

FAMILY JOURNAL

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FAMILY JOURNAL

BRIDE OF FEARS

By Anne Ward

SORROW INTO JOY.

"ETHNE and Brian, follow me into the drawing-room, please. I want to talk to you about the plans your uncle and I have made for your future."

With these words Lady Eversley re-entered the house, from which she had just emerged, leaving the two young people she had addressed staring at each other in dismay.

The elder, a girl of more than usual beauty, frowned at her schoolboy brother darkly.

"What is she going to do?" she whispered. "Why can't she leave us alone? Oh, dear, if only I were a year or two older," and she clenched her fists and kicked angrily at a small pebble.

"Well, you're not, and there's just nothing we can do about it," her brother replied. "Come on, we'd better go in and hear what she has to say—it's sure to be something beastly."

Brian Sinclair was fourteen, three years younger than Ethne, and they had just lost their father; their mother had died when they were much younger. Very forlorn and defenceless they looked as they went into the house, which had always been their home, but was soon to be so no more.

Lady Eversley, their mother's elder sister, had seated herself in the bay window of the large, splendidly furnished room, and the sunlight fell upon her cold, unsmiling face as she turned her eyes upon them.

"You will be pleased to hear," she began, "that your uncle and myself have decided that in future you must make your home with us. Now that your father is dead, and the deplorable state in which he left his financial affairs has come to light, there will be absolutely nothing for either of you. This house will have to be sold, and there is a bill of sale upon the furniture."

She made a gesture of disgust.

"How he could have allowed things to have reached such a state, knowing that he had two children to provide for, is beyond my comprehension. But the fact remains that you are little less than paupers."

Ethne flushed deeply during these criticisms of her dear dead father and her dark eyes became stormy.

"Need we talk about my father, Aunt Agnes?" she asked in restrained tones. "He didn't know that he was going to be thrown off his horse and killed. I'm sure he would have put everything right had he lived."

"The fact remains that he left nothing," her aunt said coldly. "I don't think you realise what a serious position you are both in, my girl. You should be grateful that you have relatives who are willing to give you a home and pay for Brian's education so that he can learn how to support himself."

"However," she continued, "your father always spoilt you most unreasonably, Ethne, the result being that you know absolutely nothing of the world. Your

uncle and I always disapproved strongly of the way in which you were always allowed to have your own way.

"But, as I say, you will come to Eversley Court to live, and I daresay you will be able to make yourself useful in one way or another. Brian will go on with his schooling and will spend his holidays also at the Court. Never shall it be said," concluded her ladyship, with an air of conscious virtue, "that I refused a home to my dead sister's children, inconvenient as it may be to do so."

"But auntie, I would rather find some work to do," Ethne exclaimed spiritedly. "I wouldn't mind what it was."

"It would be interesting to know for what you consider yourself fitted," Lady Eversley remarked with a disagreeable smile. "Besides, as I have already said, I have no intention of giving people the opportunity of saying that I refused a home to my sister's orphans. And now, as I am tired after my journey, I will go up to lie down until tea-time. I have ordered Nanny Brock to serve tea in this room at four-thirty precisely."

With that she made a dignified exit, leaving the boy and girl looking at each other in absolute consternation.

"No wonder daddy disliked her so," Ethne muttered as the door closed. "Oh Brian, I'd rather die than live with her, I won't. I'll run away first, I'll go out scrubbing floors or something. She can't make us do what she says, can she?" she added uncertainly.

Under her raven-black hair her large, heavily-lashed eyes looked imploringly at her brother.

They loved each other, they had had a father they adored and a home where they had been ideally happy. Now, like a clap of thunder out of a summer sky, catastrophe had overtaken them.

"I'm afraid," said Brian with unexpected wisdom, "that while we are what they call minors, or something, we've got to obey her as our nearest relation. But perhaps it won't be too rotten, Ethne. If you can stick it out for just a few years I'll be earning something and we can live together, just the two of us. That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, it's not so bad for you," she said unappeased. "You'll be away, at school, with cricket and football and all that. You won't have to hear her running father down and being reminded that one is an object of charity. No, I'd rather do anything than live with Aunt Agnes. She has always disapproved of us and always will."

"Well, you'll just have to look out for a rich husband, that's all," said her brother. "You're not bad-looking, quite decent in fact, and if you married someone with plenty of money you could have me to live with you and Aunt Agnes could go boil her head."

