had gone out, and he began to howl lustily, so that it was some time before Sandra could induce him to settle down.

But at last, after a drink of orange juice, the chubby limbs relaxed, the fair head sank back on the pillows and soon he was sound asleep.

Vastly relieved, Sandra tip-toed from the room and flung herself thankfully into a chair in the lounge.

She loved children, and was particularly fond of Sonny, but on occasions like this could well understand how necessary it was for even the most devoted of mothers to get right away from their children for a brief spell now and again.

As she reclined at ease with only the ticking of the clock to keep her company, she could not help thinking regretfully of the treat she had missed.

It would have been such a wonderful experience, she told herself, the long ride through the cool twilight, followed by a midnight picnic at the roadside. Surely Graham must realise how eagerly she would have gone if she could have done so without letting down Rita and Fred?

But he had gone away in bitter anger, after what had been the first quarrel they had ever had, and now that she had time to reconstruct their interview she remembered his parting remark that he would ask someone else to take her place.

It had sounded very much like a threat, and now added to her other regrets was the thought that another girl had taken her place.

Graham had said that he would not have far to look to find such a substitute, and this Sandra well believed.

He was so very good-looking, and such good company, that he was always extremely popular with her own sex, and she was only too certain that he would be able to pick and choose among any amount of girls.

"I mustn't be mean and grudge him a good time just because I can't have one myself," she admonished herself accusingly, ashamed of the sudden feeling of resentment against some imaginary girl. "After all, I have no priority over Graham. He's not tied to me in any way, we're both free to go out with whom we like. But he has often told me that he likes me better than any other girl he has ever known, and I know that I shall never like anyone as much as I like him."

Suddenly the door-bell rang again, startling her considerably; she had sat far longer than she realised, and a glance at

the clock told her that it was now long past nine.

Rita had not warned her that any one was likely to call, and for a moment Sandra wondered if it would be wise to answer the summons.

Then a second prolonged ring put everything out of her head except the knowledge that a repetition of the noise would probably wake Sonny, and switching on the hall light she opened the door.

What followed was absolutely breath-taking. She had just time to take in the figure of a tall, handsome young man when she was swept into his arms, lifted up until her face was on a level with his, and then soundly kissed.

It would be quite futile to attempt to describe Sandra's reactions to this remarkable episode. One can only say that she was outraged to the point of speechlessness.

One thought stood out above the general chaos of her mind and that was that she was in the presence of a madman.

And the madman was speaking:

"Well," he exclaimed in a very agreeable, mellow voice, "I always knew that Fred had good taste but I never expected that he'd got hold of such a winner."

"Please go away at once—at once," Sandra cried, stamping her foot in anger her eyes wide with fright and indignation.

The stranger looked at her with sudden apprehension. Then he looked at the number on the flat door.

"I say——" he exclaimed, "I can't have made a mistake, can I? This is where Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes live, isn't it?"

Sandra nodded.

"Yes——" she began, still furious. "But——"

"And you are Rita, aren't you?" he interrupted.

"Certainly not," she asserted, "and I don't know what your business is at this hour of the evening, but will you please go before I call the police?"

"But my dear girl——"

Suddenly he began to rock with laughter.

"I—I'm Fred's brother," he managed at last to gasp. "I thought you were my sister-in-law. Really, I just can't tell you how deeply I apologise. All the same you must own that it's all very funny."

"Some people have different ideas of humour," Sandra said loftily, the memory of that kiss still too fresh to be overlooked. "Besides," she added, surveying him unsmilingly, "how do I know that you are Fred's brother? I don't even know that he has one."

"Well, he stands before you now, my proud, frightened lady," he smiled audaciously, "and fortunately I am in a position to prove it."

He felt in a pocket, produced a wallet, and took out a snapshot, holding it out for Sandra to inspect.

It was a photograph of Fred and a middle-aged couple, and—yes, undoubtedly, the other young man grinning up at her from the somewhat faded photograph bore the same features and the same smile as the stranger on the door-step.

"You see, mum, dad and Fred and me," he remarked cheerfully, "so won't you please allow me to come in? I only landed to-day from South Africa and thought I'd just look in on Fred before going on to see our parents in Chester."

"Oh, of course you can come in," Sandra cried penitently. "How sorry they will be to have missed you. They have gone to a concert at the Festival Hall, and I'm baby-sitting."

She smiled charmingly as she stood aside for him to enter and Jim Fellowes began to feel an almost subconscious relief that she was not, after all, his sister-in-law.

"So you're a baby-sitter?" he grinned, his blue eyes twinkling. "I don't suppose for a minute that my nephew knows how lucky he is! It *is* a nephew, isn't it, not a niece? I've been abroad since before Fred married and I've lost touch with things a bit. It came across me only the other day that it was time I showed myself to the family, so here I am. I—I suppose I ought to apologise for the somewhat unconventional way in which I greeted you," he went on, "but really it was such an extremely agreeable mistake that I can hardly be expected to regret it."

"It is something which I should think each of us will be only too glad to forget," Sandra said coldly, making a disdainful gesture.

"I know—I'm sorry I took such a liberty," he said contritely. "But after all, what's a little kiss?" he went on, "especially such a brotherly one as I gave you!"

"Let us try and forget it," she said. "The mistake you made was, perhaps, a natural one. Now," she added, "I daresay you would like something to eat and drink? Your sister-in-law left some coffee which only needs warming-up, and there are some sandwiches——"

"I have fed, thanks all the same," he said. "But I would enjoy some coffee if you'll join me. Oh, by the way, my name's Jim, you are——"

Sandra told him her name over her shoulder as she went into the kitchen to put a light under the coffee saucepan.

Her cheeks were burning, and she wished that she had her powder compact with her. The memory of that unexpected embrace still shook her, she seemed still to feel the pressure of his strong arms holding her so tightly, her face tingled with the impact of the kiss.

Which all went to show, she thought to herself scornfully, what an unsophisticated goose she was.

To most girls the episode would have been one for amusement, but with something of a shock she realised that it was the first time a young man had ever kissed her. Until recently she and Graham had been too much like brother and sister in their relationship to dream of exchanging sentimental embraces, and she was certainly not on those terms with anyone else.

So it was not altogether surprising that Jim's tempestuous greeting of her should have been so disturbing, although his casual attitude towards it gradually helped Sandra to conquer any lingering feeling of awkwardness.

So it was that, over coffee and sandwiches, they were soon enjoying an animated conversation, if a somewhat one-sided one.

For Jim had so many strange and thrilling experiences to relate, and to Sandra, who had never been out of England, his adventures in Central Africa were full of interest and excitement.

"What a wonderful life you must have," she sighed enviously, "you'll never be able to settle down to ordinary existence after all that."

"On the contrary I want to do just that," he said. "I've had enough of roving, and would like to meet some nice English girl who would be willing to marry me—go back to Rhodesia. I have a partner who is married to an awfully jolly girl and they enjoy the life out there no end.

"I suppose you don't know any suitable girl you could introduce me to?" His eyes twinkled in that fascinating way he had. "I'd like her to be pretty, of course, with——" he glanced at Sandra's tawny hair—"sort of goldy-brown hair, and soft grey eyes. In return I'm sure I'd make an excellent husband, although modesty forbids me mentioning my numerous virtues."

"You must ask Rita to find you such a bride," Sandra replied seriously. "As a matter of fact I know that she has a very attractive younger sister."

"I have already discovered that she has a very attractive friend also," Jim said meaningly, and noted the flush which rose to her cheeks at the compliment.

He had not realised that girls ever blushed nowadays, for all the ones he knew were much too poised and sophisticated to do so. But then this little friend of his sister-in-law's seemed charmingly naive and inexperienced, uniquely so, he thought, recalling the embarrassment his unconventional greeting had caused her.

Sandra began to collect the cups and saucers, cross with herself for that school-girlish blush. What a silly, self-conscious child she must appear in his eyes.

The truth was, however, that she was not used to compliments and had never thought herself in the least attractive.

For one thing, she would have liked to have been tall and dark, a glowing brunette with mysterious eyes. Instead, her hair was a golden-brown and her eyes were grey, with nothing whatsoever of mystery in their clear, candid gaze.

"Where are you off to with those things?" Jim asked, and in a very sedate tone Sandra told him that she was going to wash-up.

"I'll come and lend you a hand," he said, and although she protested that for such a very small amount of crocks no help was necessary, he insisted.

"Anyway, I'll wash, you dry," he said briskly, in the tone of one obviously used to being obeyed.

Evidently a masterful man, Sandra told herself, as she reached meekly for a tea-cloth.

Just then there was a long drawn-out wail from the bedroom.

"Good gracious! What's that? A cat?" Jim asked in all innocence, and in spite of her indignation Sandra had to laugh.

"That," she said, "is your nephew. Have you never heard a baby cry before? A cat, indeed!"

"My nephew? I say, that's great, I must come and have a squint at him," he exclaimed. "I'd quite forgotten that I'm an uncle."

"No, you'd better wait until the morning or the sight of a strange man might frighten him," Sandra warned as she hurried out of the room.

"Hi! I'm no strange man, I'll have you know. I'm his uncle," Jim said protestingly, but he approached no nearer than the landing, where he watched her trying to soothe the golden-haired little child with cooing noises.

Sonny was too hot, and registered the fact in no uncertain manner until suddenly, catching sight of the man in the doorway he checked himself in the middle of an ear-splitting yell.

Whether or not he saw some resemblance to his father in the stranger, or whether it was merely due to one of those caprices to which children are liable, the fact remains that the child's face broke into a delicious, although toothless grin. In an instant his cries changed to chuckles of delight and stretching out his chubby arms he invited the young man to pick him up.

"I say, how's that for marvellous intelligence?" Jim exclaimed, highly flattered at the honour done him. "What a clever young man you are," he went on picking the child up in his strong arms. "Knew your old uncle at a glance, didn't you?" and the speaker gave Sandra a triumphant glance.

She thought. they made a very striking picture, the big broad-shouldered man and the little fair-haired boy in his blue pyjamas, his golden curls nestled so trustingly under his uncle's chin.

She met the latter's challenging eyes over the baby's head.

"Then he proved cleverer than you," she said smartly, "for you mistook *him* for a cat!"

"I say, that's one up to you," Jim agreed. "Oh, look"—with a glance at Sonny—"is he going to fall asleep in my arms. He's got his eyes shut."

"Then for goodness' sake don't wake him," said Sandra warningly. "We don't want a second crying session at this hour."

"Then—er—what exactly do I do?" he queried helplessly. "Don't you think you'd better take him? He's used to you."

"But I'm not his uncle," Sandra said teasingly. "It was you who lifted him out of his cot, remember, thereby breaking one of Rita's strictest rules. It's up to you to put him back without waking him."

They stood looking at each other, their eyes brimming with silent laughter, while Sonny slept peacefully in his uncle's arms.

"Anyone would mistake us for an illustration of domestic life," he whispered, feeling that he "owed Sandra one", and by no means averse to seeing her blush once more —"Daddy, Mummy and their first-born!"

He was not disappointed in his design. The rich colour ran up over Sandra's face and as she turned her head away she heard the familiar sound of a latchkey being inserted into the front door.

Next moment a startled and slightly apprehensive Rita made her appearance.

"Sandra, what on earth——" she began.

By that time her husband had caught sight of his brother and with an exclamation of pleasure pushed past her.

"Why, Jim, what a nice surprise! I thought you were three thousand miles and more away."

While they were all greeting each other, Sandra seized the opportunity to slip away practically unnoticed, and it was not until she had shut the door of her own flat behind her that she realised how much she had enjoyed the evening.

She had anticipated a succession of long and rather dreary hours of solitude, instead of which, following upon the arrival of that unexpected visitor, there had never been a dull moment.

Jim Fellowes had brought with him an air of vitality and high spirits impossible to resist. Sandra did not think she had met anyone quite like him before, with his gay audacity, his ready grin, his stirring stories of faraway places with strange sounding names.

With what was almost a guilty pang she remembered that she had never given a thought to Graham and to their unfortunate disagreement.

Problems Of Lovers.

ON her return from work the following day Sandra had scarcely entered the flat before Rita was at the door.

And in her hand she held one of the biggest bunches of roses Sandra had ever seen, exquisite red ones, not yet fully opened but with petals like velvet and a scent which seemed to turn the room into a whole garden of blossoms.

"Um," sniffed Sandra appreciatively. "Rita, what lovely roses! Wherever did you get them? They must have cost you the earth."

"My dear, they're not mine, they're for you," Rita announced, enjoying the other girl's surprise. "My brother-in-law bought them for you this morning and asked me to let you have them, as soon as you came home."

"For—for me?" exclaimed Sandra wide-eyed. "But Rita, whatever made him think of doing such a thing?"

"He said something about them being an offering of atonement," smiled the other. "Apparently his sudden arrival gave you a bit of a shock. And really, I don't wonder, it's not safe nowadays to let any stranger into one's home, especially at night. He really ought to have let us know he was coming, but he seemed to enjoy giving us a surprise. Fred says he's always been like that. Tell me, what did you think of him, Sandra?"

"I liked him," the younger girl replied. "He's so full of fun and life—but really, Rita, he ought not to have bought those expensive roses for me. I mean——"

"My dear, he has money to burn," said Rita. "He and his partner are growing tobacco, you know, and evidently it's a paying concern. Now that he's home we are all going to Fred's people in Chester for our holiday, a kind of family reunion, you know. Jim's going to hire a car and take us all over the place."

Sandra looked at the roses glowing richly red against their wrapping of white paper.

"How kind he is," she murmured. "Please thank him for me, Rita."

"I'll try to remember when we next meet," was the reply, "but by now Jim is well on his way home. He was longing to see his parents after all these years, so we didn't even try to get him to stay with us. Thank you so much, Sandra dear for looking after Sonny. Fred and I had a wonderful evening thanks to you."

"I had a rather wonderful evening, too," Sandra told herself a little after she had gone as she lifted the roses to her face and inhaled the matchless perfume.

She wondered if she would ever see Jim again? It was only natural that he would want to spend his holiday with his parents, in which case she supposed they would be unlikely to meet again.

It was odd how certain people drifted in and out of one's life and yet left an indelible impression behind them. She was sure that she would never forget Jim Fellowes. Short as their meeting had been they seemed to have got on terms of friendship which usually took months to achieve.

Would he ever meet that girl he was looking for; that prospective bride whose qualifications he had listed so light-heartedly.

Whoever she was she would be a lucky young woman, Sandra told herself, for she would not only have a good-looking young husband, with an easy-going temperament, and plenty of money, but would also live in a far-off country which was merely but a name on a map to her.

The roses seemed to transform her rather dingy basement into a veritable bower of beauty, and whenever she looked at them she was reminded of their giver, and wondered if he ever thought of her?

Rita had not thought it tactful to relate the conversation Jim had had with her on the subject of the baby-sitter.

It was when he had handed her the roses, with the request that they might be given to Sandra, that Jim had said:

"She's absolutely marvellous, that little friend of yours, Rita. I could fall in love with her in quite a big way."

Rita had replied—

"I'm afraid you're a bit late in the day, Jim. She's booked."

Jim's face had dropped.

"You don't mean—engaged?" he had said.

"No, not that I've heard of, but there's a boy-friend with whom she goes out regularly, so you had better start looking elsewhere, Jim. I'll help you if it's a wife you're looking for to take back to Africa."

"Thanks, Rita, but a chap prefers to do his own hunting," had been the young man's somewhat glum reply.

He couldn't possibly have got serious about Sandra in one short evening? had thought Rita with some amusement.

She had had no intention whatsoever of making mischief, and had only spoken what she believed to be the truth.

After all, everyone in the flats knew that the smartly-dressed young man who called round every Friday evening was Sandra's boy friend.

In such little communities everyone knows everything about everyone else to a degree which would surprise those who have not experienced life under similar conditions.

Jim might not be in love with Sandra, but he knew that he could be very easily, and what Rita had said rather dampened his spirits.

Still, he might have known that such an attractive girl was sure to have been snapped up by some lucky fellow or other, and so he consoled himself with the thought that perhaps there were other charming and unattached girls to be found in this dear old Homeland to which he was so glad to have returned.

MEANWHILE his unknown rival was not feeling as lucky as, in Jim's opinion, he should have been. Just then Graham Watson had a bout of guilt on his conscience.

Graham's annoyance with Sandra had not lasted long. In fact he had soon reproached himself for having been so unjust.

After all, he reasoned, she must have been just as disappointed as he that she could not join the moonlight picnic, especially as she had before her the prospect of a long boring evening looking after someone else's baby.

That was the trouble with Sandra, he had thought, she was too unselfish, she thought of herself last, and always had done.

That was another reason which contributed to Graham's sense of guilt, for since parting from her in a temper he knew that he had not only been unjust to her but untrue as well.

For on that long moonlit drive, with Freda, the sister of his friend's fiancee seated beside him in the back of the car, a completely new sensation had taken possession of Graham.

Freda Benson was a pale, fragile-looking fair girl, who always dressed beautifully. In fact, she spent most of her earnings on clothes and always looked as if she cost the earth.

With a sweet, appealing manner, flaxen hair and dark blue eyes, there was something about her which had instantly captivated Graham showing him only too plainly that never before had he been really in love. What he had suddenly felt for Freda was an entirely new sensation.

For Sandra had certainly never possessed the power to charm and thrill him as did this other girl. Graham had never felt any overpowering desire to take Sandra in his arms and kiss her until she was breathless. But the mere thought of kissing Freda in such a way made him tingle all over.

Fond as he was of Sandra he had never felt towards her in a really lover-like way. She was sweet, and he had always liked and admired her, but she lacked the thrilling air of mystery which hung around Freda. In other words, he knew Sandra too well; there was nothing exciting to discover about her.

And yet he felt that all his past actions bound him to her almost as much as if they were engaged. She had been his only girl friend, they had done almost everything together. She had nobody but him to whom to turn except for the far-away

brother in Canada, who by now had his own personal family problems to occupy him.

Somehow or other he and Sandra had drifted into what had come to seem a sentimental connection, and hitherto it had been one which he had found quite satisfying.

But now, for the first time, he realised that a girl could mean much more than just a pleasant companion.

He did not know what it was about Freda that had so completely bowled him over, for although of an entirely different type she was not really prettier than Sandra. But she did something to him that no other girl had done.

Perhaps the romantic glamour of the moonlight picnic had had something to do with it, but since meeting her Graham had thought of little else, and the memory of his former relationship with Sandra tormented him and gave him a guilty conscience.

For the poor girl was so attached to him, he told himself remorsefully. He was the only boy friend she had ever had and it would be cruel to let her down at this stage.

If only he had not met Freda he could have been contented to have gone on in the same old way with Sandra for the rest of his life. But not now!

He knew Sandra well enough to realise that he had only to tell her that he had met a girl who meant more to him than she did, and she would say good-bye to him without a word of resentment or complaint.

But how could he hurt his friend Philip's sister like that? He just hadn't the heart to let her down in spite of his burning desire to see more of Freda.

And so strong had been that desire that he had asked her to go out with him the coming week-end, an invitation which Freda, greatly attracted to the good-looking well-mannered young man, had gladly accepted.

Graham tried to excuse his action by telling himself that he would not have gone so far with another girl if he had not got into a temper with Sandra. But in his heart of hearts he knew that this was not true, so that it was in an uncomfortable frame of mind that he presented himself at the basement flat the following Friday.

Sandra's face lit up with pleasure when she saw him, for she had been so afraid that he would stay away because he was cross with her.

But the young man's first words proved that any such fear was groundless.

"Sandra, I'm afraid I behaved very selfishly the other evening." he began contritely. "It was rotten of me to speak to you the way I did and I've regretted it ever since."

"Oh, I understand, Graham dear," she said gently. "It was just one of those things which could not be helped. I do hope that you enjoyed it in spite of everything?"

"Oh yes, I did, it all went off splendidly," he said. "Bert's fiancee brought her sister along so I wasn't the odd man out."

"Was she nice?" Sandra wanted to know.

"Yes, an awfully decent sort of girl," Graham said carelessly, fingering one of Jim's roses. "I say Sandra, these are nice."

"Yes, they were a present," she said. "Fred's brother gave them to me. He arrived from South Africa unexpectedly while I was looking after Sonny. Gave me quite a start calling at that hour," she continued. "The next day Rita presented me with these roses from him.

"They must have cost a mint of money," Graham remarked, and his complete absence of interest in the man, and lack of jealousy concerning the whole incident, might have shown Sandra the true state of his feelings towards her.

But as it had never entered her head that there could be anything in the incident to provoke anyone's jealousy, Graham's lack of it conveyed nothing to her.

She was only glad to know that they were friends again, and that he had got over his disappointment; although several times during that evening she found him inclined to be absent-minded and unusually silent.

As it was still very warm they did not visit the cinema, instead they went for a stroll in the park and then had supper in a little cafe.

"If only this weather lasts we must get into the country at the week-end," Sandra said. "Where would you like us to go, Graham?"

"Well, as—as a matter of fact," he said hesitantly, "I had an idea of spending next week-end with my people."

Sandra opened her eyes.

"All that way just for a week-end?" she exclaimed, and then hurriedly went on: "Why, they would be thrilled to see you, Graham. What a lovely idea."

The young man felt mean and ashamed. That it was necessary to lie in order to spare Sandra's feelings didn't seem to make things any better.

"I hope you don't mind, dear?" he said awkwardly. "I mean, you'll be all right on your own."

"Well, I won't mind that," she said cheerfully. "I'd rather you were here, of course, but I can always enjoy a country walk by myself. Give my love to your people, Graham, of course."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" he asked lamely, still feeling horribly mean and ashamed.

"Why should I?" She spoke quite brightly in order to reassure him, for she thought she knew now what had been making him so moody and depressed.

He had been reluctant to tell her that he would not be able to take her out anywhere that week-end. Silly boy, as if she were selfish enough to grudge him a little time with his own people.

For the rest of that evening she was sweeter than ever to him and with an inward groan Graham told himself how much too good she was for him and how dearly she must love him.

Looking back, in after months Sandra could see that it was from that moment that an inexplicable change took place in Graham, a change which seemed to transform him into a different person altogether.

The change was so gradual that at first she was only aware of it as something rather disturbing at the back of her mind, something she did not probe into too much.

But it was from then that the smooth current of her life altered, and seemed to bear her along into rapids and quicksands where no peace or serenity was possible any more.

Graham duly returned from his week-end but Sandra could get very little out of him concerning it. To all her enquiries he responded so briefly, and apparently with so little interest, that she could only conclude that something unpleasant had happened during the visit which he did not care to speak of, but which would come out sooner or later.

But he grew increasingly more moody and irritable, and then would be correspondingly more contrite and ashamed, so that Sandra began to think that he was working too hard.

But when questioned on the matter he became quite disagreeable.

"Nothing's the matter with me? What should there be?" he exclaimed sharply. "You're always imagining things, Sandra. I don't worry you with questions every time you look a bit off colour."

The next minute, stricken with remorse by her wounded silence he murmured—

"I say, I'm sorry, Sandra. I don't know what makes me so snappy nowadays—must be the heat."

"You'll be better when you've had a real holiday," the girl said, and waited for him to say something that would show that he agreed with her and that it was only fatigue which was the cause of his changed manner.

But all Graham said, with a petulant sort of shrug was:

"Holidays are very much over-rated as a cure for fatigue in my opinion. So often one pays a lot of money for unsuitable rooms, poor food and the wrong sort of company."

"My, you are a cheerful little person, aren't you?" she teased. "Do you know what I think? You ought to take your holiday this year in some mountain retreat!" and she laughed.

"Sandra—I should like it," he replied, to her intense surprise. "A mountain retreat, where one could be alone and be able to puzzle things out. It would suit me down to the ground."

There was no doubt about it, she thought, he was working too hard. She knew that he had an examination coming on, to pass which would make a big difference to his career, and salary.

MEANWHILE Rita and Fred Fellowes were away, staying with the latter's parents, and Sandra missed them.

She was on friendly terms with most of the other tenants of the flats, but they were all much older people than herself, and therefore not very companionable, so that she was quite glad when the day came upon which the Fellowes' family was due to return.

Having been entrusted with the key of the flat she gave it a quick dusting and put flowers in the vases.

It was late in the evening when they came home. Sandra heard their voices on the stairs and ran up to greet them.

To her surprise she found herself confronting Jim Fellowes and also Rita's sister, Jill, as well as the rest of the family.

"We've brought him back, you see," Rita said gaily. "We've had the most wonderful holiday, Sandra, haven't we, Jim?"

The young man regarded Sandra critically.

"You're not looking as well as when I saw you last," he remarked gently. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"The usual round," she said, wondering why she suddenly felt light-hearted, unless, of course, it was because her friends had returned.

"You haven't said you're glad to see me," Jim remarked; the others had gone up to the flat and for the moment he and Sandra were alone.

"Haven't I?" she said shyly. "Well, I am. I've often wished that I had the chance to thank you for the lovely roses. I nearly wrote to you about them."

"Why didn't you?" he asked. "I should have liked a letter from you."

What was it about him that always made her feel shy? Sandra asked herself. The way he was looking at her now for instance, as if he was really glad to see her again, and that half-teasing, half-tender tone in his voice which seemed to set her pulses throbbing with an emotion she did not understand.

"Well, anyhow, let me thank you for them now," she murmured, "they were the loveliest roses I ever had."

"They were for a very lovely girl," he said, and although she told herself that it

was just a lightly-spoken compliment which he would have paid to any girl in the same circumstances, Sandra could not prevent herself from experiencing that warm disturbing thrill once more.

At that moment Rita came running down the stairs.

"Sandra, my dear, how wonderful you have made the flat look," she exclaimed. "I can't tell you what a lovely surprise it is to find everything in such good order, and all those sweet flowers, too! You really are a darling. And now you must come up and join us for supper and tell us what's been happening while we've been away."

They made a very happy little party seated round the supper table, with Sonny safely tucked up in his cot, and Sandra felt her spirits rise involuntarily in spite of the nagging anxiety concerning Graham which was always at the back of her mind.

Jim had remarked that she was not looking as well as formerly, which might well be, she conceded, for worry can affect one physically as well as mentally, and the change in Graham's manner and behaviour of late had been disturbing to say the least of it.

But for the moment she had quite forgotten all about Graham until the sudden mention of his name by one of the party gave her quite a jolt.

Rita's sister Jill thought that Jim Fellowes was paying a great deal too much attention to the young girl who was their temporary guest.

Whenever Jill looked at him—and she looked often, for Jim attracted her strongly—his eyes seemed to be fixed on Sandra, who, in Jill's opinion, was not much at all. Her clothes were anything but smart, and although one had to admit that Sandra had a kind of girlish prettiness she was quite unfashionable, or so thought Jill.

Perhaps she would not have been quite as critical of Sandra's appearance were it not for the fact that she herself was more than a little in love with Jim.

He and she had been a good deal thrown together during the past fortnight, and although the young man had done nothing to indicate that his feelings were in any respect other than friendly, Jill had discovered herself to be falling in love with him.

She was not a bad-natured girl, taken all in all, but jealousy, that meanest of all emotions, made her feel spiteful towards the possible rival she saw in Sandra.

Very handsome herself in a dark, striking fashion, she was always well turned-out. That is why she found it so very galling that Jim Fellowes' eyes should so continually turn in the other girl's direction.

Jill saw also that Sandra, although she did not often glance in Jim's direction, was aware of his glances, which was why the soft colour came and went so becomingly in her face.

"By the way, Sandra," Jill asked pleasantly, "how is your good-looking boy friend? I see that you're not officially engaged yet," and she glanced meaningly at Sandra's left hand.

Before the latter had time to answer, Jill went on, turning to Jim:

"He's one of the handsomest boys you could wish to see. but perhaps you have seen him for yourself?"

"I have not yet had that pleasure," said Jim stiffly.

Had Jill but known it she had done nothing to advance herself in his good graces by her remark; for the bearer of unwelcome news is seldom remembered with gratitude or affection.

So the reminder thus forced upon Jim that Sandra was already spoken for was so exceedingly unwelcome that it showed him plainly the extent of his feelings for her.

Unconscious of the unpopularity she was courting Jill went on:

"You must have been going about with him now for ever such a long time, haven't you? It's six months since I was here last and you were inseparable then. I remember thinking how marvellous he was and how lucky you were to have such a boy friend."

"Graham and I have known each other for much longer than that," Sandra said wondering a little at this sudden interest in her affairs by one who had never before taken much notice of her. "We were children together, in the same village."

"How romantic," sighed Jill. "Yes, I would like a little more fruit salad, thank you, Rita, but no cream, I have my figure to think of. Don't you pity us poor girls for the sacrifices we have to make on the altar of fashion?" she added, turning to Jim again.

Just then Sonny started to cry and the disturbance this caused at the table saved Jim the necessity of replying.

A Change Of Mind

AN unexpected letter arrived for Sandra next morning. It was from Ivy Watson. Graham's sister, who was passing through London on her way for a fortnight's holiday in Spain, and in it she suggested that Sandra should meet her for lunch.

Ivy was several years older than Sandra, who had been a child when the former had gone to take up her chosen profession as a hospital nurse.

They naturally had much to talk about in the brief luncheon-hour which was all Sandra could manage, and Graham was one of their topics.

"I knew it was no good hoping that he would be able to meet me," Ivy announced regretfully. "He's always much too busy to get away nowadays, but I should have liked to have seen him. It's a long time since he was home."

"But—didn't you see him during his recent week-end?" asked Sandra, and Ivy stared at her in some bewilderment.

"My dear girl, what exactly do you mean?" she enquired. "Graham has not been home since Christmas, whatever makes you think he has?"

"But, Ivy—it's only a short time ago that he went for a week-end," Sandra protested "you must have forgotten."

"You're dreaming dear," Ivy declared. "The hospital where I work is only a few miles from home, as you well know, and Graham couldn't possibly have come without my knowing it."

Sandra held her hands tightly together in her lap as the other spoke, for an ugly suspicion had taken hold of her.

That she was not mistaken, she very well knew, and that meant that for some reason of his own Graham had lied to her about that week-end he was supposed to have spent with his parents.

The knowledge made her very miserable, and it was all she could do to hide her distress from Ivy.

For what reason could Graham have to deceive her? She remembered his curt replies to her questioning following that supposed visit home. She remembered, too, her own feeling that something unpleasant must have occurred which he did not wish to speak of.

"I wish you were coming with me, my dear," Ivy remarked, "it would do you good. You're looking a bit jaded. Where are you and Graham going for your holiday? I know mother would love to have you with her."

"I don't quite know what Graham's plans are," Sandra said uncomfortably. As she spoke something seemed to tell her that she and Graham would never have that holiday together, because for some reason, which she did not yet fathom, he did not want it that way.

All that afternoon, in her office, she felt absent and distrait, feeling the shadow of some impending ill hanging over her.

It had not just been her imagination that something had happened to change Graham, she told herself. But what could it be, and why should he deliberately set out to deceive her about his actions when he was perfectly free to do what he wished?

She would not make him embarrassed by speaking to him of his falsehood, but she made up her mind to ask him straight out what had happened to alter their relationship the very next time they met, which would be the following evening.

When she reached home that afternoon, Jim's car was in the road outside the flats. Jim was in overalls and doing something to the engine. His hands and face were oil-marked.

He looked up as Sandra approached and once again it struck him how pale and listless she looked.

"Hello," he said. "Like a spin? I was just going round to the garage, but if you like we could have a run round the houses first."

Sandra hesitated. The temptation was great, for she felt weary and depressed.

On the other hand some strange, unacknowledged instinct warned her that she would be guilty of disloyalty towards Graham if she accepted the offer of this man who had so strong an influence over her.

Had it been anyone but Jim she would have accepted his suggestion without question, but that same subconscious instinct told her that there was danger for her in too close an acquaintance with him.

"It's very kind of you——" she began, "but I don't think I will. There are several things I want to do just now."

Jim made no attempt to persuade her. Instead, he said casually—

"Tell me, Sandra, are you very much in love with that boy friend of your's? Graham, isn't it?"

The suddenness of the enquiry took her so much by surprise that, instead of, administering a snub, she stammered feebly:

"I am very fond of him, of course."

"But are you in love with him?" persisted Jim.

"That is a question which he alone has the right to ask and has nothing whatever to do with you," was Sandra's reply as she gathered her scattered wits.

"It is one which I alone can decide whether or not it has anything to do with me," said Jim, quite unabashed by her rebuke. "I suppose I've offended you, have I? I'm sorry if I have, but I advise you, strictly as a well-wisher, of course, to ask yourself very seriously if what you feel for this boy of yours is really love? Cheerio, see you sometime, I expect."

He turned back to the engine whistling carelessly and Sandra let herself into her flat, trembling all over.

She ought to be furious with him she knew, he had been guilty of unpardonable rudeness in daring to question her on so personal a matter, but his words had let in such a burst of light into the unexplored regions of her heart that she could think of nothing but the problem he had set her.

Sinking into a chair she asked herself the same question—was she really in love with Graham?

It was one she had never before considered; somehow or other they had drifted into their present relationship without the slightest confession of love ever passing between them.

It had seemed so natural for their youthful friendship to pass into a stronger and more adult affection that it had never entered Sandra's head to wonder if the calm, serene emotion with which she regarded Graham had any real connection with falling in love.

She had always liked him more than any other young man she knew. But then she had not known many young men, and she had been convinced that Graham preferred her to any other girl of his acquaintance.

That such a calm, temperate kind of affection might not altogether satisfy Graham had never occurred to her, and it now seemed nothing short of absolute disloyalty on her part that she could not convince herself that what she felt for Graham was that romantic condition known as being in love.

Perhaps, she thought, she had not got it in her to feel that way towards any man. Then the vision of Jim Fellowes came into her mind and with a sensation of absolute guilt she thrust all these distracting problems aside and hurried into the kitchen to put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

It seemed as if everything had conspired to perplex and distress her. First Ivy's revelations concerning Graham, and that week-end about which he had deliberatey told her a lie, now this sudden and even more distressing problem of her own feelings.

If only, she sighed, she had someone in whom she could confide her troubles. But there was nobody.

Had she but known it Graham, too, had come to a crisis in his affairs and was facing difficult problems.

For Freda Benson had found out about and gathered that some kind of bond existed between her and Graham. So being a girl of spirit Freda had submitted an ultimatum to the young man who professed himself so deeply in love with her.

She informed him that he could not expect to run two girls at once, or at least if he could she was not going to be one of them. She told him further that his behaviour to Sandra was disloyal and deceitful and that the time had come when he must definitely make up his mind which of them Sandra or herself, he wanted.

"I made up my mind on that point the first evening I met you," said poor Graham torn between loyalty and inclination. "You know that, Freda. It is you I want, but how can I bear to hurt poor Sandra who has nobody but me to care for now that her brother lives so far away?"

"I don't want to take any girl's boy," Freda said sportingly. "I've always thought it was the meanest thing that anyone could do to steal another girl's friend. I don't know exactly how you stand with regard to Sandra, Graham, but I don't think you ought to go on seeing me if you are in any way pledged to her."

"Don't you care for me Freda?" the man wanted to know and she turned away so that he could not see the tears in her eyes.

"If you were free I could care very much," she murmured, "but I am not out to make another girl unhappy, Graham."

"I'll speak to Sandra," he declared with sudden determination. "We can't go on like this. She must see that I have changed lately. Oh, if only I weren't fond of her," he went on a little wildly, "and if only she weren't so fond of me."

"If you are fond of her then that is the answer," Freda retorted, trying to be brave.

But Graham quickly declared that being fond of someone was not the same as being in love, and now that he was in love with Freda he knew that what he had felt for Sandra was a warm, almost brotherly affection.

Ignorant of his dilemma, and feeling that she had herself been very lacking in loyalty to him, Sandra was especially sweet and considerate when next they met.

She went out of her way to amuse and interest him, and in her account of her meeting with his sister, Ivy, was careful to omit all mention of that mysterious week-end of his; of her discovery of his falsehood.

Graham looked at her and groaned within himself at all these signs of her affection. Why could he not feel towards her as he felt towards Freda?

It looked as if he was going to make this sweet, attractive girl very unhappy. She was his friend's sister, entrusted by that friend to his care, and he was going to have to let her down badly. Altogether it was an ordeal from which he shrank in horror.

"Graham, I don't want to bore you on the subject, but what have you decided about a holiday?" Sandra asked gently, struck by the look of strain on his face. "You really do need a complete rest and change, you know. I can't help noticing lately how tired and—and—well, almost unhappy you are."

The tenderness in her voice, the soft, pitying regard of her eyes finally broke him down.

"I am unhappy, Sandra, very much so." he said. "But I can't bear you to pity me, my dear, because I have wronged you very deeply."

She looked at him in astonishment. He sat where she had placed him, in the most comfortable chair in her flat, at his elbow a packet of cigarettes and a glass of orange juice.

But he had touched neither of these offerings, and with a return of that sensation of premonition Sandra knew that whatever the cause, their previous relationship was at an end.

"Tell me in what way you have wronged me, or fancy that you have wronged me," she urged gently. "Whatever it is, you know that I shall forgive you, Graham."

"That's just it," he groaned. "You are too good, Sandra. I cannot bear to hurt you, but the fact is——" he paused and swallowed hard——"the fact is that I have met someone else, Sandra, someone I have grown to love and who loves me. There, it is out, and all pretence on my part is at an end. I have been untrue to you, my dear. I thought that what I felt for you was enough, but since meeting this other girl; I know now what real love is."

Sandra's face grew bleak. She might not be in love with him, any more than he was with her, but he was all she had. He represented the only link which was left with her happy childhood, a hundred incidents bound them together, and the knowledge that she had lost him could not fail to give her a sense of forlornness.

But she spoke quite brightly.

"Well, that being so, Graham dear, there is nothing to keep you from following up your discovery. Do not think that you owe me anything—where I am concerned you are as free as the air. You have done me no wrong in falling in love with someone else."

"But—I can't bear to think of how unhappy it will make you, Sandra. I am so truly fond of you , as you know. Until I met Freda no other girl but you counted for anything in my life. To hurt you, to give you pain, is something I cannot bear to think of."

"Darling Graham, believe me I am not in any danger of breaking my heart because you prefer another girl," she replied. "We have been mistaken, you and I. We have mistaken a warm affection for something much stronger—but neither of us actually knew what being in love really meant.

"There is a difference, I have discovered," she went on,—"between loving someone and being 'in love'. I do love you, Graham, but I don't think that I am in love with you any more than you are with me. To try to keep you would be to behave in a very dog-in-the-manger spirit.

"I knew that something had happened to alter you, but the truth never entered my head. I am glad that I know it now, and surely, after all that we have been to each other we can still be friends? I should miss you too much were I never to see you again."

Almost afraid to believe in his good fortune, Graham looked up at her with shining eyes.

"I always knew that there was no one like you," he murmured. "You are trying to make it as easy for me as you can, and I don't deserve it. Do you really, really mean that it won't make you unhappy to give me up?"

"Cross my heart, wish I may die," she returned lightly, smiling at him. "Don't please regard me as a martyr, Graham, because I'm not one. We have been good friends, my dear, perhaps we have played a little at being in love, but neither of us was really so, as you have found out for yourself. I know now why you have been so morose and glum, poor boy, and my only regret is that you did not tell me the reason before."

"I suppose because I was conceited enough to believe that it would break your heart," he said a little shamefacedly, as he recalled the many occasions of late upon which he had deceived her.

"Well, now that we know that there are going to be no casualties in that line you can go to this Freda of yours and make her as happy as you are," Sandra told him.

"If only you could meet some fellow you could care for," Graham murmured, "that would make everything quite perfect."

Once more the image of Jim Fellowes flashed across her mental vision, but hastily dismissing it from her mind she gave Graham a parting handshake.

"Bring her to see me some day," she said generously. "If you think so much of her I'm sure that she must be very nice."

It was rather wonderful she thought wistfully, as she looked round the room he had vacated, to be able to make anyone happy so easily.

There had been no mistaking the more than satisfied expression on his face as he had hurried off to convey the good news to his love, of his freedom, and Sandra tried to find compensation for what she had lost in his happiness.

For she had lost something she had valued and something she was going to miss.

Despite all her efforts she could not help a feeling of depression stealing over her at the knowledge that never again would she and Graham set off in contented companionship together to visit the countryside on his scooter-cycle or go to the cinema.

He had filled her time so much in the past that except for Rita she had made no real friends, and she realised that she was going to be very, very lonely.

Doubtless Graham would come to see her and would bring Freda with him. But it was not an association which would last. They would naturally wish to be together, besides three was always an uncomfortable number, so that gradually Graham would fade away altogether until only his memory remained.

It was a depressing thought and Sandra felt at something of a loose end, for this was Friday, the evening always kept sacred to her outings with Graham. Now there

would be no more Friday evenings to look forward to!

As she stood, listless and a little despondent, in her quiet room, she heard the sound of gay voices in the hall above.

One of them she knew, it belonged to Jim Fellowes, the other was a girl's voice Jill's, unless Sandra was mistaken.

Standing there, all unconsciously listening to the happy young voices, the sound of her own name drifted down to her.

"We'll ask Sandra if she would care to come." It was Jim who spoke, and then quite clearly came Jill's reply.

"Spare yourself the trouble Jim, this is her night out with her boy friend. She always goes out with him on Friday."

A minute or two later the noise of a departing car reached Sandra's ears through the front door which Graham had inadvertently left half-open.

She was surprised that Jill should have remembered that it was the evening upon which Graham always called round for her, for the two girls had never exchanged confidences or discussed their personal affairs.

Listening now to the sound of the departing car, the idea came to Sandra that in all probability they would marry, these two high-spirited good-looking people who had just gone off together to some unknown destination.

Doubtless Rita would be pleased to have her sister married to Fred's brother, while as for Jim he had openly announced that he was looking out for a wife to take back with him to Africa.

Perhaps Jill might not altogether fulfil the young man's description of his future wife's looks, for Sandra remembered that he had expressed a preference for goldy-brown hair and grey eyes whereas Jill was decidedly a striking brunette.

But had she not recently proved for herself how very easily a young man can change his mind? In the case of Graham, for instance. It was not always wise to believe in men's complimentary speeches and meaning allusions, Sandra told herself with quite unusual cynicism.

She went to bed that night in a very dejected mood, but she was still awake when, at a somewhat late hour, she heard a car draw up outside the flats and recognised it as the one belonging to Jim.

Somehow or another this made her feel more lonely and neglected than ever, so that she shed a few irrepressible tears before she finally went to sleep. But whether because of Graham's desertion or for some other unacknowledged cause she would have been puzzled to confess.

HOWEVER, on the following morning Sandra rallied her common-sense and took herself to task. She knew that she had nothing really to complain of, she was not, and never had been, in love with Graham and it was absolute selfishness on her part to grudge him to another girl.

From that moment she was quite ashamed of her mood of self-pity and resolved to cheer herself up by making plans for the holiday which now she would have to take alone.

Moreover, having left everything so late, owing mainly to Graham's behaviour, Sandra realised that it might be difficult to book up anywhere.

Also, again owing to her break with Graham, it would not be feasible to stay with his people, which had been one of their original plans.

In all probablity, she thought, he would take his new girl there to introduce her to his family.

A little dashed, Sandra decided that all that was left for her at this late date, was to go somewhere each day by train or coach and return to the flat each night to sleep. She knew lots of people did this.

There were plenty of beauty spots in the lovely countryside of Surrey, Sussex and Kent, and she amused herself for nearly the whole of that Saturday afternoon mapping out a plan of campaign.

She was glad that her holiday was due, for Graham's actions had left her very lonely.

Rita, occupied with her two visitors, had little time to give her, and although she had thrown out a sort of general invitation to Sandra to drop in at any time, it was one of which the girl had not availed herself.

She would have been an odd number in that gay and happy little quartette, she told herself. Also she did not feel that she wanted to go into any of the necessary explanations concerning Graham, which would inevitably crop up if his continued absence was noted.

So she got into the habit of slipping out by herself on the light summer evenings and going for a bus ride, or for a walk in one of the parks.

It was during one of these solitary walks that she ran into Jim Fellowes.

Their surprise was mutual, and on Sandra's part, was mixed with a sensation of such unexpected pleasure that, afraid of betraying her feelings too openly, her greeting of Jim was slightly stiff.

Jim, however, was pleased with the encounter and showed it.

"Why, I thought I must be imagining things when I saw you in the distance and told myself that it was Sandra Wayne," he exclaimed. "Jim Fellowes, I said, it's wishful thinking on your part, for what would bring her here all alone on a summer evening?"

"Well, that's what I was wondering about you," she replied.

She spoke in as off-hand a tone as she could command because of the disconcerting way her heart was behaving, and knowing that the betraying colour was coming and going in her cheeks.

"Two minds with but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one," he quoted with a teasing grin, "although I'm afraid that can't be true, for you are looking at me in a far from kindly manner. Are you still angry with me, Sandra?"

"For what reason?" she asked, struggling against the odd, magnetic influence he always had over her, yet longing to surrender to the delight of his presence.

Never, never, never had anyone made her feel quite like this, she told herself.

"The last time we met you snubbed me good and proper for prying into your affairs, and since then you seem to have avoided all contact with the lot of us. Looking back, I can see that perhaps I did rather over-step the mark, and I apologise for doing so. Don't you feel you can forgive me, Sandra?"

She wished he would not make his voice sound so soothingly tender. It meant nothing she knew, but it seemed to cast a spell upon her, to make her feel as if the prosaic London Park were a fairyland into which her feet had wandered all unknowingly.

Struggling against the strange obsession she said confusedly—

"Oh, that? I—I thought no more about it."

"Then may I take it that I am forgiven?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course," she said. "I—I hope that you're enjoying yourself with Fred and Rita? You're having a lovely long holiday."