Despite her very real distress and anger Ethne could not resist smiling at her brother's frank suggestion. She supposed that he picked up such expressions at

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school, but could not help wondering how their aunt would re-act to such a way of talking.

Do her a lot of good to be shocked, she thought rebelliously, impotent rage once more taking possession of her at the condescending and patronising manner her aunt was adopting.

"It's only because she's afraid of what people will say that she doesn't leave us to starve or go into an institution or wherever it is paupers go," she cried, and then, remembering Brian's age, and seeing the perplexed look on his round, boyish face, she said more cheerfully:

"Well, you go and have a last canter on Rory, Brian, he's going to be taken away to-morrow, you know. Don't worry, perhaps something will turn up, and even if it doesn't I shall have to try and make the best of it, as you say."

Glad to escape from the atmosphere of unpleasantness which he could do nothing about, Brian went round to the stables where Rory, the pony upon which they had both learnt to ride, was spending his last few hours before being taken away by its new owner.

When she heard the galloping hooves disappearing down the lane, Ethne, too, let herself out of the house, and feeling a similar urge to escape went through the orchard where apples and pears, destined to be picked and eaten by strangers, were ripening in rich profusion.

A little wicket-gate led into the shady lane along which she walked rapidly as if by movement and speed she could leave her problems behind.

But it was all in vain, for pretty soon her undesirable plight recalled itself to her mind and almost overpowered her.

And, really, she had plenty to contend with, for, as so often seems to be the case, one trouble had followed another—"One woe doth tread upon another's heel, so fast they follow"—she told herself, remembering a quotation from Hamlet.

Although she had not been sent away to school like her brother she had been adequately educated by a resident governess whom she had loved dearly.

Until now her life had been an exceptionally happy one, spent in the large, comfortable country house with its well-tended garden.

Whatever her father's secret financial troubles he had never allowed them to interfere with the serenity of his home-life, and love of his two children. For Ethne his love had been the chief motive of his existence, probably because of the girl's strong resemblance to her dead mother.

Poor Robert Sinciar! A series of losses on the Stock Exchange, in the days when prices had not been too good, had reduced him to the necessity of heavily mortgaging his property in order to meet his obligations. Just when things were looking better he had met with a fatal accident while out riding.

Thus, the children he had adored, were left exactly as Lady Eversley had described them—paupers!

This lady, it may be remarked, had felt for her brother-in-law that particular brand of dislike which "a woman scorned" is supposed to feel for the man she had originally loved but who had preferred her younger sister.

Agnes Eversley had never forgiven Robert Sinclair for that, and her dislike of him had extended to his children, particularly to Ethne, in whose beautiful face she saw her sister's features repeated over again. Lady Eversley hated the idea of having the girl under her roof, at the same time she did not want people to say that she had neglected her duty towards her niece and nephew.

In these days of high wages and full employment domestic servants were few and far between and the Court was a big rambling old house, extremely difficult to run.

It would do the pampered girl no harm, her ladyship thought, to take on a few menial and domestic chores, which would help to pay for her keep.

Her husband, Sir Arthur, a bluff, self-made man, was very well-off and it must be said for him that he was more than willing to give the young orphans a home and had readily agreed to his wife's proposal that they should do so.

It was not from her uncle that Ethne anticipated receiving any unkindness, but from the woman who had spoken so cruelly of her father.

What could she do, Ethne asked herself, as she made her weary way along the pleasant country lanes. Was it true that the law could compel her to obey her aunt until she was twenty-one? She did not know; at seventeen, four years seems like an eternity, and she felt that she was ready to do anything to escape from what to her, seemed so intolerable a fate. But what was there she could do she asked herself in despair.

"On, daddy," she thought, "if only you were still here. How are we going to live without you?"

She began to cry hopelessly, and as if in sympathy with her mood the sun suddenly disappeared, the air vibrated to a violent peal of thunder and a torrent of rain descended, blotting out the landscape.

No shelter of any kind was in sight, and not caring very much for the fact that she was already wet through she crept under a thick hedge and shut her eyes against the blinding flashes of lightning.

So loud was the noise of the thunder, and the lashing of the torrential downpour, that the sound of an approaching car did not reach her. Then the sudden grinding of rapidly applied brakes, as the driver caught sight of her crouching figure, penetrated to her consciousness.

A young man descended from the car and hurried across the lane towards her, exclaiming in surprise—

"Why—whatever are you doing there? You must be drenched to the skin. You're not hurt, are you?"

Unwilling to be discovered in her present state of grief, Ethne turned a scowling face in his direction, only to discover that he was not a stranger but a friend—David Playden, whose people had long been friendly with the Sinclair family.

"Oh, it's you, David?" she quavered. "What a terrible storm."

"Why, Ethne," he exclaimed in amazement. "Quick, get into the car, you'll catch your death of cold."

He half-carried her to the waiting car, and with a sigh of relief she sank back on to the cushions. A forlorn spectacle, she looked, her soaking dress clinging to her slender body, her hair scattered wisp-like round her face, her stockings hopelessly laddered.

But David only saw the beauty of her tragic eyes and the scarlet outline of her trembling lips.

For he loved her, and could hardly remember a time when he had not done so. In fact, it was only because of her extreme youthfulness that he had refrained from telling her so.

"I'll drive you home, Ethne," he said, looking at her with commiseration as she sat shivering beside him.

"Indeed you will not," she said with spirit. "I'm not going back yet. You don't know how awful it is there now, David. My aunt is worse than she has ever been, a thousand times worse. She's been telling Brian and me what we've got to do, the terrible plans she's made for our future and, oh, I just can't bear it, David. I can't! I've half a mind to run away."

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten that your aunt was coming to-day," he nodded. "But really Ethne, you can't stay in those wet things without catching the most awful cold. Look here, there's an old sweater and a mac in the back. You'd better get in behind and slip your wet things off and put those on, you're absolutely shivering."

She hesitated a bare moment. Then—"All right, but I hope no one comes along while I'm changing."

She scrambled into the back of the car, and despite her recent feeling of misery she was still young enough to find some amusement in what she was doing.

"There," she exclaimed presently, "you can look round now, David. I wonder what on earth I look like?"

"Like nothing on earth," he laughed, as he surveyed the odd figure she presented. The sleeves of his old mac came down over her wrists, and her chin was sunk deep into the polo collar of the old sweater.

And yet nothing, he thought, could dim her beauty; even in that fantastic garb she looked what she was, a figure of budding beauty, like an unopened rosebud.

"Now," he said, "tell me all about it, Ethne. What's this Aunt Agnes of yours been doing to get your back up?"

It was a long and heated story which poured forth from the girl's lips and as he listened David agreed with her indignation.

It was extremely cruel of her aunt to speak so unkindly of her dead father, and still more cruel to impress upon her the fact that she would have to accept charity. David could not have believed that any woman would have been so unkind to a recently orphaned niece, and he became determined that Ethne should not be exposed to the patronage of such an unpleasant relation.

"It's not having to give up the house that I mind so much," Ethne concluded sadly. "because it would never have been the same without father. But to have to go to the Court, where I'm not wanted, and to receive charity from Aunt Agnes, is something I just can't face. And yet I don't know what I can do, David."

"I know what you can do," the young man said softly, "you can marry me, Ethne."

Her eyes widened in utter surprise. "Oh, David, what a perfectly lovely idea," she exclaimed. "Do—do you mean it? Would you really marry me to save me from that horrid woman?"

"Not for that reason," he said, "but because I love you, Ethne."

"Do you?" she asked, more than ever surprised. "I didn't know that you liked me in that kind of way, David. How wonderful. I just can't take it in."

"I think I have always loved you," he said simply. "But I haven't told you so because I thought you were too young—even younger than your years," he added with a half-sigh, for her reception of his declara-

tion of love had shown him more plainly than ever before how innocent she was of the ways of the world.

"I'm seventeen," she said proudly, "and my mother was no older when she married. Of course I'm not too young, David, and I accept your offer most happily."

"But do you love me, Ethne?" he queried.

"Of course I do, I love you awfully, David," she said eagerly. "You and Brian and father have always been the ones I've liked best in the world, and now that father has gone there are only you and Brian left."

"Darling," he said, touched by something pathetic in the sudden clouding of her young eyes and the way her lips quivered, trying not to be vaguely disappointed in her attitude which, after all, was only what he had guessed that it would be. "I will do my best to make you very happy, you know that, don't you?"

"Oh, I shall be perfectly happy living with you, darling David, that is—" she added a trifle anxiously—"if we can have Brian to live with us, too. I just couldn't leave him with Aunt Agnes."