"When is yours due?" he asked, "Rita was saying the other day that she thought you would soon be off."

"I go next week," was her reply.

Then a silence seemed to hang between them, during which Sandra hoped that he would not ask her any further questions and by so doing, discover that she was going without Graham.

Jim, meanwhile, was filled with the disagreeable picture presented to him, by his imagination, of Sandra and her boy-friend disporting themselves on some sunny beach or other, or strolling hand-in-hand through dusky woodland glades.

"Perhaps I ought not to keep you talking," he said, "you may be on your way to meet someone?"

She shook her head.

"No, I'm just out for a walk," she said. "The flat seemed hot and airless and——" she hesitated.

He said quickly—

"And you were lonely? If—if I had my way you would never be lonely, Sandra, but—well, one doesn't like to butt in, does one?"

"I never mind being alone," she said. "I'm used to it, I suppose. But perhaps *you* are on *your* way to some appointment?"

"No. I'm on my way from one," he said. "I had to see a man on business in the City and decided to walk back this way to where I've left my car. Let's stroll on together, shall we?"

Still with that strange feeling that she had wandered into some enchanted land, of whose existence she had never before suspected, Sandra fell into step at his side.

Nothing passed between them that all the world might not have heard, but that walk was destined to remain forever imprinted upon her memory.

There was much, very much, that Jim might have said. By now he knew only too well that he had fallen in love with this sweet-faced, lonely girl who had seldom been out of his thoughts ever since their first unconventional meeting.

But between him and the achievement of his desire was the shadowy figure of the unknown young man named Graham, of whom he had heard Rita and Jill speak so often.

It was not his way to poach on another fellow's preserves, dearly as he longed to do so.

Therefore, he sternly refrained from introducing anything approaching sentiment into their conversation, but instead he once more amused his companion with descriptions of his life in Rhodesia, thereby filling her, although he did not know it, with a vain craving to see for herself the strange and lovely land he spoke of.

Before returning they had some coffee and sandwiches at a little cafe and then he drove her home in his car.

Throughout the ride the feeling of enchantment remained with Sandra, even when their conversation was in the most ordinary vein.

She felt dreamily that she could have gone on forever driving through those busy London streets looking at Jim's brown, muscular hands on the steering-wheel, listening to his crisp yet mellow voice.

WONDERFUL NEWS

THEIR return did not go unwitnessed. From her seat in Rita's flat, Jill saw two people bidding each other goodbye.

The light from the street lamp fell full upon Sandra's red-gold hair and slender form, betraying her identity to the watching girl above, filling her with unreasoning anger and resentment.

Jill was alone, except for the sleeping Sonny; Rita and Fred having gone out for an hour or two to visit a friend.

Jill had willingly agreed to remain behind

to look after Sonny, secure in the knowledge that Jim would be back to supper and that he and she would spend the evening alone.

It was an opportunity for which she had often wished, for by now her first infatuation for the young man had grown very much stronger. It was now her fixed determination that when he went back to Rhodesia she would go with him as his wife.

So far she had made small headway in her design, which was surprising, because Jill knew that she was extremely attractive. She had read the pleasing proof of this in men's eyes when they had looked at her. She had seen it reflected from a hundred mirrors until she had come to regard herself as almost irresistible.

So pretty a young woman had naturally had more than one proposal, but so far not one of her admirers had come up to the standard she thought her looks deserved.

It was not until she met Jim Fellowes that she told herself that here was a man she would gladly marry.

The thought of life on a Rhodesian tobacco farm attracted her as much as did Jim himself. She saw herself queening it amongst the white population. She liked the thought of having plenty of money, and fine clothes.

Jim, too, was just the kind of man she admired, big and strong, he was a fitting mate for a girl like herself.

So her liking for him quickly grew into something very much stronger and with it came an unreasoning jealousy of every other girl he looked at.

Jill's feminine instinct had told her almost from the first that he was far too interested in Sandra Wayne.

She noticed that whenever the other girl's name came up in conversation he would look up from the paper he might be reading, or stop whatever it was he was doing at the moment.

If he thought he heard the door of her basement shut he would hurry to the window as if to catch a glimpse of her. More than once, when they had all been going out somewhere, he had suggested asking Sandra if she would care to join them.

Annoying as this might be there was nothing to alarm the scheming Jill because of the comforting knowledge of Sandra's handsome boy friend. However deeply Jim might be drawn to her she was already booked, a fact of which Jill did not scruple to remind Jim at frequent intervals.

All through the present evening she had waited in growing impatience for him to return from his London appointment, becoming every moment more and more resentful of his delay.

Now, before her very eyes, she saw the reason for it. He had been meeting Sandra on the quiet and taking her out.

Jill's anger grew in proportion to her jealousy so that it was only by a determined effort that she managed to greet him with a smile when he eventually entered the flat.

"Hello," he said, "all alone? Haven't the others come back yet?"

"No. I think they've forgotten all about me left here on my lonesome," Jill declared testily. "A fine dull time of it I've had while you've all been out enioying yourselves." She looked at Jim sharply, too angry to measure her words. "That was Sandra Wayne with you in the car, wasn't it?"

"If you really want to know, it was," he replied in a rather forbidding tone of voice.

"You know you'll be getting into trouble with that fiance of hers if you don't take care," she remarked.

"I think I should know how to deal with him," Jim said scornfully.

"It's Sandra I'm surprised at," Jill remarked. "She wears such an air of guileless simplicity and yet is quite ready for a bit of flirting on the sly."

"She's an exceedingly nice, straight little girl," Jim remarked coldly. "I don't think you can know her very well."

There was a moment of angry silence between them and then he said casually—

"I think I'll pop round in the car and bring back Fred and your sister, they may be glad of a lift."

"I'd like to come, too," Jill exclaimed. "I'm sick of sitting here by myself. I'd like a breath of air."

"We can't both leave the child," he said, and Jill made an angry face.

"It's the last time I let myself in for baby-sitting." she cried.

"It's the first time you've been asked to do so since you've been here, I think," said Jim and went out of the room, angry with her and angry with himself, for he knew that he was making a fool of himself in losing his heart so completely to a girl who cared for someone else.

He soon dismissed Jill from his mind, for he had long discovered her to be a vain, entirely selfish sort of character who under no circumstances would have appealed to him as a wife.

But Jill had not finished with him. A woman scorned is proverbially known as a dangerous enemy, and although she realised that she had now no chance with Jim, her jealous anger against her all-unconscious rival flared up into absolute hatred and she vowed to herself that even if she could not marry Jim, she would get even with Sandra in some way.

SOMETIMES it almost seems as if fate sided with the uncharitable and spiteful members of the human race, putting into their way the very weapons necessary to carry out their mean designs

Two days after Jill's jealous outburst, her sister came into the living-room of the flat with rather a serious expression on her usually happy face.

"I've just been talking to Sandra," she said. "Her holidays are due and I happened to ask her where she was going. I thought she seemed a bit embarrassed and I couldn't think why, and then it all came out. That good-looking boy of hers, Graham, isn't going away with her, and from what I gathered they have definitely parted for good. I can't help being sorry, for Sandra is rather a lonely little thing and he was all she had. I wonder what the trouble was between them?"

She looked from one to the other of the two occupants of the room, Jill and Jim, but before either of them could speak, Rita had to go to the door to pay the milkman.

"I think you and I know the answer to that one," Jill observed meaningly, looking across at Jim who had lowered the newspaper he had been reading. "It's only what could have been expected, and I hope you are satisfied with the mischief you've succeeded in making."

"I haven't an earthly idea what you mean," he said sharply.

"No? Would *you* like it if you were Graham Watson, or whatever his name is, and discovered that your girl went joy-riding at night on the quiet with another fellow? I think Sandra deserves what she has got, trying to run two boys at the same time."

Too furious to trust himself to speak, Jim went out of the room without answering and Jill smiled the spiteful smile of one who has scored a point in the game of revenge.

Then, however, she began to wonder if this fresh turn of events might not, after all, be just what Jim wanted? If what Rita thought should be true, and Sandra and her boy friend had parted, it meant that the field was clear for Jim to court the other girl.

More than ever inflamed against him by now, Jill sat there planning her next move in the game, for inextricably mixed up with her anger against him was her love—or what she called her love for him.

"I think I'll go down to Sandra's flat and ask her if she'd like to come to the films with me this evening." she said later in the day, when she and Rita were alone. "I expect she's feeling rather sick about her boy friend."

"Good idea," was her sister's surprised but gratified reply.

Rita had had the impression that Jill did not care for the other girl which was one of the minor reasons why she had not been more pressing in her invitations to Sandra to come up to see them.

"I was going to suggest her spending the evening here," she went on, "but we're a bit over-crowded as it is, and I'm always afraid that with so many people talking Sonny won't be able to sleep. It's nice of you to think of it. Jill."

Rita was a little disappointed that Jim and her sister did not appear to have caught on, as she put it.

But since she had seen them together she realised that perhaps they were not altogether suited.

She was naturally fond of Jill, but now that they had been thrown so much into one another's company, in the not too roomy flat, it had been impossible not to see that Jill was inclined to be vain and selfish.

Fred had noticed it, and had spoken of it in the privacy of their bedroom. He could not help being aware of the fact that in spite of all the hospitality she received Jill never offered once to take Sonny off their hands, much as he and Rita would have appreciated her doing so. For his part, Fred would not be sorry when she went home.

Meanwhile, Sandra was rejoicing that this was her last day at the office for a fortnight.

On the whole she was not sorry that she had told Rita that she and Graham had parted. It had been bound to come out sooner or later and it was rather silly of her to have been reluctant to have it known.

Only that morning she had had a picture-postcard from Graham bearing a view of a well-known beauty spot in the vicinity of his home town, thus proving that he was spending his holiday with his own people after all.

"*Having a wonderful time*," he wrote. "*Expect you recognise this spot. See you soon*, GRAHAM", and to Sandra's surprise Freda had put in a short sentence of her own. "*Hope to meet you before long, Sandra, dear.*

FREDA.".

Somehow this little message from the girl she had never seen warmed Sandra's heart. She was glad—yes, genuinely glad, she assured herself, that Freda and Graham were happy, and hoped that his family would not be too disappointed in his choice of a wife, for she knew that like her own brother it had been their hope that Graham and Sandra would marry and unite the two families more closely than ever.

Perhaps, she thought, that was one of the reasons why she and Graham had drifted into their former relationship. Everyone expected it, everyone wished it, and their own warm affection for each other had done the rest.

Well, she hoped that she would always be friendly with him and with his wife when he married Freda.

Looking back, it was odd to realise that if she had not sacrificed an evening's enjoyment to look after Rita's baby, Graham might never have met Freda and

quite a lot of things would have been different.

For instance she herself might not be condemned to spend her holiday on her own. For another she would certainly not have met Jim Fellowes under such unusual circumstances.

Even now the memory of his unconventional greeting had power to stir her pulses.

What an enjoyable drive that had been when he had brought her home that evening after their unexpected meeting in London; Sandra thought that it was a drive she would never forget and yet nothing whatever had passed between them that all the world might not have witnessed.

It gave her a strange pleasure to let her thoughts linger on the young man from Rhodesia and yet mixed with the pleasure was an equally strange sense of sadness in the knowledge that soon his long holiday would end and he would pass out of her life forever.

Would Jill go back with him? she asked herself, and was surprised at the pang, sharp and painful, with which she faced the answer.

It was of him she was thinking when, on her return from work, she received an unexpected visitor in the form of Rita's pretty sister.

Jill had made herself look unusually charming and cool, so that Sandra, still in her office dress and a little weary at the end of the long, hot week, felt washed-out and colourless beside her.

"May I come in?" Jill asked brightly, "Or are you just going to have your tea?"

"Oh, please do come in." Sandra said with hasty courtesy. "I have just put the kettle on so perhaps you'll join me in a cup? This is a rather comfortable chair I think, sit here."

"It's rather a dark little room, isn't it?" Jill remarked, looking round. "I don't think I should like to live here all alone."

"Well, I get it more cheaply because of it's drawbacks," Sandra replied. "I don't really mind it, it's cool in the summer and when I have a fire in the winter, and the curtains are drawn, it's not at all uncomfortable. Anyhow, it's the best I can afford," she added brightly, wondering a little what had brought Jill to visit her, for she had always felt instinctively that there was not much sympathy between them.

"I wondered if I could persuade you to come to the films with me this evening," Jill enquired as, a few minutes later, they sat drinking their tea. "Fred has got some stupid business friend coming to supper and I thought I'd take myself out of the way. It's pretty crowded up there at the best of times."

"But wouldn't Rita be glad of your help over getting supper ready?" said Sandra, at which the other girl tossed her luxuriant dark curls and said:

"Oh, I'm no cook. I detest standing over a gas stove in weather like this. Rita loves that sort of thing, she was always the domesticated one of the family. I'm always trying to impress poor old Jim that I'm not cast for the role of housewife, but, of course, where he lives there are coloured servants to do all the work."

What was meant by this remark was too much for Sandra to ignore. In as light a tone as she could command, in spite of a sudden chill sensation in the region of her heart, she said—

"Then his future wife will not need any skill in that direction."

"Rather wonderful in these days isn't it?" Jill said. "But somehow or other I wonder if the life out there would suit me in other ways? Think of the wrench of leaving all one's relations and friends behind. It's a great sacrifice for any man to ask of a girl."

"Is that what Jim wants you to do?" Sandra enquired bending over the tea-pot to which she had just added some freshly-boiled water.

Jill gave a self-conscious smile.

"That would be telling," she laughed. You must have seen how things are, Sandra? The poor man is quite too transparent for words."

"I have hardly seen you together," was the other's reply. "Do have another cup of tea, Jill, and what about another of these biscuits."

"My dear—my figure." Jill exclaimed, 'don't tempt me or neither Jim nor any other man will want me, for unfortunately am the type to run to fat far too easily."

Sandra made some kind of reply, though exactly what she did not know.

A kind of dull misery had settled upon er and it was no longer any use for her o try to ignore its origin. The knowledge that Jim was in love with Jill, and wanted to marry her, was so bitter that Sandra knew that she was in love with him herself.

That was the meaning of the strange ascination he had exercised over her that was why she thought of him so often and hated the knowledge of his inevitable return to Africa.

The love she had never felt for Graham had blossomed to sudden and almost terrifying strength in her secret heart of hearts for a man who cared for someone else.

"We ought to be getting a move on if we want to be in time for the full programme," Jill was saying, conscious of a certain feeling of triumph at the way in which she had inferred so much without absolutely telling an outright lie.

If Jim had any serious intentions towards this other girl she had probably put a few spokes in his wheel, anyhow. It would be too shattering, Jill thought, to see herself out-rivalled by Sandra, who dressed so simply and was certainly no match for herself in looks.

That evening remained a kind of nightmare in Sandra's memory. What she witnessed on the screen failed to register anything on her brain which was occupied with thoughts of her own stupidity in falling in love with someone who had thoughts only for another girl.

Truthful herself, and candid to the point of absolute transparency, the suspicion that Jill's carefully phrased words had no foundation in fact never entered Sandra's mind.

She had often thought of her and Jim marrying, it had seemed in nearly every way so suitable a match which only made her own folly so much the greater but did not make her unhappiness any easier to bear.

From time to time she glanced at her companion with a kind of wonder that the girl who had a chance to marry Jim should hesitate even for a moment. She did not wonder that he had fallen for Jill, she had just the kind of looks Sandra had always coveted for herself.

What Sandra did find surprising was that even a girl of Jill's undoubted charms should be able to resist a man like Jim. Doubtless her hesitation was only temporary, probably just a kind of coquetry by which she meant to enhance her own value, while all the time meaning to accept him in the end.

Like all things in this world pleasant or unpleasant that nightmare evening came to an end at last and Sandra honestly tried to make an effort to feel gratitude for what seemed the other girl's kindly thought of her.

But with what a sense of inward relief did she finally close the door of her basement flat upon Jill after wishing her good night.

Never before had the solitude of her little abode been more welcome to Sandra. Here there was no need to discipline her voice, her looks into an assumption of gay enjoyment she was far from feeling.

Here where there was no watchful eye to see her, she could give way to the deadly tide of depression which engulfed her and from which she found it impossible to struggle free.

This, she thought, wryly is how poor Graham was feeling when he fell in love with Freda and felt in honour bound to herself. Although for Graham there had been the happy ending which would never now fall to Sandra's lot.

The mood of despondency was still with her when she awoke the next day and as there was nothing special to get up for she stayed in bed longer than was her custom.

This, the first day of her holiday, she had planned out carefully.

Rita, when she had been discussing her holiday with her had suggested Dorking as a good starting-off spot for some of the country rambles Sandra had in view.

Rita had particularly recommended a walk to Shere and to the romantic Silent Pool with its tragic legend and reported ghost.

To this spot Sandra intended making her way hoping that the peaceful atmosphere of the countryside would act as a kind of balm upon her troubled mind.

She was preparing to depart when her door-bell rang and going to answer it there stood Jim! He had been so much in her mind that it was scarcely a surprise to see him, nevertheless his appearance had the usual effect of making her nerves tingle and her breath to come and go more quickly.

"May I come in for a moment?" he asked quietly, his heart wrung with pity for her: in her shadowed eyes and pale cheeks he fancied he read her natural grief at having lost Graham.

"Please do." she said hurriedly. "I—I was just going to start on my travels," she went on confusedly, "but I have a few minutes to spare, of course."

How big and strong he looked standing there in her dim little room. She wished that she did not want him so badly, that she did not grudge him to that other girl.

"Have you brought a message from Rita?" she went on, thinking of the only reasonable way in which to account for his presence.

"No, but Rita knows that I have come," he said. "She was telling me of your plans for to-day. I happened to ask her if she knew where you were going——" he went on with such a lack of his usual gay, confident manner that Sandra wondered at its cause. "And it struck me that perhaps you and I might join forces,"—speaking very awkwardly—"I mean we could perhaps explore together in my car—it would be nicer than going by train."

Sandra turned her head away that he might not see what she was feeling.

Little did he know the unutterable sweetness of the prospect his words offered. A whole long summer day with him in the Surrey countryside—just the two of them, a peep once more into that enchanted fairyland whose perilous joys she had already tasted, but which were not for her any longer and therefore must be resisted with all the resolution she could summon up.

But he belonged to Jill, how could he even think of taking any other girl around when he was trying his hardest to succeed in another direction altogether? What

would Jill think if, after her confidences of the previous night, Sandra went off for a whole day with him?

In the extremity of her thwarted longing and unhappiness she spoke more sharply to him than she realised.

"Thank you, you are very kind, but my plans are made. I don't wish to alter them."

"There is so much I should like to say to you, Sandra," he murmured incoherently, wishing from the bottom of his heart that he knew to what extent she was missing Graham, and longing to take her slender form into his arms and comfort her into happiness again.

In the dark rather dreary little room she presented, he thought, a forlorn, neglected little creature of almost irresistible sweetness and desirability in his eyes.

He had been able to think of no other girl ever since first seeing her on that night of his arrival from abroad when, for a brief moment she had been in his arms, and he had kissed her.

"I don't think I want to hear anything you may have to say," Sandra stammered out of her wounded, aching heart, "so, if you don't mind, will you please go? I have a train to catch."

He obeyed without a word, too proud to protest, too hurt to demand an explanation of her altered behaviour to him.

He thought he knew the reason. Jill had been right, perhaps, when she had accused him of having come between Sandra and that fellow she used to go out with but from whom she had recently parted.

She looked upon him as the cause of the breach between herself and Graham.

When he had gone, Sandra, far from hurrying off to catch her train, threw herself into a chair and gave way to a burst of tears.

Her day was spoilt, she didn't want to go anywhere.

She wished that Jim was back in Rhodesia or that he had never left that country, although what exactly it was that she had against him she would have found it hard to say.

All she knew was that she was very unhappy, that no one wanted her, and that she was alone in an unkind world.

She spent the day in wretched solitude a state of affairs by no means mitigated by the fact that she had nothing in the flat for dinner but bread and cheese and the egg she had counted upon having for supper.

Already she regretted the brusque, ungrateful manner in which she had spoken to Jim, and wondered despairingly what he must think of her.

He had gone off in a proud, dignified silence which made her own conduct seem ill-bred and uncouth, and never, never would she be able to explain to him the cause of her lack of manners.

"If I could only get right away," she muttered despondently. "Begin again in some strange place where no one knew me and where Jim's name would never be mentioned. I might forget him."

As if in answer to a prayer the morning brought an airmail letter from her brother. Graham had written to tell Philip how things were between himself and Sandra, because he felt that he owed it to his friend to let him know that they had parted, and now Philip wrote inviting Sandra to come to join him and his wife on their Canadian homestead.

"I don't like to picture you without any anchor all by yourself in the Old Country," Philip wrote. *"There is room for everyone out here, and we should be very glad to have you, my dear Sandra. So let me know how you are fixed financially and when you can sail. It was jolly decent of Graham to write, I don't blame either of you for splitting up if you weren't really in love, much as I should have liked him as a brother-in-law."*

Sandra had scarcely finished reading this very unexpected invitation when Rita came down to see her. She looked, Sandra fancied rather wrought-up and indeed her first words proved this to be the case.

"I think, Sandra," she began stiffly "that if you had to turn Jim down yesterday you might have been a little less brusque in your manner. You hurt him deeply and he's got some sort of idea in his head that it was because of him that you and Graham parted. I should like your assurance that such was not the case."

"Rita, of course it wasn't," Sandra gasped, "whatever gave him such an idea? Graham didn't know of his existence, or hardly knew anyhow."

"Well, Jim couldn't think of any other reason for your peculiar manner," Rita said. "I'm sorry for him, Sandra I don't like to see him so unhappy. It wouldn't have hurt you to be a little kinder to him considering that he's so desperately in love with you."

Sandra sank into a chair because she felt as if her legs no longer would support her under the shock of such words.

"In—in love with me?" she choked. "Why, Rita, you must be mad!"

"Not in the least," was the crisp reply. "He has told Fred and myself that it was his great ambition to take you back to Rhodesia with him as his wife."

"Me? You mean Jill," Sandra struggled to utter.

It was Rita's turn to stare.

"Jill? Why, I believe he actually dislikes her," she said. "I think Jill would have been quite ready to take him at one time, but of late she seems to have turned against him and I know he told Fred that it was a pity she was so different from me. Why, what on earth induced you to fancy that he was taken with Jill?"

Sandra bit back the explanation which came tumbling to her lips. She did not want to give Jill away, she was feeling so tremulously, incredibly happy at what she had just heard that she wished harm to nobody.

"I—I always thought her so pretty," she said lamely.

"Jim thinks that you're lovely," Rita declared. "Tell me, Sandra, do you feel you could ever get to care for him? He's so set on you, poor fellow."

"I—I don't think any girl would find it difficult to love Jim," Sandra faltered. She raised her eyes and looked at the other girl. "Oh, Rita," she burst out, "I am so terribly in love with him—it was because I thought it was Jill he wanted that made me so cold and stand-offish to him. Will he ever forgive me, do you think?"

"Well, you've the strangest way of showing that you're in love with anyone I've come across," Rita exclaimed.

Then she smiled.

"I'm glad, my dear," she added. "I've always been ever so fond of you, Sandra, and I know you'll make Jim a splendid wife."

"But—I don't su hpposee'll ever want to speak to me again," faltered Sandra.

Rita laughed.

"Then you'll have to look out for another boy," she said and Sandra shook her head.

"No—there could never be anyone else after Jim," she murmured. "He—I don't know what it is about him, Rita, but it makes me feel happy just to look at him."

"Pooh, there's nothing unique in that. That's the way I used to feel about dear old Fred and goodness knows he's no oil painting," Rita declared. "We're all the same when we're in love as they call it, dear! All our geese are swans, though I must say Jim is a fine figure of a man."

"Is he very cross with me?" Sandra asked.

"He's in a very bad temper with all of us, that's all I know," was Rita's reply. "Cheer up, Sandra, what is to be will be, you know. I must fly, I've left Sonny with him as Fred has gone to business. See you later."

"Oh—how you made me jump," she cried a few moments later, for there was Jim standing in the doorway looking down at her with something in his eyes which made her heart nearly stop beating.

"Sorry, but Rita told me she had left the door open," Jim said. "She also told me that—well, that you didn't altogether hate me, Sandra darling. Was she speaking the truth?"

"Oh, Jim, darling Jim," she murmured, "it's all so wonderful that I can't believe it's true."

"My little love." he said and gathered her into his arms.

There followed an unbelievably blissful interlude, during which it seemed to Sandra as if the whole world were not big enough to hold her happiness, and then suddenly Jim asked—

"What put it into that foolish little head of yours that I was in love with Jill?"

Sandra evaded a direct reply with some skill.

"I don't want to think about it," she said, "it made me so unhappy. Why, I was even considering going to Canada to get away from you all," and she indicated her brother's letter.

"Canada? No fear," Jim ejaculated. "It's Africa you're bound for, my girl—those far away places you hankered after. How soon can you be ready to sail or fly?"

THE END.

IN THE RIGHT WAY.

"Would you care for a ticket for a Christmas charity concert?" asked the ticket-seller. The householder looked at his diary of engagements. "I'm very sorry," he replied, "but my engagements prevent me attending your concert. But, of course, I will be there in spirit." "Splendid!" said the ticket-seller, not to be outdone. "And where would your spirit like to sit? I have tickets for two, three, and five shilling seats."

"IF."

A schoolmaster from the town came to the village school, and one day as he walked over the hillside, he noticed the sheep were lying in the coldest situations. Rab, a village character, came sauntering past, and the schoolmaster remarked: "Rab, if I were a sheep, I would lie on the other side of the hill." Rab nodded his head. "Nae doot, nae doot," he said with a grin. "But if ye were a sheep, sir, ye wad ha'e mair sense."

ISLE OF HEARTBREAK

By Peter Munday

THE GIRL FROM LONDON.

FIONA McLEOD steered her father's trim launch into Carrig harbour under a lowering sky, relieved that the seven-mile trip from the mainland was over.

The narrow strait separating the island from the West Scotland fishing port of Lochavon could be very rough and unpleasant at times, especially when, as now, the wind was in the west.

Shutting off the motor Fiona allowed the launch to glide gently alongside the quay, where her brother stood waiting to catch the line thrown deftly to him by Alec Finlay, who acted as her crew.

The boat's three passengers were a middle-aged couple and a girl of Fiona's own age. They sat close together with their raincoats fastened up to their necks as a protection from the wind and spray.

Hugh McLeod saw that they were strangers to the island and wondered why they had come by the launch, when in the normal course of events visitors came on the *Island Queen*, the packet steamer plying fortnightly between the mainland and the Western Isles.

Making the rope fast Hugh ran down the landing steps to help steady the launch against the piles.

"One at a time, please" he said cheerfully. "Best give me your hand, ma'am."

"Thank you!"

The older woman allowed him to assist her ashore, where she turned to wait for her companions. He next helped the girl and was rewarded by a dazzling smile, revealing two rows of even white teeth. He felt her hand warm and incredibly soft in his own and an expression of mild wonder came into his eyes.

"What a quaint old place, father," said the girl in a penetrating Southern voice.

A few minutes later, with her parents, she stood on the quayside looking round.

"It's certainly picturesque," said her father, glancing up at the white-washed houses and cottages that rose tier upon tier above Carrig harbour. "All the same, I can't say I admire Hector's taste. Living here must be rather like being marooned on a desert island."

Alec Finlay who was busy getting the visitor's baggage ashore, met Hugh's glance and winked. He had the islander's usual mild scorn for "southerners" and their soft ways compared to the "northerners."

"Mebbe they'd change their tune if they spent a winter here," he muttered.

Meanwhile the party on the quay had moved out of earshot, and Hugh was able to hear what his sister was saying.

It was something about them being relations of Sir Hector Legh, who lived in the big house at the top of the Glen.

They had, apparently, arrived at Lochavon the previous night from London with the intention of crossing on the *Island Queen*. But the steamer had delayed sailing for three days owing to engine trouble, following a violent gale.

Jamie Macpherson, the landlord of the *Three Crowns*, in Lochavon, had sought Fiona out and asked her to make room for the party on her launch, which had arrived that morning from the island.

"Does Sir Hector know they are coming?" Hugh asked. "It may be as well to 'phone him from Miss Preston's shop."

"There's nae need, Hugh," Alec chimed in, taking out some mail bags from the locker in the stern. "Jamie said he'd telephone from Lochavon, so I ken Sir Hector has been keeping a look-out for the launch." He nodded suddenly upwards. "An' there he is the noo."

A shooting brake had driven on to the quay and a tall, middle-aged soldierly-looking man got out and began greeting the party from the launch.

"He's more their style, ah'm thinking," Alec went on, in tones of disgust. "They didna enjoy the trip ower much, poor softies."

"Don't be so uncharitable, Alec," said Fiona, smiling, despite herself. "I don't suppose they knew what they were letting themselves in for when they allowed Jamie to arrange their passage."

Alec grunted and moved forward to secure the mooring lines.

Hugh chuckled.

"Your passengers seem to have got in Alec's hair, Fiona," he said.

She nodded and handed him several parcels she had brought from the mainland.

"Alec's like the rest of us—he doesn't like being patronised," she said. "I knew just what he would think when Mr. Merryweather addressed him as 'my man'!"

"Who are they exactly?" Hugh asked.

"A Mr. and Mrs. Merryweather and their daughter, Cecilie." Fiona's tone was dry. "But they didn't consider it necessary to introduce themselves. Jamie told them who I was and the fact that I called him Jamie and he called me Fiona was sufficient to put me right in my place."

Hugh laughed.

"Are they staying long, do you know?" he asked. "I mean, what about baggage?"

"They've some trunks coming over on the *Island Queen*," she said. "I said I could only bring a suitcase apiece. Alec has put them ashore." She glanced around. "I think that's everything, Alec. Will you tie her up safe?"

"Aye, Miss Fiona. I'll see tae her," replied the deck-hand cheerfully.

Brother and sister reached the quay and started to walk toward's Hugh's ramshackle old car.

But before they reached it they were hailed by Sir Hector Legh, Laird of Carrig who beckoned them to where he was talking to the newcomers.

They went over and he greeted them in a friendly fashion.

"Good afternoon, Fiona. Afternoon, Hugh!" He addressed Fiona more directly. "It was good of you to bring my cousins across, my dear. I'm very grateful. I understand the *Island Queen* will be at least a couple of days late, so it would have meant organising something else if you hadn't come to the rescue."

"It was a pleasure, Sir Hector."

Fiona made an appealing picture in her duffle coat and rubber seaboots, her dark, tumbling hair blown back by the wind.

With that sixth sense which only seems given to women, she was aware of the surprise with which Cecilie Merryweather heard her uncle address her as an equal.

"I gather the trip was anything but a pleasure," said Sir Hector, a gleam of amusement in his steely grey eyes. "You had quite a rough passage, I believe."

"Oh, not unusually so for this time of the year, Sir Hector," Fiona replied. "There was a bit of a lop on, but it was mostly spray."

He turned to his relations.

"Fiona is the best helmsman we have and that, I can assure you, is saying a very great deal! As you have already met I need not introduce you all over again but this young man is Hugh McLeod."

He gripped Hugh's arm and drew him forward.

"The McLeod's are neighbours and friends of mine, so you'll be seeing more of each other, no doubt," he went on. "You must persuade Hugh to show you some of his favourite haunts, Cecilie. He is by way of being an ornithologist and hopes to write a book about our island sea birds one day."

Mrs. Merryweather murmured something completely unintelligible, while her husband favoured Hugh with a patronising nod.

Cecilie, however, smiled sweetly and held out her hand.

"How do you do?" she said. "I can see that I'm going to enjoy my stay on Carrig, Mr. McLeod!"

HUGH drove the car into the big barn and switched off its engine. Fiona got out and her brother collected the parcels from the back.

From the barn there was a wide view of the port and the surrounding coastline.

To the right, a tall headland thrust itself into the sea, which broke in a white fury around its base.

Behind, the ground sloped steeply upwards, the stunted grass and bushes telling their own story of the poverty of the soil.

Some Highland sheep grazed in a field enclosed by a rough stone wall, their backs to the keen wind. Here and there on the slopes of the mist-covered hills were a number of empty, broken down crofter's cottages like the one in which Fiona and Hughhad been born before they had moved into a bigger place.

It was a wild, desolate scene, but to those who knew and loved the island, as did Fiona and Hugh, the place possessed a stark, haunting beauty all its own. During the summer months, when the heather was abloom, artists came from all over the world to transfer the glowing colours of moorland and sea to canvas.

Carrig boasted but few farms now for the earth discouraged all but those who, like their father, clung obstinately to the heritage they prized above all else. Potatoes were his chief crop.

The island's main industry was fishing, but that was not very flourishing for most of the younger men had left to get better paid jobs in modern industries.

"I think it very unreasonable of father to expect you to go to Lochavon in this weather, Fiona," Hugh remarked, locking the door of the barn. "After you had gone I saw Ian Duncan on his way to the coast-guard station and he told me there were gale warnings out for all sea areas."

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," said his sister shrugging. "After all, we needed various things, besides, there was the mail. The money we get from the Post Office for bringing it over is very useful," she added. "In fact, I don't know what we'd do without it at present, Hugh."

"I know," he said gloomily, as if conceding a fact which could not be disputed.

He glanced towards their cottage home. "I saw Doctor McIntyre to-day and he said father wasn't getting any better. Actually he warned me not to cross him as there was danger of a stroke."

Fiona nodded. At nineteen, she was in the full bloom of her young womanhood, her dark colouring and the high cheek bones lending her a wild beauty that had been handed down from her Gaelic forbears.

Like her brother, she was intensely loyal—loyal to the tradition in which they had been brought up as well as to each other. Some might guess, but few knew just how difficult life was being made for them by their father's gradual deterioration in health—and temper.

For Angus McLeod was a proud man, uncompromising in all his ways, but where pride and dignity so often go hand in hand in his case it had taken the form of a crabbed obstinacy which effectively swamped any nicer feelings he might have once possessed as a younger man.

There were times when Fiona—and Hugh—were hard put to it not to rebel openly against a tyranny which struck at the very roots of their independence of spirit. Of late Fiona had reached the stage of being really glad that her sweet, gentle mother had not lived to suffer, as she and Hugh suffered at the hands of the man they still tried hard to love and respect.

The trouble was, she reflected sadly, their father made no allowance for the hopes and dreams of youth. Exacting to a degree, he demanded instant obedience to his wishes, and ruled both children with the proverbial rod of iron.

Last winter he had developed a severe cold after going out in a blizzard to seek for a lost ewe and had nearly died of pneumonia.

Fiona had nursed him devotedly, but his recovery had been far from complete, so that all the work of the farm had fallen upon Hugh's shoulders. Fiona had stepped into the breach, taking over the twice weekly trips to the mainland for the mail.

"It's all very well to say that the money from the post office is useful," Hugh remarked, breaking a silence that seemed to haved stretched into minutes. "But surely Alec Finlay would be willing to take the launch over and pay us a rent for the use of her."

"Father would never agree," Fiona said starkly. "Apart from that, Alec will be called up for the services next year."

"All the same you've no right to be going out in the kind of weather we'll get in the winter," her brother argued. "Ian said as much to-day."

"Oh Ian!" Fiona dismissed the criticism with a shrug. "If Ian Duncan had his way I'd be wrapped up in cotton wool. What you both don't seem to realise is that I like taking the *Kittiwake* across to Lochavon and back. It makes a change."

"But it's a man's job, Fiona" Hugh retorted.

She smiled.

"Don't forget what Sir Hector said just now," she answered. "Besides, I promised you I wouldn't take risks, Hugh. If it comes on to blow a gale I'd never go out."

"Oh, I know, lass" he sighed. "But you can have a breakdown—the wind can change suddenly—there are no end of things that can go wrong."

"Hugh dear, what a Job's comforter you are to be sure," she said laughingly. "Anyway, we'd best not stand here talking or father'll wonder what's happened. What time is it?"

"Nearly six," he said, glancing at his watch, "Ian will be coming to-night, I expect. He said he might look in when he came off duty." He looked round at the sky. "After tea I'm away to bring in the ewes from the other side o' the hill."

In silence Fiona led the way along the muddy path to the cottage.

CONVERSATION at the meal table in the McLeod home was usually confined to questions and answers.

Angus McLeod, a gaunt, haggard man who walked about the island clad in kilt and tartan, usually sat at the head of the table, his deep-set, burning eyes holding a far-away expression.

Occasionally he would ask what was happening down at the port or up at the laird's house, though Hugh maintained that he only did so in order to criticise.

"You're late," he greeted Fiona as she entered the low-beamed, stone flagged living room, crowded with furniture much too large for it. "What kept ye?"

"The tide was on the ebb and the wind was head on," she said. "I had passengers, too, so I had to consider them."

"Passengers? What passengers?" her father asked sharply.

"A couple and their daughter," said Fiona. "They are connections of Sir Hector's. I believe. The *Island Queen* is having repairs, so Jamie Macpherson asked me to bring them across in order to save them three days wait."

"H'm," he grunted. "Well, ye'd best get tea. It's nigh on six and the shipping forecast will be on in a minute. Where's Hugh?"

"He's just coming, father," said Fiona, taking an enamel teapot off the dresser and putting it to warm near the open fire.

As she did so Hugh came in.

Angus McLeod looked up.

"Ye'd best get in the ewes from the other side o' the hill," he said curtly. "It's going to blow harder before the night is through and mebbe we'll have snow."

"Yes, father," Hugh hung up his cap and seated himself at the table. "I don't think it will snow, though. The clouds are a bit too high."

"Ye'll be telling me next it never snows in September in these parts," said his father sarcastically.

"I wouldn't say that," said Hugh calmly, beginning to cut the bread. "But I don't think itis going to snow to-night, that's all."

"Bah!" grunted the older man and turned to switch on the battery radio for the shipping forecast and the news.

MEANWHILE, up at Sir Hector Legh's big granite built mansion, a much different atmosphere prevailed.

There tea was served in the big hall warmed by a huge stone fireplace in which burnt a cheerful log fire.

Sir Hector, descendant of a long line of Scottish forbears, loved the Isle of Carrig and all it stood for.

A widower, it was a source of private grief to him that he was the last of his line, his only son having given his life for his country as a fighter-pilot in the Battle of Britain.

Nowadays Sir Hector devoted himself to the task of developing the natural resources of the island, notably Carrig tweed which was already beginning to make itself known amongst discriminating buyers in London and Glasgow.

Although it was not known to the islanders, one of the chief reasons for inviting his cousins to stay with him was in order to discuss with Mr. Merryweather a scheme for expanding the cloth-making industry and so bring much needed prosperity back to Carrig.

"A distributing agency like yours is just what we want, my dear Charles." Sir Hector had said earlier when they had been discussing the scheme.

Mr. Merryweather had nodded. A successful business man, he had recently acquired control of several shops in which such things as Carrig tweeds could be displayed and sold to advantage.

But he had not achieved his present position through making hasty decisions, however, so he had merely said that he would like to go further into the matter and see if there was money to be made out of it.

Cecilie Merryweather, looking very attractive, was seated next to Sir Hector, with her parents opposite. The servants had withdrawn, leaving them to their tea.

"I do hope it'll be fine to-morrow," said the girl. "I'm simply dying to explore your quaint little island, Uncle Hector. I'd no idea it was like this."

"You should come more often, my dear," he said smilingly. "We can't claim to possess *all* the amenities of civilisation as you know them in London, but we manage to exist very comfortably, nevertheless. As you see, we even have electric light" he added humorously. "That was one of the blessings which came out of the war as far as Carrig is concerned. When it was made an R.A.F. and naval base the authorities built a power station which we civilians now use."

"Do all the cottages have electric light?" Cecilie asked.

"Nearly all," he replied. "There are a few of the more isolated ones which haven't—farm cottages mostly—like the McLeod's. It would have cost too much to take a cable across the valley to their place."

"The McLeod's? Do you mean the young couple we met to-day, Uncle Hector?"

"Yes" he nodded. "Fiona and Hugh live with their father. They have a small farm about a mile or so from here. They are well liked and respected and I am proud to number the boy and his sister among my friends."

"What is she doing—running a ferry boat?" enquired Mr. Merryweather. "I should have thought it a most unsuitable occupation for a girl."

"Fiona doesn't run a ferry boat, my dear Charles," replied his host, laughing. "If you think your fares were included in the hotel bill you are vastly mistaken. Fiona happened to be in Lochavon and Jamie Macpherson, the landlord of the inn where you stayed last night, asked her to bring you across. She did so because he asked her and because you were my guests."

"What were the mail bags doing on the launch?" Cecilie questioned.

"That's easily explained," said Sir Hector. "If we had to depend on the *Island Queen* we would only get our mail very irregularly in the winter. So some years ago the post office offered to make a contract with anyone willing to fetch the mails twice a week. Old Angus McLeod got the contract and until his illness last year used to make the trip himself. Now Fiona does it.

"The McLeods are a very ancient Scottish family," he continued, passing up his cup for more tea. "Angus is the descendant of a branch which has lived on Carrig for many centuries. Hugh wanted to become an engineer, I believe, but they couldn't afford to send him to college, so he works the farm for his father. Like many other families in this part of the world, they are as poor as church mice and proud as Lucifer. I imagine that the money they get from the post office is very useful."

"What does the girl do besides fetching the mails?" Mr. Merryweather wanted to know.

"Pretty well everything," replied Sir Hector. "She stepped into the breach when her mother died and has held it ever since. She practically ran the farm

when Hugh was in the Navy, doing his National Service. There is some kind of an understanding between her and a lad named Ian Duncan, I believe, but she won't leave her father to marry. The old man is a bit of a tartar, I'm sorry to say, and since his illness I'm told he is much worse. I doubt very much if he could get any stranger to keep house for him, even if he were so inclined, so Fiona's hands are tied, poor girl."

"And who is Ian Duncan?" enquired Cecilie. "Another off-shoot of ancient lineage too proud to work?"

"I don't think you'll find anyone on Carrig too proud to work, my dear." Sir Hector gave her a sharp glance and she had the grace to flush. "I'm sorry if I've given you the wrong impression about Hugh and Fiona McLeod. However, you must judge for yourself.

"Ian Duncan is practically a newcomer to the island," he went on. "His family were settled in Lochavon before the war, but his parents are dead and a brother emigrated to Australia, I believe. He knows the island, of course, and when he came out of the Navy, he joined the coastguard service and was posted here. Last year he was awarded the George Medal for saving the crew of a fishing yawl."

"Oh, he's quite a hero, then?" said Cecilie, unabashed. She stifled a yawn with her hand. "My, but I am sleepy. It must be the sea air."

She got gracefully to her feet and stood smiling down at her uncle, a mischievous light in her eyes.

"I think I'll go for a walk to blow away the cobwebs," she went on. "It won't be dark for another hour yet."

Mrs. Merryweather looked anxious.

"Are you sure it will be safe, Cecilie?" she asked.

"You needn't worry, my dear Agnes." Sir Hector replied. "Cecilie will be safer here than she would be going for a walk in London. All the same," he went on, turning to the girl, "I would stick to the paths if I were you. There are some dangerous potholes near the top of the Glen and you want to keep away from the edge of the headland—there's always the danger of being blown over. I would come with you, but I am expecting Donald Blair, my factor, to call."

"It's kind of you to offer, uncle dear," she said lightly, blowing him a kiss. "But I like exploring. One never quite knows what one may find lurking round a corner."

AFTER tea Hugh McLeod put on a leather coat and went out to bring in the sheep as he had promised.

Returning about seven and having washed and changed into flannels, he went out again.

"Where's your brother gone?" demanded her father, as Fiona came into the sitting room and placed a basket of socks to be darned on the table.

"I think he's gone down to the McAllister's, father," she replied, seating herself and drawing the oil lamp nearer. "He generally goes there on a Friday night."

"More fool he, then," the old man remarked sourly. " 'Tis a pity he hasna something better to do than to go hanging his hat up *there*. The McAllister girl is no better than she ought to be, in my opinion, flirting with every Tom, Dick an' Harry in the place."

"That's not fair, father," Fiona replied spiritedly. "Eileen can't help it if the men run after her. She certainly doesn't encourage them."

"Bah!" he said irascibly. "In my time a young man would ha' thought more of making a career for himself than in running after a flibberty-gibbet with more looks than brains."

Fiona smiled to herself. Her father's prejudices were not to be taken seriously for they were rooted in nothing more alarming than a year-old quarrel with the father of the girl in question.

Tom McAllister had put up a boundary fence, cutting off a corner of what Angus McLeod believed to be his land. Later it had been discovered that Mr. McAllister had done the correct thing, but Fiona's father still avowed that he had been swindled.

There fell a short silence, during which the old man sat forward in his chair, his pipe between his teeth, his frosty eyes fixed unwaveringly on the flames in the hearth.

Stealing a glance at him, Fiona wondered what thoughts went on behind the mask he presented to the world. Were his black moods, his frequent outbursts of temper, merely a defence against feeling, or were they what people said they were, the outcome of sheer bad temper?

The trouble was he was his own worst enemy, she thought sadly. She wanted to love him, to give him the affection that was his due, but her love was the one thing her father did not seem to want. Slavish obedience, yes. But nothing else.

She felt a little wave of pity go through her. He could not have always been like this; curt, unapproachable, walled-in. If he had been, her mother could never have loved him.

Yet there must always have been a hard streak in him, otherwise he could not have acted as he had done when Hugh had wanted to go to the engineering college.

Fiona had been only fourteen at the time but she could never remember without a shudder the scene that had followed the receipt of the letter from Hugh's headmaster saying that the boy should have a chance to go to the college.

Now the knock she had been expecting came at last.

"That will be Ian," she said, in response to her father's enquiring look. "He told Hugh he might call in on his way home."