"Our home shall be Brian's, of course," he agreed.

"How wonderful," Ethne sighed. "Only a short time ago I felt that I would not have minded much had I caught pneumonia and died. Now I'm so happy I can hardly believe it."

She turned her lovely young face towards him with an expression of childlike gratitude.

"I'll try to make you happy, too, David," she said, and he leant over the back of his seat and kissed her tenderly.

"You have made me the happiest man in the world already," he said a little unsteadily, for the touch of her soft young lips seemed to fill him with fire.

He had dreamt so often of possessing them, and now his dream had come true, she was his, soon to be his very own.

"I wonder what Aunt Agnes will say?" she exclaimed excitedly, "it will be fun telling her. I know that father would have been pleased," she added, "he was always keen on you, David. What an afternoon it has been. I can hardly believe that I've had a proposal of marriage, and I shouldn't think that any girl ever had one looking as I must now. I think you had better take me back and I'll break the news to my aunt while you let your parents know—will they mind, do you think?"

"Darling, they'll be overjoyed," was his reply. "I know that mother has always guessed that I meant to marry you or no one, and I expect she has passed the news to father. They both like you, sweetheart, how could anyone help it?"

"Aunt Agnes can," smiled Ethne, feeling all at once enormously lighthearted and gay. "Come round for coffee this evening, David, we've still got dear Nanny Brock to look after us, you know, but all the rest of the staff have gone."

"Rather," he said, for he, too, was feeling that life was wonderful. "Give me one more kiss before I start up," he begged.

Ethne surrendered her mouth to him instantly, and if his kiss sent no electric current sweeping through her veins, it at least warmed her heart and gave her a pleasurable sensation of being wanted and adored.

"Let's be married as soon as we can," she said as they drove swiftly along the rain-drenched roads. "Then I need scarcely spend any time at all with my aunt."

"I expect my mother will want you to make your home with us to start with when I tell her how much you hate the idea of going to your aunt's," he said. "Even if the wedding takes place from the Court you can live with us until a few days before."

"Oh, good!" Ethne cried, clasping her

hands together in ecstasy. "You're wonderful, David darling. I feel as if nothing can ever go wrong again now that I'm going to be your wife, although honestly I can't see why you want to marry me."

"I love you, of course," he smiled. "And I love you because you are beautiful and sweet and good—aren't those reasons enough?"

"Well, it's like a fairy tale that all comes right in the end," she declared. "Won't Brian be pleased when he hears? He told me that I ought to find a rich husband, and you are rich, aren't you, David?"

"Quite moderately so, darling," he said, with an odd smile.

"Well, that makes everything perfect," she sighed. "And here we are at the end of our lane already. I think you'd best put me down at the back drive, David, and I'll slip in through the kitchen before anyone sees me."

"What a child she is at heart," David thought as he watched her strangely-clad figure scamper up the drive after throwing him a farewell kiss.

Obviously she was not yet ready for love, but he would be able to teach her its sweetness all in good time.

THERE was one other member of the Sinclair household to whom the general break-up following the master's death had brought little less than tragedy.

This was Nanny Brock, who had been the children's nurse and had stayed with the family ever since, loving and beloved, almost as if she were one of themselves.

She was quite old now, and she had nowhere to go. The future promised her little but loneliness and poverty, for although Mr. Sinclair had always paid her generously, she had for years helped to support a crippled sister and so had saved very little.

The old woman had been down in the master's will for an annuity but alas, like all his other bequests, there was now no money to meet them.

Nanny was reflecting sadly upon all the coming changes when the kitchen door burst open and into that spotlessly clean room appeared an apparition.

"Why, Miss Ethne, what in the world have you been doing?" she cried as the girl burst out laughing at her expression.

"It's all right, Nanny—these are David Playden's things—my dress got soaked through in that storm and he lent me these. Don't look so shocked, Nanny dear, I'm going to marry him, so it's all right."

Nanny's face became a study of mingled emotions. Surprise and shock were followed by a look of almost overpowering relief and happiness.

She clasped her hands as if in prayer and murmured—

"No, Miss Ethne, you're having a joke with me, aren't you? It's just too good news to be true."

"It's true enough, Nanny dear, he's coming in this evening for coffee and to speak to my aunt about it. Oh, think of it, Nanny, I shan't have to go on living with her now—nor will Brian. I'll have my own home and you'll come with us, of course."

To the old nanny it was like an answer to prayer. Her dear Miss Ethne would be safe and happy, for she knew and approved of David.

"You'll come, won't you, Nanny?" Ethne asked, as the other did not answer immediately.

"Well, that's for Master David to say," was the answer, "he may not feel the same as you do in these matters."

"Oh, he'll do anything for me," was the rather airy reply, "He's in love with me, Nanny. Isn't it wonderful?"

"And are you in love with him, Miss Ethne?" asked Nanny.

"Why, of course. I've promised to marry him," answered the girl. "Please say how glad you are, Nanny, for I'm brimming over with excitement and relief."

"I'm very happy for you, my pet," the old woman said tenderly. "Happier than I can say. And now run up and make yourself presentable. Your aunt is cross because there was no one in for tea."

"Oh, just make me some toast and a fresh pot, will you?" Ethne said, undisturbed, as she fled up the stairs.

A few minutes later a vision of radiant loveliness appeared before Lady Eversley's eyes.

Ethne had brushed out her hair, which being naturally wavy had suffered nothing from its wetting, and had put on one of her prettiest dresses. Very like Lady Eversley's dead sister she looked as she stood poised in the doorway, which was perhaps why her loveliness only increased her aunt's dislike of her.

"Well, my girl, so you have condescended to turn up at last," she said coldly. "I thought I told you explicitly that tea was to be at four thirty? Have you never been taught that it is ill-mannered to be late for meals? Your brother seems to be equally ignorant on the matter for he has not yet returned from wherever he went."

"I expect he got caught in the storm, as I did," Ethne replied, and immediately her aunt was aware of an air of self-assurance in the speaker which had been lacking before.

"The tea must be stone cold by now," she said indifferently. "But that is your fault."

"Oh, that's all right, Aunt Agnes," Ethne said carelessly. "I asked Nanny to make some fresh."

The other sniffed.

"I hope you don't expect that you'll be able to behave in this casual and thoughtless fashion when you come to the Court," she remarked acridly.

"I won't be going to the Court, Aunt Agnes," said the girl calmly. "I've just promised to marry David Playden."

And she had great satisfaction in watching her aunt's reactions to this verbal bombshell.

As in the case of Nanny Brock, Lady Eversley was the prey to very mixed feelings. Surprise, incredulity, and then relief, showed in her face. For now she need not take this girl, whom she so thoroughly disliked, into her house, nor need she brave public opinion by letting her go out to work. The problem had been solved for her.

Nevertheless, mixed with her satisfaction, there was a slight tinge of annoyance at the knowledge of her niece's good fortune.

David Playden was what is considered in the eyes of the world, especially Lady Eversley's world, a good match. He would be an extremely wealthy man when his father died and he was already holding down an important post in a publisher's office. It looked as if her niece would be universally envied instead of being the object of pity, which it had pleased her aunt to imagine.

"Dear me, how wonderful," she exclaimed, "but surely this is very sudden, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, David has been in love with me for ages," Ethne replied nonchalantly. "I've told him to look in for coffee this evening, Aunt Agnes."

The air of assurance with which she spoke irritated her aunt afresh, but with assumed cordiality, she said:

"Quite right. He is sure to want my approval on the matter, which, of course, I shall give. You are to be congratulated, my dear."

"Thank you," said Ethne, and as she heard footsteps, added: "Oh, here is Brian at last, I hope Nanny has made heaps of toast, for he is sure to be as ravenous as I am."

"I will leave you to break the news to him while I go and telephone your uncle," announced Lady Eversley. "He ought to be informed immediately."

She had scarcely left the room when Brian entered, looking slightly apprehensive.

"I say, Ethne, I suppose I'm for it," he exclaimed. "Is she very mad with me?"

"It doesn't matter any more if she is," said Ethne joyously. "We're not going to live with her after all, Brian, we're going to live with David. He's asked me to marry him, sn't it just too marvelous? You should have seen her face when I told her."

"My, what absolutely super news," the boy cried. "I must say you're jolly lucky, Ethne, David is absolutely the tops. I wonder why on earth he wants to marry you?" he added, puzzled.

"Darling, so do I," his sister said, not in the least offended by her brother's frankness. "He says he has always wanted to, and, of course, you will come to live with us and everything will be just perfect."

TOO YOUNG FOR LOVE.