Blushing a little she went out into the narrow hallway and paused for a second, breathing rather quickly. Then, with a little sigh at her own foolishness, she opened the outer door.

The young man who stood there was not unlike her brother in many ways. He had the same clear grey eyes, the same frank, open countenance. But in Ian's case he was wearing the double breasted pilot jacket and uniform cap of the coastguard service and on his breast were the medal ribbons he had won in Korea, as well as that of the George Medal.

"Good evening, Fiona," he said a little shyly. "Hugh told you I hoped to call, I suppose?"

"Yes, Ian. Come in, will you?" She opened the door wide and stood aside for him to pass.

It was four days since she and Ian had met and on that occasion they had come very near to quarrelling. The fact that he had called showed that he wanted to make his peace with her, but the cause of the trouble still remained.

"How is your father?" he asked politely, as he hung up his cap.

"I don't think he'll ever get better," she said in a low voice. "Hugh told you what the doctor said, I imagine."

"Yes." He nodded. "I'm sorry. It makes things very difficult for everybody."

For a moment Fiona had a frightening vision of the future, bleak and empty before her, then she turned to the living-room.

"He doesn't know, Ian," she said softly, her hand going out to the door knob. "Be careful, won't you?"

"Aye," he said briefly. "I'll be careful."

AN hour later Ian rose to go. For the greater part of that time Fiona's father had scarcely spoken, but had sat moodily in his big chair, staring at the fire.

To Ian's respectful greeting he had returned but the briefest of nods and had then resumed his former attitude, seemingly ignoring the two young people.

Yet Fiona knew from past experience that he had been listening to all they had said, his moody abstraction hiding a quiet watchfulness that seemed to dry up her thoughts.

Fiona got up as well, a slender figure in the subdued lamplight, her eyes shadowed She was wearing a Fair Isle jumper and a tartan skirt, with her hair combed back and fastened with a ribbon.

"I'll walk as far as the lane with you, Ian," she said. "Just wait a moment while I get a coat."

"I'll wait outside then," Ian replied, and turned to his host. "Good night, sir," he said respectfully.

The old man neither spoke nor raised his head. Ian might not have been there for all the notice he took of him.

For a moment the young man hesitated, his lips compressed; then, with a repressed sigh he turned and walked out of the room.

Fiona joined him a few seconds later.

"I wonder you dared to come as far as the door with me," he said bitterly, taking her arm. "Won't that old curmudgeon have something to say to you when you get back?"

"He might. I don't care." She sounded reckless and unhappy, and Ian could tell that the tears were not far from the surface.

He drew a deep breath.

"Why don't you stand up to him a bit more?" he demanded forcibly. "You're no longer a child, Fiona." His shoulders sagged. "Everyone on the island knows what he is. You——"

Fiona's eyes darkened.

"Oh, Ian, please—we've had all this out so often before," she begged, a break in her voice. "If you go on we'll end up by quarrelling again."

He kicked a stone out of his path, his face darkening.

"I don't want to quarrel with you, Fiona my dear," he said slowly. "But I'm only human—you can't expect me to stand by and see you treated as little better than a servant by that selfish old man."

"I know father is selfish, Ian," she murmured gravely. "But carping about it doesn't make things any better. It makes them worse. At least, it does for me. I try to remember that he's old and has had a hard life. It isn't his fault and now that he is ill——" She sighed.

They came to a turn in the path and saw the port of Carrig below them, a cluster of lights in the misty dark, the waters of the harbour reflecting those of the R.A.F. Air-Sea Rescue station on the north side.

Ian stopped and turned to face her.

"Look here, Fiona," he said, a dogged expression coming into his face. "You know how I feel about you, don't you? I love you and if I had my way, I'd marry you to-morrow. There's no one else, Fiona, nor ever likely to be. Well, then——"

"Ian, dear!" she broke in tremulously, putting a hand on his arm, her face pale in the weak moonlight. "Please don't go on. You know that I would be both proud and happy to become your wife but father would never consent—never!"

"We don't need his consent," he argued. "There isn't a court in the land would uphold him if we asked for permission to wed.

You're nineteen and that's old enough to know your own mind, and I've got a secure job with the promise of a coastguard's cottage if I *do* marry."

Fiona closed her eyes for a moment as temptation shook her.

Then she looked away, only the tightening of her fingers on his sleeve betraying her emotion.

"It's no use, Ian. I can't leave father. It—it's impossible—you must see that."

"I can only see that you seem bent on sacrificing both of us for a man who doesn't care one snap of the fingers for anyone but himself." he said doggedly. "One of these days——"

"Ian—please!" Fiona lifted her head, her eyes beseeching him. "You said you wouldn't quarrel with me again! It—it isn't going to help either of us to—to keep fighting about it. It only—hurts."

He shrugged.

"It's natural for a man to fight for the girl he loves," he said hopelessly. "But it's not you I'm fighting, Fiona, my dear. It's this idea you have that you owe your father a loyalty he dinna deserves. Why don't you let me tackle him about it? He can't eat me, can he?"

"What would be the use, dearest?" she sighed wearily. "He'd only forbid you the house and that would make things worse."

For a moment he hesitated, struggling with himself. Then, with a sigh, he put his hands on her shoulders, looking down into her face.

"All right, lassie," he said gently. "I reckon you've burden enough without me adding to it. But I'm no letting you go my dearest. I love you and that means—everything. I'll wait till Doomsday if need be."

Fiona lifted her face, her eyes misting.

"Oh, Ian dear," she whispered brokenly.

He bent his head and gently kissed her.

"Shall I see you at the kirk on Sunday?" he asked, on a more cheerful note.

"Yes, Ian. Unless something unforeseen happens," she replied.

"That's something, at any rate," he said bitterly. "I suppose, if I'm good I'll be allowed to walk back as far as the house with you!"

"If you promise not to go on fighting me I might even come for a walk with you on Sunday afternoon," she promised, with a flickering smile. "Now I must go Ian. He'll be furious if I stay out too long."

"All right " he said. "Don't worry about things too much—I've an idea they'll come right for us *somehow*. I don't know why—it's just a feeling I've got."

He stood hesitating, as if he might say more, and then he stooped and kissed her lightly on the brow.

"I'll wait here till you're safe back " he added. "Good night dearest."

She slipped from his arms and ran back to the cottage.

FICKLE HEART

IT was two weeks later and Cecilie Merryweather hummed a little tune to herself as she strode over the short, springy turf of the hillside. There was a stiff breeze blowing, so that she had to put her hand up to keep her beret on.

She was on her way to meet Hugh, who had promised to take her to see a puffin colony on the headland. The other day she had laughed at the sight of one of the quaint little birds walking sedately down to the water's edge and Hugh had said he would show her where they nested.

"Some birds—especially sea-birds—are more like human beings than any other creature," he had told her at the time. "You've only got to look at the penguins at the London Zoo to think of a lot of pompous old aldermen going into a council meeting. On the other hand, puffins make one think of the proverbial absent-minded professor—they've got that same vacant look about them."

"Do you know London?" Cecilie had asked.

"I went there when I was in the Navy," he told her. "I was stationed at Chatham for a time and I spent several of my short leaves looking around."

"Did you like it?" she had asked.

"I did and I didn't." he had answered. "London stands for something in our history, of course. You can't visit places like the Tower and Westminster Abbey without realising that. But I should hate to live there."

"You prefer Carrig?" she had asked.

He had smiled.

"At least one can breathe decent, clean air here," he had replied.

Cecilie was thinking of this as she hurried towards the place where Hugh had said he would meet her.

To a girl brought up as she had been, the island offered a new and interesting way of relieving the boredom which had marked so many of her former activities.

She had never met anyone quite like these dour islanders, with their almost haughty independence of spirit and their complete lack of class distinction. It was "Jamie this" and "Donald that" irrespective of whether the speaker was laird or a crofter.

She had agreed to accompany her parents mainly out of curiosity and partly because she had grown tired of Tony Hardcastle. Tony was the son of wealthy parents he had scarcely a care in the world and only one object in life—to have a good time!

Cecilie had enjoyed being taken about by him, but lately he had become so tiresome that she was glad of the excuse to shake the dust of London off her feet and make a change.

A gleam of humour came into her eyes as she thought of Hugh.

Cecilie was accustomed to having young men lay their hearts at her feet to be trampled on, that it never occurred to her that she was being cruel.

To lead men on in order to watch them squirm afterwards was second nature to the girl who was both self-indulgent and thoroughly spoilt.

In Hugh she had found someone different from any of the other men. Strong and good-looking, he had a blunt direct manner which thoroughly intrigued her. Perhaps it was because he made no attempt to flirt with her.

He was waiting for her at the appointed place and as she came up, he smiled casually. He was hatless, and wore a reefer sweater, like a fisherman.

"Good afternoon, Cecilie," he said politely. "I wondered if you had forgotten."

"Does that mean I'm late, Hugh?" Her blue eyes opened in wide innocence; she was half an hour late—deliberately so—for she had long since decided that it was good policy to keep a man waiting.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," he said, and added, pointing to the lip of the frowning headland. "Look, there's a puffin's nest in that hollow there away to the right. Shall we go and have a closer look?"

"Rather," the girl exclaimed interestedly.

When they reached the nest, the little inhabitants of the headland were completely unafraid of their presence and went about their business in their usual way.

"Funny creatures, aren't they?" she said, with a laugh. "You are quite right, Hugh. they *are* like human beings. It's rather like watching a village on market day."

Hugh nodded, pleased at her show of interest. He was normally a poor conversationalist—more likely to become tongue-tied in the presence of a girl like Cecilie than anything else.—but here he was on his own ground, and having a subject dear to his heart, talked more fluently than usual.

But like most things, even the habits of puffins began to pall on Cecilie and soon she began to show signs of becoming restless

Hugh was quick to notice this and suggested going down the steep path until they came to the shore on the other side.

"Isn't it dangerous to walk round the foot of the headland?" she asked. "Uncle Hector warned me against it when I said I was going out the other day."

"It's all right when the tide is out," Hugh replied. "But you have to allow plenty of time to get round before it comes in again."

"All right—it'll be fun," she said. "Then everything on Carrig is fun," she added.

"I'm glad you like it." he answered simply. As they came to a difficult spot he held out his hand. "Best let me help you over this."

Cecilie gave him her hand, and when they were at the bottom, curled her fingers enticingly into his, unleashing the full battery of her eyes and charm on him.

"I *do* like it, Hugh." she said smilingly. "Do you remember the day I arrived? When my uncle introduced us? I said then I was going to enjoy my stay. And I am."

Hugh looked down at the hand in his, not quite sure how it got there.

Behind them the cliffs rose sheer, and in front were wet sands with only the cry of the gulls for company.

Though the harbour was less than a mile away they might have been in a little world all of their own.

"Yes, Carrig's a grand place," Hugh said quietly. "But there's a world of difference between living here and just paying a visit. You'd soon be pining for London, I'm thinking."

Hidden laughter lurked deep in Cecilie's eyes.

"Oh, I don't know, Hugh," she said, with an affected little sigh. "London has its points, but it's all very artificial. This is real."

He looked past her, his eyes narrowing.

"Maybe you'd change your mind in the winter, when there's snow and ice and the wind from the north cuts like a knife."

"Girls like your sister don't seem to mind it."

"Fiona's different," he said. "She's been brought up to it—you haven't. Besides, why should you want to live on Carrig? Your people are wealthy—you can live where you like, have what you like. Fiona and I have no other choice."

"If you had a choice, though, would you still live here, Hugh?" she asked challengingly.

"Maybe, it's hard to say." He looked down at her hand again. "Do you know what I thought when I helped you out of that launch that day, Cecilie?"

She fluttered her eyelids.

"I couldn't guess. Was it something nice?" she asked.

"I thought how wonderfully soft your hand was," he said. "Like it is now."

"You have nice hands, too," she said applying pressure with her fingers. "So broad and strong. A girl could feel safe with hands like yours to protect her."

As she spoke she met his eyes and it was as if something electric had passed from one to the other.

Next moment he had taken her into his arms, bent back her head, and kissed her lips.

The girl made no protest.

HALF an hour later they reached a little footbridge near the harbour and here Cecilie stopped.

They had walked for a long while in

silence, following Hugh's last remark after he had kissed her.

When she spoke now her voice was cool.

"Do be sensible, Hugh," she begged. "Just because I've allowed you to kiss me it doesn't mean that I'm in love with you. And you are not with me, if it comes to that."

"You mean—you were just flirting with with me?" His voice had a sharp edge to it.

Cecilie sighed impatiently.

"You shouldn't take that kind of thing so seriously, Hugh," she said. "It was just a bit of harmless fun."

"Fun! It may have been for you, but it wasn't to me," he said, passing his hand rather wearily across his forehead. "I don't understand you at all, Cecilie. I thought you liked me, now it seems you have only been using me to pass the time."

"I do like you, Hugh, I think you're nice," she said. "But I'm certainly not in love with you. I would never have allowed you to kiss me had I known you would jump to such wrong conclusions." She gave a little tinkling laugh. "In any case, aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, and what's that?" he asked, baffled.

"You're Hugh McLeod, the son of a crofter," she said cruelly. "You don't really think I'd be content to become a crofter's wife—even in the very unlikely event of my ever falling in love with you, surely?"

"I could leave Carrig and get work on the mainland," he said heavily.

Cecilie drew in her breath sharply, beginning to feel afraid. She had never dreamed that her light-heartedly begun flirtation would lead to this. But it was not the first time that she had been in such a position.

"Don't let's spoil things Hugh, dear," she wheedled, laying a soft hand on his arm. "I do like you very much and want us to be friends, but if you are going to be a silly boy I shall have to go away!"

He looked at her in silence for a while, then—

"I see," he said grimly. "Then there's nothing more to be said. Shall we go?"

They walked past the R.A.F. Air-Sea-Rescue station and Cecille was waved to by one of the crew of the speed launches moored there.

She waved back, but Hugh only scowled, unable to understand how she could revert to normal so easily after what had happened.

He glanced round the empty harbour.

"We've come the long way round, and it's a fair walk back to the Glen," he said. "Maybe I'd best telephone to ask Sir Hector to send down the car for you."

"Isn't that your sister over there?" Cecille exclaimed, pointing. "She has just driven up to the post office."

"Aye, that's Fiona. I didn't know she was coming into town to-day," Hugh answered. "It's just as well, she can drive us back. I've got work to do."

Cecilie gave him a darting glance from beneath her long lashes.

Plainly she was in disgrace, she thought amusedly. Oh well, he would soon get over it. In twenty-four hours he would be ready to eat humble pie, she reflected.

"Who's the young man talking to her?" she enquired lightly as they hurried towards the corner where Fiona had left the old car.

"Ian Duncan—he wants to marry her," replied Hugh, forcing himself to be polite.

Cecilie smiled to herself.

"Why doesn't he, then?"

"Fiona can't leave father," he said. "He's very nearly an invalid."

"I see," she said, unable to understand this sort of thing.

She eyed Ian Duncan with interest as she came up, remembering what her uncle had said about him.

"Good afternoon, everybody!" she cried gaily, as Fiona turned. "You must have second sight, or how did you know that Hugh and I wanted a lift, Fiona?"

"I didn't," Fiona replied smilingly.

She glanced from Cecilie to Hugh, and knowing her brother, drew her own conclusions from his sullen expression.

The familiar use of her Christian name did not pass unnoticed, either. The three previous occasions upon which she and Cecilie had met, she had been addressed formally as Miss McLeod.

"I don't think you and Miss Merryweather have met, Ian," she remarked turning to the young man. "Miss Merryweather—Mr. Duncan."

"How do you do?" said Cecilie, laying her hand in his and favouring him with her most dazzling smile. "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Duncan. My uncle said you are the local hero."

Ian went a dull red and looked very uncomfortable.

"I just do my job, Miss Merryweather, he said modestly.

"I see, like most heroes, you like to blush unseen," she cooed, putting on such a blatant expression of respectful hero-worship that Fiona wanted to shake her.

"I think we'll have to be going," she said abruptly. "We can drop you off at Sir Hector's place if that suits you, Miss Merryweather?"

"Thank you, Fiona," Cecilie responded. With another flashing smile, she turned to Ian. "You must show me over the coast-guard station one of these days. Mr. Duncan," she went on. "I simply *adore* learning about such places."

"It will be a pleasure, Miss Merryweather," Ian replied, with a slight bow. "You have only to let Fiona know when you would like to come and I'll arrange it."

"That'll be lovely," she enthused.

Fiona got into the car and started the engine, leaving Cecilie no option but to follow. Hugh climbed over the tailboard at the back.

Ian stepped up to where Fiona sat at the wheel.

"May I see you this evening, Fiona?" he asked, lowering his voice. "I come off duty at seven."

"If you like," she replied indifferently, letting in the clutch.

The car shot forward, leaving Ian standing gazing after it, a puzzled expression in his eyes. Something had told him that Fiona was annoyed about something, although she had been all right until Cecilie had come on the scene.

EILEEN McALLISTER had vivid red-hair and a fiery temper. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes aflame, she looked across the kitchen to where Hugh stood by the window, a sheepish expression on his face.

"You've a nerve, I'll say that much for you, Hugh McLeod!" she exclaimed, her voice rising with scorn. "Come to the village social with you indeed! Can you give me one good reason why I should?"

"If it comes to that I can give you more than one, Eileen," he answered sullenly. "You've always come with me and——"

"That's not a reason," she interrupted him, tossing her head. "In any case, don't bother, I'm not coming with you. If you're hard up for a partner, why don't you ask your lady love from the big house? No doot she'll be flattered, you big, strong, silent man, you!"

Hugh went red and looked very uncomfortable. He was beginning to think that he had made a fool of himself—or been made a fool of.

Evidently there had been some talk going on and it had reached the girl's ears.

"Look here, Eileen. I came here this evening——"

"With your tail between your legs like a whipped cur," she interrupted sarcastically. "Do you think I'm blind as well as daft, Hugh McLeod? Who was it took your precious Cecilie sailing the other day? And who was it went walking with her along the headland? Now that she's running after Ian Duncan I suppose ye think ye've only to whistle an' I'll come back to ye? Well, I won't!"

"What harm was there in taking a girl sailing?" he demanded angrily, going redder. "She's a visitor, isn't she?"

"There's visitors and visitors," Eileen retorted, with a scornful toss of her head. "It's no use trying to pull the wool over my eyes, Hugh. Why, the whole island's laughing at ye for the softie ye are."

"They can laugh," he answered glumly. "I still say there's no harm in being civil to a visitor. If I like to take someone sailing that's my affair."

"All right!" Eileen crumpled up the tablecloth she had been holding and dropped it in the centre of the table. "Answer me this one question, then! Have you kissed her?"

"I——" Hugh's mouth opened and closed and his voice trailed off into silence.

Before he could find his voice Eileen had turned away.

"I can see you have," she said, a note of disgust coming into her voice. "Don't bother to deny it. I guessed, anyway. What fools men are, to be sure."

She lifted a corner of her apron to her face, fighting back the tears. Hugh stared irresolutely at her for a moment, then took a stride forward and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Eileen," he said humbly, trying to turn her round. "Eileen dearest, listen to me, please! I——"

"Oh, go away! Go away, do you hear?" She stamped her foot in fury. "Go away! I hate the sight of you!"

"Oh no you don't," he said, drawing a deep breath. He gripped her tightly. "It strikes me I've been a fool in more ways than one, but that doesn't mean I've got to go on being one. It's you I love, Eileen, not Miss Merryweather. for a' her fine ways. I've loved you ever since you were a spindle-shanked carroty-top at the infants' school in the High Street, only I hadn't the sense to know it. Will ye no give me anither chance, Eileen dear?" he added pleadingly.

Slowly she raised her head, her eyes searching his face and for a while there was a silence in the big kitchen. Then—

"Is that true, Hugh?" she asked quietly. "Or are you just saying that because you feel sorry for me?"

"It's as true as I stand here," he said solemnly. "I've no excuse to offer you, my dearest—I was a softie and I'm no denying it. I can't explain what came over me—it was just one of those things. Say ye forgive me?" he added coaxingly.

There was another silence, not so long this time. Then—

"So I was a spindle-shanked carroty-top, was I?" she said, her anger pretended. "Well, I won't tell you what you were, you—gowk! And if ever you kiss another girl I—I'll scratch her eyes out and yours!"

Hugh gave a shout and snatched her to him, his eyes glowing.

"You're the only girl for me," he declared masterfully. Then he paused, a note of wonderment creeping into his voice. "Do

you know I've never kissed you?"

"Well," she said invitingly, "what are you waiting for?"

ON the night of the social, Fiona left her father's supper all ready for him, with the teapot warming on the hearth.

Ian was to call for her at half-past-seven, but as she looked around to make certain she had forgotten nothing, she felt anything but in a mood for gaiety.

Yet, the annual social held in the Mission Hall was an event eagerly looked forward to by nearly all the islanders. The proceeds of the sale of tickets went to help swell the kirk funds, and there was no lack of volunteers to help decorate the hall and provide refreshments.

If the weather was kind, a party would come over from Lochavon, and music was provided by a radiogram sent down from the laird's house. There would be games and singing and dancing and usually Fiona enjoyed herself as much as anyone.

But to-night the savour had gone out of it all for her. Mr. and Mrs. Merryweather had returned to London the previous week but no one had been surprised when Cecilie had announced her intention of staying on.

As she thought of all that had happened during the past ten days Fiona had a feeling that something had to break soon. She only hoped it would not be at the social.

It was quite bad enough having Ian dance attendance on the fair Cecilie as he was doing, without the added humiliation of being publicly outshone by her well-dressed rival.

Eileen McAllister had summed up the situation in her usual forthright manner when she and Fiona had discussed the other girl.

"She's a cat," she had declared contemptuously. "She's only happy when she's got her claws into someone so that she can watch them squirm. She would have made Hugh suffer if he hadn't come to his senses in time—now it's Ian. When she's had her fun she'll drop him like she dropped Hugh, you mark my words."

Well, if Ian fell a victim to the other girl's charms it was her own fault, Fiona supposed drearily. In not accepting his offer of marriage she had done what was needed to drive him into another woman's arms.

For months past she had watched with aching heart the bitterness eating into his mind, watched him beating down his longing, his eagerness, his love. Soon, she told herself, the fine edge to his feelings would become blunted and dulled and he would turn away from her for good.

If only it did not mean that he was going to be hurt as Cecilie Merryweather would surely hurt him in the end.

Cecilie would be at the social, of course. Sir Hector always came and danced with all the girls. It was most unlikely, therefore, that his niece would miss the opportunity of queening it over them all, Fiona thought bitterly.

There came a knock at the door and she opened it to find Ian outside.

He looked nice in a blue serge suit, with a white shirt and black tie.

As she greeted him, Fiona was conscious of a little pang that pierced her heart like a sword thrust. It had been an understood thing that Ian would take her to the social, just as he had done the previous year, so that the question had barely arisen. But she could not help wondering if he would not have preferred to be calling for Cecilie!

"I'm nearly ready," she said. "I'd better just tell father we're going. He's over at the barn."

She went through into the kitchen and he heard her voice calling out to her father that she was leaving.

Then she came back and handed him her coat.

"You look nice enough to eat," Ian said, with one of his deep chuckles, as he helped her on with the coat.

Fiona smiled faintly. She was wearing a dress she had made herself from some green material which she had bought in Lochavon.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" she asked.

"Call it what you like," he shrugged, taking her arm. "But there won't be a girl in the hall to hold a candle to you to-night, I'm thinking."

"Oh, I daresay you'll say that to every girl you dance with," she returned, assuming a lightness she was far from feeling. "But we'd better hurry—Hugh is going to wait for us at the Halfway Bridge. He's taken the car to fetch Eileen."

The Mission Hall looked very festive and there was quite a crowd already assembled when they arrived. The radiogram was playing a Highland reel and several couples had taken the floor.

"I haven't noticed dear Miss Merryweather," remarked Eileen scornfully, when she and Fiona were taking off their coats in the cloak room. She went to the mirror and dabbed powder on her cheeks. "I suppose she'll come later with her uncle so that she can 'Make an Entrance'. Somebody will have to hold me back or I'll scratch her."

Fiona smiled gently.

"You don't have to worry now," she said. "Hugh has learnt his lesson, I think. You could have him eating out of your hand if you wanted to."

"I don't want that, thank you," Eileen retorted, with a wisdom beyond her years. "A man who plays doormat to a woman is apt to get trodden on. I want to respect the man I marry."

"It seems that men are all the same," said Fiona, with a faint curl of her lips. "But I must say I credited Ian with more sense than to fall for a girl like Cecilie Merryweather. Anyone with half an eye can see that she is only leading him on."

"Perhaps he hasn't—you never know," said Eileen trying to be kind. "Just wait and see what happens, Fiona, maybe he'll come running back to have his broken heart mended."

"In that case he can mend it himself," said Fiona shortly. "If he thinks I am going to play second fiddle to Cecilie Merryweather he's very much mistaken."

Yet deep in her heart she knew she was being unfair. For had she been prepared to give Ian the answer he sought, all this might never have happened.

As it was he was within his rights to point out that he owed her no loyalty, for she had made it abundantly clear that there could be no question of marriage, or even engagement, while she was needed at home.

The truth was, she had to admit, one could not have one's cake and eat it, too. She could not expect Ian to wait indefinitely, without even hope to encourage him, so he was not to blame if he looked for happiness elsewhere.

THE evening went with a swing right from the start.

Fiona danced with Ian and Hugh, then she was claimed by various other young men leaving Ian free to dance with Cecilie and Eileen.

During an interval, in which a visitor from Lochavon sang some folk songs, Fiona found herself one of a group consisting of Eileen, Hugh, Ian, Cecilie Merryweather and Sir Hector Legh.

As the applause died away and another dance record was put on the radiogram, Sir Hector turned to Fiona.

"Come along, my dear," he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Let us show these young people how a schottische *should* be danced!"

Sir Hector, despite his sixty-odd years, was a handsome, upstanding figure in his kilt and velvet tunic, and together they made a striking couple as they took the floor. Cecilie watched them go with narrowed eyes.

"I'm afraid my education has been sadly neglected," she said, with an affected laugh. "I don't even know what a schottische *is*, much less how to dance one."

"It's never too late to learn," said Eileen waspishly, as she glided on to the floor in Hugh's arms. "Why not get Ian to teach you? I'm sure he'd just love to."

Hugh had not looked forward to the evening with any pleasure, not wishing to meet Cecilie again. For the fact that a girl could deliberately lead a man on in order to appease some quirk of vanity in her make-up was enough to condemn her in his eyes. Now that she had set out to do the same thing to Ian made Hugh dislike her all the more.

"That girl makes me weary," Eileen said angrily, only half her mind on the dance. "What you men see in her I can't for the life of me imagine! She's nothing more than a dressed up doll."

"All right, my dear," said Hugh huffily. "I know I made a fool of myself, so you needn't rub it in."

Eileen tossed her head with indignation as across the width of the floor, she saw Ian pick up Cecilie's coat and lay it across her shoulders. Next moment they had disappeared through the curtained doorway on to the terrace outside.

When the dance ended. Sir Hector led Fiona back to where Hugh and Eileen were standing.

"That was delightful, Fiona," he said, bowing over her hand.

Fiona smiled and murmured something in reply, but Eileen saw that her gaze had gone round the room and knew that she was looking for Ian. She bit her lip, tempted to tell her that she would find him in the grounds with Cecilie.

Not that it would do much good, she then reflected angrily. Fiona was far too proud to wear her heart on her sleeve.

Just then there was a stir from the other end of the hall and the minister appeared on the platform and raised his hand for silence. He was about to make his usual speech, thanking all those who had helped to make the evening a success.

Fiona slipped away without being noticed. Someone would be bound to ask where Ian was the moment the minister concluded his speech and she did not want to be there when they did.

Her head ached and she had a sudden longing for the darkness outside, the touch of the cool wind on her brow.

She pushed the curtain aside over the doorway and once outside ran down the steps on to the lawn. There was a space between the front of the hall and the road and at the side the grass sloped downwards to where half a dozen Scots pines reared themselves against the night sky.

Here she sat on a bench and allowed the darkness and the sea breeze to lull her to calmness.

She found that she was able to think of Cecilie quite dispassionately, without jealousy. The other girl was more to be pitied than blamed, she decided. Evidently she just could not help leading men on to make love to her. It was as though she was desperately seeking something and, failing

to find it, must go on seeking.

Perhaps that was how it all started, she thought. Men of Ian's and Hugh's type began by being sorry for her. Or was it just the lure of a pretty face, an allure that offered a challenge to their manhood?

A burst of hand clapping sounded from the hall. That meant that the minister had finished his speech and she supposed she ought to go back, to pretend to a gaiety she was far from feeling.

How long she sat there she could not have said, but just as she was beginning to feel chilled there came footsteps on the path below her, followed by the sound of Cecilie's voice.

Fiona started up and then sat back again. In that split second of indecision she had lost her chance of moving out of earshot. If she moved now they would see and hear her.

The place where she sat was in dense shadow, but the moonlight streamed in past the trees to whiten the space which separated her from the hall. It would be impossible to cross it without being seen.

Cecilie's voice reached her, soft and appealing.

"What a strange person you are, Ian," she said. "Sometimes you behave as if you were frightened of me! I won't explode, you know!"

They were in full view by now. Cecilie had turned to look at Ian, so that her back was towards Fiona. In the moonlight the latter could see Ian's face quite plainly. It wore an expression she had never seen before. There was almost a glazed look in his eyes, as if he were hypnotized and when he spoke he sounded spent, like a man who has run far and fast.

"Why should you say that I am frightened of you, Cecilie?" Fiona heard him ask.

She felt the blood drumming in her temples and had to clench her fists to keep from getting up and rushing away. Only the knowledge that Ian would never be able to forget the humiliation of knowing he had been seen enabled her to remain where she was.

Cecilie laughed and moved closer to him.

"It is just that you are," she said teasingly. "If you are not, then why don't you do want you want to do?"

"And what is it you think I want to do?" He dug his hands into his pockets, and Fiona guessed that his fists were clenched, too.

"Kiss me, of course," Cecilie replied, in a soft, slurring voice. "You do, don't you, Ian . . . darling?"

There was a breathless pause. Fiona clenched her fists tighter. She wanted to cry out, for she knew only too well what was going to happen. But strangely enough, she still did not feel jealous; only desperately unhappy and faintly sick.

Then, as if tired of waiting, eager only to make her victory complete, Cecilie put up her hands and twined them round Ian's neck, drawing his head down until their faces were nearly touching.

To Fiona it was like being in a nightmare.

"Kiss me!" Cecilie breathed, pressing closer to him. "Oh, Ian darling, don't you know I have been waiting for this moment?"

Ian brought his arms up as if there were weights attached to them, his fingers closing over the girl's wrists. Then firmly and deliberately he removed her hands from around his neck.

"I think," he said, through clenched teeth, "that you are making a mistake, my dear Cecilie. I am sure there must be many men who would like to kiss you—but I don't happen to be one of them."

She drew back as if he had slapped her face, staring at him as if he were some strange animal she had never met before.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded almost shrilly. "What's in a little kiss, anyway?"

"Quite a lot," Ian said, standing back from her. "At least, there is when one happens to be in love with somebody else."

Cecilie laughed; it was an ugly sound.

"You—you *milksop*!" she said contemptuously. "How could I ever have thought you were a man!"

With that she turned and left him, hurrying back to the hall, her cheeks aflame and fury in her heart.

Fiona must have made a little movement, for Ian turned instantly and said:

"Who's there?"

There was a little pause. Then—

"Me," Fiona replied, in a small, shaky voice.

He took two strides towards her.

"Fiona!" he gasped. "Have—have you been there all the time?"

"Yes." She spoke through trembling lips. "I was here when you came. I couldn't go away—you would have heard me."

"So you saw what happened?"

"Yes," she said flatly. She was standing now, slim and straight, a new look in her eyes. "*Why* didn't you kiss her, Ian?"

He said roughly—

"Well, you heard me tell Cecilie, didn't you? It happens to be the truth."

"You mean, you really didn't want to?" she asked in tones of wonder.

"That's what I said," he laughed shortly. "What do you think I am?"

"Yet, this last fortnight—you've seemed—oh, it's hard to explain, only—well—people have talked," Fiona faltered, out of her depth.

"I know they've talked." He sounded irritable and frustrated. "I don't expect you to understand, but the kind of situations a girl like Cecilie can engineer aren't easy for a chap to handle. Apart from all that she—well—casts a sort of spell over one. As far as I'm concerned, though, it didn't work."

Fiona drew in her breath sharply. She did not know how she felt, except that she was wildly, gloriously happy.

She put a hand on his arm, almost afraid to touch him.

"I'm ever so sorry, Ian," she murmured brokenly. "Please forgive me. I thought—I mean——" She made an empty gesture.

Some men would have taken her in their arms and kissed her then, telling her not to bother her head about things she did not understand.

But, from Ian Duncan's viewpoint, anything like that would have been an anti-climax. Apart from that he was still suffering from reaction after a struggle with forces that had come near to undermining his self-respect, so that all he wanted was a means of returning to normality by the shortest possible route.

He smiled down at her, therefore, and tucked her hand under his arm.

"May I have the next dance, Fiona dear?" he asked smilingly.

PERILOUS JOURNEY

THE very last person Fiona expected to call on her the following day was Cecilie Merryweather.

She had just washed up the dinner things, and Hugh had gone back to work when there came a knock on the back door. When she opened it there stood the younger girl.

"May I come in?" Cecille asked.

"Of course." Fiona opened the kitchen door wide. "Won't you sit down?" she added, pulling forward a chair. "I would ask you into the sitting-room but father always has a nap after dinner."

"Oh, it's quite all right," Cecilie replied, sinking into the chair. "As a matter of fact I hoped I would find you here—that's why I didn't come to the front door."

She drew a pair of gloves through her fingers and avoided Fiona's gaze for a moment.

Then she looked up.

"I suppose you're wondering why I have come?" she asked, and without waiting for a reply went on: "The *Island Queen* isn't due until next Wednesday, so I wondered if you could take me across to the Mainland this evening? I—I have to get to London as soon as I can."

Fiona hesitated.

"I was across there the day before yesterday," she said slowly. "My next trip isn't until Saturday—that's the day after to-morrow. Can't you wait until then, Miss Merryweather?"

"No," replied the other girl impatiently. "I must go to-day—to-night. There's a train for Glasgow I can get which leaves Lochavon at nine-thirty, so there's plenty of time for you to arrange things."

"It's rather difficult," said Fiona slowly. "You see, my ordinary trips are made in daylight, so that I am back before nightfall. I have to think of my father, you see—there would be no one to get his supper."

"If it's the question of money," said Cecilie rudely, "I would pay whatever you asked."

"No, it's not a question of money," replied Fiona, trying not to sound affronted. "But couldn't you get someone else to take you? Your uncle has a launch."

"My uncle's launch is out of commission," said Cecilie. "And I'm certainly not inclined to go down to the harbour and beg one of the fishermen to take me!"

"I might get Alec Finlay to take you," said Fiona, wrinkling her brows in thought. "But I would have to ask my father whether he will allow the launch to be used, though. I'm almost sure he will say no."

"Evidently I have wasted my time, then," said Cecilie, getting up, a slight flush of anger in her pale cheeks. She raked Fiona with a glance that was distinctly hostile. "I should have thought that you would have been glad of the chance to get rid of me," she added insolently.

It was Fiona's turn to look angry.

"It is of no interest to me whether you go or stay, Miss Merryweather," she said, with deceptive quiet. "I can't imagine why you should think otherwise."

"Can't you?" Cecilie laughed. She paused a moment her mouth crumpled like that of a petulant child; then suddenly and without warning she sank into the chair again and broke down.

For a moment Fiona did not know what to do. Cecille was weeping as she had never seen anyone weep before.

She went swiftly to the stricken girl's side and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Please don't cry like that, Miss Merryweather," she begged. "I'm sorry to have to disappoint you but I daresay something can be arranged. I had no idea you were so desperate to leave."

She spoke as she would have done to a child, at the same time wondering why on earth, if the matter was as urgent as all that, Cecilie had not consulted Sir Hector. There was some mystery here, for it was obvious that the girl had not burst into tears merely because she had been disappointed.

Cecilie looked up at length, drawing a deep, shuddering breath.

"I'm sorry," she said, in a low voice. "I—I'm not given to that sort of thing as a rule. But—you don't *know* how important it is for me to leave this place to-night. I suppose

I had counted on you, though Heaven knows why."

Her lips trembled and she broke off abruptly, burying her face in her hands.

"Listen," said Fiona with practical sympathy. "I'll put on the kettle and make a pot of tea. You'll feel better after that and then, if you want to, you can tell me all about it."

Cecilie looked at her questioningly. "You—you are very kind," she murmured, a gentler tone in her voice.

For a while neither spoke as Fiona set about making tea, but just after Cecilie had sipped hers, she looked up suddenly.

"I don't know why you should bother with me," she said, a break in her voice. "I wonder you don't hate me."

"If you mean trying to get Ian to kiss you, I don't hate you at all," said Fiona calmly. "I'm just sorry for you."

"Do you mean—he told you?" The colour swept into Cecilie's face.

"No, I happened to be there," said Fiona.

"I—I don't understand. How could you be there?" Cecilie demanded in a strangled voice. The hand holding her cup trembled.

Fiona explained in a few words.

Cecilie laughed mirthlessly as she ended.

"How you must despise me!" she said, with a curl of her lips. She sighed. "Anyway, you can't despise me any more than I despise myself."

Fiona looked steadily at her, wondering where all this was leading.

"Why should I despise you?" she asked. "As you said at the time, what's in a kiss? I have no doubt that your code of principles allows for that kind of thing. Mine doesn't, as it happens, but that doesn't give me the right to judge."

Cecilie stared down at the floor.

"I don't know anything about codes or principles," she said, with a kind of disdainful weariness. "It's been the same ever since I left school. It seems I can't help wanting men to fall for me. At least, I suppose I could help it but I got some kind of a kick out of it. My old Nannie used to take me to task about it. She always said that the day would come when I would be the one to do the falling and that when that happened, all the hurts I had inflicted upon others would come back to me a hundredfold; I used to laugh at her then but now it has happened."

Fiona felt suddenly faint.

"You—you mean—you've fallen—in love?" she gasped.

"Yes," said Cecilie. She lifted her head, her eyes bleak. "Funny, isn't it? The biter bit and all that kind of thing. Now do you understand why I've got to get away from here?"

"Not quite," said Fiona, her mouth dry. She hesitated a moment, then asked the question she knew she must ask. "I—I suppose you mean Ian?"

Cecilie stared.

"Ian? Good heavens, no! I mean Hugh."

For a moment Fiona was too shaken to speak.

Then—

"But—but I don't understand," she said bewilderedly. "I—you and Hugh—oh no!"

Cecilie sighed.

"I don't expect you to understand," she said. "I don't understand myself. But Hugh's different from all the others. I realised pretty soon that I was heading for trouble, for he isn't the sort who can be trifled with. I started to play around with Ian instead, though I wasn't interested in him in the same way. I didn't know *why*, though, until last night." She laughed shortly. "It's never very pleasant to see yourself as you really are, especially in a man's eyes."

"If—if you feel like this about my brother why was it you tried to make Ian kiss you?" asked Fiona, her head spinning. "I mean, it doesn't make sense."

"Not to you, perhaps," said Cecilie quietly. She put down her cup and stood up. "But from my point of view it was necessary to do something. My pride was in rags and I wanted to get Hugh out of my system."

"I see," said Fiona, not seeing at all. She had never been touched by that kind of thing, so that she felt as if she had come into contact with something rather horrid.

She glanced at the clock. Then—

"Do you still want to get to Lochavon to-night?"

"Yes." Cecille nodded. "I must get away. Hugh will marry that red-headed girl he was with last night and be perfectly happy. It would be a pity to spoil all that, wouldn't it?" she added bitterly.

Fiona nodded and looked away. Evidently Hugh's infatuation had gone deeper than either she or Eileen had realised.

That being the case, his emotions might still be in a state of flux. Cecilie had hinted as plainly as if she had uttered the words, that she could take Hugh back from Eileen if she liked to try. It was something too great to risk happening again.

"I think father is awake," Fiona said, picking up the teapot. "I'll just take him a cup of tea and ask him if I can have the launch. I suppose your uncle knows you are going?"

"Yes. He doesn't know why, of course," said the other. "I told him several days ago I would probably be going back after the social."

Five minutes later Fiona returned.

"I can have the launch," she said. "Can you be down at the quay by five?"

"Yes." said Cecilie briefly. She made an abrupt little movement before turning away. "It's an awful pity, really. If—if all this hadn't happened I believe we could have been friends."

Fiona's throat contracted painfully and she felt tears come to her eyes.

"I'm sorry, too," she said gently. "You see, I didn't realise——" She faltered and stopped before Cecilie's crooked smile.

"Don't worry." she said. "I'll get back into the straight—somehow." She picked up her gloves and turned again to Fiona. "I know it's a funny thing to ask you," she went on quietly, "but—after I've gone—I mean, to-morrow, perhaps—will you say Good-bye to Hugh for me?" I'd like to remember him like that."

Fiona nodded.

"Of course, my dear," she said tremulously.

THEY had landed their passenger in time to catch her train to Glasgow. Now the launch was on its way back in almost pitch darkness.

Behind the lights of Lochavon became nebulous and misty, while in front the channel opened to the black formlessness of sea and sky, relieved only by the whitecaps which hissed past them.

Alec Finlay made his way aft from coiling down the mooring lines and turned up the collar of his duffle coat.

"There's more than a lop on noo," he observed, looking seawards. "Shall I gie ye a spell at the wheel, Miss Fiona?"

"No, thanks, Alec. You keep an eye on the motor," she replied, her slim hands gripping the spokes of the steering wheel. "It mustn't let us down to-night."

Standing by the engine, listening to its steady beat, Alec peered into the darkness, trying to pick up the lights of Carrig Point. He knew the waters around the island and he was very uneasy. With every moment that passed the sea was getting rougher, the wind stronger.

"There's the light noo, Miss Fiona," he shouted, turning half round. "It's bearing aboot twa points to starboard."

Fiona narrowed her eyes and stared into the darkness.

Just then a much larger wave than before thumped against the bows of the launch and a shower of stinging spray cascaded the length of the hull.

"Yes, I can see it," she said, wiping the water from her eyes.

Another wave broke over the bows, then another.

"We'll need to slow down—she's beginning to ship water, Alec!" she shouted presently.

"Aye, aye, Miss Fiona."

He bent over the casing, adjusting the throttle. The beat of the motor slowed slightly and the motion of the launch became a trifle easier.

Next moment the engine ceased altogether!

Fiona spun the wheel sharply to bring the launch up into the wind. In a trice Alec was on his knees, the engine casing open, his young face set and anxious in the dim light from the inspection lamp he snapped on.

Fiona concentrated on her task of preventing the launch from falling into the trough of the waves, leaving Alec to do what he could to start the motor again. She knew better than to worry him with questions.

A minute passed—two! The launch rose sluggishly to the waves and fell sickeningly into the troughs. The wheel felt slack and useless now there was no steerage way. Already the light on Carrig Point was much farther north than it had been. They were drifting fast to the south—and rocks!

"The main bearing's gone!" Alec shouted, his face pale. "She's completely seized up!"

Fiona bit her lip. They were at the mercy of wind and tide, drifting towards rocks to the south of the island. Meantime they were liable to be swamped at any moment.

"Best send up a distress signal," she shouted, striving for calmness. "And put on your life jacket."

"Aye, aye," said Alec grimly.

He went to the locker in the stern and brought out a yellow box containing half a dozen rockets—signals of distress!

WHEN the first rocket went up Ian Duncan was on duty in the watchroom at the coastguard station, writing up the log. A colleague was standing at the wide view window, a pair of night glasses to his eyes.

Suddenly he lowered them and turned to Ian.

"Look! There's a distress signal," he said. "Are there any local boats out to-night, do you know?"

"Not that I know of," Ian replied, and picked up another pair of glasses from the table. "Sure it was a distress signal, Sandy?"

"Yes! Look, there's another."

A flash of crimson shot into the darkness.

Ian fixed the position in his mind and went to the chart.

"Bearing south-sou-west two points," he said. "Whoever it is they are getting dangerously near Black Rocks." He jumped to the door. "Better call up the Lochavon lifeboat while I get on to the R.A.F."

He went into the next room to telephone while Sandy transmitted a signal in Morse code to the coastguard station on the other side of the channel.

When Ian returned his face was set grimly.

"It must be the *Kittiwake*," he said. "The duty sergeant says he saw her leaving harbour soon after five making for the mainland. They are going out—and I'm going with them! Any word from Lochavon?"

"Aye," said Sandy. "They've called out the lifeboat."

Ian ran out of the door and plunged down the path to the harbour.

When he reached the jetty a fast R.A.F Rescue boat was waiting to cast off, it's powerful engines throbbing

Barely had he jumped on board than the sergeant in command shouted an order. Mooring lines were slipped and a bell clanged somewhere deep in the streamlined hull as they headed for the open sea.

FIONA was soaked to the skin. Alec had fired off the last of the rockets, the light at Carrig Point was now out of sight. and the *Kittiwake* was settling low in the water.

Into her ears came the dull thunder of heavy seas breaking on the dreaded Black Rocks!

Both she and Alec could swim, but no swimmer could hope to survive for more than a few minutes in the maelstrom all around them. If they were not mercifully drowned. the rocks would batter the life from their frail bodies before giving them back to the sea.

"*And the sea shall give up its dead*——"

But somehow she did not feel afraid—just worried.

She thought of Ian and Cecilie, of Hugh and Eileen, lastly, of her father.

Would he grieve? she wondered. In the last few days he seemed to have softened a little so that she had wondered what had brought about the change.

Was it due to the fact that Hugh had defied him over the question of his engagement to Eileen?

The outcome of that isolated act of rebellion had not been the least strange happening of the past few weeks. Not only had her father given in but he had actually been quite gracious to Eileen when she had come up to the house.

Then suddenly she knew that she did not want to die! She wanted to live and she wanted Ian—

"Hark, Miss Fiona! Can you hear anything?"

Alec's voice crashed into her thoughts. She lifted a dazed face, staring at him, a mute question in her eyes.

"Listen!" he urged, a note of urgency in his voice. "I think—yes, I can hear it plain noo!"

Fiona got up, holding on to the steering wheel to steady herself. She could hear the sound which had excited him now: a deep, pulsating throb which seemed to come nearer and nearer, only to become faint again, as if the boat which made it was casting round in wide circles.

"It's the R.A.F. Rescue launch, I think," she called, her lips stiff.

Alec nodded. He was busy ramming some oil-soaked cotton waste into a square tin that had contained biscuits. Fiona saw the flash of his lighter and then a lurid glow penetrated the darkness as the oil-soaked material caught fire.

"They'll see that a mile off," he cried pushing the improvised flare into an empty space with the toe of his sea-boot.

Seconds later a searchlight stabbed the darkness, much nearer than Fiona had thought it would be.

Then in a flurry of foam and spray she saw the high, flared bows of the rescue launch as it came round in a wide circle to bring them under its lee and heard the engine room bell clang as the screws churned the sea into froth.

Someone threw a line, which Alec caught, and then she was being lifted to safety by strong arms and Ian's voice was telling her that everything was all right.

IT was nearly a week since the R.A.F. launch had towed the disabled *Kittiwake* into Carrig Harbour where, it seemed, half the population of the island had gathered to see them come in.

Ian had carried her ashore, her lips blue with cold, her limbs weak from strain, to find that not only was Sir Hector present, but that her father was there as well. With Hugh and Eileen they had been waiting with the others, praying that a miracle would happen.

Out of the confused medley of impressions she retained of that time, there were some that remained distinct and clear cut, like pictures on a screen seen against a blurred background.

Perhaps the most vivid was her father's: "Thank the good God that ye are safe lass!"

Now, completely recovered, Fiona and Ian walked up to the headland to watch the sunset and discuss the birth of the new industry that was to come to the island, thanks to Sir Hector.

A meeting of the islanders had been called and at it the laird had put forward his suggestions.

"There's a market for the class of tweed we can turn out here," he had said. "So I have offered to put up the capital necessary to start a small factory and am taking steps to improve the number and quality of the sheep we can rear. That means that farmers will be assured a market for their wool."

"What about selling?" Hugh had wanted to know.

"That's all been arranged, Hugh. My cousin, Charles Merryweather, is going to handle our products in London," Sir Hector had answered. "All you have to do is to grow the wool. We'll do the rest!"

And with that settled all that remained was to put the plan into operation.

Already tenders for the erection of the factory had been called for and a new shearing shed was being built on the farm. Hugh and Eileen were to be married at the end of the month, they were to live at the farm!

The change that had taken place in Fiona's father was the most difficult of all to grasp. At least, as far as she was concerned.

With the plans put forward by Sir Hector and enthusiastically agreed to by Hugh, the older man seemed to have taken on a new lease of life. He showed the greatest possible interest in all that was proposed and instead of the opposition they had anticipated, they found him both willing and ready to co-operate.

Ian had his own explanation for all this.

"Your father became self-centred when your mother died. I imagine." he said. "He no longer had an incentive and he is the type of man who can't really live without one. Now he's got something to live for." He smiled teasingly as he spoke. "Do you know what he told Sir Hector the other night?"

"No? What was it?" she had asked innocently.

Ian's eyes had twinkled suddenly.

"He said he wanted to be able to bounce his grandchildren on his knee!" he said.

Fiona clung suddenly to his arm, her eyes pensive.

"Oh, Ian," she murmured. "I'm so happy that I'm almost afraid!"

"What are you afraid of? Being married to me?" he asked, his lips quirking.

She blushed and shook her head.

"Of course not, silly. But it all seems like a dream. I'm really awake, I suppose?"

"It's no dream, sweetheart," he said tenderly. "I told you—long ago—that things would work out all right in the end and, as you see, they have. There's only one thing I want to know and then we needn't talk about the past any more."

"Yes?" she enquired. looking trustfully up at him.

"*Why* did you take Cecilie over to the mainland that night? Why couldn't she have waited until the *Island Queen* called?"

"Don't you know?" she questioned. "Cecilie wanted to go *then* because she was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes." Fiona nodded. "She was afraid she wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to try to take Hugh away from Eileen. You see, she had fallen in love with him!"

Quietly she told him all that had transpired that afternoon in the kitchen up at the farm.

Ian listened gravely, his eyes intent on her face.

"Poor girl," he said softly. "Let us hope that she has realised it doesn't pay to play fast and loose with human emotions! That way she may find happiness yet."

"I hope so," Fiona murmured. "I hope so for more reasons than one. You see, my dearest, she brought me my greatest happiness."

"Cecilie did?"

"Yes," she laughed and blushed. "That night in the grounds outside the Mission Hall. I knew, then that you loved me more than I deserved and I made up my mind that *somehow* we would find a way out of our difficulty."

"Instead of which, it has been found for us," he said, drawing her into his arms. "I think I learned how much I loved you the night you were out there in the *Kittiwake*! If we hadn't seen your signals——" He broke off abruptly, his face working.

"Oh, don't!" She buried her head in his shoulder. "I—I was terribly afraid, Ian. I didn't want to die. I—I wanted to tell you—how much I loved you."

"Well, now you can," he said, half humorously, cupping her face between his palms and looking deep into her eyes. "Only, there's no need. You see, my dearest one, I *know*!"

He took her in his arms again, gently and possessively, and kissed her once more.

As he did so a faint, elusive light flickered along the horizon to the north, and as they turned to watch, it strengthened and grew.

In a moment the whole sky seemed to be filled with trembling flame, blue and yellow, scarlet and mauve as the Aurora Borealis—the Midnight Sun—fanned out into a triumphant arch.

"Oh, look!" Fiona breathed, her voice a whisper. "I've never seen the Aurora so perfect before."

He turned her face to this.

"It's a promise," he said softly. "The promise of life and the years of happiness to come."

Fiona put up her hands and drew his head down.

"Yes, my darling," she breathed. "The years of happiness—together!"

THE END.

FAREWELL TO A DREAM

By Sheila Storm

DWINDLING HOPES

NORMA TREADWELL walked slowly along the path which led through a grove of stately oaks. Just ahead the path dipped steeply into a valley through which ran a little stream, crossed by a footbridge.

Over the footbridge the path wound steeply up again to the road from Lynmoor, beyond which was a wood, little changed since the time of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Under the spreading trees, where the slanting beams of the sun made misty shadows, it was possible to imagine Sir Lancelot riding up from Camelot, intent on finding the Holy Grail.

Reaching the other bank Norma paused for a moment to gaze round at the familiar scene. A kingfisher regarded her curiously, as if wondering what strange creature this was who had come to disturb its peace.

From here she could look back to the twisted Tudor-style chimneys of Dallings Manor showing above the distant trees. With its farm buildings and sweeping parkland, it was a typical country house, its mullioned windows reflecting the level rays of the evening sun.

This was the home of Victor Renfrew, whose father had been one of the last of the old West Country hunting-squires.

Since his death last year—he had died following a fall in the hunting field—his mantle had fallen on Victor's shoulders; the latter had resigned his commission in the R.A.F. to take over his responsibilities.

And Victor wanted to marry her!

Norma, however, was not thinking of Victor at that moment. Her thoughts had gone farther afield to London, for that was where Piers Madison had gone that morning for an interview with a famous musical critic from whom he sought an introduction that would further his musical ambitions.

But by now he would be well on his way back.

She glanced at the watch on her wrist and sighed. She was nearly fifteen minutes early for their meeting time, for Piers could not possibly arrive at Lynmoor Station before half past six. Then he would have to get his car out of the garage and drive through the town to this spot.

Just eighteen, Norma was the younger of two daughters, her sister being named Jane.

A few years ago their father had sold his business in Lynmoor and come to live in semi-retirement in Dallings village, devoting himself to his garden and the affairs of the local council.

Mr. and Mrs. Treadwell were homely people, and wanted nothing so much as to see their two daughters find the kind of happiness they themselves had found. Unfortunately they did not see eye to eye with Norma over what constituted happiness.

Even Jane made no secret of the fact that she considered her sister was wasting her time waiting for Piers Madison to make good, so that Norma felt as if she had been landed on the opposite side of a gulf to the others and it was slowly but surely widening between them.

Like her sister her parents favoured Victor Renfrew's suit; Norma could not altogether blame them for that.

Victor was an only son, good-looking and well-to-do, virtually lord of the manor and much else besides. A keen sportsman, he rode well, as he did everything else.

It was openly hinted that when the next Parliamentary elections were held Victor would be invited to stand as the candidate for the division, for Colonel Chetwynd, the present Member, was going to retire.

Against all this Piers Madison had nothing to offer beyond a blind faith in himself and his music.

The only son of a ne'er-do-well actor father and a doting mother, Piers had been orphaned during an air-raid on a seaside town, and had subsequently been brought up by an aunt who kept a small haberdashery shop in Lynmoor.

As a lad he had gained a county scholarship which had given him three years at the London School of Music, from whence he had graduated to Salzburg, studying under a world-famous teacher, paying his fees by playing in a small concert orchestra.

At the age of twenty-one he had returned to England with dreams of becoming a successful concert violinist, his worldly possessions being the clothes he stood up in and a violin.

But dreams, he had soon discovered were not enough. Concert players it seemed were two a penny in England and he had to take whatever job came his way. For the past year he had been playing in an orchestra at a nearby seaside resort.

That her mother openly disapproved of the understanding between Piers and her younger daughter was only one of the reasons for the shadow that lurked in Norma's eyes.

Solid material success counted for a very great deal in Mrs. Treadwell's eyes, and musical genius for nothing at all.

Her sister had been openly sceptical about the young violinist's future prospects.

"It's all very well hitching your wagon to a star, but nowadays a girl needs to keep her feet well and truly on the ground," Jane had said. "Thank goodness Roger took up law!"

Roger Blake, Jane's fiance, was already a junior partner in the law firm founded by his father, so that their future was assured.

As for Piers, unless a miracle happened, he and Norma were as far off marrying as they had ever been.

Only Norma, of all those who knew him, was fully aware that matters were fast approaching a crisis. Frustration was taking its toll and Piers was beginning to lose heart.

That he came in for criticism was not to be wondered at for few could understand that music was something more than a means to an end where he was concerned.

Thus, when it became known that he had refused an offer to play for a well-known dance band at twice his present salary, many people went so far as to say that he had grown too big for his boots.

Only to Norma had Piers revealed his true feelings about the offer.

"I'd rather starve than accept that kind of work," he had said, gloomily. "I'll either become what I want to become or nothing at all." He had sighed desperately. "I think you'd best forget that there is such a person as Piers Madison, Norma," he had added heavily.

Norma had smiled through her tears.

"I'll do nothing of the kind and you know it, Piers darling," she had protested loyally. "I don't care what people say. One of these days we'll make them eat their words."

He had grinned at her suddenly, with something whimsical in his eyes.

"Bless you," he had said, with a funny kind of break in his voice. "If it were not for you and dear old Aunt Maud I don't think I would have the heart to go on."

Now, it seemed, there was the faintest glimmer of hope for better things. A concert given by Seabay Municipal orchestra, in which he played, had been broadcast as part of a series and Professor Lanning, a well-known musical critic had commented favourably upon the performance in one of his press notices. Though slightly patronising in tone, it was nevertheless a pat on the back from a very great man and, encouraged by the conductor of the orchestra, Piers had decided to seek an interview with the writer.

"I don't quite know what I may get out of it," he had said frankly, when telling Norma of his intentions. "It isn't as if I had given an individual performance, but Professor Lanning did say that the violin obligato in the second movement had been feelingly played. On the strength of that I'm going to ask him for an introduction to Julius Bringemann, of the Royal Philharmonic. All I want is a chance—just one small chance. It isn't asking a lot, after all."

Not a lot, perhaps, but as far as they were concerned, it was everything.

Only a few nights before her father had more or less forbidden her to continue the association—at least, on its present footing.

"Piers isn't in a position to marry and won't be, as far as I can see, for many years to come," Mr. Treadwell had said. "The world is overcrowded with second-rate musicians who, it seems to me, are too proud to do an honest job of work! I have no objection to music as such, but I'd think a great deal more of that young man if he thought a little more of you and a little less of his violin!"

Norma had been up in arms at once.

"That's not fair, daddy," she had protested. "Piers——"

"Just a moment before you take up the cudgels, my dear girl," her father had interrupted. "Piers Madison may be a very talented musician—I have no doubt he is—but something more than musical talent is needed to make a success of life these days! *You* think he's a genius, he does, too, but that doesn't make him one. If he were, he would not be playing in the Seabay Municipal Orchestra for a wage rather less than a road-sweeper's.

"You've got to face up to realities, my dear, and one of them is that men like Piers spend half their lives living on hope and the other on the charity of their friends. There is an old saying—'what's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh' and I, for one, haven't forgotten what Piers's father was."

Norma's eyes filled with tears at the memory of these words. Hitherto she had always been able to take her troubles to her father, secure in the knowledge that she would meet with understanding and sympathy. Now their views were opposed and on a matter so far-reaching that no amount of glossing over would do any good.

"I don't want to appear to be unjust," her father had continued quietly, after a pause to allow his words to sink in. "At the same time I can't help wishing that you didn't see Piers quite so often. Your mother and I have talked this matter over, and I think you'll be the first to admit that we are doing no more than our duty in trying to ensure, as far as it lies in our power, that you do not throw away your chances of happiness by chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. That being the case, I must ask you not to invite Piers to the house until he has shown in some form or another, that your faith in him is justified. Do I make myself clear?"

Her father had not actually forbidden her to see Piers, that was something, she consoled herself. It meant that they could still meet as they had been in the habit of doing, either at his aunt's tiny flat over the shop or as she was waiting to do now.

WITH a sigh Norma turned and walked up the path to where it joined the main road.

As she reached it, a shabby two-seater car appeared from the direction of Lynmoor and drew up at the grass verge.

The young man seated in the driver's seat gave her a smile, his eyes lighting up when he saw her. Good looking, in a clean cut, rather intense way, Piers had dark hair, a sensitive mouth and rather deep-set blue eyes.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting, darling," he said, greeting her. "The train was a bit late and then I had a job to start the car."

"I've only just come, Piers," she murmured, summoning up a smile. She searched his face and added: "How did you get on?"

"Just about as well as I expected," he said, with a curl of his lips. "In other words—nothing doing!"

"Oh, Piers! You mean Professor Lanning wouldn't see you?" she said disappointedly.

"Oh, he saw me all right," Piers returned, with a shrug. "He was very kind, in a lofty, patronising sort of way, but extremely unhelpful. He went to a lot of trouble to point out a great deal that I already knew, such as the impossibility of an unknown young violinist getting a hearing, much less the chance of playing a concerto with a well-known orchestra and a great deal more besides. He suggested I might find an outlet for my talent by playing for a dance band if, as he seemed to think, it was merely a question of money."

"The beast!" Norma cried indignantly.

"No, he wasn't a beast," said Piers, with another shrug. "He's just a successful music critic who is rather puffed up with his own importance. From his point of view, I'm a nobody, and he was doing me a favour in giving me some of his time. I daresay he gets pestered by all kinds of crazy idiots who think they only need a chance to be able to set the Thames on fire."

"I'm sorry, darling," Norma said gently, putting a hand in his. "I can understand how disappointed you must feel. But cheer up, dearest—it is always darkest before the dawn, they say, and I have a feeling that you'll get your chance before long. I've just been reading that book you gave me by that famous American critic and I was very impressed by something he wrote."

"Oh? And what was that?" he asked.

Norma wrinkled her brows in thought.

"It was in connection with a child prodigy who someone had asked him to hear play," she said. "He refused, saying that if the child wasn't the genius they made out he could only blight their hopes by telling them so, but that if he was the world would hear of the child in due course."

"H'm," Piers sighed. "In other words, opportunity is a fine thing—if you can get it."

"It'll come, I know it will, darling." Norma said earnestly. "The thing is to be ready to seize it when it does."

"Even that isn't easy," he pointed out. "To be able to play the solo in the Beethoven Violin Concerto in D, for instance, means hours of daily practice, and at the present time I can barely manage to learn the stuff we are to play at Seabay each day."

"Isn't there some way of getting people interested?" Norma cried almost desperately. "How did the others manage?"

"Oh, various ways," Piers replied abstractedly. "One is to get an agent to arrange a concert, with a lot of advance publicity and special invitations to the critics. All that, including the fees for the orchestra and advertising may cost up to five hundred pounds and before he takes a step the agent would want that guaranteed in hard cash by someone. In other words, my sweet, a musician is like a ship—he has to be launched."

"Five hundred pounds!" she repeated slowly. "Oh, Piers! If only I had the money."

"Well, you haven't, my dear, and if you had I wouldn't let you risk it that way," he said. "To be honest, I feel like throwing the whole thing up and doing what everybody advises me to do. Play in a dance band, I mean. If I were earning twenty pounds a week and had a contract to back it even your parents might not take quite such a dim view of the situation."

Norma's eyes filled with tears.

"Promise you won't do anything of the kind, Piers," she begged tremulously. "If you did you'd break my heart."

He turned swiftly and took her hands.

"Oh, Norma darling," he said chokily. "You don't understand. How do you think I feel, knowing what I do? Your parents don't approve of me—they've made that pretty obvious this last few months—and now I'm beginning to lose faith in myself. It's possible to be wrong, you know, my sweet, and I often lie awake at night wondering if I have made a mistake."

"You mean in—in putting your music first?" she whispered.

"Well, that's what I have been doing, isn't it?" he said. "Maybe I *have* got swollen headed, as so many people seem to think! Maybe I am being a fool and throwing away my last chance just because I've got an idea that I'm a second Kreisler. Maybe music isn't so important after all."

"Nonsense, Piers dear," she said stoutly. "I'll never, never believe that. You were meant to succeed and succeed you will. I keep on telling you because it's *true*."

She spoke with a burning conviction that caused her eyes to shine with a curious inner light.

All at once she had a sudden vision of a crowded concert hall, with the orchestra grouped in tiers at the back of the platform, the conductor smiling, and Piers, violin in hand, bowing to the thunder of applause that rose in a gigantic wave of sound from the packed audience. It was so real that she was startled when a sudden exclamation from Piers brought her back to reality.

"Oh, heck," he said. "Look who's coming?"

She turned her head and her heart missed a beat.

Coming up the path from the footbridge was a tall, well built young man of about twenty-six, with a frank, open countenance and a determined mouth. A golden retriever ran in front of him, bounding forward to leap the stile when he saw Norma. It was Victor Renfrew!

"Good afternoon, Norma," he said smilingly, raising his corduroy cap. He nodded to Piers. "Hullo, Madison. How are things?"

"No better and no worse than one expects for the time of year," replied Piers, with unwonted flippancy. He grinned at the newcomer. "I needn't ask you the same, I suppose."

A momentary gleam came into Victor's eyes, but he passed the remark off with a laugh and turned to the girl.

"I was going to 'phone you later on, Norma. I wanted to ask you if you would care to come to the gymkhana at Willingshurst on Saturday. My sister Pat and her husband are coming over for the week-end and I thought it would be rather nice to make up a foursome."

Norma shook her head and blushed awkwardly.

"It's very kind of you, Victor," she said. "But I'm afraid I won't be able to come. I already have an engagement for Saturday afternoon."

"Pity," he said, a disappointed expression coming into his eyes. "Can't you break it or is it something more than usually important?"

"It *is* rather important, Victor," she answered. "Though as a matter of fact I would like to see Pat—it's ages since we met—but I can't very well let someone down can I?"

"I suppose not. Being you, that is," he smiled. "Pat will be disappointed—I practically told her on the 'phone that you would be sure to come. Anyway, I'll be seeing you."

As he strode on, Piers looked after him a dour expression on his face.

"It must be grand to be a country squire without a care in the world," he observed, with more than a hint of sarcasm in his tone. "They say that one half of the world doesn't know how the other half lives. I can just imagine what he'd say if I asked him to back me to the extent of guaranteeing the money for a concert, yet I don't he'd even miss it."

"I think you are being rather hard on Victor," Norma said quietly. "It isn't his fault that he's well-off—at least he tries to do his duty by his tenants and takes a very real interest in their welfare."

"It's a pity you don't marry him, then," Piers retorted childishly. "Your parents would be no end pleased and you wouldn't have to worry about whether I got a chance or not. You would only have to say the word and he'd come running—everybody knows *that*."

Norma looked steadily at him.

"If that's the way you are going to talk, I think I'll go home," she said. "I mustn't be late in any case, so it would be a pity to spoil what little time we have by quarrelling, wouldn't it? I don't want to marry Victor—I want to marry you, Piers, but I don't like you being stupidly jealous just because someone asks me to go to a gymkhana with him."

Piers drew a deep breath and reddened.

"I'm sorry, Norma," he apologised. "You are quite right, of course, I had no cause to speak as I did. Only, sometimes I wonder how you stick it, what with your own people being against me and all that."

"They are not against you, as you put it, Piers," she corrected. "Naturally they worry. You can't blame them for that. I mean——" She hesitated and was lost.

"What you mean is your parents lump all musicians together and think they are all a useless bunch," he said, still bitter. "I don't want to be unkind, but the truth is, your father probably doesn't know the difference between a concerto and a symphony—that is, if he's ever listened to either. He'd think a great deal more of

me if I earned my living with a pick and shovel."

Norma remembered her father's reference to the money Piers earned, but said nothing that would make matters worse.

Instead she looked at her watch.

"I shall have to go in a few minutes," she said, with a little sigh. "I didn't tell anyone where I was going and they might start wondering. Besides, you have to be in Seabay by half past seven, haven't you?"

Piers did not answer for a moment, but stood frowning into space, his hands dug into his pockets. There was an expression on his face that Norma had seen before and she knew he felt sorry for himself.

"I've a good mind not to go at all," he burst out moodily, kicking a stone out of his path. "For two pins I'd chuck the whole thing."

"If you feel like that you'll never get anywhere," she reminded him quietly. "What is more, I could never marry a man who allows himself to be beaten without putting up a fight, Piers."

She paused a moment before adding slowly:

"After all, it doesn't matter what people think—it's what one does that counts. Even daddy admits you have worked and studied hard and that you have made your own way since leaving school. It's just that he thinks your efforts would have been better directed elsewhere, that's all."

"Exactly," he declared, as if she had made the point for him. "He thinks there must be something queer about a man who can devote as much time and energy to learning something that, in your father's eyes, is completely useless. Well, he may be right. As far as I can see I'm never going to get anywhere, whether I put up a fight or not. It's always been the same and always will be.

"Why," he went on, "some of the world's greatest music was written by men who starved to death because no one appreciated what they were doing. It's all a vicious circle. No agent is going to run the risk of giving an unknown violinist a chance because he needs someone with a name to draw an audience—and you can only get a name by playing with an orchestra whose standing is beyond question. In other words money is at the bottom of it all, like it is of everything. Without it you're sunk."

"But surely," Norma protested, "there are men who would be prepared to give a really good violinist a chance, Piers? Suppose you wrote to Julius Bringemann and asked him to let you rehearse sometimes with the Royal Philharmonic? A famous conductor such as he is must always be on the look-out for new talent, surely."

"That's where you're wrong, my dear girl," he shook his head. "Men like Julius Bringemann don't have to bother. Agents and managers do all that. They get together and draw up a series of programmes for a tour, or a season of concerts, and then look round for soloists to fit into the general scheme. The Royal is coming to Seabay in a fortnight's time, as you know, and Greta Monkhouse is the soloist in the Beethoven Violin Concerto in D.

"Well, how do you think that came about? I'll tell you!" he went on. "When they drew up the programme Miss Monkhouse happened to be available so the choice fell on the violin concerto. If she hadn't been free, and some well known pianist *was*, you would have been treated to one of the piano concertos, no doubt—the 'Emperor' for choice, as it happens to be the most popular." He laughed bitterly. "Music, like everything else, has become Big Business, and conductors and agents alike are more concerned with the royalties they get from recordings than with actual door takings."

"But the people you say are names, like Greta Monkhouse—they must have started at the bottom. How did they become famous?" Norma protested.

"I've told you. Either they got someone to back them, or they knew the right people. Greta Monkhouse is a case in point—her father is a director of the State Opera. Naturally, he was in a position to pull strings and he did so to some effect."

They parted soon after that, rather unhappily. Piers offered to drive her home, but Norma declined the offer.

She could get home across the fields almost as quickly and, though she refrained from telling him so, she had no desire to cause trouble by driving up to the house with Piers.

Arriving back she slipped upstairs to her room her mood a deeply thoughtful one.

Although she tried not to do so she found herself making comparisons. Piers was clever but he was much too inclined to think that he was hard done by.

Victor was different; she could not imagine him indulging in the kind of moody introspection that marked so much of what Piers said and did. She tried to imagine what Victor would do if he were in a similar situation and decided he would be quite different.

But if only she could think of some way in which to help Piers!

Her door was flung open and her sister bounced into the room. Dark as Norma was fair. Jane was an exceedingly pretty girl with an olive skin and dark brown eyes that sparkled with the zest of living. An expensive looking engagement ring graced the third finger of her left hand.

"Hullo," she said, flopping down on the end of Norma's bed. "Been seeing Piers?"

"Yes," said Norma flatly. She did not turn from her mirror, but dug her fingers into a jar of cold cream and began rubbing it into her cheeks. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I ran into Victor and he said he'd seen you," replied Jane.

"Then you knew very well I'd been with Piers," Norma said a little crossly.

"All right, my dear, you needn't get huffy. I wasn't trying to catch you out," said Jane. "All the same, I do think you are being foolish, Norma. Victor is madly in love with you, though he's the kind who wouldn't dream of wearing his heart on his sleeve. If you married him you'd have very nearly everything a girl could wish for."

"Except one thing," Norma turned to face her sister, a little gleam of anger in her eyes. "Since Piers and I hope to get married some day the advantages of marrying Victor are rather lost on me, I am afraid."

"More fool you, then," said Jane with sisterly candour. "Oh, I know you think the sun shines out of the back of Piers Madison's neck. And I daresay you think he's a howling genius who only wants a chance to have the world at his feet, but you don't know for sure. do you? I'm inclined to agree with Roger—he says that if Piers was any good he'd have made his mark by this time instead of being content to play in a second-rate orchestra in Seabay."

Norma flushed indignantly.

"That's very unfair, Jane," she declared stormily. "Piers isn't content with that at all. He has tried in every way possible to get a chance to do real concert work. Today he went to London to see Professor Lanning, the famous critic—that's why I met him this evening. I wanted to know how he got on."

"Well, how did he get on?" enquired Jane, not unkindly.

Norma's colour deepened.

"Not very well," she admitted. "Professor Lanning—oh, but what's the use? You wouldn't understand, anyway."

Jane looked pityingly at her. She was very fond of her younger sister, and sensed that the tears were not far from the surface.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said abruptly, real feeling in her voice. "If you are right about Piers he'll come out on top in the end and I'll be the first to eat my words." She smiled. "Meantime, you'd best put it out of your mind. I came to warn you that Aunt Agatha has turned up for dinner, complete with her pekingese, so be on your guard. She's got eyes like a hawk and you'll get little mercy from her if she suspects there's something wrong."

"Oh, blow Aunt Agatha!" exclaimed Norma undutifully.

"My sentiments entirely," smiled Jane. "She's a dear, really—it's only her beastly outspokenness that is so hard to bear. She had hardly arrived before she started reading the Riot Act because I'd changed my hair style. She said I looked *fast*!"

Norma had to smile. Aunt Agatha was her mother's elder sister, who lived in a large house on the other side of Lynmoor where she ruled a small staff of servants with a rod of iron.

Very wealthy, she had a disconcerting habit of driving over without warning accompanied by an overfed Pekingese with a nasty habit of nipping at the girls' ankles if they passed near. It was called Fou-Fou and was the apple of its owner's eye, so that they were forced to suffer it in silence.

"If Aunt Agatha criticised a little less and did something worth while with her money it would be more to the point," Norma suggested. "I wonder what her reaction would be if I asked her to guarantee a concert for Piers?"

"My dear, she'd have a fit!" Jane said, pulling a face. "She thinks only highbrows listen to classical music and that anyone who *pays* to go to a concert needs their brains testing.! All she can talk about is food and the price of everything—to listen to her anyone would think she hadn't a penny in the world! Anyway, you'd better come down or she'll want to know what's happened."

DINNER that night for Norma was an ordeal, for her aunt was in one of her more critical moods.

Among other things she wanted to know when Jane was going to be married and said that she did not believe in long engagements, because they gave men a chance to cool off.

Jane, flushed and indignant, was about to make some scathing reply but was frowned into silence by her father, who tactfully changed the subject.

"I hear that you have been asked to present the prizes at the Willingshurst Gymkhana next Saturday, Agatha," he remarked. "Congratulations on a well deserved honour."

"Well deserved, fiddle-sticks," snapped Aunt Agatha, a gleam of humour coming into her eyes. "I'm president of the Women's Institute this year, as well as being on several local committees—they couldn't help but ask me, especially as the Lord Lieutenant and his wife are away on a holiday in the South of France." She turned away from him and looked across at the two girls. "You're going, of course, both of you?"

Jane looked at Norma, who dropped her eyes.

"I am, Aunt Agatha," she said. "Roger is taking me."

"Aren't you, Norma?" her mother enquired, looking across at her youngest daughter. "I thought you were going with Victor and his sister, and were joining Jane

and Roger there. I know it was Victor's intention to ask you."

"He did ask me, mother," Norma replied, with a touch of defiance. "I—I told him I had another engagement."

Now for it, thought Jane resignedly. Poor Norma!

"Another engagement?" said their mother a faint frown marring the smooth serenity of her brow. "What other engagement, my dear?"

Norma lifted her head and met her mother's eyes.

"I promised to meet Piers in Seabay and have tea with him," she said. "That was before Victor asked me and I can't very well let Piers down."

"Stuff and nonsense," cried Aunt Agatha, before anyone could speak. "You can put the young man off, can't you? An invitation merely to tea isn't binding on either party if something more important crops up."

"But then I don't regard the gymkhana as being more important, Aunt Agatha," said Norma spiritedly. "I mean—it would look as if I had dropped Piers in favour of Victor, wouldn't it?"

"You wouldn't take up such a high-falutin' attitude if the positions were reversed, I'm sure of that," retorted the older woman sharply. She turned to her brother-in-law. "I wonder you allow such goings on, John! Things were done very differently in my time, very differently."

"My dear Agatha," he protested, loyalty to his daughter momentarily outweighing other considerations. "Norma isn't a child any more. She is quite old enough to make her own decisions in such matters. Whether I approve of them or not is beside the point."

"My goodness, man, I should think it is very much to the point," said his formidable relative. She glared at Norma. "In my young days it would have been considered unthinkable to have done anything contrary to one's parents wishes! The trouble with the present generation is that they have no sense of the fitness of things, no sense of responsibility."

Jane thought it high time to come to the rescue and plunged into a spirited argument with her aunt, who was only too willing to air her views about the modern generation.

Norma leaned back in her chair, feeling faint and rather sick.

She was grateful for Jane's intervention, but the air of disapproval in the room sapped her mental energies, so that she felt unable to think properly.

It would have been easier, she thought, had they all been less kind, less loving. For instance, had she felt that she was being unjustly treated, had they been less sympathetic, she might have taken refuge in resentment.

As it was, she knew that the critical attitude of her parents—Aunt Agatha, too—was rooted in love and affection for her and that they sought only to shield her from making a mistake.

Every time she saw the worried look which came into her mother's eyes, when Piers was mentioned, it was like the stab of a knife in her heart.

Norma loved Piers and knew that he loved her; there was nothing she would not have done for him, suffered on his behalf. Yet there were times when she felt she almost hated him and, as an inevitable consequence, hated herself; times when she knew a sense of sickening panic that overcame her power to think and reason.

"I can't stand it much longer," she whispered to her reflection in the mirror that night. "Something has got to happen soon or I shall have a nervous breakdown."

STRANGE PROPOSAL

THE following Saturday afternoon Norma found herself standing on the running board of Victor Renfrew's shooting brake with his married sister. Pat, Jane, and Roger Blake, and Pat's husband, George Longmore. They were watching one of the events of the gymkhana organised by the local hunt.

Victor was riding, and as the horses cleared the last jump Pat Longmore uttered a little exclamation and clapped her hands.

"It's Victor's race," she cried. "He'll win in a canter."

Small and slenderly built, Pat was immensely proud of her brother and Norma gave her a fleeting smile as Victor passed the post, an easy winner.

A few minutes later he joined them, looking very handsome in well cut riding outfit.

"The jumping is next," he said, scanning the programme. "I won't be on until about five-thirty, so what about some tea, everybody?"

"Good idea," enthused Pat. "Besides, if we go now the refreshment tent won't be too crowded," and she linked her arm through that of her husband, a quiet-spoken young farmer who had distinguished himself in the previous point-to-point event.

Victor put a hand under Norma's elbow and smiled down at her, telling himself that she had never looked more lovely than she did then.

"Glad you came after all, Norma?" he enquired softly, as they followed the rest of the party towards the refreshment tent.

"Yes, of course," she murmured, her colour deepening.

He gave her an oddly whimsical look.

"Really mean that?" he asked.

"I never say things I don't mean, Victor. Or, at least, I try not to," she answered.

"Good!" he said, almost as if she had taken a load off his mind.

If she were honest with herself, Norma could not have correctly analysed her feelings just then.

Despite the pressure that had been brought to bear upon her she had been adamant in her refusal to go with the others to the gymkhana. To her way of thinking a question of principle was involved, for her promise to have tea with Piers was a long standing one.

Then, two days previously, Piers had telephoned to say that he would not be free after all! A little afterwards Pat Longmore had telephoned to ask if she would not change her mind, having just learned from her brother that Norma had pleaded a previous engagement and, lacking a further excuse, the younger girl had given in.

She could not understand why Piers had had to put her off so suddenly. There was no performance until the evening, though he usually drove to Seabay on Saturday mornings for rehearsal and lunched at one of the cafes on the front.

Sometimes she went all the way to meet him and they would spend the afternoon together. At others they would meet in some inland spot, content just to be together until it was time for him to leave her.

It simply never occurred to her that she was making all the running, even when she found herself making excuses for glaring faults in temperament that, in another man, would have brought forth her sharpest criticisms.

She had long ago resigned herself to the knowledge that she must always take second place to Piers' music. That was the penalty for knowing a genius, she told herself, remembering all she had read about the lives of the great musicians.

Over tea she listened to the gay chatter of the others without taking very much in. Victor sat next to her, and plied her with cakes, refusing to take no for an answer when she said she was not hungry.

"It's all part of the fun of the fair," he said, forking a particularly sticky looking eclair on to her plate. "As a child I never felt that a party had been a success unless I was almost sick afterwards."

"Don't be so disgusting, Vic," said his sister. "You men! I don't know why we girls bother with you."

"Because you can't help yourselves, my dear Pat," said Roger Blake impishly. "To a woman we represent the three F's—Food, Fires and Finery! It's been the same ever since the wedding ceremony consisted of a bonk over the head with a club in the Cave Men's day."

"If that's what you think then you can take back your ring," said Jane, amid laughter. "If I merely wanted to marry a bank account I would have chosen somebody good looking."

"Like me," said George Longmore, with affected modesty. "When I swam on to Pat's horizon she nearly swooned with joy. Honest!"

"Is—that—so?" enquired his young wife scornfully. "Well, let me tell you that the only reason I married you was because you bred Jersey cows—and I *adore* Jersey cows!"

Norma relaxed in her chair, smiling. It was always like this when they were together. Fun and laughter, with good-natured gibes at each other's failings given and taken in good part.

But it was the kind of gathering Piers would look upon with the half amused tolerance of a superior being. She could imagine the supercilious smile with which he would listen to jokes which, from the lofty standpoint of a genius, would seem rather childish.

PRESENTLY Norma found herself strolling away from the horse lines with Victor.

They had walked down to where the travelling loose-boxes were parked and stopped for a time to pat Victor's mare. It would be some time yet before the jumping contest, in which he was participating, so there was no hurry.

"There's something worrying you, isn't there, Norma?" he asked, breaking a short silence. They had come to some railings and he stopped, his hands on the top bar.

Norma hesitated. They were good friends and she knew that he was completely reliable. Yet, if there was a grain of truth in what Jane had said—that he loved her—then he was quite the last person in whom she could confide.

"Doesn't everybody have something to worry about these days, Victor?" she returned evasively. She did not look at him, but her gaze wandered over the gaily attired crowd clustered about the field where the jumping was taking place.

"That, my dear girl, is begging the question if you don't mind my saying so," he said quietly. "I suppose, really, I shouldn't have asked you, but I can't bear to see you looking unhappy."

"Why do you think I am unhappy?" she asked, turning to look at him. "I'm not really, you know."

"Not really—only a little, eh?" he said, with a lift of his eyebrows. "As for the rest, I don't think—I know. You see, I possess the inestimable advantage of being in love with you, my dear, and that, as far as you are concerned, enables me to see quite a long way."

Norma sighed. She had known that

something of the kind was inevitable sooner or later. She was not officially engaged to Piers: even her parents and Jane did not know how far the understanding between them had gone.

"I—I'm sorry, Victor," she said haltingly. "I'm very fond of you, as you know, but—well—it isn't the same thing as being in love, is it "

"Granted," he replied promptly. "I never flattered myself that you were in love with me, my dear. All the same, I am willing to take a chance on ultimately winning your love. That is, if you'll give me the chance."

"I'm sorry," she said again, in a flat voice. Absurdly enough, she was thinking that if she were not in love with Piers, she would have been made proud and happy to hear Victor say what he had done. "I—it wouldn't be fair to—to let you hope that I might change my mind. I mean——"

"You mean you're in love with someone else," he broke in calmly. "Or you think you are—that amounts to the same thing. Would I be far wrong if I suggested that the someone was Piers Madison?"

She lifted her head proudly and met the challenge in his eyes.

"No, you wouldn't, Victor," she admitted in a low voice. "But——"

"Don't worry, my dear, your secret is safe with me," he said. "All the same, I can't help asking if you are quite sure? It shouldn't be any business of mine, of course, but I can't see that you have much prospect of getting married for a very long time. For one thing, your parents would strongly disapprove, wouldn't they?"

"They do now," she confessed, with a dreary little laugh. "Father has practically forbidden Piers the house. It—it's horribly unfair, really." Her lips quivered. "It isn't Piers' fault that he hasn't become known. He hasn't any backing and without it he can't hope to succeed."

"Is that so?", Victor enquired kindly, a thoughtful expression settling in his eyes. "Suppose you tell me all about it, Norma? You never know—I may be able to help."

"Oh, if you only could!" She sighed and made a little gesture. "I—I think I'd do anything to give Piers his chance. That's all he needs—a chance."

She went on to recapitulate all that Piers had told her from time to time.

Victor listened intently, occasionally putting in a shrewd question that told her he had missed nothing.

When she came to an end he remained silent for a few minutes, leaning back against the rails, one foot hooked up on the bottom bar.

Then—

"You said just now that you would do anything to give Madison his chance," he remarked slowly. "Just what did you mean by that?"

"I don't follow, Victor? I just meant what I said."

He smiled.

"In that case, your problem is solved, my dear girl," he said. "According to you, Madison only requires a backer—someone prepared to risk losing quite a sum of money to get him launched. Very well, then! I am prepared to do all that is required in that direction—but there is a condition."

"Oh, Victor! You—you mean——"

"I mean that I am prepared to guarantee any sum an agent requires to stage a concert, or a series of concerts, that will give Piers Madison the chance he needs. All you have to do in return is to allow me to announce our engagement!"

Norma drew a sudden breath as the full implication of all he said came home to her. She stared at him blankly, wondering how serious he was.

Surely knowing her, he could not expect her to accept so outrageous a proposal? It would be a case of dropping the substance for the shadow with a vengeance.

"If—if that is meant as a joke I think it is in very bad taste," she said reproachfully. "How could I possibly become engaged to you when I am in love with Piers? That would be a curious way to help him, wouldn't it? Besides, do you really think he would agree?"

"Whether Madison agrees or not remains to be seen," he said calmly. "All I am concerned with at the moment is whether you agree, my dear girl. Listen to me for a moment. You think you are in love with Madison, don't you? But I say once again—are you *sure*? As I look at it, you and he have next to nothing in common except, perhaps, a mutual belief in his genius. On the other hand, you and I have everything—the same interests, the same love of the conntryside—oh, and a lot more besides. I needn't tell you that I would do everything in my power to make you happy, need I? And you would have the satisfaction of knowing that, if Madison makes good, you and you alone will have given him his chance."

Norma sighed.

"It's madness, Victor," she said, her voice trembling. "Can't you see how impossible it is? If Piers makes good, then there is nothing to stop us getting married. If—if you really love me, as you say you do, why won't you help Piers and ensure my happiness—without conditions?"

"Hang it all, you can hardly expect me to go out of my way to lose you, my dear girl," he protested with a little laugh. "I'm sorry, but even if you think I am acting like the villain in some Victorian drama, I stand by my guns. Consent to marry me and I will make it my business to see that Madison has all the chances he can use."

As he ended they saw Roger Blake and Jane coming towards them.

Victor glanced at his watch and heaved himself upright.

"Time to saddle up for the last event," he said almost casually. He turned to her and added: "Well, what's the answer, Norma?"

She shook her head, a look of deep distress coming into her eyes.

"You—you must give me time, Victor," she murmured. "I can't possibly give you an answer to such a mad proposal right away."

"That's all right, my dear," he said, with a shrug. "I didn't expect you to. Take as much time as you like. Patience has always been my strong suit. As far as I am concerned, the offer remains open until you either accept or reject it."

FOR the next few days Norma went about with her mind in a whirl.

Victor's proposal had come as a shock to her, for the more she considered it, the more preposterous it all seemed.

She found herself sleeping badly, waking each morning tired and unrefreshed, so that her tiredness began to take toll of her nerves, making her jumpy and irritable. This brought her to the verge of quarrelling with Piers.

It was a week after the gymkhana, and they were returning from tea at his aunt's flat. The forthcoming concert to be given in Seabay, by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, cropped up in the course of conversation and Piers told her that, of course, the Municipal Orchestra would not be playing in the concert room that night.

"That means I'll be free to take you if you'd care to come, Norma," he said. "I could call for you at your house about seven—that would give us nice time to get to Seabay. You will enjoy yourself, I know."

Norma shook her head sadly.

"I'm terribly sorry, Piers, but I don't think I'll be able to come," she said, and went on to tell him of the advice she had been given by her father.

Piers listened with a sullen, downcast look on his face and then exploded.

"So I'm to be shown the door because I prefer to choose my own way of life!" he said angrily. "Well, that's all right as far as it goes—what your precious parents think doesn't interest me in the slightest. But I thought you, at least, would be loyal."

"It isn't a question of loyalty, Piers," she began wearily. "My faith in you has never weakened, but I owe mummy and daddy something as well. I mean," she stumbled on, "however unreasonable we may think they are being, we've got to remember the reason for it. Daddy hasn't actually forbidden me to see you but——"

"Oh, you needn't bother to sugar the pill, my dear girl," he said cuttingly. "The trouble with your parents is that they judge everything from the standpoint of how much money a person makes. In their eyes I'm a failure! Well, I couldn't care less."

Norma could not look back on what followed without an accompanying feeling of disaster. They had quarrelled before, but never like this. Piers thoroughly lost his temper and said things that hurt and rankled for days to come. But though he apologised afterwards, and she forgave him Norma found it impossible to forget.

THE next Wednesday Victor came to dinner. Norma did not know that he had been invited until Jane told her in the bedroom only an hour before he arrived.

Then she went downstairs, wishing she could plead a headache and so absent herself from the meal, but decided that the remedy would be worse than the disease. Her mother would know, and Norma felt that she could not face the lecture that would follow.

She was the first down and entered the drawing room to find Victor standing at the long casement window, looking out over the garden.

He turned at her entrance, his face lighting up.

"Good evening, Norma," he said, coming towards her and taking her hands. "How are you, my dear? You look,"—he added sympathetically—"as if you haven't been sleeping well."

"I haven't," she said shortly, withdrawing her hands and going to the window. Over her shoulder she added: "Did you expect me to?"

"I'm sorry if it's my fault," he said quietly. "I gather you have been giving thought to what I suggested."

She turned, a little flush of anger stealing into her pale features.

"I've thought about it until I'm numb and can't think any more," she said. "You know I love Piers and would do anything to help him, but what you ask is impossible. I think it's very cruel of you to put me in such a position."

"That is the last thing I intended," he said quietly, his eyes on her face. "It is only because I love you that I put it the way I did—cruel though it may seem."

The entry of Jane put an end to the discussion, much to Norma's relief. In another moment she would have had to tell him that under no circumstances could she marry him, not even to help Piers, but perversely enough, she was conscious of a strange reluctance to do so.

It savoured, in some queer way, of burn-

ing her boats and, over-riding all other considerations, there remained the inescapable fact that it had been placed in her hands to give Piers his chance.

SHE spent a miserable week during which she neither saw nor heard from Piers. Then he telephoned to ask her to meet him at the stile where she had waited on the night he had returned from his fruitless trip to London.