AS David had foretold, his parents invited Ethne and her brother to stay at The Coppice—the name of their pleasant country house—until ten days or so before the date fixed for the wedding.

The Playdens were very pleased with their son's choice, for they had known Ethne and her family for many years and she had always been a favourite with them, just as Lady Eversley had been one of their pet abominations.

Even so they had a respect for the tradition which decrees that the actual wedding ceremony should take place from the home of the bride's nearest relative, and as Ethne's uncle was also very set on doing the right thing by her, it was from Eversley Court that she was to start her married life.

Meantime, she was being thoroughly feted and spoilt by the entire neighbourhood, as well as by her future in-laws.

The Sinclairs had always been popular and everyone had felt for the young people when their home had been sold. David also was well-liked, and so many were the invitations which poured in upon them that his chief complaint was that he scarcely ever had Ethne to himself.

If she was considered lucky, David thought himself even luckier. He had won the only girl he had ever wanted and the more he got to know of her, the more he appreciated the genuine sweetness of her character.

Impulsive she might be, and not without the habit of getting into little tantrums every now and then, but she was loyal and candid and entirely free from any cattishness.

Moreover she had the artless affection and gratitude of a child, and in the first flush of his happiness, David thought that her demonstrativeness was ample reward for the love he lavished upon her.

To be able to kiss her and hold her in his arms, was so completely wonderful that the fact that her answering kisses were lacking in warmth entirely escaped him.

Often she would throw her arms round his neck and press her soft young lips to his, murmuring—

"You're such a darling, David. I love you very much."

It never dawned upon him that in much the same manner she had embraced her father and her brother, completely without passion.

Had he actually been aware of that fact he would probably only have rejoiced in

her childlike innocence and told himself that it would not be long before her sleeping heart awoke and turned to him in complete surrender.

"Happy, sweetheart?" he would ask sometimes, and she would snuggle up to him murmuring; "Yes, darling. It's lovely being engaged to you."

Once he said—
"And do you think it will be just as lovely being married to me?"

"Why, yes, why not?" she said, turning her wide, childlike eyes upon him. "What difference will it make, except that we shall be living in our own little home? Isn't it perfectly sweet of your father to have given us Green Gates Cottage, David? It's just like something out of a fairy tale. I'm simply dying for the day to come when we move in."

"Then how do you think I feel about it, darling?" he asked probingly, and there was something in his tone, a kind of dark and secret quality, that for the first time made Ethne feel vaguely uneasy.

He loved her too much, she told herself, the intensity of his feelings almost frightened her, and then as she met his tender eyes, the brief moment of panic fled, and was forgotten.

MEANWHILE, amidst the general chorus of approval, there was one harsh note. This was in the voice of David's cousin, Fenella Cope, a dark-haired, handsome girl with an opulent figure, the generous lines of which filled its owner with secret fears about the future, so that she had to be very careful of what she ate.

Fenella had just broken-off her engagement to a young man whose expectations of money from a wealthy aunt had not completely materialised. This was chiefly because his aunt had heartily disliked the girl her nephew had chosen to marry.

Accordingly, the wealthy aunt had altered her will at the last moment, leaving her nephew less than a sixth of what had originally been her intention, with the result that Fenella had sought an early opportunity to end the engagement.

Thereafter she had turned her attention to her cousin David, for whom she had always had a weakness, and with whom she had always been on friendly terms. He was the next best matrimonial catch she could at the moment think of, for she was now in her middle twenties.

When she received the news of David's engagement to a girl she had never heard of, together with an invitation to come to stay at The Coppice for the engagement party, Fenella accepted with secret chagrin, a state of mind which was intensified when she saw how beautiful, and young Ethne was.

Engagements could be broken, Fenella had proved that for herself, but if she had nourished any hopes that her cousin's engagement might terminate in the same was as her own she had soon to relegate any such idea into the background.

She had brought with her from London an extravagantly gorgeous frock for the party, but Ethne, in her white tulle skirt, with a plain black top, surpassed all the girls present, and David could hardly conceal his pride. He looked, Fenella thought peevishly, ridiculously happy.

Her congratulations, so sweetly worded, nevertheless had a sting in their tail.

"David, I'm so very happy for you," she said wistfully, "it's nice to see anyone looking so absolutely rapturous. Ethne looks really charming, but aren't you marrying a child, David?"