As soon as he got out of the car she knew that something unusual had happened.

"Listen, darling," he said, taking her in his arms and kissing her. "I've had a letter from Alfieri—you know, the chap who offered me a place in his dance band some time ago. It appears that his first violinist has gone and started an orchestra of his own and Alfieri wants me to play with his crowd. They've just landed a B.B.C. contract and are going to appear as a regular item on television. I would be earning about three times as much as I'm getting now and that means we could snap our fingers at your people and get married. Well, am I to accept?"

Norma drew back in dismay.

"But—but, Piers, you said that to take on something like that would finish you as a concert violinist," she exclaimed. "Surely you haven't given up hope of making a name for yourself one day, have you?"

"Darling, I'll be old and grey by the time that day comes," he said moodily. "I've realised that it's only in storybooks that unknown violinists wake up to find themselves famous. I didn't tell you, but I wrote to Julius Bringemann enclosing the cutting from the review in which Lanning praised my obligato and asked him to hear me. He didn't even bother to reply."

Norma stared before her, her hands clasped together, an expression on her face he could not analyse. Then—

"Don't do it, Piers," she said brokenly. "Please don't do it. You'll be sorry ever afterwards if you do. The money doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that."

"I thought so—once," he said cynically, "but I've changed my mind. We can't go on in this hole and corner fashion for much longer, Norma darling. It isn't fair to you, for one thing. For another," his mouth twitched—"I'm sick of waiting for the chance that never comes and I'm not waiting any longer."

"But it will come, Piers. I know it will," she pleaded, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Oh, Piers darling, promise you'll wait a little longer. I—I have never asked you for anything before but I ask you now to do this for me! Why, to accept Alfieri's offer would be *cheating*!"

He looked at her queerly, more moved than she had ever known him. Then he caught her in his arms and kissed her almost roughly.

"All right," he said, in a choked voice. "I'll do as you ask, my dear. I only wish I had your faith, that's all."

NORMA went straight to the telephone when she got back to the house. Her parents and Jane were out so that her action in ringing Victor up passed without comment.

He was in and she had only to wait a few moments before his voice reached her across the wire.

"Norma speaking," she said, her heart pounding. Only the knowledge that the sands of time were running out enabled her to go on. "I—I want to speak to you. Can—can you come over?"

"Why, yes, of course," he said instantly. "Now?"

"Please, Victor." She felt like a child asking a favour. "Dinner isn't until eight and it's barely half-past six now. I—I hope it's convenient?"

"Gracious, yes," he answered, laughing. "Shall I come to the house or——"

"No, I'll meet you at the entrance to the spinney," she broke in.

"Right," he said. "I'll start now."

She replaced the receiver and hurried up to her room, quickly dabbing powder on her cheeks.

Then she sat on the edge of her bed trembling and thinking.

Five minutes later she went downstairs again, and letting herself out of the side door, walked across the lawn to the back garden gate.

When Victor arrived at the spinney she was standing on the edge of a small pool, breaking pieces off a dry twig and throwing them into the water.

"I came as fast as I could," he said, after greeting her. "There's nothing wrong, is there, Norma?" He looked at her keenly. "You sounded a bit tense on the phone."

She turned her head away, staring down at the water. Then—

"You said the other night that—that your offer was still open, Victor." She hesitated a moment before adding: "If I may I would like to accept it."

If she had been looking at him she would have seen that his colour ebbed from his cheeks, then came rushing back. For a moment he did not speak. When he did, his voice had a curiously strained ring about it which moved her as no fervent declaration of love could possibly have done.

"You mean—you'll marry me, Norma?"

She nodded, throwing the last piece of the twig into the water.

"Yes," she said tonelessly. "I—I have been thinking about it a great deal, Victor and—yes, I will marry you—wait!"—she turned to him as he was about to speak and laid a hand on his arm. "No one must know about this until—until——"

"I've fulfilled my part of the contract?" he finished for her, and saw the wave of scarlet which ran up into her face.

"Yes," she nodded, with a quick intake of her breath. "It would be rather difficult to explain otherwise."

"You are afraid Madison might not accept such a sacrifice at your hands?" he questioned quietly.

She lifted eyes that were dark with pain and sorrow.

"Would you?"

"It all depends upon what I regarded as the most important side to the issue," he said meaningly. "Fame is the spur, you know. However, I agree that it would not be wise to let anyone into our secret. What exactly do you want me to do? What have you in mind?"

"Piers has told me the name of the man who arranges some of the concerts given by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and also acts as manager for several well-known players," she said. "It would be best if you went to him and said that Piers was a kind of protege of yours. Piers need not know who it is who has guaranteed to make good any loss there might be."

"But won't he suspect?" Victor asked.

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. "There are a lot of rich people in Seabay who go to the concerts there, so it's quite possible he'll imagine that one of them is his benefactor. You will have to tell the agent that you don't want Piers to know, of course."

He looked at her admiringly.

"You've thought it all out, I see," he remarked. "I hope, for your sake, that Madison justifies your faith in him, my dear Norma. But let that pass! If you'll give me the name of the agent in question I'll drive to town to-morrow and set matters going. No doubt he will explain all that is involved in arranging an affair of this kind.

"Personally," he continued, "I should have thought that none of that was necessary. I was reading the other day about a young Australian singer who came to England without any backing except a letter from the director of the School of Music where she studied. She put herself in an agent's hands and got several first class bookings right away."

"Piers did all that," said Norma bitterly. "He had several offers to play at well-known halls, but he just couldn't get anyone to act as his guarantor. In any case, that wasn't what he wanted at the time."

"I see," remarked Victor drily. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'll do what I said and after that"—he paused, and taking her hands, looked down into her eyes—"we announce our engagement?"

"Yes," she said in a faint voice.

"Good." He hesitated a moment, then stooped and kissed her gently on the brow.

A CHANCE IN A MILLION

NORMA put on a light coat and stepped into the garden. It was a perfect night, with a full moon making the trees stand out like black silhouettes.

It was two days since she had given Victor her promise, and earlier that evening he had telephoned to say that everything had been arranged; the man he had gone to London to see had written to Piers asking him to go and see him.

"Madison will have received the letter by first post this morning." Victor had said. "I impressed upon Mr. Engelman that he was not to let Madison know my name—now it is up to the young man himself. Engelman told me that he couldn't promise, at this stage, that he would get bookings. All he could do was to arrange for what he called a 'try-out'—that's some kind of stage test. Apparently famous conductors are apt to be choosey—naturally so—and they're not going to give an unknown violinist a chance until they are pretty certain he won't let them down.

"From various remarks that were let fall I gathered that Madison was attempting to fly rather high—Engelman seemed to think that he ought to be content to make his bow at something a little less ambitious than a full scale concerto, but I daresay he'll discuss all that with our protege when he sees him. The main thing is, he is prepared to act for him in return for my guarantee against possible losses."

Now she walked slowly down the lane deep in thought.

She had thanked Victor, trying to express her gratitude in a voice that did not tremble.

But there had been heartbreak behind her words, and she wondered, for the hundredth time, how Victor could reconcile his avowed love for her with the cruel alternative he had placed before her.

She thought unhappily of all that she and Piers had planned in their dreams. Of the fame that would one day be his and how they would travel from country to country, each journey a triumphal progress in which their love would be born anew.

Since the night she had told Victor she would marry him, she had not seen Piers, but that was nothing unusual and she did not mind. He found it difficult to get away, for in addition to the time taken up by the orchestra he had to practice.

What would she say to him when next

they met? She shied away from the thought for deceit in any shape or form was abhorrent to her. Yet, unless she was to defeat her object, she was faced with the necessity of playing a part that would have required a skilled actress to carry off successfully.

Even Jane, who was wrapped up in her own wedding affairs, had begun to notice that something was seriously amiss.

"Have you and Piers had a row or something, Norma?" she had asked, bluntly only that morning. "You look like a ghost these days! Anyone who didn't know you would think you were afraid to say 'Boo!' to a goose."

"Perhaps I am," she had answered, with a wan smile. "I loathe geese, anyway. Nasty, cackling brutes."

"Don't hedge," Jane had said severely. Then her expression had softened and she had laid a hand on Norma's arm. "What's wrong, dear?"

"Nothing's wrong." Norma had drawn away, a petulant note creeping into her voice. "I wish you wouldn't ask a lot of silly questions, Jane. Why should anything be wrong, as you put it?"

"Search me," had said Jane inelegantly. "However, I can take a hint as weil as the next."

She had gone. leaving Norma a prey to bitter reflections.

SHE returned to the house an hour later to see Jane crossing the hall.

"Oh, there you are," the latter said. "I was wondering what had happened. Piers telephoned. He wants you to ring him back as soon as you can. He seemed excited about something."

Norma thanked her and dug her hands into the pockets of her coat, her lips compressed.

From the drawing-room the sound of the radio filtered through the closed door, a cheerful, tinkling sound that told her her parents were listening to a popular variety show.

With a shrug she went into the cloakroom, where the telephone was kept, and dialled a Seabay number.

It was a minute past nine—the interval lasted from nine till nine fifteen, so that she knew Piers would be free. He must have been waiting for her call, for the girl who answered said "Hold on, please," and then Norma heard his voice.

"Listen, darling," he said, almost before she could speak. "I've got the most wonderful news. Who do you think I've had a letter from? You'll never guess, so I'll tell you. Max Engelman! He wants to see me in town as soon as possible, so I've arranged to go up to-morrow."

"That—that's marvellous, Piers." Somehow she managed to infuse something that would pass for excitement into her voice. "Does he say why he wants to see you?"

"No. The letter is quite brief—it merely asks me to telephone and make an appointment. I did that right away—I only found the letter when I got back this evening; it had been sent to me here, you see. *That, thought Norma abstractedly, was a shrewd move on Victor's part. Piers would be the more ready to believe that some wealthy member of the audience who had heard him play was backing him.* I'm to see him at noon to-morrow, so I shall go up by the nine fifteen. Wish me luck, darling."

"You—you know I do, Piers," she murmured, brushing a tear from her eyes.

"You don't sound very excited," he grumbled. "I thought you'd want to throw your hat over the rooftops."

"I do. But you—you rather took my breath away, that's all. I——"

"I must go now," he put in. "Shall I see you when I get back to-morrow?"

"I—yes—it depends on when you get back. Why not 'phone me when you arrive."

"Okay, my sweet. Until to-morrow, then! Good night."

"Good night, Piers," she whispered shakily, and put down the receiver.

For a while she leaned against the wall, trying to collect her scattered wits, while the room seemed to rock and sway. Then, with a queer look in her eyes she stumbled blindly up the stairs to her room.

IT was Jane who started the happenings that were destined to alter the entire course of Norma's life.

She came down to breakfast rather late, to find Jane seated at the table, reading the morning paper. Mr. Treadwell had finished and gone out and Mrs. Treadwell was having breakfast in bed for a change.

"Hullo," Jane greeted her brightly. "What happened to you—oversleep?"

"I'm afraid I did." Norma pushed her cereal aside and took a piece of toast instead.

"You'll not get fat on toast," said Jane flippantly. "You're not training for love-in-a-cottage by any chance, are you?"

"If that's meant to be a joke I don't consider it very funny," said Norma shortly.

"All right, moody," shrugged Jane. "Going about looking as if you'd lost a pound and found sixpence won't get you anywhere, remember. Even Roger wanted to know what was up when he was here last night. He said you looked as if you were heading for a breakdown."

"I wish Roger would mind his own business," Norma retorted.

A little silence followed. Then Jane, evidently on the look out for something that would smooth matters over, glanced up from her paper.

"That's done it!" she exclaimed. "Greta Monkhouse has got 'flue."

"Greta Monkhouse?" Norma echoed.

"Yes, listen to this!" Jane read out a paragraph. "Miss Greta Monkhouse, the famous violinist, has had to cancel all engagements for some time. She is at present in a nursing home in London suffering from a severe attack of influenza'." She laid the paper aside. "That means she won't be able to play at Seabay on Wednesday."

"They'll get a substitute," mused Norma, her thoughts racing ahead.

"Oh, I daresay, but it won't be quite the same thing, will it?" said Jane. "Roger's on the Finance Committee of the Council there, as you know, and he was only saying the other night that these big concerts nearly always involve a loss which the council has to make up out of the rates. He'll tear his hair out when he hears this."

Norma suddenly pushed her plate away and got up. Then she walked out of the room, crossed the hall, and shut herself in the cloakroom with the telephone.

Was this the chance Piers had been waiting for? she wondered. Had she been granted a reprieve?

"Oh, Victor!" she said, when he answered her call. "This is Norma. Yes, I'm quite all right, thank you. Listen! How long will it take to get to London by car?"

"Let me see. about four hours—why?" he answered.

"I want to be there as soon after three o'clock as possible," she said, drumming a little nervous tattoo with the fingers of her free hand on the panelling. "Can you take me?"

"Yes, of course, if it's that urgent," he replied. "Has something happened, Norma?"

"I'll explain later." she said cautiously. "Will you call for me here or shall I walk down to the drive?"

"I'll call for you," he said promptly. "Will ten o'clock suit you? That will give us time for a snack on the way."

"Thank you, that will be lovely," she murmured. "You—you don't mind, do you?" she added.

There was a chuckle.

"Of course not. As it means having you to myself for nearly a whole day I'm very pleased. You're not running away, by any chance, are you?" he added jokingly.

"No," she said with a faint smile. "I'm not running away."

SHE was waiting on the steps when Victor drove up, wearing a neat two-piece suit and smart, close fitting hat. In one hand was a cricket bag, with gloves and shoes to match.

"Put me out of my misery," Victor smiled, as he swung the car on to the main road a minute later. "Where exactly are we going—and why?"

Norma stared through the windscreen, her hands clenched in her lap.

"We're going to call on Max Engelman, the agent you saw the other day," she said, after the briefest of pauses. "I hope to persuade him to ask Julius Bringemann to let Piers play the Beethoven Violin Concerto at Seabay on Wednesday night in place of Greta Monkhouse."

Victor nearly steered the car into a ditch in his amazement.

"My dear girl. have you gone crazy?" he exclaimed. "Engelman will have us both thrown out on our necks."

"I don't see why he should," she said calmly. "Miss Monkhouse is ill—she's in a London nursing home and won't be able to play on Wednesday. That means a substitute will have to be found. Well, why not Piers?"

She went on to explain, but at the end Victor remained unconvinced.

"I don't know a lot about music and still less about the way these things are arranged," he said. "Nevertheless, I find it hard to believe that a world famous conductor is going to allow someone he has never even heard of to take the place of a violinist of Miss Monkhouse's standard. Apart from being a great artist, she must obviously know the concerto inside out, and that in itself is no mean accomplishment. Whereas Madison——"

"Piers knows the concerto inside out, too," Norma broke in. "It is his one dream to play it with a big orchestra and always has been."

"Even so, that's not going to be sufficient to persuade anyone—— Oh, come now Norma, why not be sensible and let me take you out for the day somewhere?" he pleaded "I mean to say, you've only got to leave things as they are and Madison wiil have his chance to play all the concertos he wants to play in the end."

"No," said Norma obstinately. "I have a feeling that this is Piers' big chance. Don't you see, the newspapers can make a story out of it. He has lived here all his life, except when he was away studying and——"

"Local Boy Makes Good, eh?" Victor said, when she broke off. He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "All right, my dear girl, if that's the way you want it, I'll do all I can to help. How do you know that Engelman will be there?"

"I 'phoned and made an appointment before I 'phoned you," she said.

"That's why I wanted you to come with me."

Victor drew a sudden, deep breath, a wave of almost unbearable jealousy seeping through him. It was a shock to discover that he could give way to such an emotion as easily as all that, but for the moment he

could have found it quite easy to hate Piers Madison.

The next moment his better nature triumphed, and the smile he gave her was singularly winning.

"So be it," he said, in a resigned tone, sending the car speeding along the highway "I'll do all I can to help, but I'm afraid you are in for a disappointment. What did you tell your people, by the way?"

"I said that you were going to town on business—that's true enough—and that I was going with you," she replied.

FIVE hours later Norma sat in a tastefully furnished drawing-room of a West End flat.

Victor stood by the window, his hands in his pockets, frowning down at the traffic. Max Engelman, a short, plump man with a clean shaven face and shrewd grey eyes, stood in front of the fireplace.

They were waiting for Julius Bringemann to see them.

It had been a few minutes after three when they had been ushered into Max Engelman's Piccadilly office and offered chairs.

Somewhat to Norma's surprise, the famous agent had listened carefully to all she had to say, making an occasional note on a pad.

Then he had asked a series of rapid fire questions about Piers—where was he born, who were his parents, what were his scholarships, and so on.

Then he leaned back in his chair.

"It's a good story," he had remarked thoughtfully. "The point is—is this young fellow good enough to make it go? It's worth a try, at any rate. Excuse me."

He had gone out of the office and had been absent for about ten minutes. On his return there had been a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"I've talked to Bringemann," he had announced. "He thinks I'm crazy—said so, too. Anyway, he wants to see you—now."

A door opened at the far end of the room and a man came out.

Just what she had expected, Norma could not have said. She had never seen a picture of Julius Bringemann and had imagined him to be tall. with a commanding presence. But instead he was a small, dapper man with a gleaming head of raven black hair brushed smoothly back until it shone. He gave Max Engelman a casual nod of greeting.

"Is this the young lady you spoke about?" he enquired, looking at Norma.

"Yes, Mr. Bringemann." The agent presented Norma and Victor to the great man.

"So you want me to replace Miss Monkhouse by a completely unknown young man who may or may not be a budding genius?" he enquired, frowning at Norma. He peered penetratingly at her. "What is your interest in him? Tell me that?"

"He is a very great friend, Mr. Bringemann," she replied, going scarlet.

To her mortification the conductor chuckled.

"Ah! I begin to see," he exclaimed. "And you, sir,"—he wheeled on Victor—"where do you come in, pray?"

"I am a friend of Miss Treadwell's," Victor answered, with an easy smile. "As Mr. Engelman no doubt told you, I am anxious to help the young man in question for reasons of my own."

"Mr. Renfrew has offered to guarantee the expenses of a concert for Madison," interposed Max Engelman. "He——"

"Wait a moment." The conductor turned again to Norma. "What makes you think that your young friend could take Miss Monkhouses's place? Are you a judge?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Bringemann," said Norma hurriedly. "But," she added slowly, "Professor Lanning is."

"Lanning? Has he heard him?"

"Yes, Mr. Bringemann." She quickly told the other about the broadcast performance and its sequel.

Julius Bringemann listened courteously and then turned to the agent.

"You, of course, are interested in this matter solely from the point of view of publicity, I know," he said. "But I have other things to consider that are, to me at least, of far greater importance. However." he paused as if considering. "I suppose there can be no great harm in hearing what this young man can do. Tell him to report to me personally at the Lyric Hall tomorrow morning at half past eleven." He turned to Max. "You had better be there as well, Mr. Engelman."

"Certainly I will," said the agent, with an expression on his plump features that made Norma think he wanted to dance.

The famous conductor then looked at Norma.

"I can promise nothing, you understand that, of course?" he said. "But if this young man is worthy of a chance he shall have it. And you can tell him that he owes it to a very charming and determined young lady?"

"WELL," said Victor, a little later as they were having tea. "You could have knocked me down with a feather! Of course. old Bringemann is just as alive to the publicity value of the story the papers will make out of this as Max Engelman. He stands to lose nothing, of course. If Madison fails to impress him, all his magnanimity will have cost him is the time given to a rehearsal. On the other hand, if all goes well he will get the credit for having 'discovered' a genius. Marvellous!"

"Don't be so cynical, Victor! You sound like Piers when you talk like that."

"Heaven forbid," he said hastily. Then he laughed. "Ah, well, we can only wait and see. I suppose you'll telephone Madison this evening and tell him the good news?"

"I must," Norma sighed. "I wish now that I had asked Mr. Engelman to do it. I mean it's going to be frightfully difficult to explain to Piers how I came to have anything to do with it. He—he may think I've been intefering in his affairs."

Victor stared.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "He ought to go down on his bended knees to you in gratitude! I wonder if you realise just what you *have* done for him?"

"Oh. I know." She sighed again. "But ——"

"There are no buts," he interrupted firmly. "I wonder how many girls would have seized the chance with both hands as you did? Not many, I'll be bound. And now it is time we started making tracks, or your family will think you are lost." He got up and paused, looking down at her before adding in a deliberately casual tone: "Will you be going to Seabay to hear him play?"

"No," she said. She looked almost startled as if such an idea had never crossed her mind. "Piers mightn't like it. In any case, I don't think I want to." She smiled faintly. "I can't believe that it is true, somehow. I've dreamed of something like this happening and now when it has I don't seem able to understand it."

"I know." He smiled crookedly. "I suppose it hasn't struck you that I've been chief mourner at the funeral of my own ambitions?"

Norma crimsoned as the full implications of all that had happened dawned on her.

"Oh, Victor, I'm so very sorry " she murmured impulsively, placing a hand on his. "I didn't think—I mean——"

"It's all right, child," he said gently, when her voice broke. "All I want is to see you happy. It has been a very great privilege to do what little I have done and whatever happens, now or in the future, I shall always have the consolation of knowing that when you needed help, you turned—to me."

An hour later he stopped the car outside her door and to her invitation to come in shook his head.

"Thanks very much, but I think I'll push along." he said. "I've various jobs to do. Let me know how things go to-morrow—I'd like to know." He took her hand and pressed it gently. "Good-night, my dear " he added softly.

AFTER THE DREAM

IT was an autumn day eighteen months later when Norma crossed the little footbridge spanning the stream. pausing for a few minutes to watch the play of the sunlight on the water.

She was in a deeply thoughtful mood. and her step seemed to have lost much of its spring. Now it was an altogether more mature graver girl who climbed the steep path to the stile than the one who had hurried this way to meet Piers on his triumphant return from London all those months previously. Now she was twenty!

Even at this distance of time the memory of all that had happened in between was sufficient to recapture the humiliation that followed. Even now, when time had softened the blow, it seemed incredible that Piers Madison could have gone out of her life so completely.

Others had been right about him—she wrong!

For success had gone to the young man's head and the selfish streak, to which she had deliberately blinded herself for so long, had finally carried him away out of her life.

She came to the stile and rested a moment, her gaze going towards the distant hills. It was here that she used to meet Piers: here that she had told him that she loved him, and she had been waiting, sitting on the top bar looking eagerly down the road, when he had come to tell her that he was to play the Violin Concerto at Seabay the following night—eighteen months ago!

Every moment of the bitter-sweet time that had followed was etched in her brain.

The way the news had spread after the story of Julius Bringemann's "discovery" had been skilfully fed to the press by Max Engelman. The way people had suddenly changed their views and started saying "I told you so". The way even her parents had grudgingly admitted that, perhaps, they had been somewhat hasty in their judgment of the young man.

There had been another rehearsal at Seabay on the morning of the concert. but Norma had not exaggerated when she had told Victor that Piers was note perfect in the concerto.

Victor had telephoned to say that he had managed to secure a block of tickets so that they could all go to the concert to witness Pier's triumph, a gallant gesture which had brought a lump to Norma's throat and tears to her eyes.

She put her hands to her ears suddenly, as if to shut out the memory of the thunderous storm of applause which had greeted the finale of the concerto.

As in a dream she had seen the conductor step down from the platform to shake Piers by the hand; the orchestra had joined in the clapping. Piers, a pale figure in evening dresss, had been called back again and again.

As far as he was concerned it had been a double triumph. Not only had he been lifted into the front rank of concert violinits, but he had also made his debut in the

district where he had spent his boyhood and the romantic story of his early struggles had been made headlines by the local press.

A reception had been held in the green room at the back of the hall later that evening.

Max Engelman, beaming and hospitable, had waved a contract under Piers' nose and thrust a pen into his hand.

Looking a trifle dazed, Piers had signed it and found himself committed to make a tour of sixteen American states where he would play with some of the world's most famous orchestras.

Victor had been there, looking a little pale, his lips twisted in a curiously grim smile. Yet his congratulations had been sincere, she had been sure of that.

Two days later he had told her that he was closing Dallings Manor for a time and putting the servants on retaining wages.

"I've a cousin in New Zealand who has been wanting me to visit him for a long while past," he had explained, painfully circumstantial. "As I've always had a hankering to see the place I'm going to kill two birds with one stone. I needn't tell you how glad I am that things have turned out the way they have for you, Norma."

Even then she had not realised the truth. It had taken a positive hammer blow to awaken her, and that was the gross betrayal by Piers of all her faith and trust!

PIERS had played at two major concerts in London before sailing for America, and at each one had gained the approval of musical critics not usually given to hasty or ill-considered judgments.

In one thing, at any rate, her faith had been justified. Piers *was* a genius!

With Jane married to Roger Blake, the house had never seemed so empty as it had in the months that had followed.

Everywhere she went she had been reminded of Piers—by the wireless, by people who asked how he was getting on in America, by the sight of his aunt standing behind the counter of her little shop, serving her customers as she had always done as if such a thing as suddenly finding she possessed a famous nephew was not nearly so important as matching a customer's wool.

Strangely enough, it was to his aunt and not to her mother, or Jane, that Norma had turned when the news of Piers' falling away had come to her through the medium of a newspaper paragraph. He had got his chance through Jane reading a morning newspaper and she heard the first rumblings of the storm that wrecked her life through another.

At first she had not believed it. True Piers' letters had been scrappy and unsatisfactory for some time, but she had put that down to the fact that he was working hard.

It had been Jane who had showed her the paragraph in the gossip column of a London newspaper It had been cabled from their American reporter.

"Have you seen this, Norma?" Jane had come over to tea, bringing the paper with her.

Norma had read it, unable at first to grasp that it referred to Piers, a slow flush of indignation rising to her cheeks.

It is rumoured . . . Piers Madison, the young English violinist . . . Miss Betty Summers, daughter of Hiram K. Summers . . . engagement impending.

"How beastly!" she had exclaimed, putting the paper down. "It seems to me that American reporters will say anything!"

"There's nothing in it, then?" Jane had asked.

"Of course not." Norma had denied. "It's just a newspaper story. Piers has probably been out with the girl or dined at her house—he has to meet all kinds of people naturally—and the papers have made up the rest."

But it had been true; Piers had finally written.

Condescending, almost patronising in tone his letter had confirmed what Norma knew in her heart to be true. His engagement to the daughter of a wealthy American canned meat king had put the seal on his success.

Curiously enough she had felt no surprise, she felt nothing in fact.

The incident was closed and she, the girl who had pledged her faith in the genius of the man she loved must face the bitter consequences.

At the time she had thought of Victor, of his quiet strength and deep understanding. She had realised, with a little thrill of dismay, that he had foreseen from the beginning that her trust would eventually be betrayed and had tried, in his own way, to save her from it.

A few days ago she had heard that Victor was on his way home. He might already have arrived, for she knew that the servants were back and the house being got ready for him. Soon—almost at any moment now—she would have to make a decision one that would affect not only her own life, but Victor's as well.

From the memory of that time, when he had gone away, there came the echo of a nightingale's song in the garden and of Victor's quiet tones as he had said good-bye.

"Don't worry about me, my dear girl," he had comforted her. "As I have told you repeatedly, all I want is to know that you are happy. Well, your faith in Piers Madison seems to have been completely justified and so all will be well for you both. I'm out of the running, but I shall always love you. And remember, if ever you need me—for any reason at all—I will count it just as much a privilege to serve you as I have done in the past. Don't ever forget that, Norma dear."

Now she drew a deep breath, a new and unexpected sense of freedom sweeping through her. The past was dead. It no longer had power to frighten or distress her. It was as if by some mysterious process she was unable to understand, it had become relegated to a separate part of her existence, one which had nothing in common with her thoughts and desires, her present life.

For, if she had learned nothing else, it was that, no matter what happened, life went on.

Jane was happily married and expecting a baby. Her father had been made an alderman and was immensely proud of the honour.

Even Aunt Agatha seemed to have become less awesome and more human; it was she who had taken Norma for a trip to Italy and Switzerland when the news of Piers' engagement had been announced.

And now Dallings Manor was crying out for its owner. Pat Longmore had been at once blunt and direct about it when she had come to return Norma's last visit.

"Why don't you marry Victor and be done with it?" she had said. "He's in love with you. He always has been and it's time he married. A bachelor squire is like a bachelor clergyman—there's a part of him missing. There is so much you can do to help him and you would find happiness in doing so. After all, you can't spend the rest of your life yearning after all the might-have-beens."

How true that was Norma was only just beginning to realise. Piers had become a shadowy figure, the outlines of his personality blurred, like the dimly remembered figures seen on the cinema screen and almost as easily forgotten.

She had thought she would never forget: that the shimmering wonder of her first romantic love would endure for ever. But now she could almost smile at herself and wonder that she could have been so blind.

She turned at a sound, to see Victor coming towards her.

He was dressed in flannels and a sports jacket, and the golden retriever bounded ahead of him as it had always done.

"Victor!" she said softly, jumping down from the stile.

"My dearest!"

He took her hands, smiling into her face, his own sun-browned and tender. There was a light in his eyes that she had only seen there once before; that had been when he had looked at her across the tea-table and said, "*I suppose it hasn't struck you that I've been chief mourner at the funeral of my own ambitions.*"

She heard herself asking questions; all the usual ones, her words skimming the top off all that was in her heart. When did he arrive—how long had the journey taken, had he had a good time?

"Did you come here by chance or were you looking for me?" she said at last.

"I was looking for you. I rang up the house and your mother told me you had gone out. I guessed you'd be here," he said.

"How did you know? I haven't been here since——" She broke off abruptly, a shadow crossing her face.

"Where you are concerned I am a thought-reader, my dear Norma," he said. "You came here this afternoon to wipe out the last of your memories, didn't you?"

"Yes," she answered truthfully, gazing at him in wonderment. "But——"

"As I said before, there are no buts, my dearest," he broke in softly. He drew her closer, still holding her hands. "I heard about Madison and the Summers girl, of course. Pat wrote and told me. It seems that I have been doing him an injustice!"

Norma looked hard at him.

"Doing him an injustice?" she repeated. "I don't understand, Victor."

He laughed shortly.

"I put him down as a temperamental egoist," he said calmly. "I was afraid that, if you were proved right and he *was* a success, that it would go to his head. But he is far cleverer than I realised. By marrying an American heiress he has got his feet on to really solid ground, for by all accounts her father could buy up the Metropolitan State Orchestra if he wanted to."

Norma flushed scarlet and withdrew her hands from his grasp.

"All right, you needn't rub it in, Victor," she said resentfully. "I realise I was an infatuated little idiot and that you and everybody else were right bout Piers. But saying 'I told you so' doesn't make it any easier to bear."

She turned away, her lips quivering. Victor looked quizzically at her, a surge of tenderness rising in him. He knew that her pride had suffered and that her head was in the dust, yet there were things that had to be said between them.

"I'm not trying to rub anything in," he said patiently. "I happen to love you far too much to want to make things more difficult for you. But there is a question I have got to ask you, Norma. It—it's rather an important one, you see."

She turned and looked at him.

"I'll try to answer it if I can, Victor," she murmured.

"You can," he assured her smilingly. "It is this—are you still in love with Piers Madison?"

For a moment there was a little silence. Then—

"I never was," she said, and there was a sudden undercurrent of laughter in her voice. "I only thought I was. It—it took what happened to open my eyes to the real truth, Victor. At any rate, I know it now and can only ask you to forgive me."

"To forgive you? What on earth for?" he said, knitting his brows.

Norma smiled.

"For misjudging you," she said softly. "When—when you asked me to marry you in return for helping Piers, I thought for a moment that you were deliberately taking advantage of the way I felt about Piers to—to force my hand. It—it didn't seem like you—I couldn't understand it, yet——"

"Yet I did it!" he said smilingly. He put his hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. "And now?" he added softly.

She sighed and made a sudden little movement.

"Now I realise just why you did it," she said gravely. "You saw what I could or would not see—that Piers was selfish and completely egotistical. Others—Jane, my parents—they saw it, too."

Victor looked whimsical.

"Does that mean you see it now?" he asked.

"Yes." She nodded. "I think I have known it all the time, but I kept pushing it away. It's difficult to explain, but if you love someone you try to delude yourself, and make allowances, I suppose. I know now that I didn't really love Piers, but only thought I did, but as you yourself said, at the time it amounted to the same thing. Now I realise that I was in love with someone who didn't exist."

Victor nodded.

"And that, my sweet, is where you put your finger right on the spot," he said. "If I hadn't known that—if I hadn't felt absolutely sure of it—I would never have asked you to marry me—on any terms!"

"Yes," she sighed. "But—but that doesn't explain one thing, Victor."

"And what is that, dearest?"

"Why you went away," she murmured.

"I went away because I thought I had made a mistake," he said. "When you came to me for help—and afterwards—I felt sure that you must really be in love with the fellow. It was up to me, then, to do all I could to ensure your happiness and then fade out of the picture. That's what I did."

"I see," she said softly. She hesitated a moment, then looked up at him, a question in her eyes. "Do you still want to marry me, Victor?" she asked wistfully.

"Do you need me to tell you that, darling?" he countered, his grip tightening as he drew her towards him. "*Do you?*"

"No," she whispered. "I don't think I do. I—I am very glad, Victor. I mean," —with a sudden blush—"it would be frightful if you didn't because, you see, I want terribly to marry you."

With an exclamation he drew her into his arms, pressing his lips on hers.

Beside them the shadows lengthened and the hush of sunset fell upon the earth. From the adjacent woods the evening song of a bird came to their ears, but sweet as the music was, it could not match the song in Norma's heart.

"Victor darling," she whispered, when at last he put her down, her cheeks rosy. "Do you remember telling me that one had to be very sure about loving a person? That was the afternoon you asked me to marry you."

"Yes, of course, my love," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

She smiled shyly up at him, her eyes like stars.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm sure—at last," she said softly. "There—there is only one thing I'm not sure about. It sounds silly, I know, for if you didn't love me you wouldn't have been so patient."

"Then what is it you are not sure of, sweetheart?" he enquired.

She sighed deeply.

"I—I want to know whether you really mind about Piers. I know all that is behind us but—I mean——" Her colour deepened. "He used to kiss me and—and hold me in his arms. Now——" She made a funny little gesture, half of apology, half of embarrassment.

Victor gave a shout of laughter and kissed her again.

"You little goose," he said, with a chuckle. "Do you really think I'm going to be jealous of a fellow like that? All that matters—all that is ever going to matter—is that we love and need each other. Between us, God willing, we are going to create a storehouse of memories that will bring back each lovely, tender moment of our lives whenever we like to unlock the door. The past doesn't matter—it is the future which counts."

If she had been humbled before, Norma now experienced a greater sense of humility.

But it was of a different kind. Then her pride had been humbled. Now it was as if from afar off, like a voice in a cloud, she heard extolled the calm, eternal wisdom of the spirit, telling her that love and love alone mattered so that it was selfless and pure, for then it would endure even unto the end of the world.

"Oh, darling," she breathed, her eyes filling with tears. "I've been so lonely and unhappy, but now that you have come back I know that everything is going to be all right."

As she spoke the sound of church bells drifted to them on the still evening air. Norma's hand tightened on his and she turned towards the path.

"Come, my dearest," she said softly, looking to where the twinkling lights in the valley pierced the purple dusk. "Let us go back together. I want to tell mummy and daddy our wonderful news."

He kissed her again, holding her tight for a moment. Then, hand in hand, they strolled slowly through the twilight to the kingdom that was to be theirs.

THE END.

TO NONE BELONGING

By Christine Cordell

THE SIREN WAILS

NINE-YEAR-OLD Nelly would probably not have heard the siren that night, had she not had the row with young Artie—a row about, of all things, a tin of sardines which Nelly had "pinched" from a nearby delicatessen shop.

Not that Artie objected to "pinching"—far from it.

"Good for you!" he had said, as he caught sight of the tin of sardines. He took the tin and slipped it into his pocket. "Lucky we got a tin-opener in our cave," he added, a grin on his face.

"We ought to have some bread as well," Nelly muttered.

"All right," Artie said, "you run along and get some bread. The baker woman's a 'softy'—she's always good for a chunk of bread. Just lay it on thick for her about your being starved by Ma Mason, and perhaps you'll get something else as well."

So Nelly had run off to the "baker woman" and had been given part of a stale loaf and a couple of broken jam tarts—the latter she devoured greedily on her way back to the house. Her conscience reproached her about this but, as Nelly argued to herself, she had provided most of to-night's supper, so she had a right to anything extra. Besides, Artie would never know, and she rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth to remove any betraying signs of jam.

When she got back to what the two children called "home", Nelly found that Artie had vanished. He had, however, left a note for her. It was addressed "N", and when she untwisted it, she read the cryptic message:

"*Gone to cave A.*"

Nelly lost no time in making her way to their secret haunt among the bomb ruins. There she found an embarrassed Artie, who explained rather too glibly that he had lost the tin of sardines out of "that old hole in his pocket".

"But, Artie, you told me you never put anything in that pocket," she said reproachfully.

"Well, this time I did," he flung back at her.

Nelly sniffed.

"I can smell the fish, Artie. I believe you opened that tin and ate the sardines," she said accusingly.

"I didn't!" he said.

"You—you greedy pig! You did!" Nelly cried.

"All right, then, I did," he admitted. "I was hungry, wasn't I?"

"So was I," Nelly retorted, furiously angry, and flung the bread at him. "You may as well have the lot now and make a thorough beast of yourself," she added, and poised herself for flight.

"You'll be sorry for this, my girl," Artie said. "I'm going to run away to-night and you'll never see me again!"

"I don't care!" snapped Nelly.

"You will, though. Wait till you hear the siren and there's no one to run along to the shelter with you," Artie warned.

But Nelly's anger was still too hot for his words to have any effect, and she flounced out of the "cave" as they called their hideout.

Artie listened as her footsteps became fainter. Then, looking out cautiously from the edge of their secret retreat, he saw her disappear round a corner of the street.

darkly, and then set about making himself as comfortable as possible for the night.

That done, he tore a crust of bread from the loaf, ate it, and lay down amidst the debris to sleep.

On returning "home". Nelly sat on her shaky camp bedstead and glowered into the twilight until she heard Ma Mason and her husband clattering down the stairs.

"Might have known they would forget all about me," Nelly told herself bitterly, as she heard the front door bang behind them.

Drawing an old army blanket over her, she shut her eyes and tried to fall asleep. Here, at the top of the house, everything was very still. She knew that the Masons had gone to the pub at the end of the street and would not be back until closing time.

She would hear them come staggering up the stairs, and maybe feeling "happy" with themselves, but more likely fighting mad with each other. Then they would go to sleep, and not even the wail of the sirens would awaken them.

Nelly's tears, which she had been trying hard to keep back, now began to trickle down her cheeks. She felt all alone in the world—as, indeed, she was.

"Please God don't let there be an air raid to-night," she prayed over and over again with quivering lips.

She added to the prayer another—that God would send Artie back so that they could run together for the shelter of the "cave"—a cellar underneath a half-demolished shop.

But even as she prayed, Nelly realised that it was too much to expect God to work a miracle for a girl who, that very evening, had stolen a tin of sardines.

She recalled with deep regret, the pleasant and peaceful farm to which she and Ma Mason had been evacuated. It had been so delightful there with all those darling little pigs, to say nothing of the nice food they had to eat.

But they had been there for less than a month when Ma Mason had declared herself "fed up" with the country and had insisted on their coming back to London, bombing or no bombing.

The thought of it all caused Nelly's tears to flow afresh.

Then, presently, the siren sounded and she realised there was no Artie to run with her to the shelter. But she must not stay here alone in the attic right at the top of the house since everyone said it was the most dangerous place to be in during an air raid.

So, with choking little sobs escaping her, Nelly rushed down the stairs in the wake of the other tenants who were making for the shelters. Once in the street, she started to run, and then came a sound which, for the moment, seemed to paralyse her—a sound rather like that of a railway train.

She knew it was one of those awful "doodle-bugs" and wished that Artie was by her side. Next moment there was a deafening explosion, and Nelly knew no more.

A MIDDLE-AGED V.A.D. at St. Peter's Hospital, weary after a long night's toil, heard the telephone ringing outside her ward and hastened to answer the call.

"A child—a little girl?" she repeated to the unknown caller. "Not hurt badly, but suffering from shock? Very well, please bring her along, and tell the orderly to ask for Nurse Wilmot."

She replaced the receiver and returned to the ward where her husband, Dr. Wilmot was attending to a case. He glanced up as she approached and noticed how very pale and overwrought she looked.

"Listen, my dear Lucille," he said, in a low voice, "you had better go off duty for the time being. You have been hard at it for over twelve hours, you know, so please find matron and tell her that I insist on your returning home at once."

"Oh well, if you insist, David," she answered resignedly. "By the way," she added, "I have promised to admit a little girl who has been found lying unconscious in the street, and they are bringing her along in the ambulance."

Dr. Wilmot frowned as his glance travelled round the already overcrowded ward.

"Frankly, Lucille," he said, "I really don't know where we are going to put the patient. As you know, we have scarcely an inch of room to spare in any of the wards."

"But, David, we must find room for the poor child somehow," she pleaded.

"Very well, my dear," he said, "I'll have a word with matron about it. If it's only a case of shock and we can't find room for the child in the hospital, she could be taken to our house for the time being, couldn't she?"

"Yes, of course, David," his wife answered eagerly. "That's a splendid idea."

Dr. Wilmot guessed what she was thinking. Lucille had recently lost a baby girl at birth, and would, unfortunately, never be able to have another child. Perhaps, he reflected, if his wife were given charge of this bomb-shocked waif, it might help to take her mind off her own irreparable loss.

"Now please take my advice and run along home and have a good rest, my dear," he said gently. "Matron and I will see to the child, and if, as you have been given to understand, she is suffering from nothing more than shock—well, we will look after her ourselves for the time being, if necessary."

It was at about this time that Nelly's friend Artie had found himself imprisoned in the cellar they called "the cave", and was hoping fervently that, when daylight came, someone would hear him shouting for help and rescue him.

HESTER BLAKE, though getting on in years, was still an active, vigorous woman. She had been Lucille Wilmot's "nanny", but now performed a variety domestic duofties.

On hearing Dr. Wilmot's car pull up outside the house soon after his wife's arrival home, Miss Blake rushed to open the front door. She saw that the doctor was carrying something in his arms, but t was not till they had passed beyond the heavy black-out curtains in the hall that she saw what it was.

"Why, it's a child, Doctor Wilmot!" she exclaimed, with suppressed excitement.

At that moment Mrs. Wilmot came hurrying into the hall.

"Oh, David, so you have brought the child home, have you?" she said smilingly.

"Yes, my dear," the doctor replied. "She's suffering from shock. It is nothing very serious, apparently."

Some wordless message seemed to pass between Lucille Wilmot and her old nurse. and they smiled at each other understandingly.

Then nanny suddenly became practical.

"I suppose I'd better take the poor little thing upstairs to the spare room," she suggested. "It's all ready and the bed's warm and aired."

The doctor nodded approvingly, and nanny quickly disappeared with the child in her arms.

"We are both badly in need of a meal, Lucille," he remarked. "So we'll wait on ourselves for once, shall we?" he added smilingly.

After a hasty meal, Dr. Wilmot and his wife went upstairs to see how the "patient" was getting on.

"Oh, what a lovely child!" breathed Lucille. as she bent over the bed and gazed at the unknown girl.

"Quiet and warmth and nourishment is what she needs, my dear," remarked Dr. Wilmot. "Obviously, the child is suffering from malnutrition and neglect."

Mrs. Wilmot sighed.

"David dear," she said thoughtfully, "I don't think I'll go to the hospital to-morrow. Perhaps I had better give up my work there altogether for the time being and look after this dear child. I think, too, that I'll sleep in this room to-night, as it would never do for the little darling to wake up and find herself all alone here, would it?"

Her husband and Hester Blake exchanged significant glances, and nanny, who might have been expected to insist that it was her job to watch over the child, kept discreetly silent.

ARTIE'S hopes of rescue from his "cave" were not immediately fulfilled. Luckily, however, a constable on his beat happened to hear cries coming from a newly collapsed building, and with the help of members of a rescue squad, he managed to extricate him from the debris.

Artie was taken to the rest centre, more frightened than hurt.

IT was a lovely spring day in the Cornish valley with its murmuring stream, running down to the cove on its way to the sea.

There was only one house in the valley—a grey granite cottage, with its garden full of spring flowers, surrounded by a hedge of fuschias. There were daffodils and Easter lilies, violets and daisies and many other flowers seemingly bent on being seen earlier in their blooming than in previous years.

On little sun-bathed boulders peeping out of the ground, were mats of purple and mauve wild thyme. The bumble bees were humming madly, for the sweet scents of spring time were intoxicating. A small boat with a crimson sail could be seen in the blue water of the cove tacking back and forth with seeming aimlessness.

A girl with corn-coloured hair came out of the cottage and walked slowly to the gate, apparently deep in thought. Suddenly she gave a start as a voice hailed her, and looking up, she saw a young man turn from the easel he had set up and hurry towards her. She gave a quick glance at the cottage door, and then went forward to meet him.

"How is your father to-day, Nancy?" he asked, an anxious expression on his face.

"I don't know yet—Dr. Weiss is with him now," she answered thoughtfully. "I'm waiting to waylay the doctor when he comes out, so I mustn't stay here, Jack," she added, a troubled look in her eyes.

"Well, please don't worry too much, Nancy," he said, in a sympathetic tone. "I expect your father will be all right in a few days. Being a doctor himself, he knows the importance of obeying doctor's orders, and if he takes things quietly——"

Jack Hastings broke off abruptly as he heard the sound of the garden gate being opened. It was Dr. Weiss, and Nancy hurried to intercept him as he was about

to set off up the path to where he had left his car.

"How—how is daddy, Dr. Weiss?"

"As well as could be expected, Miss Wilmot," he answered gravely, "though he has had a near call and will have to stay in bed and avoid all exertion for some considerable time, I'm afraid. Your father may live for years, of course, but at the same time, I must not hide from you the fact that the heart condition is pretty bad."

"What—what does that mean exactly, Dr. Weiss?" she asked falteringly.

The doctor hesitated a moment. Then—

"It means, my dear, that your father may live for years, as I have said, on the other hand, he could pass out at any time in his sleep. It is all to the good that he is a doctor himself and knows that he must obey orders. Even so," Dr. Weiss added, "I think it would be advisable to have a nurse staying here with you in case of emergency."

"Yes, yes, of course," Nancy agreed.

"Very well, Miss Wilmot, then I'll send one along from the Cottage Hospital. In the meanwhile, keep the patient calm and don't let anything happen to cross him in any way, as agitation of any kind would be bad for him." Dr. Weiss glanced at his watch, and went on—"Would it be convenient for you if the nurse arrived, say, in about an hour's time, Miss Wilmot?"

"It will be convenient at any time, doctor," Nancy replied. "And the sooner the nurse arrives, the better."

The doctor nodded understandingly.

"Quite," he agreed, and was about to walk on, when he paused, and said—"By the way, Miss Wilmot, your father, very prudently, I think, wishes to make his will, and he has requested me to call at Heath and Prossiter's on my way back and ask one of the partners to come to the house to see him about it this afternoon."

Nancy gave a quivering sigh.

"Oh, come, please don't look so scared, my dear. Making a will is not necessarily a prelude to dying, you know," the doctor told her smilingly, and then hurried away.

Nancy went indoors and took a vase of golden daffodils upstairs to her father's room.

"You are feeling better to-day, aren't you, daddy dear?" she said, trying to convey more optimism than she felt.

"Oh yes, heaps better," he answered, knowing that it was untrue. "Now come and sit down, my dear. I want to talk to you."

Nancy sat on the bedside chair, and a dead silence followed for a moment or two, during which Dr. Wilmot appeared to be deep in thought.

"A penny for your thoughts, daddy!" Nancy remarked jestingly.

"They're worth more than that, honey-top," he answered, reverting to a pet name he had coined for her when she was a child. "I—I was thinking of you, my dear."

"Were you, daddy?"

"I was wondering what Dr. Weiss had said to you when he left me."

"Well, he told me that you had still to be kept in bed for a while, daddy, and that on no account must you be allowed to lose that violent temper of yours!" Nancy said.

"Is that so?" he said, with a wry smile. "Tell me, poppet," he went on, "what is the first thing you can remember in your life?"

Nancy considered for a moment. Then—

"Oh, I think, daddy, the very first thing I can remember is being in bed and Nanny calling me 'pet', and fussing over me because I refused to eat. I have a vague recollection of being worried about something I couldn't remember, and Nanny wouldn't leave me alone to try and think what it was."

Dr. Wilmot nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes, I quite understand, my child," he said, "and that is what I want to talk to you about." He paused, then went on—"You see, my dear, Lucille, my wife, was not your mother, and I—and I am not your father."

Nancy gazed at him in amazement.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried, and seeing that she had recoiled as from a shock, he reached out and took her hand in his.

"This is the moment of truth, my poppet, and I feel that I must tell you everything," he said. "My dear wife and I loved you as though you had been our own child," he added, speaking with great difficulty.

Nancy saw that his breathing was a little laboured, and she became alarmed.

"Perhaps—perhaps you had better not tell me any more just now, daddy," she murmured tremulously. "After all, I have gone on so long without knowing what—what you have just told me that it doesn't matter if I have to wait a little longer, does it, daddy dear?"

At that, he again muttered something about "the moment of truth", and Nancy was so afraid of thwarting him, that she refrained from making any further objection.

"You were about nine years old at the time, poppet," he continued, "and Lucille, as a V.A.D. and I, as a doctor, were working in a London hospital. There had been a dreadful air-raid one night, and you were among the casualties that were brought in for treatment. You were suffering from shock more than anything else, and as the hospital was overcrowded with patients, we decided to take you to our home until you had recovered and could tell us who you were. But you had completely lost your memory, and as no one came to claim you, we—we adopted you as our daughter."

For a moment, Nancy was at a loss what to say or do.

"Daddy dear," she murmured at last, "do you think you ought to take one of those tablets Dr. Weiss left for you?"

He nodded.

"There had been terrible devastation in London that night," he went on. "A whole block of buildings that had been scheduled for demolition, was reduced to rubble, and there was an appalling loss of life. Therefore, it is scarcely to be wondered at that no one came to claim you, my child," he told her sadly.

"But surely, daddy, if as you say, I was nine years old at the time," Nancy began, then stopped short, her mind in a whirl. "Then, had I—had I lost my memory?" she stammered on.

"Yes, my child, you had lost your memory and no one was able to identify you."

Nancy drew a sharp breath.

"And you and mummy kept me and cared for me!" she murmured shakily.

Dr. Wilmot nodded.

"We loved you very dearly, my poppet," he said. "In fact, you were like a gift from Heaven to my wife. You see, Lucille had lost a child of her own at birth, and could never have another."

The doctor paused, and after resting for a while, he requested Nancy to open a small deed-box which stood on the bedside table. Having done this, he asked her to take out a folded scrap of discoloured paper from it. There was, she noticed, a captial "N" on the outside fold of the paper.

"Please read it, my dear," he said, and wonderingly, Nancy unfolded the grubby slip of paper and succeeded in deciphering the childish scribble inside.

"*Gone to cave A*", was all it said, but there was a roughly drawn skull and cross-bones below the A—obviously the initial letter of the writer's name.

"That scrap of paper was the only thing which might have led to your identity, but it failed to do so," said Dr. Wilmot. "Nanny found it in the pocket of the little waif who had come into our lives on that memorable night.

"And when it became clear that we had done everything we possibly could do to trace your family, we were at last allowed to adopt you legally and give you our name, my poppet."

Nancy sighed.

"And is—and is that scrap of paper the only link you have with my life before that night, daddy?" she asked, a troubled look in her eyes.

Dr. Wilmot pondered the question for a moment or two, and then explained that, because of the cryptic letter "N" written on the slip of paper, they had decided to give her a Christian name beginning with "N", they had picked on "Nancy."

"I wonder what the letter 'A' stands for?" Nancy murmured.

"It is the initial of a boy's name in all probability," the doctor replied. "The skull and cross-bones rather suggests that. He may have been your brother, of course—or he may have been one of your playmates, my dear. In any case, perhaps you had keep that scrap of paper.

"Yes, of course," Nancy agreed, a puzzled look in her eyes. "By the way, daddy," she added, "Dr. Weiss told me he is sending a nurse from the cottage hospital to see that you 'obey orders', and I think she will be here for lunch to-day."

"But I don't need a nurse," the doctor said testily. "Weiss is like a fussy old hen, I'm expecting my lawyer to call this afternoon, and I don't want a nurse lurking about while he's here, as we shall probably be drawing up my will, among other things."

"Well, in that case, daddy, just think how nice it will be to have the nurse handy to witness your signature!" Nancy suggested, with gentle raillery.

She then left him and went downstairs to assist in the preparations for lunch.

Nurse Everitt arrived an hour later, and when Mr. Heath, the solicitor, came late in the afternoon, she and Mrs. Carbine, the housekeeper, witnessed Dr. Wilmot's signature to his will.

"Well, daddy, now that you have transacted your business affairs with the lawyer, you will be able to take a nice long rest, won't you?" Nancy suggested, when she entered the sick-room after Mr. Heath had taken his departure.

"All in good time, my poppet," the doctor answered, beckoning her to come and sit by the bedside . Nancy laid her cheek against his caressingly, and he gently smoothed her golden hair. "Yes, I have settled everything with my lawyer now—it is always wise to be prepared for the worst, though hoping for the best, you know," he added, with a wan smile.

Sensing that he had something—perhaps something very important —to tell her, Nancy waited, with bated breath.

"You are amply provided for, my child, and I have left Nanny a small legacy," he went on. "Ever since my dear wife passed away and you went to a boarding-school, I have arranged for Hester Blake to receive a modest monthly allowance, and I would like you to continue to do so when the time comes for me to leave this world."

"Yes, of course, daddy," Nancy murmured.

Another short pause followed. Then—

"And another thing, my dear. When I am gone, you will be all alone in the world, and I feel a little worried about that."

"Oh, but you mustn't worry, daddy," Nancy said quickly. "For one thing, nothing is going to happen to you, darling, —Dr. Weiss will see to that. And since as you say you have made a provision for me, what is there to worry about, daddy?"

"Loneliness, my child," he said. "The world can be a very lonely place for anyone without family ties."

"Yes, daddy, but I have friends, haven't I? So you must not worry on that account."

"Unfortunately, my poppet, just ordinary friends are not family ties, you know," he said, "and if I knew you were married—or engaged to be married—to some nice young man——" The doctor hesitated, then added—"Tell me—what do you think of Jack Hastings, my dear?"

Nancy smiled to herself.

"I—I like him very much, daddy," she stammered.

"What I mean is, darling, have you ever thought of him as a possible husband?"

"Well, no, I haven't, daddy."

"But I think the young man is very much in love with you, Nancy," the doctor remarked thoughtfully.

"Oh dear, I hope not, daddy, for I'm afraid that would spoil everything," she said. "And Jack and I are such good friends at present."

"Yes, yes, I know, my dear Nancy. But it does not put an end to friendship to marry a man who loves you, does it? My dear Lucille and I were always excellent friends, as I think you know, and we loved each other very dearly. In fact, "the doctor added, "if a girl marries a man without liking him as well as loving him, the relationship is not a perfect one."

This was a new point of view for Nancy.

"Well, yes, daddy, I—I like Jack Hastings very much," she added in a low voice.

"Yes, so do I, poppet, and there is no one to whom I would rather entrust your future, my dear," the doctor told her, with a wistful smile.

"But, daddy, there must be love as well, of course," she objected.

"Perhaps there is love, my child, but because you are so young and inexperienced, you haven't so far recognised it for what it is." The doctor paused, then added—"Had it not been for my illness and the uncertainty of how long I shall be with you, I would not have mentioned this matter to you all of a sudden, Nancy. In any case, my dear, it will do no harm to think things over, will it? And if you find you can regard Jack as more than a friend——"

"But, daddy. what—what makes you think Jack Hastings is in love with me?" Nancy broke in.

"Because he has told me so himself, my dear," the doctor answered.

Nancy felt herself quivering, and knew that she was filled with alarm and dread. It was almost as though her daddy, who loved her so dearly—blinded as he evidently was by fear of leaving her orphaned—was forcing her to the brink of a precipice.

But to think like that was childish of her, of course, she reminded herself. It was her duty to give the matter her earnest consideration and, if she found it possible, to become engaged to Jack Hastings. It was her bounden duty to free her daddy, if she possibly could, from the anxiety concerning her future that was oppressing him.

Meditating, she rose and walked over to the window to see the young man himself standing at his easel the other side of the stream. He appeared to be painting away as though his very life depended on finishing the picture he was working on in record time.

Then, when Nurse Everitt returned to the sick-room, Nancy availed herself of the opportunity to go downstairs and, after hesitating for a moment or two at the garden gate, she crossed over the little stream on the stepping stones and joined Jack on the opposite bank.

"Hullo, Nancy!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Well, and what's the news? How is your father?"

Nancy told him that she thought her father was feeling a little better, and then relapsed into absorbed silence while pretending to be examining the picture on the easel, and as she did not seem to want to talk. Jack resumed his painting.

Stepping back a pace or two in order to be out of his line of vision, Nancy transferred her gaze from his painting to himself. What she saw was a well set-up and good-looking young man with clear-cut features.

His eyes, she knew, though she could not see them at the moment, were the grey of wet shingle and invariably met her gaze with a friendly frankness. Nancy felt instinctively that a girl who really loved Jack Hastings and became his wife, would be headed for happiness.

A girl who loved him!

Jack was not just a good-natured nonentity. Nancy's thoughts ran on. He had plenty of character and seemed likely to make a successful career for himself as an artist.

Hearing her sigh, Jack turned abruptly and met the brooding gaze in her eyes.

"What's the trouble. my dear Nancy?" he enquired solicitously, laying down his brush.

"I—I was just thinking, that's all," she answered, flushing and lowering her eyes.

"Are you up against a problem of some kind, Nancy?" he probed.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I am," she admitted, in a low voice.

"Then won't you tell me about it and let me see if I can help you solve it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid that is quite out of the question, Jack," she murmured, again avoiding his eyes. "There are some problems one has to solve for oneself."

"Of course, my dear Nancy," he agreed.

"Is it—is it something which your father has said to you about—well, about us?" he ventured to ask, diffidently.

Nancy nodded, and again lowered her eyes.

"Well, let's talk it over, shall we, Nancy?" he coaxed, taking her arm and leading her to the nearby trunk of a fallen tree. Then, when they sat down—"Now please tell me what is worrying you, my dear," he urged gently.

After hesitating for a moment or two, Nancy mustered up courage to say—

"Well, daddy has told me that you—that you—that you are in love with me and —and that you want to marry me."

Jack nodded.

"Yes, that is so, my dear Nancy," he said. "I love you with all my heart and soul, and if—and if you can hold out no hope for me, my dearest, then life for me will be dust and ashes!"

Nancy sighed.

"Life is so—so difficult," she murmured falteringly.

"Why, darling? Is it because you feel you could never love me? Is—is that it?" he asked, an anxious note in his voice.

"Oh, I—I just don't know, Jack. I am very fond of you—I mean, we have been good friends, haven't we? And it's been fun fishing and sailing and doing all sorts of things together. But—well, somehow, I feel there's something missing that ought to be there to make it real love," Nancy added lamely.

"Well, there's certainly nothing missing in my feeling for you, my darling," Jack said, taking her hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze. He paused, then added—"Tell me, Nancy, is it because there is some other man in your life?"

"Not in the sense you mean, Jack," she answered, "and I think I like you better than any other man I've ever met. It's only that the way I feel about you—it's the sort of way I might have felt about a brother, had I one, if you understand what I mean. I'm sorry, Jack, but perhaps the capacity to feel real love was left out of my make-up when I came into the world!"

Jack shook his head dubiously.

"Oh no, I can't accept that, my dear Nancy," he said. "I am quite certain you are capable of deep and true love—in fact, I'd stake my life on that. But you're so young and inexperienced—and, perhaps, a little afraid of the unknown future. I expect many girls feel as you do when they first become aware of the overwhelming reality of the heart's awakening. Many poems have been written on the theme. Have you never heard anyone quote the lines—

'Maiden with reluctant feet
Where the brook and river meet'!"

Nancy nodded, and said she had seen the lines quoted in an old calendar under the picture of a girl standing on a river bank.

"But I didn't know it had anything to do with love," she explained.

"What an innocent little darling you are!" Jack exclaimed, smiling into her eyes. "Really, Nancy, I feel I want to wrap you up in cotton wool and protect you from the chill winds and the buffets of the stern reality of life."

"Oh no, Jack, there's no need for you to say that," she protested laughingly. "Don't forget that I am nineteen, which is quite grown up, you know, and I am therefore able to stand on my own feet and take a few hard knocks that may come my way."

"Yes, yes, of course," he agreed, a twinkle in his grey eyes. "Please don't hold it against me that I want to take all Fate's knocks intended for you, and that I want none but the gentlest and kindest winds to blow on you. Lovers are like that, you know, darling."

"No, I suppose not, Jack," she said, "and if—and if I were only quite sure——"

Nancy broke off and her eyes met his.

"I think I understand, Nancy dear," he told her smilingly. "Evidently, you are not yet quite certain that what you feel for me is love. Well, now, let's tackle this problem together, darling. First of all, you do like me. don't you—perhaps quite a lot? Does that sound to you presumptuous? Anyway, it's not. It's strictly logical.

Nancy smiled.

"Is it?" she murmured.

"Yes, darling," he went on, "if a girl gets so much real enjoyment out of boating, swimming. fishing and the rest of it with a man, as you appear to have done, it bespeaks quite a lot of liking, and she may well be on the way to loving him without being actually aware of it."

"You rather make it all sound just as you want it to be, Jack," she told him smilingly, "and listening to you. I'm almost beginning to believe what you say. But I'm afraid that when I am alone and have time to think it over, I shall still have my doubts about it all."

He sighed, and she went on—

"I want to be fair to you, Jack, and am very anxious to please daddy in every way I possibly can. But it would not be fair to you, would it. if I promised to marry you and then discovered that I would never give you anything but mere friendship?"

"Well, no, I suppose not, Nancy," he conceded. "All the same, darling, we've got to do something about it, if only because of your father, haven't we? Now listen, my dearest, suppose we get engaged if only to please your father? There will be no need to make the engagement public, and it could easily be broken off later on if you decide that you do not wish to marry

me—though, I devoutly hope this will not be the case."

"Oh, but I think that would be very unfair to you, Jack," she objected.

"Never mind that, my dear Nancy," he said. "If I'm willing to take the risk of losing you after all, you will have nothing to worry about, will you? In any case, I shall have had a further chance of making the running, and if my luck fails me in the end—well, it will be just too bad darling."

It was now Nancy's turn to sigh.

"You—you must be very much in love with me, to talk like that," she said.

"Yes and I hope and pray that before very long, my dearest, you will love me as much as I love you" he told her smilingly.

ECHO OF THE PAST.

THE car stopped on the lip of the valley where Dr. Weiss was wont to park his car when he visited his patient at "Silver Mist."

"This looks like being it," announced the pleasant-faced elderly woman in the car, smiling at her husband.

"Shall I go down and find out for you, Mrs. Thorneycroft?" asked the chauffeur.

"Yes, please do, Mears," she said, and leaping out of the car, the young man took the narrow path leading down into the valley.

"This looks pretty good to me," Arthur Mears was thinking, as he admired the rich profusion of wild flowers to be seen everywhere in the valley.

As he neared the end of the path, he stopped to gaze at two small sailing boats tacking about in the cove. Then, as he was about to walk on, he caught sight of an unattended easel with a picture upon it not far from where he was standing and he went to have a close view of it.

He saw at once that it was a picture of the valley with its lovely flowers in full bloom. In the foreground, was the figure of a beautiful girl with golden hair, and in the distance, a crimson-sailed boat could be seen in the cove.

"What a smashing girl!" Arthur muttered to himself, and next moment his brows drew together in a puzzled frown, for somehow the face seemed oddly familiar.

He tried to think where he could have seen the girl before.

"It's something about those hazel eyes and the mass of golden hair that baffles me," he told himself.

At that moment, a girl wearing the corn-flower-patterned dress shown in the picture —came strolling out of the garden of a grey stone house. With her was a young man in a paint-spattered artist's smock.

Arthur Mears was not one to be embarrassed at having been caught looking at the painting. He grinned disarmingly as they approached, and announced that he liked the picture very much indeed.

"Thanks for the compliment, old chap," the artist replied. "As long as you don't follow up by telling me that you don't know anything about art, but that you happen to know what you like, I won't murder you!" he added, his eyes twinkling.

"Is that so?" Mears returned, the grin on his face broadening. "Anyway, it's nice to know that I passed the test. By the way," he added, "I'm looking for a house called 'Silver Mist'. Can you tell me if I'm on the right track?"

"That is 'Silver Mist' over there," said the girl, pointing to the grey granite house from the garden of which she and her companion had just emerged.

"Oh, good!" Mears returned, with a cheerful smile. "I'm looking for Doctor Wilmot."

"Are you? Well, Doctor Wilmot is my father" Nancy explained.

"Is he?" Mears muttered in surprise. "Then I'd better go back to the car and tell my passengers."

"Your passengers?" Nancy echoed, gazing curiously at him.

"Yes, Doctor Ralph Thorneycroft and his wife," Mears answered.

Nancy drew a quick breath, and turned to Jack Hastings.

"They're my Aunt Josephine and her husband from South Africa!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Oh. I'm so glad we met you." she explained to the stranger. "My father has been very ill—and still is, for that matter. So I think I'd better go and prepare him and thus soften the shock of their sudden and unexpected arrival."

Mears nodded understandingly.

Nancy gave him a puzzled look, and went on—

"But who are you, may I ask? Somehow your face seems familiar to me. Have I seen you somewhere before? You aren't a cousin by any chance, are you?"

"Oh no, my name is Arthur Mears, and I'm the chauffeur," he answered, grinning.

"But you spoke of your 'passengers'," Nancy said. "Surely you cannot be a chauffeur and own the car as well!"

"Can't I?" Mears returned. his eyes twinkling. "Well, it so happens that I run a hire-a-car-and-drive-yourself business in London, with a partner. So, when Doctor Thorneycroft hired the car and wanted a chauffeur, and I knew he was coming to Cornwall for a month or so, I took the job on. But, somehow, I have the same sort of feeling as you have that we've met somewhere before."

"My name is Nancy Wilmot," she told him, "and I live here with my father."

Mears considered a moment, then shook his head.

"Doesn't ring a bell," he said. "But never mind, Miss Wilmot, I expect it'll come back to me suddenly. My mind is like that.

"Well, I must get cracking," he said. "I'll be seeing you," he added amiably, and took his departure.

Nancy turned to the other young man.

"I had better go and break the news to daddy," she said, "and then I'll have to think about getting lunch for the guests. So I'm afraid I shan't be able to pose for you again to-day, Jack."

"I quite understand, my dear Nancy," he muttered, trying not to sound disgruntled at the sudden turn of events. "I'll pack up for to-day, and perhaps we can get on the job to-morrow morning."

"I can't promise absolutely," she warned. "You see, Jack, my aunt and uncle will probably stay here with us for several days, in which case, my time won't be my own what with one thing and another."

"Yes, of course," he conceded glumly, and added that, as things were, perhaps he had better run up to London for a few days to try and fix up an exhibition for his paintings.

Nancy nodded her agreement, and then hurried into the house.

Jack shrugged resignedly.

"It is now three weeks since we decided to become engaged, and I haven't made a scrap of progress with Nancy," he reflected.

Then and there he decided that he really would go to London and see his agents about the art exhibition they had promised to arrange for him. The thought uppermost in his mind was that his absence would make Nancy miss him very much and long for his return.

But how misguided he was!

"SO this is your adopted daughter, is it?" Mrs. Thorneycroft remarked smilingly, after kissing Nancy. "I have always maintained," she went on jestingly, "that it's much better to choose a daughter or a son rather than to take whatever Mother Nature chances to send you, and your case proves me right, David."

"It is nice of you to say so, Aunt Josephine," murmured Nancy, flushing with pleasure at being so greatly approved by her aunt.

"I couldn't agree with you more, my dear Josephine," her husband put in, smiling at Nancy.

"Now if you will kindly excuse me," Nancy said, with an anxious glance at the clock. "I'll go and catch the bus to St. Ives and do a little shopping, or I'm afraid you will have to have bread and cheese for lunch."

"And what could be nicer?" Aunt Josephine suggested laughingly.

"Hold on, my dear, this is the first I've heard about an invitation to lunch," Dr. Thorneycroft said, with a genial smile.

"Of course you haven't been asked, Uncle Ralph—it's taken for granted," Nancy said, smiling back at him.

"Yes, yes, of course, my child," Dr. Wilmot said. "Not only that," he added, his face lighting up with a smile, "I hope you will decide to spend a few days here with us after coming all the way from South Africa."

"Thank you very much, David," his sister-in-law said. "Now stop looking at that clock, Nancy," she ordered. "If you really must go to St. Ives, there is no need for you to go by bus. You will find a car at the top of the path with a nice young man in attendance, and he'll run you to St Ives."

"Oh, good!" Nancy said laughingly.

With the flush of happy excitement on her lovely face, she then hurried off.

"What a very sweet girl she is, David!" Mrs. Thorneycroft remarked.

Dr. Wilmot nodded.

"Yes, she certainly is, my dear Josephine," he agreed. "Nancy has been a godsend to me."

"Well, and what does your doctor think of you, David?" she went on. "And being a doctor what do you think of your self, may I ask?"

Dr. Wilmot shrugged.

"I've left it to Doctor Weiss," he answered, "for if there's one article of faith I don't hold, Josephine, it's 'Physician, heal thyself'. Anyhow, when Doctor Weiss intimated that I'd had a 'very close call', I had no difficulty in believing him, and I sent for a lawyer and made my will."

"Tell me, David, what's the trouble exactly?" enquired Dr. Thorneycroft. "You certainly don't look seriously ill at the moment."

Dr. Wilmot gave a wry smile.

"I've got angina, my dear Ralph," he said, "and I'm liable to pop off at any moment if I overdo things."

Dr. Thorneycroft shook his head dubiously.

"I find it difficult to believe that," he said.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you, David," put in Mrs. Thorneycroft, "at one time, Ralph thought of becoming a heart specialist."

Dr. Thorneycroft rose, walked over to the window, and stood looking out, a thoughtful expression on his face. Josephine, like her sister Lucille, had been a nurse, and she knew what was passing in her husband's mind.

"Ralph says," she continued, "that quite a number of people, if the truth were known, David, die of being persuaded they have angina."

"It's like this, David," said Dr. Thorneycroft, turning from the window, "it's one of those diseases that Nature can stimulate faithfully if the conditions are right. For

instance, the patient may have bad indigestion and, in consequence, great pain, shortness of breath and all the rest of it. Then, very impressivly, the doctor announces 'Angina' and thus hypnotises his patient into believing he is suffering from it.

"Naturally, I can have no opinion at all on your case, David—officially, that is," Dr. Thorneycroft continued. "But if you will suggest to your doctor that you would like him to have a consultation with me, and mention that I have a particular interest in heart cases, I'll be happy to collaborate.

"Well, Doctor Weiss is calling here to see me this afternoon." Dr. Wilmot remarked.

MEANWHILE, Arthur Mears, with Nancy in the car, had set off for St. Ives. Presently he brought the car to a standstill on the cliff road.

"Gosh! Isn't this absolutely marvellous?" he cried enthusiastically, gazing out to sea.

"I expect you're used to it all, aren't you, Miss Wilmot? But if you'd just come here from London, I reckon you'd see what I see, if you know what I mean."

"Oh yes, I think I understand what you mean," Nancy told him laughingly. "The sea is as blue as cornflowers to-day, and the sky is forget-me-not blue. Down below there are black rocks, and the deep water in their shadow is a lovely green for which I've never been able to find a name.

"And," she went on dreamingly, "farther along, at Clodgy, just beyond St. Ives, there are no end of pink sea-thrift on the cliff-tops and there's a lovely smell of wild thyme.

"My hat, how you must adore it all!" he exclaimed, with boyish glee.

"Oh yes, I certainly do," Nancy agreed. "It's my idea of Heaven on a day like this. But I love it at its wildest in the winter, too, when there are no bright colours anywhere.

"I can quite believe that," he said.

"Tell me—are you a good swimmer, Mr. Mears?" she enquired, with a disconcerting change of subject.

"Well, yes, not too bad," he answered, and told her that, as a youngster, he had learnt to swim in the Thames from the foreshore at Putney Bridge.

"This part of the coast is very treacherous for bathers." Nancy went on to explain. "Sometimes the look-out people have to warn even the strongest swimmers that it's unsafe because of the undertow. There's one spot at the tip of the 'Island', as we call it—though it isn't one—where there's a whirlpool and it just sucks the unwary bather down and——"

"Thanks, my dear girl," he broke in laughingly. "I think I'll avoid that spot."

"But there hasn't been a fatality there for quite a long time." she said. "It only happens when people ignore the warning on the notice-board."

"Any more tempting little danger spots?" he asked jokingly.

"Well, yes," Nancy replied. "There's the risk of a swift-running tide trapping you on Clodgy Point rocks, and there is the cove at Zennor."

"What's the hazard at Zennor, Miss Wilmot? Not a quicksand, I hope?"

"Oh no," she replied. "At Zennor, the danger lies in the rapid tide and the undertow. Only a few years ago a whole family was wading there—just wading, ankle-deep—and the undertow sucked the lot of them down and away. It was a dreadful tragedy."

"Now hadn't we better drive on, Mr. Mears?" she said. "I'm supposed to be catering for six people for lunch, you know."

He started off in haste, and they soon arrived at St. Ives. After Nancy had completed her shopping, she found that she was well ahead of time. When she mentioned this to Mears, he grinned, and said—

"Let's dawdle on the way back and enjoy this lovely day, shall we?"

Nancy nodded.

"Yes, let's," she agreed, her hazel eyes sparkling.

"Fish!" he exclaimed abruptly, as they drove along at a leisurely pace.

Nancy gazed at him in surprise.

"Why fish?" she enquired, with an amused little laugh. "I suppose you think we've taken rather a lot of fish aboard? But, as I've already told you, there are six of us for lunch, though the oysters are for my invalid father."

Mears made no reply, and Nancy rambled on—

"Those small oysters I bought are found in a local stream. Somebody once found a valuable pearl in one, and since then we've all had hopes. It's a family joke to warn our guests 'Mind your teeth on the pearls'!"

"Oh, hang it all!" Mears exclaimed irritably.

"What's the matter now?" Nancy asked laughingly. "Why are you so moody all of a sudden?"

"Well, I've been trying to remember something—something to do with fish," he said, "but all to no purpose."

Nancy spread out her hands as one who gives up an insoluble problem. She saw his eyes dilate as he watched her twirling the signet ring on her finger.

"Is—is that an engagement ring?" he asked bluntly.

"Well, yes, a temporary one," she answered smilingly.

"Just my luck!" he muttered morosely. "All the nice girls I meet seem to be engaged."

"And it's rather queer how all the nicest men seem to be married," Nancy retorted.

"Well and who's the lucky man, may I ask?"

Nancy hesitated a moment. Then—

"Jack Hastings," she replied.

"You—you mean the artist chap I saw you with?"

Nancy nodded, and Arthur Mears drove on, deep in thought.

"DADDY is evidently beginning to feel better already," Nancy whispered to Mrs. Thorneycroft after lunch, "for he made his classic jest—'No pearls in those oysters'!"

"Splendid, my dear!" applauded Aunt Josephine, and then suggested that Nancy should go for a long drive in the car during the afternoon. "Your Uncle Ralph and I will look after your daddy, so you need not hurry back."

"Oh, how very kind of you, auntie dear!" Nancy exclaimed delightedly, "I shall enjoy showing Mr. Mears some of our lovely Cornish beauty spots."

"Yes, and he will greatly appreciate it, my dear," Mrs. Thorneycroft said. "You had better call him 'Arthur', as we do? He is not really a chauffeur, you know. But he very kindly consented to act as chauffeur for us during our stay in England."

As she was speaking, Aunt Josephine noticed the ring on Nancy's engagement finger, and went on smilingly—

"I'm looking forward to meeting your fiance soon, my dear. I wonder whether I shall think him good enough for such a nice young girl as you?"

"I wonder?" Nancy returned shyly.

Half an hour or so later, Mrs. Thorneycroft stood at the front door and watched Nancy drive off in the car.

At the place where the narrow track leading from the cove joined the main road, Arthur stopped the car.

"Right or left?" he asked smilingly.

"Right leads through St. Ives to Zennor," Nancy explained.

"Where the family of waders came to such a sad end?" he suggested, with a whimsical smile.

"Yes, but there are pleasanter things to recommend it, you know," Nancy said. "For instance, the road from Zennor leads to several picturesque coves, and the coast is lovely and wild."

He re-started the car and took the turning to the right.

"Do you like living in London?" Nancy asked, as the car sped along in the direction of Zennor. "From what I've read about it in books, I should think life there must be very exciting, Mr. Mears."

"Oh yes, it certainly is," he replied. "You ought to be glad you didn't live there in the war years, though, for it was a perfect hell during the blitz."

"Yes, I'm sure it must have been," Nancy murmured. "It makes me shiver even to think about it."

LOVE COMES UNBIDDEN

ON arriving at St. Ives they had lunch, and then set off along the glorious stretch of coast for Zennor, by way of Tren Cron.

Nancy was enjoying every moment of the drive.

"Oh, look, Arthur!" she suddenly exclaimed, unconsciously addressing him by his Christian name as he steered the car into an indentation in the hill-side.

"You mean that cromlech with the flat rock on top that makes it look like a huge mushroom?" he asked.

"Yes, it's a rocking stone," she explained, "and it is said that only a slight push would send it crashing into the valley."

He stopped the car and gazed in awe at the scene—it was really the high spot in the drive from St. Ives to Zennor. The sea was an intense blue, and high above in the blue sky were wind-blown clouds of the purest white.

Nancy had turned away from him to gaze at the fishing fleet on its way out to sea, and he noticed that she had become very serious all of a sudden.

Queer, Arthur meditated, how the mention of London, as on a previous occasion had brought that brooding look to the girl's face. She turned to him again, and pointed to the blaze of golden gorse-blossom below the rocking-stone on the hill.

"Perfectly lovely, isn't it?" he remarked, inhaling the sweet fragrance of the gorse.

"What does it's scent remind you of, Arthur?" she asked.

"I—I really don't quite know," he answered thoughtfully. "It sort of does something to me so that I can't recall any other perfume."

"I think it reminds me a little of being in an apple orchard," she murmured dreamily.

"In an apple orchard, eh?" he said, grinning at her. "Well, I think we had better push on now. I'm beginning to remember that little alfresco tea-party we have in mind."

"Oh yes, let's drive on to Sennon Cove—that is, if you're not too exhausted by hunger to wait till then," Nancy suggested mockingly.

"And if I am?"

"Well, we can have tea in the car, or sitting on a boulder amongst the bracken by the roadside."

"Good!" he said, and throwing away the cigarette he had been smoking, he drove on.

"Well, here we are!" Nancy announced gaily, when they arrived at Sennon Cove.

By now, the ice had been well and truly broken, and after tea, they settled down on the beach with their backs propped up against a sun-warmed rock.

They sat in silence for awhile, gazing out to sea. Presently, glancing at her companion, Nancy saw that his eyes were closed, and thinking that he must have fallen asleep she leaned forward to take stock of him.

Lean, strong face; generous, humorous mouth; eyes which, though shut, she knew to be blue; dark hair which, blown by the gentle breeze, fell into waves over his forehead; and he appeared to be only a year or two older than herself.

Nancy was thinking how nice it was to be able to chatter and laugh and enjoy herself with a youthful companion. Her daddy and Aunt Josephine and Uncle Ralph were dears, of course, but there was that gulf of the years between them and herself.

Turning away, she gazed out to sea again, and opening his eyes, Arthur Mears watched her covertly.

But she had been forgetting Jack Hastings, her thoughts ran on—Jack who loved her and whom she had promised to marry.

Two lines from a poem came unbidden into her mind:

"Oh, the little more and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!"

Nancy sighed as she suddenly realised the truth of those lines.

"Why the sigh?" Arthur asked.

She turned to him with a start and forced herself to smile.

"So you are awake at last!" she twitted him.

"Naturally. I couldn't go on sleeping while you sat there thinking aloud," he retorted boyishly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Well, that heavy sigh of yours, of course. It was to the very life that of the lover 'sighing like a furnace', as Shakespeare puts it. Does your fiance sigh like that, too, when he's away from you, I wonder?" Arthur speculated daringly.

"I haven't the slightest idea" she answered laughingly.

He laughed.

"By the way," he said, "the Thorneycrofts call me 'Arthur'. So why don't you do so? It would sound much more friendly And then I could call you 'Nancy', couldn't I?"

"Very well," she agreed.

"I understand that your fiance has gone to London," he went on. "When is he coming back?"

"Next week, I expect," she answered, with an air of indifference.

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"You know, Nancy, I don't think you are really in love with him," he said, greatly daring.

"Why—why do you think that?" she stammered.

"Well, you aren't, are you?" he persisted, looking her straight in the face.

Nancy shrugged.

"Perhaps not as yet," she admitted. "You see I only came home for good from boarding-school last January."

"Is that so?" Arthur murmured. "And how old are you, may I ask?"

"I—I think I'm about nineteen," she answered.

"You think, Nancy! But surely, my dear girl——"

"Well, you see," she broke in, "my birth certificate was lost."

"You could get a copy by applying to the registrar of births and deaths in the locality where you were registered, you know."

Nancy shook her head sadly.

"But I couldn't," she murmured.

"Why not, my dear girl? What's all the mystery?"

"I—I don't know where I was registered," she stammered, avoiding his gaze.

"Please forgive me, Nancy," Arthur said contritely. "I shouldn't have asked you such questions. All the same, when your father is quite fit again, I suggest that you ask him to make enquiries about your birth certificate."

Nancy sighed.

"I—I suppose there is no reason why I shouldn't tell you," she said impulsively. "You see, it's like this," she went on, after a brief pause. "Daddy is not my real father. He and his wife adopted me—I was an orphan of the blitz on London, and no one knows where I was registered."

Arthur nodded thoughtfully.

"How old were you at the time, Nancy?" he asked.

"About nine, I think. You see, I had lost my memory when someone picked me up unconscious in the street after one of the air-raids on London. An ambulance took me to a hospital where daddy was a doctor, and mummy a nurse. That's how I came to be adopted by them.

"My real parents were never traced," she continued. "I expect they lost their lives in the raid that night, for I've been told that a whole block of buildings near where they found me was totally destroyed. So you see," she added, with a wan smile, "I'm little Miss Nobody from Nowhere without even a name of my own!"

"WELL, now, we'll call it a day, shall we?" Arthur said smilingly, as Nancy dabbed at her eyes with a wet handkerchief.

She nodded, and taking her powder-puff and mirror from her bag, set to work to repair the ravages wrought by her tears.

"That's better," Arthur commented judicially, when she looked at him and smiled. "Now you are looking your sweet self again, my dear Nancy."

She laughed.

"Really, Arthur," she said, "you rather remind me of my old Nanny when she took a close look at me to see if I was sufficiently spick-and-span to go to a children's party!"

"But you were a bit old for a Nanny, weren't you—at nine, I mean?" he suggested laughingly.

"Yes, of course, but Miss Blake had been mummy's nanny and was in charge of everything in the house in London. Then, when I appeared on the scene, she took me on as well,"

"I see," Arthur murmured. He paused, then added—"Tell me, Nancy, why did you get yourself engaged to that painter chap?"

"It—it was daddy's idea really," she explained. "You see, Arthur, he is very ill with heart trouble and may die at any moment. So he persuaded me to become engaged to Jack Hastings."

Arthur repressed a groan.

"And so your daddy arranged for you to make a loveless marriage!" he suggested, a bitter note in his voice.

"Well, no, it's not quite like that," Nancy said. "When Jack proposed to me, I told him I was not in love with him. But I agreed to become engaged to him on the understanding that, if daddy got better, and I still did not love him, we—we could break it off."

"More likely that you'll find yourself being rushed into a marriage by special licence because it's your daddy's dying wish," Arthur muttered sombrely.

Nancy frowned, and thinking that he might be misjudging Dr. Wilmot, she was on the defensive at once.

"In any case," she said, "daddy and his wife took me—a child who had literally been picked up out of the gutter—and brought me up although I had no claim whatever on them. I owe everything to them. So is it too much for daddy to ask me that I should marry before he dies in order to set his mind at rest about me?"

"It is—if it means marrying a man you do not love," Arthur answered bluntly.

Nancy sighed.

"I'm afraid we shall never agree about this," she said. "So suppose we talk of something else, Arthur?"

"All right, go ahead," he invited, but Nancy could think of nothing to say.

They sat there in an embarrassing silence for some little time, then Arthur spoke.

"Listen, Nancy," he said, "let's bury the hatchet and avoid the subject of your engagement from now on, shall we?"

"Yes, let's," she agreed, eager to get back to what had seemed a most pleasant friendship.

"After all," he went on, "it's no affair of mine, of course. I realise now that I have been usurping the privileges of an intimate friend, and yet we have known each other for only a few hours—though, somehow, I feel that I have known you for years, Nancy."

"Strangely enough, that's the way I feel about you, too," she said. "Have you any inkling at all where we could possibly have met, Arthur?"

"Not the slightest, my dear girl," he replied, frowning, as he scooped up a handful of sand and let it sift through his fingers.

"Listen, Nancy," he said, "if you have lost the memory of those first nine years of your life, you have had, for all practical purposes, only ten years of actual experience of life, haven't you?"

"But what does it matter?" she countered. "I am quite content with the place in life that daddy has given me, and have no wish to delve into my childhood days."

Arthur nodded understandingly.

"Evidently you must have lost your relatives in that awful air-raid," he said. "So the past is dead and gone as far as you are concerned. Anyway," he added, on a more cheerful note, "let's forget it, Nancy, and plan something for to-morrow. How about a swim in the cove before breakfast?"

"Yes, that would be lovely," she told him smilingly.

"Very well, then, I'll be waiting down on the beach for you," he promised.

Arthur lit a cigarette, and she suddenly became aware that he was gazing at her.

"A penny for them, Nancy," he offered, smiling at her.

"I was just wondering what sort of a small boy you were, Arthur," she said, smiling back at him.

He laughed.

"Oh, a perfect pest!" he replied. "I think I had all the makings of a gangster."

"But there's no trace of that now, Arthur. So you have evidently grown out of it."

"Oh yes, I suppose one outgrows things like that," he said. "Besides, I had a wonderful stroke of luck."

"Did you? Please tell me about it," Nancy urged.

"Well, you see, I was in charge of foster-parents, and there was a tremendous air-raid one night. So I scuttled off to a well—to a sort of secret cave of mine. Then, when the bombing was over, some one discovered me and I was taken to what was called a 'rest centre'. Next day I was told that my foster-parents had been killed in the air-raid. So I was placed in charge of some other foster-parents who lived in the country and they were wonderfully kind to me.

"They noticed that I was a pretty clever

kid," he went on, a broad grin on his face. "So the wife encouraged me to study all I could. And her husband, who ran a garage, saw that I had a passion for cars, and what he didn't teach me about them, wasn't worth knowing. Then, after a while I won a scholarship and was sent to a grammar school. There I met the chap who is now my partner in a 'Hire-a-car-and-drive-yourself' service. So here I am, a really reformed character, Nancy, and making a good living for myself," he added triumphantly.

Nancy smiled.

"Good for you, Arthur," she said. 'We have both had the same sort of disruption in our lives, and have both had luck, haven't we?"

Arthur nodded thoughtfully.

His success story had revived Nancy's courage.

WHEN she returned home that evening, Nancy was informed by Dr. Thorneycroft that he wished to keep her daddy under close observation for a day or two.

Next morning, she received a letter from Jack Hastings, and wrote him a friendly reply. Though Nancy did not admit it even to herself, she regarded her fiance's absence as a welcome interlude. and she sought to enjoy every minute of the time when she was with Arthur Mears.

Their morning swim together was only the prelude to a day spent more or less in each other's company. Aunt Josephine, who had now learnt just why Nancy had become engaged to the artist, did everything she possibly could do to throw her and Arthur together.

"I know what sick-nursing is, Nancy dear," she said. "You have been having a pretty slim time of it, so please take advantage of my being here and enjoy yourself by going for long country drives as much as you can."

And Nancy, who had awakened to the fact that she felt a joy in Arthur Mears' company such as she had never known before, allowed herself to drift, refusing to think of the day of reckoning when Jack Hastings returned from London on the following Saturday.

Perhaps Arthur was feeling the same compulsion to snatch every minute of time with her, for he was waiting on the beach for Nancy on Saturday morning a good quarter of an hour earlier than usual.

It was a glorious sunny morning, with a soft, relaxing breeze, and when Nancy arrived in her beach-wrap. she said—

"Let's sit down and talk for a little while, shall we, Arthur?" and he eagerly fell in with the suggestion. "Only one more day," she added, with a wan smile.

"But you don't really mean to go on with this engagement, do you, Nancy?" he said.

She sighed.

"Nothing has changed, except for the worse, perhaps," she murmured.

"What do you mean by 'for the worse'?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it, that since daddy is kept under observation by Uncle Ralph, he must be in a very serious condition " Nancy said, a troubled look in her eyes.

The same idea had struck Arthur. Knowing Nancy as he did, he realised that there was no use arguing the matter with her. If Dr. Wilmot's condition deteriorated, and he pressed her to marry Hastings right away, Nancy would have to consent to his wish, no matter what it cost her.

"But let us forget all about that for the moment, Arthur," she pleaded. "Let us live for to-day. So please help me to forget," she added, with a forced smile.

"Very well, my dear Nancy, then let's go for our swim," he said, and helped her to her feet.

When she removed her beach-wrap, Arthur stared at her in surprise.

"What—what's the matter, Arthur?" she stammered. "Why are you staring at me in such a way?"

He recovered himself with an effort.

"I—I notice that you have a cherry-coloured mole on your shoulder, Nancy," he said.

"Yes, I know, and it's an awful nuisance, for I am never able to wear a backless evening dress," she told him regretfully.

"But I—but I can't understand why I didn't spot it before, Nancy."

"I can," she said, with a wry smile. "It's because I've been wearing my old school bathing costume. This is a more modern one and has a lower back. But why are you making such an ado about it, Arthur?"

He did not reply for a moment or two, then he laughed.

"Anyway, I happen to know now who you really are, Nancy, and where we first met!" he said exultantly.

She gasped and gazed at him incredulously, then turned abruptly. and slipping on her beach-wrap, rushed up the slope to "Silver Mist".

Arthur Mears saw her no more that day.

FATE MAKES AMENDS

"NANCY is suffering from a bad headache and is staying in bed, so I am doing the shopping to-day," Mrs. Thorneycroft informed Arthur, when he called to announce that the car was waiting to take Nancy for her usual morning drive.

Then, when Mrs. Thorneycroft had taken her seat in the car and Arthur was about to drive off, she laid a restraining hand on his arm, and said—

"What has happened Arthur? Have you and Nancy fallen out about something, may I ask?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Well, no," he answered glumly. "But I—well I chanced to catch sight of a birthmark on her shoulder and—and I identified her as a girl who had shared a grim past with me when we were kiddies," Arthur paused then went on—"Like a fool, I blurted it out to her and, apparently she was so scared that I was about to remind her of who and what she had been in her childhood days, that she took fright and ran away from me. And now, I suppose, she'll never want to see me again," he added despairingly.

Mrs. Thorneycroft smiled to herself.

"You're fond of the dear girl, aren't you, Arthur?" she said.

"Yes, I certainly am, Mrs. Thorneycroft," he admitted. "In fact, I am so deeply in love with her that if she marries that artist fellow. I shall have lost everything worth living for."

"Oh, come, Arthur, please don't give way to despair. Why not take me into your confidence and tell me exactly what happened to you and Nancy during the war?" Mrs. Thorneycroft suggested coaxingly.

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, we were both orphans and had been dumped on drunken foster-parents who didn't give us enough to eat, and they gave us a good beating occasionally. But we mattered as much to each other as though we'd been brother and sister, if you understand what I mean?"

Mrs. Thorneycroft nodded understandingly.

"Yes, I think I do, Arthur," she said. "But why is Nancy so afraid of remembering her past?"

"She is evidently afraid of the hold her past may have on her," he replied. "I suppose it's only natural. But I think it may also have something to do with a fear that the past might be strong enough to make her break her word to Dr. Wilmot, who has always been so very kind to her, and to whom she owes so much."

"Yes, yes, of course," answered Mrs. Thorneycroft. "But don't lose heart, Arthur. I have reason to believe that Dr. Wilmot will soon be restored to health again, then he will regard everything, as far as Nancy is concerned, in a different light. So keep up your courage, Arthur. You can rely on me doing everything I can to help you. Tell me," she added, "what was Nancy's real name? And do you happen to know anything about her parents?"

"Nancy's name was Nelly Lovell, and she and I lived with foster-parents who we called Ma and Pa Mason. That is how we came to know each other."

"I see," Mrs. Thorneycroft remarked. thoughtfully. "Very well, you had better drive on now, Arthur."

Nancy remained in her room all that day. It was late in the evening when, worn out by the fight she was having with herself to keep her resolve not to see Arthur again before Jack Hastings had returned from London—and then only in the presence of others—that she succumbed to the temptation to open the drawer of her dressing-table and take out the grubby little note signed with the initial "A" which Dr. Wilmot had told her was the only clue to her childhood identity.

As she unfolded it with trembling fingers, she knew—since Arthur himself had blurted out the fact—that they had shared the same past. Therefore, she supposed that the initial "A" must stand for his name. What she expected to gain by reading the note, Nancy did not know. But when she did read it, she suddenly went deathly pale.

"Artie!" she gasped. "Not Arthur—Artie!"

Memories came flooding back to her, the past unfolding before her like a scroll. She lived again an awful day when Pa Mason, staggering drunk, had beaten her, and Artie had rushed to her aid and they had fled to "the cave."

Then followed the vivid recollection of their last night together, when they had quarrelled because Artie had eaten the sardines she had "scrounged".

There were other poignant memories, too—dim memories of her father, and shadowy ones of her mother stitching away for dear life at her needlework to earn a living. Then her mother had been taken ill and died, and Pa and Ma Mason . . .

Nancy shuddered at the thought of it all—the dreadful wailing of the sirens, the terrible crash of the bombs, of panting, stumbling and choking. then of falling into a bottomless pit of blackness!

Next thing she had known had been Lucille, her new mother, and Nanny trying to coax her to eat . . .

WHEN Nancy awakened on the following morning, she was feeling a little dazed. Presently, however, two sets of memories seemed to arrange themselves in place in her mind, and she had the curious sensation of feeling a whole person again.

"Our last day alone together!" she reflected sadly, and knew that she had not the strength of will to forbid herself those few remaining hours to be with the young man she loved.

It wouldn't be a whole day, of course, she reminded herself, since Jack Hastings was due to arrive at five o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Yet it was all they were ever likely to have together, so she and Artie must make the most of it.

It did not occur to Nancy that her fiance, ardently desiring to see her again, might have travelled on the night train from Paddington and would arrive on Sunday

morning. Her only fear was whether Artie, knowing that she had fled from him in such a fright, would regard it as proof of her decision not to see him again.

She donned her swim-suit and beach-wrap, and stealthily leaving the house, ran down to the cove.

But another person had risen early that morning, and had seen her go—Aunt Josephine! Fearing that Nancy would refrain from going for her usual swim that morning, Mrs. Thorneycroft had been listening for movements in the house from an early hour, and a smile crossed her face when, from her bedroom window, she saw Nancy tripping lightly down to the cove.

"Thank heaven for that!" she murmured to herself. Then, turning to her husband, she said—

"Ralph dear, do please tell me frankly what you really think of David's condition. As you know, I have always respected your rule never to discuss any of your cases with you. But this case is different. David is our brother-in-law, and quite a lot depends on whether he is going to get well or not." She hesitated, then added—"You see, Nancy will probably marry young Hastings, because it's her daddy's wish, but she is deeply in love with Arthur Mears."

"Oh, so that's the way it is?" muttered Dr. Thorneycroft.

"Yes, Ralph, that's the way it is," his wife confirmed gravely.

"Well, in that case, Josephine, I'll break my rule for once, and tell you that it is my opinion that David is going to be all right again before very long. I've delayed telling you this because of my desire to convince Doctor Weiss of the rightness of my diagnosis.

"You see," Dr. Thorneycroft continued, "it's rather a delicate situation since I wished myself on the worthy G.P. as a consultant. It is therefore only fair to let him arrive at agreement with me off his own bat, so to speak. But I have every reason to think from what he has already told me, that he will do so."

"Oh, Ralph, I'm so glad to hear you say that!" Josephine exclaimed delightedly.

MEANWHILE, down at the cove, Nancy could see no sign of Arthur. She stood for a while forlornly staring out to sea and listening to the cries of the gulls—the birds seemed to be mocking her!

Then, suddenly, she caught sight of Arthur. He was sitting on the sand a little farther along the beach, leaning against the seaward side of an old disused pilchard boat. When he saw her hurrying towards him, he sprang to his feet and ran to meet her.

"Oh, Arthur, I'm so glad—so very glad that you have come," Nancy said, a little breathlessly, as he took her outstretched hand and gave it a firm grip. "I—I'm afraid this is our last chance of being together alone," she stammered on, "and—and we have so much to say to each other, haven't we?"

"I certainly have a lot to tell you, my dear Nancy," he said, smiling into her eyes. "And first and foremost is this—you can't possibly marry anyone but me, can you?" he challenged, his grip on her hand tightening.

"Can't I?" she countered, her eyes twinkling. "Well, I can remember everything now, Artie," she went on. "I have a grubby little note that daddy gave me a short time ago. He told me that it seemed to contain a clue to my identity. It was signed 'A', and there was the pirate's symbol—the skull and crossbones! As I stared at it, I found myself thinking that 'A' stood for 'Artie'—not Arthur. Then, suddenly my mind was flooded with lost memories and everything seemed to fall into place."

Arthur grinned.

"Oh yes, I remember writing that note, Nancy," he said. "But I didn't know then that I was going to fail you so badly."

"I suppose you are thinking of those sardines you wolfed?" Nancy suggested laughingly. "Well, you have no need to worry about that, Artie, for I ate the jam tarts the baker woman gave me, and hadn't meant to let you know anything about it. So, you see, Artie," she added, "we're both tarred with the same brush. But we were horribly hungry at the time, weren't we?"

"Yes, and that accounts for our childish pranks, of course," he said, with that boyish grin of his. He gently stroked her shining corn-coloured hair, and went on—"Anyway, you realise now, don't you, Nelly dear, that you and I belong to each other? We've been through so very much together, haven't we?"

"I—I'm afraid such a thing is quite out of the question, Artie," she murmured. "You see, it is still touch and go whether daddy has long to live. If there had been any sign of improvement, Doctor Thorneycroft would have told me, of course, for he has been making a close study of daddy's condition."

Arthur sighed, and said no more.

When, a quarter of an hour or so later, they had finished their swim, and Nancy was donning her wrap, she remarked sadly—

"Well, this will be our last swim here together."

Arthur suppressed a groan, and before Nancy had time to realise what was happening, he impulsively threw his arm around her shoulders, gazed deep into her eyes for an instant, and then, while the gulls squawked overhead as if in derision, their lips met and clung in a long, passionate kiss.

And it was thus that Jack Hastings saw them. He had made an early morning call at "Silver Mist", and Aunt Josephine had told him that he would find Nancy down at the cove.

NANCY and Dr. Thorneycroft and his wife were sitting in the lounge after breakfast that morning when the telephone bell rang, and Mrs. Thorneycroft went into the the hall to answer it.

"The message is for you, my dear," she told Nancy smilingly. when she returned to the lounge. "It was from Mr. Hastings. He wishes me to let you know that he has been unexpectedly detained in London and is afraid he will not be able to get back here for several days. That being the case, Nancy, I think you had better avail yourself of a lovely day like this and let Arthur take you for a nice long drive, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course, my dear," Dr. Thorneycroft put in, before Nancy had time to reply.

She gave Arthur a shy smile when, an hour or so later, he handed her into the car.

"I feel as though we have passed through some crisis and that everything is now going to be all right for us in some miraculous way," she told Arthur smilingly. as they set off on their drive.

Arthur shrugged and shook his head a little dubiously.

"I don't think we can count on miracles, my dear Nancy," he said. "As I see it, our future happiness depends on you, and you alone."

"Oh, Artie dear, is that quite fair?" she asked, with gentle reproach. "Surely you must realise that I have been trapped into my present situation by Fate? Besides, what would be so miraculous about my daddy getting well again? It seems to me that he is now improving every day."

"But, Nancy, even if Doctor Wilmot did get well, I expect you'd discover that, for some reason or other, you'd still have to marry that man Hastings," he muttered morosely.

Nancy sighed.

"In any case, Artie, please let us look on the bright side and hope that everything is going to be all right for us," she urged.

"Very well, my dearest," he agreed, his face brightening up. "It shall be as you suggest. To-day is ours, and we will make the best of it . . ."

WHEN Nancy went indoors to dress after they had had their usual swim together on the following morning, Dr. Thorneycroft told her that her daddy would be allowed to leave the sick-room for a short time that day.

Nancy's heart gave a bound.

"Then—then daddy is really improving, Uncle Ralph?" she said.

"Of course your daddy is going to get well again, my dear," Aunt Josephine put in, with a cheerful smile. "And if he obeys the rules your Uncle Ralph has laid down for him, he has a long life before him. As a matter of fact, Nancy," she added, "we are hoping that your daddy will be fit enough to undertake the voyage to South Africa with us."

"To—South Africa!" Nancy stammered incredulously.

Aunt Josephine nodded.

"Yes, my dear," she said, "that's part of the treatment your Uncle Ralph has planned for him. We're hoping that when your daddy gets to South Africa, his condition will so improve in the new environment that he will stay out there permanently with us."

"Oh, Aunt Josephine, how—how wonderful!" gasped Nancy.

Seeing the unspoken question in the girl's eyes, Aunt Josephine smiled, and went on—

"Of course, Nancy dear, this will set you free from your promise to marry Jack Hastings. I think you gave the young man to understand, didn't you, that you were not really in love with him and that the temporary engagement was only entered into in order to set your daddy's mind at rest, in case—well, in case anything happened to him?"

"But, Aunt Josephine, would it be fair to Jack?" murmured Nancy. "You see, he is very much in love with me and——"

"Yes, and so is Arthur Mears, my dear," Aunt Josephine broke in. "Please don't forget that. Now tell me quite candidly—which of the two young men do you really love, Nancy?" she challenged smilingly.

"I—I am in love with Arthur," she answered frankly.

"Yes, I know you are, my dear. Well, take my advice and mark time for the present. I have a hunch that everything will come all right for you in the end," Aunt Josephine added, giving Nancy an affectionate pat on the shoulder.

It was then that Arthur arrived on the scene and handed Nancy a letter which the postman had given him when he got out of the car at the top of the valley.

NANCY and Arthur strolled dreamily arm in arm, in the gloaming in the garden at "Silver Mist", listening to the occasional notes of a night jar and, to complete the fantasia, the eerie hooting of an owl.

They had been married that day, and seemed to be only partly conscious of their surroundings. Dr. Wilmot had handed over the deeds of "Silver Mist" to Nancy

as a wedding gift before leaving for London en route for South Africa with Dr. Thorneycroft and his wife.

"I'm glad we are spending our honeymoon here, Arthur dear," murmured Nancy, smiling up at her husband.

"So am I, dear heart," Arthur returned softly, gazing into her hazel eyes which a golden harvest moon had turned into limpid pools of golden light.

"It—it all seemed so utterly hopeless until that morning when you brought Jack Hasting's letter to me in which he announced that he had fallen in love with another girl."

"Well, let's wish him the best of luck, darling," Arthur said, his arms tightening about her. "Nothing can ever happen to part us now, can it, my love?"

"No, nothing, my dear Artie," Nancy murmured, her eyes radiant with happiness.

THE END.

JOURNEY TO LOVE

By Leslie Winter

PEGGY'S DILEMMA

PEGGY WARDEN stood in front of a long mirror running a comb through her golden hair cut in an urchin bob. She applied a touch of lipstick to her lips, smiled at her reflection, and then fetched a duster from one of the cupboards.

Monsieur Dulac's little shop stood within the imposing portico of the Hotel Metropolitan and was, in fact, part of it. Here one could buy the most expensive perfumes in London, as well as the most exclusive cosmetics and toilet luxuries of all kinds.

Below the shop was a gentlemen's hairdressing saloon which was also owned by Monsieur Dulac, and included in the staff were three manicurists, of whom Peggy was one—she also helped in the perfume shop occasionally, when required.

The shop door opened suddenly and a slender, dark-haired girl entered.

"Hullo, Doris. I was just going to start dusting," Peggy remarked.

"Well, it's my turn really, but as you're about to start you might as well get on with it, my dear," Doris said lightly as she took off her hat and coat and hung them in a cupboard. "Miss Banfield not here yet?"

Miss Banfield was the manageress and cashier. She was a little older than either of them and they knew she was saving up with a view to starting a beauty parlour of her own in one of the suburban districts.

"No," answered Peggy, proceeding with her dusting. "She told me last night that she might be late in arriving this morning."

"A man in the case?" Doris suggested laughingly.

"I don't think so," Peggy replied. "She's so bound up in her ambition to set up business on her own that I don't think she has any time for such a frivolous thing as love-making."

Doris went to the mirror and patted out the creases in her tight-fitting black dress with sleeves that came a little below the wrist.

"By the way, Peggy, seen your sugar daddy lately?" Doris inquired, as she turned away from the mirror.

Peggy flushed. She knew that her friend was only teasing, but even so, it didn't sound at all nice. And all because Sir Mark Ireton, who was old enough to be her grandfather, always insisted on having her to attend to his hands whenever he came to the shop.

"No, I have not," she answered shortly.

"Sorry, darling," Doris muttered contritely. "I was only joking, of course. Somebody told me the other day that he's a millionaire."

Peggy shrugged.

"I don't know whether he's a millionaire or not," she said, "but I believe he's enormously rich. Anyway, he's not a bad old boy really. Sometimes I feel rather sorry for him."

"Sorry for him?" echoed Doris. "You're not going to hand out that old stuff about riches not bringing happiness, are you? Until I've proved it for myself, my dear, I, for one, will never believe it."

"Well, Sir Mark is certainly not happy," Peggy said. "But whether or not it has anything to do with his being rich, I can't say."

Doris laughed.

"Is it his health, or his conscience that's worrying him, I wonder?" she asked flippantly.

"I rather think it's his son," Peggy murmured.

"Didn't know he had a son," Doris said.

"Well, he has, and Sir Mark told me all about him the last time I was doing his hands," said Peggy.

"And what did the young man do? Run away with the gardener's daughter or something of the kind?" Doris asked jestingly, as she started to arrange a number of dainty powder puffs in a show-case.

"Oh no, nothing like that," Peggy replied. "It seems that he gave up studying medicine and left the country. Sir Mark thinks he went to Australia, but he isn't sure."

"What a dirty trick to have played on the old man," commented Doris.

"Well, yes, it rather sounds like it," Peggy agreed. "But that's only Sir Mark's side of the story. Bruce—that's the name of his son—might have a different version, of course, and—Hullo," Peggy muttered, lowering her voice, "here comes Miss Banfield at last."

The door opened to admit a smartly dressed woman of about thirty. Having murmured good morning to the two girls, she gave a swift glance round the shop to make sure that everything was in order, and then disappeared into a small room at the back of the shop.

"I bet she'll be glad to have a place of her own, instead of being at the beck and call of 'Old Froggie'," muttered Doris.

"S-sh!" warned Peggy. "Miss Banfield might hear you."

"Precious little I'd care if she did," retorted Doris. "I can always get a job somewhere else if I want to."

Peggy knew this was true, but it might not be a job like this one. Having learned her trade in a small suburban beauty parlour Peggy considered herself extremely lucky to have been engaged by Monsieur Dulac. This was Mayfair where one got glimpses of the lives of the wealthy, where fashion reigned and where one picked up all sorts of tit-bits of gossip about people who really "mattered".

"All the same, I like it here, Doris," she said. "Monsieur isn't a bad old stick, even if he does become a bit excited now and again."

Doris then changed the subject.

"How's the boy friend, Peggy?" she asked.

"You mean Frank? Oh, he's off to Geneva shortly to cover some conference or other," Peggy replied.

"Gosh, who wouldn't be a journalist?" Doris exclaimed. "Seeing the world and having a jolly good time. Some people have all the luck."

"Oh, but Frank has some pretty tricky and unpleasant jobs sometimes," Peggy said.

"Yes, Frank Rubin always looks to me about the toughest guy I've ever met. But I think you must admit, darling, that he's no oil painting!" Doris added laughingly.

"Oh, well, I've no liking for handsome men," Peggy retorted. "They're always so frightfully conceited."

"Depends on the man, my dear. Hullo!" Doris went on, in a low voice, "here comes Monsieur and he's looking pretty fierce this morning. Whose blood is he after now, I wonder?"

"Miss Warden, you are wanted in the salon," said Monsieur Dulac, putting his head inside the door. "The client is Sir Mark Ireton," he added importantly.

"Very good, Monsieur Dulac, I will come at once," answered Peggy.

Doris grinned as the door closed on the proprietor.

"That means a ten bob tip, I bet," she said. "My mean set seldom ever disgorge more than five bob."

When Peggy entered the salon, she found her client awaiting her.

"Good morning, Sir Mark," she said brightly. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes, quite, Peggy," he answered. "Well, and how are you, my dear?" he added, smiling at her as she opened her manicure case.

"Very well, thank you, Sir Mark."

"Wish I could say the same," he muttered. "As it is, I'm under doctor's orders. 'Mustn't eat this, mustn't drink that, and only a couple of cigars a day' and the rest of it. I'd gladly give all I possess, Peggy, to be—well, say, thirty years younger."

Peggy smiled.

"Would you, Sir Mark?" she murmured.

"When I was very young," he went on, "people used to say that money didn't bring happiness, but I didn't believe it, of course. If it were true, I thought to myself, why is everybody trying to get rich? Anyway, if money didn't bring happiness, poverty certainly didn't, and neither did failure."

He paused, and thinking that he was expecting her to make some comment, she said—

"So I suppose you set to work and made money, Sir Mark?"

"Yes, that is so, Peggy, and I succeeded," he replied. "But the trouble was—and this I hadn't foreseen—that I was so busy making money I hadn't time to be happy. I hadn't even time to realise that I was alive. I became a sort of automaton with no thought except for the stock-markets. Would the shares I had invested in rise or fall? Should I buy or sell? Should I try and get control of this company or that?"

"I should think it must have been very wearing for you," Peggy murmured.

"Oh, I don't know, my dear girl," he said. "It fascinated me. I was like those professional gamblers who have a flutter at Monte Carlo. Absolutely engrossed in the game. Nothing else mattered."

"Oh no, not at all, Sir Mark, I'm very

interested," Peggy said, as she started work on the other hand.

It wasn't strictly true, of course, but Peggy knew it was part of her business to seem interested in her client's affairs.

"So that's how it went on," he continued. "Then late in life, I married a woman I did not love, simply because her father had influence in the City and was in a position to advance my interests. I was fully aware that Rita was not in love with me, but she had been brought up to obey her father in everything, and she would never even think of going against his will."

"Was—was the young lady in love with someone else?" Peggy ventured to ask, and then realised that this was not the sort of question she should have put to him. But Sir Mark did not seem to mind.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, she was," he said. "I didn't know it at the time, but Rita confessed to it some time after we were married. She was in love with a naval officer she had met at a dance. But he had nothing but his pay, and her father soon got wind of the affair and put a stop to it. To the best of my knowledge, Rita and the young man never met each other again."

"There, Sir Mark, I've finished my task," said Peggy, rising to her feet.

"Thank you, my dear—and thank you for listening so patiently to an old man's maunderings," he said, grinning at her. "It's not everybody who would, you know."

Peggy murmured something polite, accepted the generous tip he had slipped into her hand, then wished him good day.

"No," Peggy reflected, "money does not bring happiness after all, and perhaps the more money people make, the less happy they are."

"SO you've seen old money-bags again, have you, darling?" her fiance remarked laughingly, when Peggy met him that evening and told him about Sir Mark's visit to the salon.

Frank Rubin, who was a special correspondent for the "Daily Messenger", was a big, tough-looking individual who, as Doris Cole had put it, was "no oil painting". There was a suggestion of ruthlessness about his rugged features and ice-cold blue eyes which, for some reason she could not explain, sometimes made Peggy feel a little afraid of him.

"All the same, Frank dear, I can't help feeling sorry for him," she said. "He has had an unhappy married life. His wife is dead, and his only son ran away from home."

"Maybe if he'd been a decent sort of father, the son wouldn't have run away," Rubin suggested, with a cynical laugh.

"Oh, Frank, I do wish you wouldn't say things like that," Peggy said. "It's like passing judgment without knowing all the facts. I daresay Sir Mark has done things he ought not to have done. But who hasn't?"

Rubin grinned.

"You seem to be very partial towards the old bird, don't you, my dear girl?" he said. "But then, I suppose he tips you well, doesn't he?"

"Anyway, let's go and have dinner, Peggy, and forget about your elderly Croesus," Frank was saying. "No doubt, in due course, his nibs will get what is coming to him."

"I say, Frank dear, why are you so bitter against the old man?" Peggy asked. "He's never done you any harm, has he?"

"I said, let's forget him," he countered, grinning at her again.

They went to a small restaurant in Soho, and having ordered the meal, Frank referred to his forthcoming visit to Geneva on behalf of the "Daily Messenger".

"It will be the usual spate of words, no doubt," he muttered, with a contemptuous shrug. "Most of it will be just hot air, but newspaper correspondents have to dress the stuff up for the public to give the pretence that it really means something."

"Oh, Frank, why are you so awfully cynical?" Peggy murmured. "It makes one almost feel that there's nothing worth believing in."

He laughed.

"Everyone has to believe in something, my dear girl," he said. "For instance, your friend, Sir Mark Ireton believes in money, doesn't he?"

"You suggested that we forget Sir Mark, didn't you?" Peggy retorted.

"Well, yes, I rather think I did," he admitted laughingly. "Now what about going on to 'The Jolly Dog' for a spot of dancing when we leave here, darling?"

"The Jolly Dog" was one of the more exclusive West End night clubs to which Frank, as a well-known representative of the Press had the *entree*. Peggy had been there with him on several occasions, but now, for some reason or other, she was feeling unusually depressed and excused herself on the plea that she had rather a bad headache.

"Oh, very well, if you'd rather not," he said a note of annoyance in his voice. "In that case, I'll see you home."

"There's no need for you to do that," she said quickly. "You go on and amuse yourself, Frank."

"Well, if that's how you feel about it, Peggy, I will," he returned huffily. "I can't think what's come over you to-night. Really, you seem to find fault with everything I say."

Peggy sighed. There was a certain amount of truth in his accusation, but, she told herself, he ought not to have said such unkind things about Sir Mark Ireton.

"I'm sorry, Frank," she murmured a little unsteadily, and felt an almost irresistible urge to bury her face on his shoulder.

"Well, you have properly messed up our evening," he said, "and I think we'd better say good night before we quarrel."

"Yes, perhaps we had," she agreed, blinking back the tears that came to her eyes. "Good night, Frank."

"Good night," he muttered, then turned and walked quickly away.

Peggy felt like calling out to him to come back, but pride prevented her from doing so. It was the first time since they had become engaged that they had parted without kissing.

When Peggy arrived at the shop next morning, her friend Doris Cole, sensed at once that there was something wrong.

"Had a quarrel with the boy friend last night, darling?" she inquired bluntly.

Peggy frowned.

"What makes you think that?" she countered.

"Well, you don't look exactly as though you'd woken up this morning singing 'Hail, smiling morn'!" Doris replied laughingly. "But never mind, my dear," she added consolingly. "it will soon blow over—such things always do."

"I'm not so sure," muttered Peggy.

"Bad as that, was it? Well, and what was the bone of contention?" asked Doris as she started arranging the powder puffs in their case.

Peggy hesitated. Then—

"There wasn't any, really. But Frank said a number of unfair things about Sir Mark Ireton, and I defended him. After all, the old man has always been so nice to me."

"But surely Frank Rubin is not jealous of the poor old dodderer, is he?" Doris said. "Why Sir Mark must be well nigh eighty!"

"Oh no, I don't think he's jealous—it's simply that Frank for some reason or other, doesn't like the old man," Peggy replied.

"Well, you never know," commented Doris. "Men are queer creatures, and I suppose your fiance could be jealous of Sir Mark if he suspected the old boy was paying you attentions."

Peggy shrugged.

"Oh, well," she said resignedly, "I expect it was just that Frank was not in a good mood last night, and that it was as much my fault as his that we had a tiff. I'm beginning to realise now that I shouldn't have taken him so seriously and——"

Peggy broke off abruptly as the shop door opened and Miss Banfield entered.

When she arrived home that evening, Peggy found a hurried note awaiting her from Frank saying that he had to leave immediately for Geneva by plane. There was no reference to their misunderstanding of the night before and no affectionate message. The note was merely signed "F. R".

So, she thought miserably, Frank had not forgiven her—not that there had been anything to forgive as far as she was concerned, she reminded herself, calling upon her pride and sense of fairness.

"Oh, well," Peggy reflected, "if that's the attitude Frank is going to take up, I can do the same. I certainly don't see why I should apologize to him when I've done nothing wrong."

During the next few days, though she read the reports he sent to the "Daily Messenger" from Geneva, Peggy received no word from Frank. She knew, of course, that he must be very busy; even so, surely he could have found time to send her a line. Could it be that he wanted to break off their engagement? she wondered.

Gradually, Peggy convinced herself that he did. She even removed the engagement ring from her finger, and made up her mind to send it back to him as soon as he returned to London—though some nights she cried herself to sleep at the thought of it all.

Then, one morning, Monsieur Dulac informed Peggy that Sir Mark Ireton's secretary had rung up requesting that she should go to his flat in Park Lane at the earliest possible moment.

"It appears that Sir Mark has been taken ill and cannot come here himself" Monsieur Dulac explained, and handed Peggy the address.

When Peggy arrived there, the door of Sir Mark's luxurious flat was opened to her by a dignified-looking butler.

"Please come in, and I will inform Sir Mark that you are here," he said.

He then showed her into what appeared to be a morning room, and even Peggy's inexperienced eye, recognised that the furniture consisted of very valuable antiques.

In a few moments, the door opened to admit a young woman in nurse's uniform.

"Is—is Sir Mark very ill?" Peggy inquired, a little nervously, as she rose to her feet, for she had not expected to find a uniformed nurse there.

The nurse nodded gravely.

"I'm afraid he is not in a fit condition to have manicure treatment this morning, but he insisted on having his own way," she answered primly.

On their way to Sir Mark's room, they met the doctor who was attending him.

"This is the manicurist the patient sent for, Dr. Milsom," the nurse said. "I tried to dissuade him, but it was no use."

The doctor shrugged resignedly.

"I don't think it matters very much, nurse," he said. "It is a case of sudden collapse, and I'm afraid there is nothing much we can do about it except make the patient as comfortable as possible."

The nurse then took Peggy into a large room overlooking Hyde Park. The patient

lay in a bed facing the window, propped up by pillows.

"Here is the manicurist you sent for, Sir Mark," the nurse announced in a low voice.

He smiled at Peggy then murmured—

"You can leave us, nurse."

"But, Sir Mark, the doctor's instructions were——" the nurse began.

"And it is my wish that you leave the room for the time being, Nurse Wilson," broke in Sir Mark irritably. "Am I master in my own house, or am I not?" Then, when the nurse had reluctantly taken her departure, he grinned at Peggy, and said—"Once you get one of these hoity-toity nurses in the house, they behave as if they owned the place."

"Oh, but I expect the nurse was only obeying the doctor's orders, Sir Mark," said Peggy soothingly.

"Well, she's obeying mine now," he muttered. "Now please sit down, my dear girl, as I want to have a talk with you."

"But hadn't I better attend to your hands first?" Peggy suggested.

"No," he answered, grinning at her again. "I don't need a manicure. I merely used that as an excuse for getting you here. As a matter of fact, Peggy, my number is pretty nearly up!"

Peggy sank into the bedside chair and stared at him in alarm. Not until this moment had she fully realised how desperately ill he actually was.

"The—the reason I sent for you, my dear Peggy," he added, "is that I want to make you my wife!"

For a moment or two, Peggy thought she must have misunderstood what he had said, and she gazed at him in bewilderment.

"I know it must sound preposterous to you, my dear Peggy," he went on, "but I have a very good reason for asking you to marry me. Your common sense will tell you that it can be nothing but a marriage in name only. Nevertheless, I want to make you my legal wife, Peggy, although in a matter of hours almost, you will have become a widow."

"But, Sir Mark, I—I do not understand," stammered Peggy, thinking that he must be delirious. "Evidently you do not fully realise what you are saying."

"Now you are talking like that officious fool of a nurse, my dear girl," he blurted out irritably. "Oh yes I know perfectly well what I am saying. All that I ask of you is to utter a few words which will make you my wife in the eyes of the law."

"But—but why, Sir Mark?" Peggy murmured falteringly.

"I'll tell you, my dear," he said huskily. "If—if I wait much longer I may not have sufficient strength left to put into words what I want to say to you. Give me your hand, Peggy."

She meekly obeyed, and he went on—

"I have few relatives in the world, and not one of them ever tried to help me when I was young and penniless and badly in need of help. But now that they know I am rich and about to say goodbye to this world, they are gathering around like vultures, hoping I will forget and forgive and that they will come in for some of the pickings. But they are going to be sadly mistaken, Peggy."

It was when he paused, as if to regain strength, that Peggy suddenly remembered he had told her that he had a son called Bruce.

"But what about your son, Sir Mark?" she ventured to ask. "I think you once told me you and he had quarrelled about something. But—but he is still your son, isn't he?"

"Yes, I know, Peggy, and he as good as told me in the last letter I had from him that his one great wish was to forget that I was his father. And as I intend to leave him nothing," the old man added grimly, "that should help to assist him in forgetting me."

"Even so, Sir Mark, you could leave a will——" Peggy began when he cut her short.

"Wills can be contested, but no one would contest the right of a wife to inherit her husband's property. Now please give me your answer, Peggy. You can make it so that I can fade out of this life with my mind at peace, by simply becoming my wife for a few hours; or you can refuse and let an old man die with a mind embittered and no peace in his heart. It is for you to choose, my dear girl."

Peggy covered her face in her hands, at a loss what to say or do in such a terrible dilemma. She was very fond of Sir Mark, for all his inexplicable harshness and cynicism and she felt extremely sorry for him. But it might be his own fault that he found himself in such a pathetic position.

"Well?" he prompted, when she hesitated. "You have only to say the word, Peggy. I have already made the necessary arrangements!"

"But—but couldn't you give me a little time to—to think the matter over, Sir Mark? she pleaded. "I—I may be able to give you an answer to-morrow."

"To-morrow may be too late, Peggy," he answered gravely. "I am asking you to make a sacrifice—though only for a short time—for an old man's sake."

Peggy sighed.

"Very well, Sir Mark," she blurted out.

With a sudden sinking of the heart, she realised that she had given him her promise for good or ill, and could not go back on it.

"Thank you, my dear Peggy," he said. "Now please ring that bell on the table."

Feeling dazed, and half-inclined to believe that it was all some dreadful nightmare from which she would presently awaken, Peggy meekly obeyed his request, and next moment, the nurse came hurrying in, looking worried and uneasy.

"Tell Barton to put my instructions into effect right away, nurse," Sir Mark ordered.

When the nurse had taken her departure, Sir Mark explained that Barton was his valet.

"Henry Barton" he went on "has been with me for over forty years, and I trust him as I trust no other man. It is Barton who has arranged everything for me—including obtaining the special licence for our marriage."

"But—but how could he do that, Sir Mark, before you knew that I would consent to marry you?" Peggy asked, gazing at him in astonishment.

The old man grinned.

"I took the chance, my dear," he said. "In any case, no harm would have come even had I not been able to use the licence. Barton has also arranged with the vicar of a nearby church to come here and perform the marriage ceremony. He knows that my end is very near, and Nurse Maybrooke has promised to be one of the witnesses."

"Is that the nurse who just left us?" Peggy asked.

Sir Mark shook his head.

"Oh, no," he said. "Nurse Maybrooke is the night nurse whom you haven't met. She and my son Bruce fell in love when he was studying to be a doctor, but the young fool abandoned his career and went abroad. Nurse Maybrooke has never forgiven him for letting her down so badly."

At that moment the door opened to admit a tall woman in nurse's uniform. Peggy judged her to be about thirty. There was a suggestion of hardness about her features which rather diminished her attractiveness.

"I understand that you wish to see me, Sir Mark," she said.

"Yes, that is so, Nurse Maybrooke," he replied. "This is Miss Peggy Warden who has promised to become my wife."

Nurse Maybrooke gave Peggy a questioning glance, and then turned to the patient.

"You look very tired, Sir Mark," she said. 'Do you think you will have sufficient strength to go through with—with all this?"

"Yes, of course I shall," he answered testily.

Nurse Maybrooke pursed her lips, and without making further comment, she arranged the bedclothes. Then, having placed a small table at the foot of the bed, she glanced at her wrist-watch, and murmured—

"They should be here very soon now."

A few moments later, the door opened to admit an elderly clergyman followed by Sir Mark's valet. Barton placed a small bag on the table, and then stood a little aside.

Peggy could never quite remember all the details of that fantastic marriage ceremony. She remembered, too, whispering "I will" in answer to the clergyman's question.

Then, after they had all signed a number of papers, the parson took his departure, followed by Barton. Meanwhile, Nurse Maybrooke was bending over Sir Mark, who seemed utterly exhausted.

"I think you had better leave now, Lady Ireton," the nurse said gravely. "But you had better leave me your private address,"

Peggy hurriedly scribbled her address on the back of one of Monsieur Dulac's business cards and handed it to the nurse.

"Is that all?" she murmured, still feeling a little dazed.

"All for the present, Lady Ireton," the nurse replied, and then turned to her patient.

Peggy left the room as one in a dream. Barton was awaiting her in the corridor.

"If you will pardon me saying so, my lady," he said, deferentially. "I should like to tell you how greatly relieved I am that you acceded to my master's last request. I have been with Sir Mark for nearly fifty years, and it would have been a very sad thing for me to know that he had died a frustrated and embittered man—as would have been the case had you refused to marry him."

"Then—then you are fond of Sir Mark?" murmured Peggy who, up till now, had heard very little said in favour of the old man.

"Yes, very fond indeed, my lady," answered Barton. "I know Sir Mark made many enemies, but he has always been very good to me."

Peggy nodded, and then wished him goodbye.

Barton accompanied her to the outer door and Peggy emerged from the vestibule into Park Lane. During the short time she had been in the luxurious flat, she seemed to have lived another life. She had entered the flat an unmarried girl with no thought of marriage in her head, and now she had left it the lawful wife of a dying man.

The reality of it all drove from her mind the feeling that she had been in a dream. What she thought had happened, actually *had* happened. From the point of view of the law, she was no longer Peggy Warden, but Lady Ireton! Fantastic though it might be, it was perfectly true.

All the same, she assured herself, as she hurried in the direction of the Hotel Metropolitan, she would not say a word about the affair to anyone, not even to Doris Cole. If she did, people would naturally think she had taken leave of her senses.

When she arrived back at the shop, Peggy explained to an impatient Monsieur Dulac that she had been detained longer than she had expected, because Sir Mark was ill, and he accepted the excuse.

"Did he give you the usual tip?" Doris Cole inquired.

"He was too ill to think about tips," Peggy murmured.

It was on the following morning that Monsieur Dulac told Peggy she was wanted on the telephone. He was annoyed with her, for it was one of his rules that none of his staff should make or receive private calls during business hours.

"It was a lawyer," he said, "otherwise I should have refused to send for you."

Peggy picked up the receiver.

"Yes, who—who is it, please?" she stammered.

"Is that Lady Ireton?" inquired a man's voice.

"Well—yes," Peggy answered nervously.

"Then will you kindly call at the office of Messrs. Corbin and Rutley, of Lincoln's Inn Court, at three o'clock this afternoon, Lady Ireton?"

Peggy gasped in dismay.

"But I—but I shall be unable to get away until after five o'clock," she said. "You see, I dare not ask my employer to let me have time off this afternoon, as he has several appointments booked for me."

A short pause followed. Then—

"I am afraid I do not understand, Lady Ireton. Of course you are aware that your husband died last night. I was informed that your address was the Hotel Metropolitan and——"

"Yes, but I am an employee there," Peggy broke in. "I—I am a manicurist and am employed by Monsieur Dulac."

Another pause. Then—

"I—I see. All the same, Lady Ireton, I am afraid it is essential that you should come here and see Mr. Corbin, the senior partner of our firm, this afternoon."

It seemed to Peggy that she had no option in the matter.

"Very well," she said, "I will do my very best to come."

When she asked Monsieur Dulac whether she might have the afternoon off, he glanced at her in astonishment and refused point-blank.

"I'm afraid I shall have to take the time off, all the same, Monsieur Dulac," she said. "The lawyers insist on my calling on them this afternoon.

"Lawyers!" Monsieur Dulac cried angrily "I have my business to think of, have I not? Several appointments are booked for you this afternoon."

"Even so, I really must go, Monsieur Dulac." Peggy returned steadily.

"You tell me you *must* when I tell you you *must* not?" he stormed. "*Bien*, you shall go, but never will you return to my establishment. You are sacked you understand, and I will instruct Miss Banfield to give you your money in lieu of a week's notice!" Monsieur Dulac added, fuming with rage.

Peggy did not wait for the money. Knowing that she was sacked she decided to clear off at once and thus avoid having to answer embarrassing questions which Doris—and Miss Banfield, too, no doubt—would hurl at her.

As it happened, Miss Banfield had gone out to have lunch, and Doris was attending to a client in the salon, so Peggy was able to leave without saying a word to anyone.

She had a light lunch at a restaurant in a quiet street leading off Piccadilly Circus. Someone had left an early edition of an evening paper on the chair next to hers, and while waiting to be served, Peggy picked it up and her eye caught the headline:

FAMOUS FINANCIER'S DEATH

SIR MARK IRETON, THE "MONEY WIZARD" DIES AT AGE OF 87.

There followed an obituary notice telling of numerous companys Sir Mark controlled, of his various financial *coups* and so forth. But, Peggy noticed with deep relief, there was no mention of his last-minute marriage.

On arriving at the lawyer's office, she was at once shown into the senior partner's room, and Mr. Henry Corbin rose and placed a chair for her. He was not at all the severe looking person she had imagined him to be. On the contrary, Peggy told herself, he was more like a benevolent uncle.

"I suppose," he remarked smilingly, "you are not yet accustomed to being addressed as 'Lady Ireton'. Everything happened so very swiftly, didn't it?"

Peggy nodded.

"So swiftly that even now I can scarcely believe that it has happened," she murmured. "It—it's all very upsetting."

"Yes, yes, I can quite understand that," Mr. Corbin agreed. "Personally, I think you did a very courageous thing Lady Ireton—and a very generous one as well."

The lawyer then began to fumble with a pile of documents on his desk, and went on—

"It will be my duty to read Sir Mark's will in the presence of those of his relatives who happen to be present after the funeral. It is not necessary that you should be there, Lady Ireton, and I think I may stretch a point and let you know the main provisions of your late husband's will."

"My—my late husband!" murmured Peggy. "It—it does not sound possible, even now."

"I quite understand how you feel about it all, Lady Ireton" the lawyer said in a sympathetic tone. "I do not think you need attend the funeral if you would rather not. No doubt the newspaper men will turn up in full force, especially if the facts concerning Sir Mark's last-minute marriage become known. In any case, the secret will soon be out and I think we may take it for granted that everyone even remotely connected with the affair will be pestered by newspaper reporters."

Peggy sighed.

"Yes, I'm afraid that is bound to happen,' she said, thinking of the avidity with which Frank Rubin would seize on such a sensational "story", and the ruthless manner in which he would pursue it.

"That is why I suggest that it might be advisable for you not to attend the funeral, Mr. Corbin said. "And now as regards the will, Lady Ireton." he went on unfolding a legal-looking document. "I will skip the usual preliminaries. Briefly it amounts to this—after leaving generous provision for his valet, Henry Barton and several other old and trusted servants, free of death duty, the bulk of Sir Mark's fortune goes to his wife—which means you, of course."

"But—but what about his son?" Peggy asked. "Sir Mark told me that he had a son, and I think his name is Bruce."

"And did he not tell you that he had had a serious quarrel with his son, Lady Ireton?"

"Yes, he did, Mr. Corbin," she replied. "But I cannot believe that a father—especially one as well-off as Sir Mark—would fail to make ample provision for his only son."

The lawyer smiled.

"You did not know Sir Mark as well as I did," he said drily. "He could be very generous, and he could be completely ruthless——"

Mr. Corbin broke off abruptly as there came a knock at the door, and one of the clerks entered.

"Several newspaper reporters have called and would like to see you, sir," the young man announced, in a low voice.

The lawyer and Peggy exchanged significant glances. Then—

"Very well, Hobson, tell them to wait," Mr. Corbin said. "So the secret's out, apparently," he commented when they were alone again. "I have no intention of telling these men anything, Lady Ireton, but it won't do any harm to let them cool their heels downstairs for a while. It will also give you a chance to leave the office by a side door unseen by them.

"I think, Lady Ireton," he went on, as he rose from his chair, "that it would be a good plan if you left London for a while. Why not take a holiday in Cornwall? You would still be within easy reach of us should your presence be needed over legal matters. Meanwhile, you can, of course, draw on us for whatever money you want."

"Oh, but I would rather not do that, Mr Corbin," said Peggy

"But why not, Lady Ireton?"

"Well, you see, I didn't marry Sir Mark for his money."

"No, of course not," Mr. Corbin said. "I appreciate your point of view, Lady Ireton but you can scarcely resume your occupation of manicurist now, can you?

"Well, no, I suppose not," Peggy agreed.

"In any case, whether you like it or not, Lady Ireton, you are Sir Mark's widow and, under the terms of the will, you inherit his wealth. You cannot refuse it as though it were a sort of—well, as a sort of honorarium for services rendered, you know. It is a responsibility laid on your shoulders.

"Please remember that this money is not a gift," Mr. Corbin went on to explain. "In the eyes of the law it belongs to you. There can be no argument about that. However, we can go into details later. There will also be the matter of introducing you to your late husband's bankers. Now, about money for your immediate needs, Lady Ireton. What amount do you suggest?"

"Well, if you could let me have, say, a hundred pounds," Peggy murmured diffidently.

"Yes, yes, of course," Mr. Corbin said. "Would you prefer to have the money in notes?"

"Yes, please," Peggy answered.

Having handed her the hundred pounds, Mr. Corbin said—

"I will now see you out by a back door, Lady Ireton. In that way you will escape being seen by those newspaper men who are waiting to see me in the outer office."

THE PENALTY OF RICHES

FRANK RUBIN sat in the plane on his way back from Geneva feeling that his time had been wasted. The conference which he and other journalists had been sent to report, had been postponed indefinitely.

All the same, he could not help feeling glad to be on his way home, since it would give him an opportunity to see Peggy again and make it up with her. Having had time to think the matter over, he had come to realise that he had behaved foolishly to say the least of it. How on earth, he wondered, could he have been such an idiot as to be jealous of an old dodderer like Sir Mark Ireton, who must be tottering on the brink of the grave?

And now, according to the newspaper reports, the financier had died suddenly.

"Oh, well," Frank told himself confidentially, "I'll soon talk dear little Peggy round, and then everything will be all right again. I feel pretty certain that she will forgive me."

But when he arrived at London Airport, an unpleasant surprise awaited him. The first thing that caught his eye in an evening paper were the headlines:

LATE FINANCIER'S ROMANCE

SIR MARK IRETON MARRIED MANICURIST ON HIS DEATHBED.

"*An astonishing fact has now been revealed*," the report stated. "*On the very day*

of his death, the late Sir Mark Ireton married a pretty manicurist, Miss Peggy Warden, employed by Monsieur Dulac of the Hotel Metropolitan . . . ."

Frank gritted his teeth as he read on. It was all there—including an imaginative description of the bizarre ceremony in Sir Mark's bedroom. This was followed by interviews with people remotely concerned with the affair, and then what purported to be an interview with Peggy herself.

As an experienced journalist, Rubin realised at once that this so-called interview actually consisted of a few non-committal words which had been dragged out of Peggy, but they had been so skilfully "bumped out" as to make it seem as though she had opened her heart to the reporter.

"*Asked what she proposed to do with the money she would doubtless inherit from Sir Mark,*" the report continued, "*Lady Ireton said she had not yet had time to think about it, 'It has all happened so suddenly,*' she said, '*that I am still feeling rather dazed.' Asked if she would go abroad, Lady Ireton hinted that this was quite possible as soon as her late husband's affairs had been settled.*"

Frank's gaze travelled again to a two-column photograph of Peggy standing on the doorstep of the house where she lodged, but the effect was so blurred that one could not tell whether she looked pleased or not. He thrust the newspaper into his overcoat pocket, then took a taxi and gave the driver Peggy's address.

So, he reflected, furious with rage, he had been right to be jealous of that old money-grubber after all. But why on earth had Peggy married such a man? The obvious answer was—for his money, of course. On the other hand, Peggy was one of the least avaricious people he had ever met.

Suddenly he seized upon another grievance against Peggy. She had allowed these evening papers to "scoop" the "Daily Messenger" By to-morrow the news would be stale unless some other dramatic incident could be dug out of it Why, he asked himself, infuriated, couldn't she have held the news till it was too late for the evenings to publish it? If she had done this, the "Messenger" could have scooped its rivals.

Rubin did not quite know whether he was more angry with Peggy for letting out the news to rival papers, than for marrying Sir Mark Ireton, the result being that he was in no mood to effect a reconciliation, or to approach the matter with tact, when Peggy opened the door to him in answer to his knock.

"Why, Frank, I—I didn't know you had returned to London!" she stammered, gazing at him in astonishment.

"No, I don't suppose you did," he muttered grimly. "Have you seen the evening papers?"

Peggy shook her head.

"Please come in, Frank," she said. "We can't talk here on the doorstep. The landlady is out, so you can come into the sitting-room."

He followed her in, and they sat down opposite each other.

"What on earth induced you to marry that old money-bags?" Rubin demanded, glaring at her. "I had heard of his death but it was not until I bought an evening paper at the airport to-night that I knew anything about this marriage of yours."

Peggy shrugged.

"Oh, yes, it's quite true, as far as the actual fact of the marriage is concerned," she said. "But I doubt very much if you will believe what I have to tell you about the reason for my consenting to marry Sir Mark Ireton."

"That remains to be seen, my dear girl. Anyway, out with it!" he muttered glumly.

Haltingly Peggy told him the fantastic story of how Sir Mark had begged her to marry him in order that he could die in peace, and that they had both realised that it was a marriage in name only.

Rubin gave a mocking laugh.

"It's about the maddest thing I've ever heard of," he declared. "When I left London a few days ago, you were my fiancee, Peggy, and I come back to find that you are a titled lady—and of course, a wealthy widow!" he cried sarcastically.

"Well, yes, according to the lawyer, I am," Peggy said.

"Ah, so that was it!" he exclaimed accusingly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Surely you're not trying to tell me you married that old money-spinner for love, are you, my dear girl?" he countered.

"But, Frank, I have already explained to you that I consented to marry the old man because—well, because I felt so very sorry for him."

"Yes and you were well paid for it, too, apparently," Rubin retorted. "Did you know, before the ceremony took place, that the old man was going to leave you his money, may I ask?"

"No, of course not." Peggy replied indignantly. "The thought of money never crossed my mind."

"Nor the fact that the marriage would make you Lady Ireton?"

"No, certainly not," cried Peggy. "I—I thought of nothing except that Sir Mark should die with his mind at peace. After all, he had been kind to me, Frank. You call the old man 'money-bags' and other opprobrious names, but I have always found him most kind and generous."

"Yes, kind and generous enough to do his only son out of his rightful inheritance!" Rubin flung back at her. "Have you ever thought of that?"

"From what Sir Mark told me, his son has not behaved at all well to him," Peggy said.

"That may be my dear girl, but don't you see what you've let yourself in for?" Rubin asked. "You can take it from me, Peggy, that everybody will think you married the old man on his deathbed for the sake of his money. Anyway, what else could anyone think when a girl of twenty-one marries a man of eighty-seven, I should like to know?"

"The world must think what it likes, Frank, my conscience is perfectly clear."

"Yes, but what about me?" he retorted. "If I marry you now, people will think it's because of your money—in fact, they may even think it was a put-up job between us!"

Peggy laughed.

"You needn't worry yourself on that account, Frank," she said, "for I am not going to marry you."

"What!" he exclaimed staring at her in surprise.

"Not after the things you said to me just before you left for Geneva," she said. "I made up my mind then that we were not suited to each other, and what is more, I took off your ring with the intention of letting you have it back as soon as you returned to London. See, I am not wearing it," Peggy added, holding out her left hand.

Rubin frowned.

"Oh, come, Peggy," he said, "surely you don't mean that do you?"

"Oh yes, I certainly do, Frank," she answered. "Even if I had not married Sir Mark Ireton, I should have broken the engagement after your callous behaviour towards me before you left for Geneva."

"I—I see," he muttered sullenly "So that was the way of it! You did not marry old money-bags entirely out of pity for him, but to show me that I no longer mattered."

Peggy shrugged.

"Well, yes, I suppose it could be as you say," she murmured.

"Exactly," he said suavely. "Very clever of you, my dear Peggy. You are quite right—you and I are not suited to each other. In any case, you won't find any difficulty in securing a husband now that you are the wealthy Lady Ireton."

"Frank, how dare you!" she cried indignantly. "That is a most insulting thing to say to me, and I—and I'll never forgive you!"

"You can tell me that when I ask for your forgiveness," he said jeeringly. "Meanwhile, you may rest assured that I shall not lose any sleep over it."

"If you'll wait a moment I'll give you your ring back," Peggy said, and she ran upstairs to her bedroom to get the ring.

She returned in a few moments and handed it to him.

"Thanks," Rubin said, and slipped the ring into his waistcoat pocket. "I suppose this is where we say farewell for good?"

Peggy nodded, and he walked towards the door, then turned to face her again.

"You—you might have saved that story of yours for the "Messenger" instead of letting the evening papers get the scoop," he muttered reproachfully.

Peggy did not know whether to laugh or cry. It was such a ridiculous anti-climax after the return of the ring and the definite breaking off of their engagement.

Already she was beginning to taste the penalties of notoriety. The representative of a Sunday paper pleaded with her to let him have her full life story, offering her a fabulous sum if it were "exclusive". Letters came tumbling in—begging letters, abusive letters, and letters advising her what she should do with her money.

Unfortunately, her address had been mentioned in one of the newspapers, and there seemed only one way to escape from it all, and that was to go somewhere else. But where could she go?

Peggy mentioned her problem to Mr. Corbin one day after they had discussed certain details relating to the estate.

"I was rather afraid something like this might happen, Lady Ireton," he said.

"But what am I to do, Mr. Corbin?" she asked. "Nearly every post brings me a fresh torrent of letters, and I am simply overwhelmed by them."

The lawyer considered for a moment or two. Then—

"Well, now that the funeral is over, there is no one in Sir Mark's flat except Barton, and Mrs. Cloughton, the housekeeper," he said. "So why not stay there, Lady Ireton, until things are sufficiently settled for you to leave London?"

"But everyone knows about the flat, Mr. Corbin," objected Peggy. "It would be as bad there as it is at my lodgings."

"Oh, no, I don't think so," he said. "For one thing, very few people would expect you to make your home there; for another, you could depend on Barton to keep you safe from unwelcome intruders. As you are probably aware, one of the man's duties was to protect Sir Mark from unwanted callers."

"Yes, it might be worth trying, Mr. Corbin," murmured Peggy.

"Then take my advice, Lady Ireton, and see how it works out. Now would you like me to ring up Barton and tell him of your plans? The housekeeper will then get a room ready for you."

Peggy nodded her assent, and Mr. Corbin telephoned to Barton and arranged for Peggy to remove from her lodgings to the flat that night.

It was an agreeable change from her "bed-sitter" and a somewhat cantankerous landlady, to find herself in a luxury flat with servants to wait on her.

Even so, Peggy had the queer feeling of

being a sort of prisoner, chained down by the wealth she had never sought, and which had brought her no happiness.

There was another thought, too, at the back of her mind. Like every other normal girl, Peggy had hoped to marry and have a home and children of her own. But this hope seemed likely to be unfulfilled. No doubt there were plenty of men who would be ready to marry her, but it would be for her money, and not because they were in love with her!

On the other hand, the very sort of man she might like to marry—young, energetic and with his way to make in the world—would probably fight shy of her for fear of being thought of as a fortune-hunter.

In any case, she was no longer pestered either with people or letters, and was able to go out for drives in one of Sir Mark's cars without being molested in any way. In this respect, life was certainly easier for her.

But she had no intimate friends. Peggy would have loved to go and have a cosy chat with Doris Cole, but she dared not take such a risk.

It was impossible for her to leave London for the time being, however. The law works slowly, and Sir Mark's financial affairs were somewhat complicated. She was frequently being called upon to sign documents and papers relating to his various interests the extent of which came as a surprise even to the lawyers.

"People often say of those who complain of the responsibilities of wealth, that they could 'easily give it away'," Mr. Corbin remarked on one occasion.

"Yet a few weeks ago, Mr. Corbin, I would have laughed at anyone who said it was difficult to give money away," Peggy remarked.

It was one afternoon a few days later and Peggy was having tea in the drawing-room, when Barton entered with a silver salver on which lay a visiting card.

"I did not know whether you would wish to see the gentleman, m'lady," he said, his face expressionless.

Peggy picked up the card and read just two words. "Bruce Ireton."

"It—it's Sir Mark's son?" she stammered excitedly.

"Yes, m'lady."

For some reason, Peggy suddenly felt cold all over and her heart began beating rapidly. Had this man come to accuse her of robbing him of his inheritance? she wondered.

"Do you intend to see him, m'lady?"

Barton's words recalled her to herself.

"Yes, of—of course," she answered. "Please show him in, Barton,"

Mr. Bruce Ireton, m'lady," announced Barton, a few moments later, as he opened the door and stood aside for the visitor to enter.

Peggy rose to her feet to greet Sir Mark's son. She saw that he was tall, broad-shouldered and handsome in a somewhat rugged way. Also, allowing for the difference in age, he was remarkably like his father in appearance.

"How do you do, Mr. Ireton," she said, holding out her hand.

She was aware of a pair of steely grey eyes regarding her appraisingly, but seemingly, not with dislike. Rather, the man's expression suggeted a detached curiosity.

"How do you do, Lady Ireton," he returned, his hand grasping hers in a firm grip.

Peggy drew a quick breath. Then—

"Do please take a seat, Mr. Ireton. May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Thanks very much, Lady Ireton," he answered a faint hint of amusement in his eyes.

It was almost like playing at amateur theatricals, Peggy was thinking—this pretending not to be themselves, but just fictitious characters.

Peggy touched a bell, and when a maid arrived, she ordered more tea.

"I—I had an impression that you were in Australia, Mr. Ireton," she remarked.

"New Zealand is now my home, but I had to come to England on business and, of course, to meet my—my step-mother," he answered, his grey eyes twinkling.

Peggy repressed a gasp. Oddly enough, it had never occurred to her that she had become the young man's step-mother. Why, Bruce Ireton was only three or four years older than herself.

"I—I see," she murmured, feeling very embarrassed.

"For you are my stepmother, you know," he said. "And," he added, grinning at her, "by the same token, I am your stepson, Lady Ireton."

Peggy laughed.

"All the same, it sounds utterly ridiculous to me," she said.

"Perhaps it would be even more ridiculous if I called you 'mother'," he suggested laughingly.

At that moment, a maid entered with a fresh pot of tea, and when the girl had disappeared, Peggy went on, as she started pouring out—

"I am known to my friends as Peggy, and I think it would be more sensible if you were to call me by that name, instead of 'Lady Ireton'. It would sound much less formal, wouldn't it?"

"Very well, I'll do so, but on condition that you call me 'Bruce'," he countered, as he took the cup which she handed to him.

Still feeling a little dazed, Peggy smiled to herself. Here was the man whom she expected to accuse her of robbing him of his inheritance, behaving as if the whole thing were a joke, and obviously enjoying the absurdity of their being stepmother and stepson.

"I suppose," he went on, "you are wondering why I have called here to see you? The answer will probably shock you—it is curiosity, yes—vulgar curiosity."

"Curiosity?" she repeated, gazing at him in surprise.

"Yes, Peggy, curiosity. I had heard, of course, about your marrying my father, and I wondered what sort of woman you were. My mother, who died when I was a small boy, had not led an exactly happy life, for my father became so completely absorbed in piling up a fortune, that he almost forgot her very existence."

"I don't mean that my father was exactly unkind or anything like that," he went on. "As far as material things were concerned, my mother could have everything she wanted. What she missed was love—and my mother was one of those women who can't live without love."

"Yes, I—I quite understand," Peggy murmured. "And what did you expect to find when you saw me, may I ask?"

Bruce grinned.

"Well, to be quite frank with you," he replied, "I rather expected to find a hard, brittle young woman with an eye on the main chances—what used to be called a 'gold-digger'. I couldn't imagine any other type of woman marrying a man as old as my father."

"Then what reason do you suppose I had for marrying Sir Mark?" she asked.

"I've been wondering about that now I have met you, Peggy. You are the very reverse of what I anticipated. You certainly do not strike me as being hard and self-seeking, and I can think of only one reason."

"And what is that?" she prompted.

"Pity," he answered. "My father was old and lonely, and making money no longer interested him. Am I right?"

Peggy nodded.

"Yes, you are," she answered. "You see, Bruce," she went on to explain, "I used to be your father's manicurist. He would have no one else but me, and he was always very kind and generous to me. I felt exceedingly sorry for him. It seemed so very sad that Sir Mark should be so rich, and yet so unhappy and lonely."

"Yes, I quite understand what you mean," Bruce said. "My father was a sort of modern Midas."

"Then—then you bear no ill towards your father, Bruce?"

"No, but I did once," he replied. "When I threw up my studies to become a doctor he was furious with me, and we had a violent quarrel. Finally he flung twenty pounds at me and told me to clear out and never let him see my face again. But I flung his twenty pounds back at him and he never forgave me. So we never saw each other again."

Peggy nodded. This was more or less what Sir Mark had told her himself.

"From then on," continued Bruce, "I never asked for or received a penny from him. I worked my passage out to New Zealand, got a job there and eventually started in business on my own—yes, and made a success of it."

"But, Bruce don't you resent my having inherited what should have been rightfully yours?" Peggy asked. "After all, you are Sir Mark's only son, and——"

"What my father refused to let me have when he was alive, I have no wish to take from him now that he is dead," Bruce broke in. "For all I cared, his money could have been buried with him—as, no doubt, he would have wished it to be had that been possible."

"Oh, Bruce, please do not feel so bitter towards your father," pleaded Peggy.

"Why not, my dear girl?" he retorted. "His attitude never changed towards me, did it? If the truth were known, I expect he only married you in order to make sure that I should not touch a penny of his money."

"Perhaps, Bruce, it would have been different if your father could have seen you again before he died," murmured Peggy. "I don't think it was hate that made him disinherit you, but pride. Apparently, you had never made a step towards a reconciliation, and so your father nursed his resentment to the bitter end."

Bruce shrugged.

"Yes, Peggy, but I was afraid that if I made the first move, the guv'nor would think I was trying to worm my way back into his favour because of his money. Anyway, he's dead now, and there's nothing to be done about it."

He paused, then added—

"Tell me, Peggy, what are you going to do with the fortune you've inherited from the old man?"

"I really don't know, Bruce," she answered thoughtfully. "I had no idea that money could be a millstone round one's neck, and that's what it has turned out to be in my case. The sole reason for my coming here to live in this flat was to escape being pestered by newspaper men who want to publish my life story, and from the writers of begging letters."

Bruce nodded understandingly, and she went on—

"Anyway, I am glad we have met, Bruce, and that you have no feeling of resentment towards me. If you had come here hating me, it would have made me more unhappy than ever."

"Poor little rich girl, eh?" he said, smiling at her. "And now, Peggy," he added, "what about having dinner with me to-night?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to, Bruce!" she said her eyes lighting up.

"Very well, then, I'll call here for you at

seven o'clock. Is that okay?"

"Yes, of course," Peggy answered smilingly.

Instead of ringing for Barton, she accompanied him o the lift herself. They shook hands and Peggy returned to the drawing-room, a pleased smile on her face.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

AS Peggy dressed to go out with Bruce that evening, she experienced a queer thrill of excitement such as she had never known before. Honest with herself, as always, she knew that she had lost her heart to Bruce Ireton.

She knew, too, that true love, once it came, could never be mistaken for anything but what it was, nor could it be denied.

This, Peggy told herself ruefully, was what had happened to her and Frank Rubin. They would never have quarrelled as they had done if they had been deeply and truly in love with each other. They had mistaken a mutual attraction for love and at the first strain it had given way.

She put on her prettiest frock—one she had bought to accompany Frank to some social "do" . So far, Peggy had spent very little on herself, although the lawyers had placed a considerable sum of money to her credit at the bank. She was not by nature extravagant, and there was no reason, as she put it, to "deck herself out", when there was nobody to please or impress but herself.

Punctually at seven o'clock, Bruce called for her. Wearing evening dress and looking very handsome, he was shown into the drawing-room, and when Peggy entered, his eyes lit up with admiration.

"You look simply wonderful, Peggy!"

"Do I, Bruce?" she murmured, blushing with pleasure. And then, with true feminine inconsistency—"this dress I am wearing is an old stand-by of mine really."

"Oh, but I don't see anything wrong with this frock, Peggy," he said. "Anyway," he added smilingly, "it's not the frock that matters, you know, but the girl inside it."

"Do you pay compliments of that sort to all your lady friends?" she asked.

Bruce laughed.

"I haven't any 'lady friends'," he said. "You see, in New Zealand, we accept one another for what we are. Come," he added, "let me help you on with your wrap, Peggy."

It was not really a wrap, but a warm cape such as nurses wear—Peggy had bought it at a sale of surplus Government stores. As he placed it around her shoulders and she raised her hands to draw the cape about her, their fingers touched, and to Peggy it seemed as though an electric current had passed through her.

Peggy tried to fasten the clasp at her throat, but her hands were trembling so much that she was unable to manage it.

Bruce gave her a wavering smile.

"Let me see if I can fasten the thing for you, Peggy," he said, and as he fumbled clumsily with the clasp, his gaze met Peggy's and each read in the other's eyes the secret they could no longer hide.

"Peggy—my dear Peggy!" he breathed shakily, and next moment she found herself tightly clasped in his arms, his lips pressed to hers.

At last, breathless and shaken, they drew a little apart.

"Oh, Bruce, you—you shouldn't have done that!" Peggy murmured.

"Why not, my dear Peggy?" he asked, smiling into her eyes. "I love you as I never thought it possible to love any woman, and it's only natural that I should want to kiss you, isn't it, my darling?"

"Please say you love me, my dear Peggy," he pleaded. "I know you do, for I can read it in those lovely blue eyes of yours."

"I love you, Bruce," she breathed and raised her lips to his in glad surrender.

Their kisses were now tender and lingering, while eyes spoke to eyes in the silent language of love.

At last, Bruce released her and they stood gazing at each other, shaken by emotion.

Suddenly Peggy gave a bemused little augh.

"But—but Bruce, we are forgetting, aren't we?" she said.

"Forgetting what, darling?" he asked.

"Well—that I am your stepmother, of course."

Bruce laughed.

"Yes, it certainly does sound a bit fantastic," he said. "But you and my father never even saw each other again after he slipped that ring on your finger, did you?"

Peggy shook her head.

"Therefore, my father was no more your real husband, than I am your son, was he?"

"No, I suppose not," Peggy murmured.

"There is no 'supposing' about it, darling, it's a fact," Bruce asserted laughingly. "And now, my sweet," he added, glancing at his watch, "it's time we got a move on. I have a taxi waiting outside."

Five minutes later, they entered an exclusive West End restaurant where Bruce had already booked a table for two. As they were about to take their seats, Peggy gave a half-stifled gasp of dismay, for she suddenly caught sight of Frank Rubin dining with a friend at a nearby table.

"What's the matter, darling?" he asked, noticing her agitation.

Meanwhile, the waiter had handed them each a menu and when Bruce had given the order, he turned to Peggy and smiled.

"Seen someone you don't like, my dear?" he asked jestingly.

Peggy hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, yes—the man I used to be engaged to," she answered in a low voice. "Perhaps I ought to have mentioned this to you before, Bruce. We—we weren't really in love with each other. Then, one night we had a quarrel and decided to part."

Bruce pursed his lips.

"Where is he sitting?" he muttered glumly.

"At the second table on our left. His name is Frank Rubin and he is a special correspondent for the 'Daily Messenger'," Peggy explained. "I think the man with him is also a journalist."

"And what did you quarrel about, may I ask?"

"Well, Frank knew that your father was very fond of me and——"

"But, my dear girl," Bruce broke in, "Surely you don't mean to tell me he was jealous of an old man close on ninety!"

"Well, no, not exactly jealous, I suppose. But for some reason or other, Frank had a strong dislike for your father nd always spoke of him disparagingly. 'Old Money-Bags', he used to call him."

"I see," Bruce muttered. "So that's why you quarrelled?"

"Our final quarrel came when Frank learnt that I had married Sir Mark. I tried to explain just why I did it, but it made no difference," murmured Peggy.

"Tell me, Peggy, what made you fall for this man Rubin in the first place?" Bruce asked.

"I—I really don't quite know," she murmured. "Frank Rubin has charm and a rather dominating personality—I had never met anyone like him before."

"And what made you first begin to doubt your love for him, Peggy?"

"It's hard to say, Bruce. I think it was when I began to realise how ruthless he could be, and how his work came first and foremost, dominating everything else," she replied mediatively. "He would sacrifice anybody and anything in order to get what he called a 'scoop' for his paper. There were times when he seemed to me—well, almost inhuman."

"Yes, there are men like that, I know," Bruce said. "My father was one, only in his case, it was money he was after, and not a newspaper stunt. Such men usually get to the top of their particular tree—at a price. Then they find that they've missed the one thing that matters in life—happiness."

"Maybe they find happiness in what they are doing?" Peggy suggested.

"Well, yes, for a time, perhaps, but it doesn't last, Peggy. Would you have called my father a happy man?"

Peggy shook her head.

"Oh, no!" she said. "I think Sir Mark was one of the most unhappy men I have ever met."

"And yet, in the eyes of the world, he was a highly successful man," Bruce remarked. "I suppose, in his own particular profession, Rubin is successful. All the same, Peggy, I wouldn't change places with him, any more than I would have changed places with my father."

"Oh, but you are different, Bruce," she said. "You are not the victim of a devouring ambition as, I now realise, Frank Rubin is."

"As I love you, darling!" Bruce whispered softly.

"And as I love you, Bruce dear." she whispered back.

It was at this moment that Frank Rubin rose from his chair and strolled over to their table.

"Hullo, Peggy!" he said, smilingly. "Won't you introduce me to your friend?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, with forced lightness. "Bruce, this is Mr. Frank Rubin. Frank—Mr. Bruce Ireton, who has recently arrived in London from New Zealand."

"Delighted to meet you," Rubin said, as he shook hands with Bruce. "You are here on holiday, I suppose, Mr. Ireton?"

"No, on a business visit," Bruce replied.

"I—I see," the journalist murmured thoughtfully. Then, grinning at Peggy, he went on—"It must be rather thrilling to meet your stepson like this, my dear Peggy. I am wondering what relation I shall be to you, Mr. Ireton, when I marry Peggy," he added, with a cynical laugh.

Bruce frowned.

"You marry Peggy——" he began.

"Yes, of course," Rubin broke in. "Don't you know that Peggy and I are engaged? True, we had a little tiff recently, and——"

"Oh, yes, I happen to know all that," Bruce interrupted in turn. "But you are making a great mistake, Mr. Rubin, if you regard yourself and Lady Ireton as still being engaged."

"Is that so?" Rubin retorted. "Then am I to regard myself as a discarded lover?"

"Well, yes, you may," Bruce muttered.

Peggy winced. She knew Frank's methods all too well.

"Hadn't we better be going now, Bruce?" she suggested, rising from the table.

But Rubin hadn't finished yet.

"Then am I to understand, Mr. Ireton, that you have supplanted me in Peggy's affections?" he asked, with a mocking grin.

"Yes, you may," Bruce replied curtly.

"And is it your intention to marry your stepmother and take her to New Zealand with you, may I ask?" Rubin persisted, an ironical smile playing about his lips.

"Well, as your predecessor in Lady Ireton's affections, I wish you both every happiness," Rubin said leeringly, and then returned to his friend sitting at the other table.

"I wonder what he will have to say about it all?" she murmured. "In the 'Daily Messenger' I mean."

"I don't see what the insulting bounder

can have to say," he said. "After all, I merely told him that you and I are engaged, didn't I, darling?"

"Yes, I know, Bruce, but it's the way he may put it. I'm afraid he'll try and revenge himself on you for having—well, for having 'cut him out', as the saying goes."

"But, my dear Peggy, how can I have 'cut him out' when the engagement was already broken?" Bruce asked.

"Well, you see, Frank may be thinking that, but for you, he and I might have made it up again."

"Nonsense, darling!" he said. "I think you are making a mountain out of a molehill. Now let us go into the lounge and have coffee, shall we?" he added smilingly.

"I think, Peggy dear, it would be a good idea if you called on the lawyers to-morrow and told them that you wish to leave London as soon as possible," Bruce suggested, when he had ordered coffee.

"Do you think I ought to tell him about—about our engagement, Bruce?" she asked.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't, darling," he answered. "They'll have to know about it sooner or later, of course. Besides, there's no need for us to treat it as secret, is there?"

"No, of course not," Peggy agreed.

She had an uneasy suspicion that it wasn't going to be a secret for long. The question was—would Frank Rubin write just a paragraph in the "Daily Messenger" announcing that she had become engaged to Bruce Ireton.

"FIRST-RATE stuff, my dear chap!" the night editor of the 'Daily Messenger' muttered gleefully, as he finished reading the copy which Frank Rubin had placed on his desk. "Worth splashing on the front page, eh? Anybody else get hold of the story?"

"No," Rubin replied, a broad grin on his face, "and I would have known nothing about it myself, Wilson, if I hadn't spotted the couple dining together to-night."

"Rather odd when you come to think of it stepmother engaged to stepson," the night editor remarked. "But you were quite right not to stress that side of it, Rubin. The main interest lies in the fact that young Ireton, having been dispossessed by his father, gets back his inheritance by marryng his father's widow. It's all right in law, I take it?"

"Quite," he replied. "My friend, Horace Dimbly, Q.C., has glanced through the story and O.K'd it. Besides, it was a deathbed marriage—as a matter of fact, Sir Mark Ireton died a few hours after the ceremony had taken place."

"Well, we have scooped the evenings, anyhow," the night editor said, "By the way, Frank," he went on. "do you think young Ireton managed to plot the affair so as to get his hands on the old man's dibs?"

"That I can't say, my dear chap," he said. "He's Sir Mark's son, of course, and it would be a bit queer of the young man was completely indifferent to the shekels."

"What's bred in the bone, eh?" the night editor remarked with a grin. "Still, you've skimmed over the ice very delicately, Frank, I must say, and with nothing much happening on the home front to-night, this story will brighten the paper up a bit."

WHEN Peggy opened the "Daily Messenger" next morning, these startling headlines met her eyes:

YOUNG WIDOW'S ROMANCE

IRETON HEIRESS TO MARRY DISINHERITED MILLIONAIRE'S SON.

By some journalistic magic, Frank Rubin had managed to get three-quarters of a column of vivid, engrossing matter out of his brief interview with Bruce Ireton.

"It is somewhat ironic," continued the report, *"that in marrying in order to disinherit his son—a fact of which the late Sir Mark Ireton made no secret—he did the one and only thing which could enable the son to share the fortune that had been denied him. Surely the Fates must have been smiling on Mr. Bruce Ireton when they arranged that he should arrive in England from New Zealand at such an opportune moment, and that love should have cancelled what hatred had decreed!"*

"How—how dare he write such stuff?" Peggy muttered indignantly. "I'll never forgive Frank Rubin—never!"

But there was nothing libellous in that last paragraph. In the eyes of the law, it could be regarded as nothing more than a humorously friendly comment, and Peggy knew this.

Soon after breakfast Bruce rang up.

"Hullo, darling!" he said, with suppressed excitement. "Have you—have you seen the report in the 'Daily Messenger' this morning?"

"Yes, Bruce, and I—and I'm awfully upset about it," she stammered breathlessly. "And I expect you are, too."

"Naturally I am, darling," he replied. "I've already rung up my solicitors and asked them if they thought I ought to bring an action for libel against the paper, and they have advised against it. They also pointed out that such an action would entail more unpleasant publicity than ever."

"Yes, I quite agree, Bruce. Besides, it would mean that we should have to remain in England till the case was heard, and that might mean months of waiting."

"Yes, of course," Bruce muttered. "By the way, darling," he added, "may I come round and see you this morning?"

"Oh yes, please do, Bruce dear."

When he arrived at the flat half an hour or so later, he found Peggy eagerly awaiting him in the drawing-room.

"Now let's forget all about that wretched report in the 'Messenger' my dearest," she said, after they had given each other an affectionate embrace. "After all, we shall be leaving England quite soon, shan't we?"

"I certainly hope so, my dearest," he said. "Tell me," Bruce added jestingly, "are you beginning to get used to being a rich young lady?"

"Well, yes, I think I am, Bruce dear," she confessed, "though at first I didn't think I would. But it's rather wonderful, you know, to be able to buy whatever I want without having to calculate how many lunches I shall have to go without in order to pay for it!"

"Poor darling," he sympathised, "is that what you used to have to do?"

"Yes, Bruce," she said, "it was a case of counting the pennies all the time. I don't know whether I ought to be ashamed of myself for admitting it, but now that I am learning what it is to be rich, I should hate to wake up one morning and find myself poor again."

"Oh yes, I can quite understand how you feel, darling," Bruce said.

They spent the rest of the day together, finishing up with dinner and a show. Bruce drove her home, and promised to call at the flat and take her out to lunch next day.

But on the following morning, another shock awaited Peggy. As she was glancing down at the correspondence column of the "Daily Messenger" her eye caught the heading "Romantic Widow", and the letter read as follows—

"Sir:—Permit me to correct a false impression which, unintentionally, no doubt, your reporter may have given in his report of the engagement of Lady Ireton to Mr. Bruce Ireton. The late Sir Mark Ireton, having, presumably, foreseen such a possibility, added a clause to his will to the effect that, in the event of such a marriage taking place, his widow would forfeit any benefits that would otherwise accrue to her under the said will. Yours faithfully:

"CORBIN AND RUTLEY, *Solicitors.*"

Peggy gasped. She read the letter through twice, and then decided that she must assure Bruce at once that, as far as she was concerned, the loss of Sir Mark's legacy would make no difference to her at all. But when she got through to the hotel, she was told that Bruce had left there that morning.

LOVE THE CONQUEROR

AT first, Peggy was not particularly disturbed at learning that Bruce had left his hotel. She told herself that he would either call at the flat or ring her up before lunch time.

But when he failed to do so, she began to feel worried. Shortly before noon she received a telephone call from Mr. Corbin requesting her to come to his office at once.

Wondering what had happened, Peggy took a taxi and drove to Lincoln's Inn Court. There was a grave expression on Mr. Corbit's face when she was shown into his room.

"The first intimation I had of your engagement to Mr. Bruce Ireton was when I read that report in yesterday's "Daily Messenger'," he said. "Naturally, Lady Ireton, it came as a great shock to me. Have you forgotten that under the terms of Sir Mark's will you would forfeit all benefits if you married his son?"

Peggy stared at him in amazement.

"But when you read me the will—or rather part of it—to me, Mr. Corbin, I do not remember hearing anything about that," she said.

"In any case, I was under the impression that I had made this clause in the will quite clear. I must admit that, at the time," Mr. Corbin continued. "the matter seemed somewhat irrelevent in view of the fact that Mr. Bruce Ireton was, to the best of my knowledge and belief, still in New Zealand.

"When—when did you do this, Mr. Corbin?" stammered Peggy.

"This morning, Lady Ireton," he replied, "and he made no comment when I had fully explained the situation to him." The lawyer paused, then added—"When Bruce Ireton proposed to you, I take it, he was under the impression that the suggested marriage would make no difference to you financially.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Corbin."

"And when the young man got to know that it would make a difference, he appears to have decided to pack his belongings and leave his hotel without letting you know, and has not communicated with you since," Mr. Corbin remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, but I expect I shall hear from him later on to-day, Mr. Corbin," she said, trying to sound hopeful, as she rose to leave.

WHEN she arrived back at the flat, Peggy found a letter awaiting her. It was from Bruce. Feverishly she tore open the envelope and extracted a sheet of paper.

"Dear Peggy," she read, *"by the time you get this I shall be on my way by air back to New Zealand. When I proposed to you, I had no idea, of course, that our marriage would debar you from accepting the fortune bequeathed to you by my father. It was not until Mr. Corbin explained the facts to me, that I knew anything about this clause in the will. Don't you think, Peggy, that it would have saved us both a great deal of unhappiness if you had told me of all this yourself? For I presume, you were aware of it.*

"I am writing this to you because I feel that a personal interview would be very painful to us both. All the same, please believe me when I say that I wish you every happiness,

Peggy, and earnestly hope that someday, not too far distant, you will meet a man who is worthy of you, and whom you can love. Yours very sincerely,

"BRUCE IRETON."

Peggy sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. So Mr. Corbin had been right after all. As soon as Bruce learnt that she would have to forfeit her right to his father's money if she married him, he had thrown her over! It was the money he wanted. in spite of all he had told her to the contrary.

But in spite of everything. Peggy knew deep down in her heart that she still loved Bruce.

She rose next morning tired and listless and with dark shadows under her eyes.

She was sitting in the drawing-room idly glancing through the morning paper. when Barton entered and announced that Mr. Frank Rubin had called to see her.

"Are you at home, m'lady?" he tactfully inquired.

Peggys first impulse was to say no, then she changed her mind.

"Please show him in, Barton," she said. with forced lightness.

A few moments later Rubin was ushered into the room, and Peggy rose to greet him with polite formality.

"Good morning, Peggy," he said a broad grin on his face. "I hear that Bruce Ireton is on his way back to New Zealand."

"Really?" she muttered. "And how did you know that?"

"My dear girl, you ought to know by now that it's part of my job to keep a tab on people in the news." he said. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Please do," she said.

"I take it that you know why the young man decided to change his plans all of a sudden, don't you, Peggy?" he went on.

"Need we talk about that, Frank?" she murmured.

"Not if you would rather not, of course," he said. "A man who leaves a girl high and dry because he suddenly finds she will lose her fortune if she marries him, is scarcely worth discussing is he?"

"Why have you called to see me?" she demanded. "Surely it wasn't to tell me what I already know."

"Listen, my dear Peggy," he said. "you have been in the limelight long enough, haven't you? First as the girl who married a dying millionaire, then as the prospective bride of your own step-son. Surely that—"

"Yes, and I hate it all," Peggy broke in passionately. "I feel as if everything I do is going to be reported in the newspapers and that I am being trailed by reporters."

"Yes, my dear Peggy, and there is only one thing you can do about it," he said.

"And what is that, may I ask?"

"Cease to be 'news'." he answered.

"Well, and what do you suggest I should do, Frank?"

"Marry me, of course, my dear Peggy. You know that I do not want your money. don't you. You can give it all to a home for stray cats. for all I care. You'll then be able to call your life your own, won't you?"

"But, Frank, we—we both came to the conclusion that we did not really love each other," she objected. "We agreed that our engagement had been a mistake, didn't we?"

"Well, yes. I'm not going to pretend that I am desperately in love with you, because I'm not, and I know you're not really in love with me." he said. "We each found out our mistake before it was too late, I know. But now it would be different, of course. We should be marrying without any false illusions."

Peggy shook her head dubiously.

"But—but it wouldn't work out that way, Frank?" she stammered.

"Why not?" he countered. "Many people who get married are not passionately in love with each other and yet they make a do of it and are reasonably happy."

"Well, I'm afraid it wouldn't be so in our case, Frank, because I have lost my heart to Bruce Ireton," she said. "I know it's a humiliating confession to make, but there it is."

"I shall never be able to understand women." he muttered resignedly.

"In any case, Frank, as soon as the legal formalities connected with Sir Mark's affairs are concluded by the lawyers, I shall go on a world cruise," Peggy said, "and by the time I return to England. I and my affairs will be completely forgotten."

"Unless on the cruise you fall a victim to some unscrupulous fortune-hunter!" Rubin suggested. with a cynical laugh.

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself, Frank," she retorted, "for I have learnt a great deal in the last few weeks."

"Then am I to take it that you have finally turned down my offer to marry you?"

"Yes, Frank, that is so," she answered.

"Very well," he said, rising to his feet. "I wish you all the best, Peggy, and if ever I can be of any help to you. please don't hesitate to let me know."

"Thanks, Frank," she said, shaking hands with him and wishing him good-bye.

IT was a glorious moonlight night, three months later, when the *Carpathia* left Colombo to continue her cruise. Peggy, wearing a simple white frock, leant on the taffrail watching the water surge past under the ship's counter. Her name figured on the passenger list as Miss Peggy Warden, but, as she soon discovered, nearly everybody on board knew that she was the wealthy Lady Ireton.

Among the men who competed to partner her, was a tall, dark, handsome man whom everyone knew as Count Antonio Lombardo.

She was feminine enough to be pleased and flattered by his attentions.

Now, while she stood gazing at the moonlit sea, Antonio's voice sounded in her ear. It was soft and caressing. and fitted in with her mood of gentle melancholy.

"What a really glorious night, signorina!" he remarked. "A night made for love and romance and poetry—a wonderful night one can never forget."

"You make it sound even still more wonderful, Count Lombardo," she murmured, smiling up at him.

"Ah, but that would be impossible, my dear signorina," he said. "It would, as your great English poet says, be 'painting the lily'. For instance, no mere words could make you more beautiful than you are."

"Oh, please do not talk such nonsense, Count Lombardo!"she protested laughingly.

"It is strange," he went on, smiling into her eyes. "how difficult it is to pay an English girl a compliment."

"Perhaps it is because an English girl prefers sincerity!" Peggy retorted.

"But if I tell you that you are young and very lovely, signorina."

Peggy could think of no answer to that. She felt a little embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Count Lombardo," she murmured apologetically. "I realise, of course, that you were only trying to be nice to me."

He made a despairing gesture.

"Nice!" he repeated. "I am madly in love with a girl; I adore the very ground she walks on and would readily die for her. Is it that you English do not know the meaning of love?"

He laid his hand upon hers where it rested on the taffrail, and went on—

"In Italy we do not speak of love as though it was something to be ashamed of. We love with every fibre of our being, and I cannot help falling hopelessly in love with you, my adored signorina. So please say you love me in return and promise to be my wife!" he pleaded.

AT last New Zealand was in sight, and Peggy was standing at the taffrail watching dreamily as the vague outline of the coast resolved itself into mountains and valleys and wide bays. Her heart contracted with pain as she reminded herself that somewhere over there Bruce Ireton was probably busy at work—he might even be watching as the *Carpathia* glided past. Just discernable in the distance.

"A very enchanting country, isn't it, Miss Warden?" said a man's voice, and turning, Peggy saw that it was Colonel Dempster, with whom she had become very friendly during the voyage.

"Yes, it looks very enchanting indeed, Colonel Dempster," she murmured.

There followed a short pause, and then the colonel spoke again.

"I do not wish to appear inquisitive, Miss Warden," he said, "but is it true that you have become engaged to—er—to Count Lombardo?"

"Well, I—I wouldn't go so far as to say that, Colonel Dempster," she stammered, "though we are very fond of each other, and he—and he has asked me to marry him."

"I see," the colonel remarked. He hesitated, then went on—"It's queer, Miss Warden, but nobody on board seems to know anything about the man. It is no business of mine, of course, but—well, you are very young and——"

"Do you mean to suggest that Count Lombardo is—well, an adventurer?" Peggy broke in.

"I would not go so far as to say that, Miss Warden," the colonel replied. "Nevertheless, I would warn you to be very careful."

"I greatly appreciate your kindness, Colonel Dempster, but I think your fears are quite misplaced," Peggy said.

THE *Carpathia* had arrived at Wellington and people were streaming on board to meet their friends. Peggy stood aside watching the happy reunions, feeling sad and lonely. If only Bruce had been there to meet her! If only——

She gave a gasp of amazement. Surely that must be Bruce forcing his way up the gangway! Yes, it certainly was, she told herself excitedly.

"Oh, Bruce dear, why—why did you leave me the way you did?" she murmured brokenly. "Was it really because you found out I would have to forfeit my right to your father's fortune if I married you?"

"Darling, don't you remember that talk we had when you admitted how wonderful it was to find yourself in a position to be able to buy everything you wanted?" he reminded her. "When I learnt that, by marrying me, you would lose everything, I decided to disappear and——"

"Oh, Bruce," she broke in, "how—how happy I am to be with you again!"

"And when the *Carpathia's* passenger list was published in the local paper, and I saw your name there. I just couldn't resist the temptation to come on board to see you again, my love," Bruce went on. "Now shall we go ashore, darling?" he added, with a wistful smile. "As you know, no doubt, the *Carpathia* is not due to leave here until late this evening."

"And when she does leave, it will be with at least one passenger less." Peggy told him exultantly, "for I am going to stay in New Zealand with you, Bruce dear, at all costs. If I have to make a choice between money and love—then love it shall be!"

THE END.

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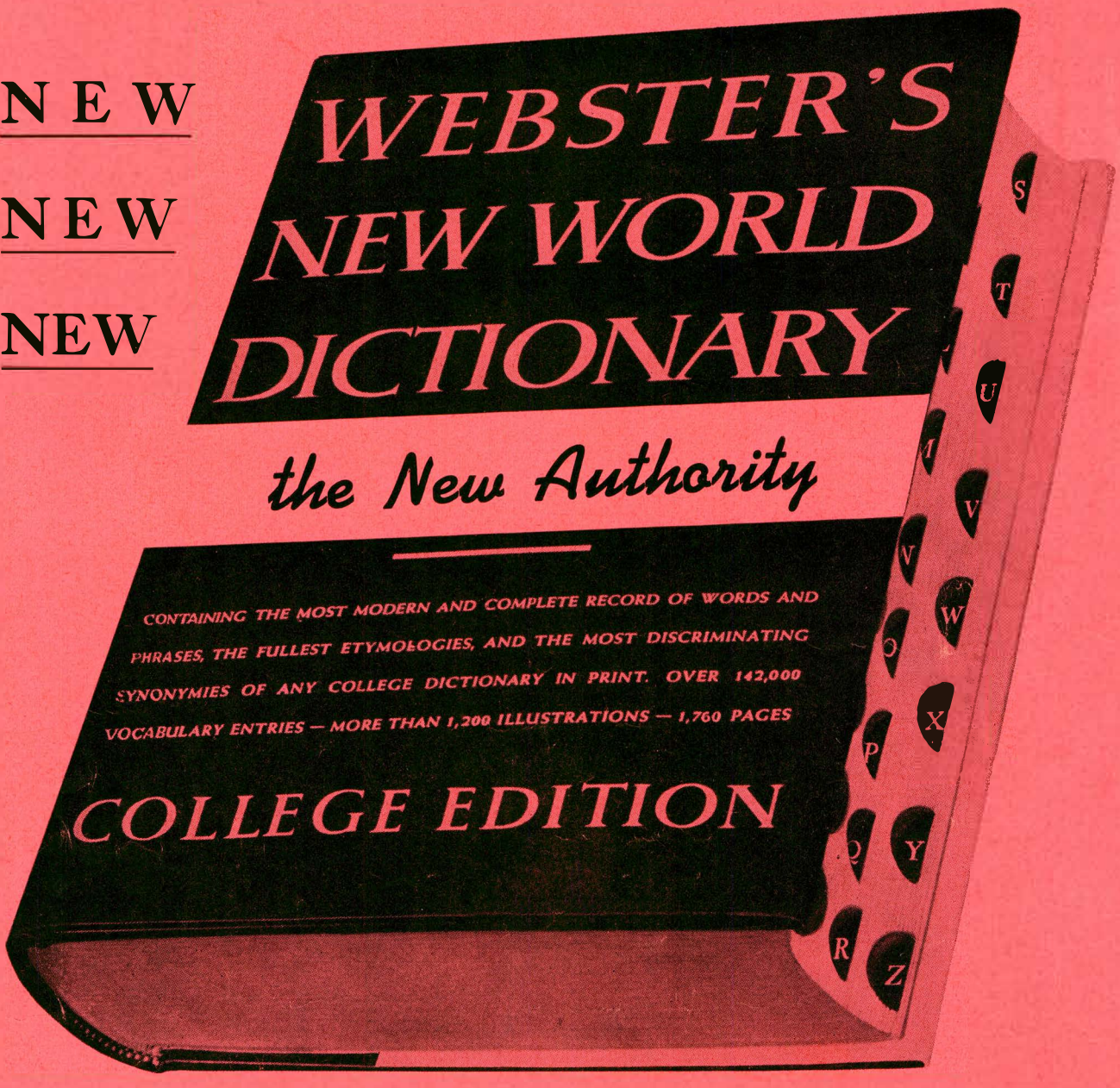

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