"Yes, she does look absurdly young, doesn't she?" was his reply. "I know that some people consider her too young to be

married, but you see, Fenella, the circumstances in which she was left—homeless—left us no second choice. Besides," he added, almost shyly, "I didn't want to wait for her, even a month seems too long."

"How terribly romantic," sighed his cousin. "You know, of course, that my romance came to a sudden end, David?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry, Fenella," he said. "Tom Cartwright seemed such a decent chap. What happened? Or would you rather not talk about it?"

Her long lashes fluttered.

"Can't you guess?" she murmured.

David looked surprised.

"I'm afraid I haven't a clue, Fenella. Should I have?"

"One day I may tell you—when my heart is not quite so sore," was her reply and she fluttered away like some exotic butterfly.

For Ethne it was an evening of complete bliss. Everyone was so nice to her, she was the queen of the moment, moving once more in the atmosphere of love and appreciation to which she had always been accustomed and which had only been interrupted by her father's death and the unpleasant interlude connected with her Aunt Agnes.

Whatever should she have done without David, she asked herself time and again.

It was David who had saved her from the horrible anticipation of life under her aunt's rule, David who had made the sun to shine for her once more and whose love wrapped her like a warm cloak.

How wonderful to think that he and she were going to spend all their lives together in that enchanting little house called Green Gates Cottage, where Nanny Brock was already installed, superintending the decorators and generally getting the place in order for the bridal pair on their return from the honeymoon, which was to be spent in Paris and Rome.

"Did you say Paris and Rome?" enquired Fenella. "Oh, you lucky girl, do I envy you!"

Ethne looked at the gorgeous scarlet-clad figure before her and thought how handsome David's cousin was but how daringly low-cut was her dress. In the country one did not see quite such revealing fashions and her girlish taste in these matters was a little revolted.

"Yes, I am lucky," she exclaimed with a friendly smile. "I feel like that person in the popular song—'everything's coming my way', I just don't know what I've done to deserve it all."

"David has such a very sweet disposition," the other girl said. "He is always so good and kind to everyone, I'm sure he got a lot of pleasure out of rescuing you from your rather sorry plight, he's like that."

Ethne looked a little blank. It struck her as rather a peculiar way of putting things, but she was too happy to dwell long upon this aspect of David's proposal to her, and being claimed by him at that moment for the next dance was spared the necessity of replying.

"Enjoying yourself, sweetheart?" he asked, thrilled at the feel of her young body in his arms.

"Need you ask, dearest?" she exclaimed. "I've just been saying to your cousin that I feel like that man in the song—'everything's coming my way'."

"Poor Fenella," David remarked. "I'm afraid all this must bring back to her all that she herself has recently lost. Her engagement to an awfully decent chap has just ended you know, and I think she's feeling more than a bit sore about it."

"She's very attractive," said Ethne,

"and she's got the most wonderful opinion of you, David."

"Do you know, I'm beginning to think that I must be rather a good chap to have won the heart of a girl like you, darling," was his joking reply. Then, a little more seriously. "Yo do love me, Ethne, don't you?"

"Of course I do, darling," she nodded smiling. "You're sweet and I adore you!"

FENELLA, during her few days stay, seemed to make herself very agreeable to Ethne, though somehow or other the latter could never quite make up her mind whether she really liked David's cousin or not.

For one thing she found the elder girl's poise and sophistication rather alarming; one never quite knew what embarrassing things she would say next or what awkward questions she would ask.

She made Ethne feel very young and ignorant; which was what Fenella hoped to do. For she had no doubts whatever about her feelings for Ethne. She frankly detested her, and while finding it impossible not to admire her good looks disliked her for what she considered her youth and innocence.

Had she been able, Fenella would dearly have loved to have put a spoke of some kind in her wheel, and now and then she did indeed endeavour—very subtly—to make Ethne appear small in front of David.

But all to no avail, for David was much too in love to see a single flaw in Ethne's perfection.

In fact, the contrast between the two girls, in his opinion, only showed him all the more plainly what a sweet and candid nature she had. David did not want his future wife to be worldly and cynical and witty, full of double meanings and doubtful jokes. He liked her to be just what she was, the dearest person in all the world.

Ethne's trousseau, with the exception of her wedding and going-away dresses, which her uncle was giving her, was to be bought in Paris, but she and David spent some exciting days in London, where she went to be fitted for the afore-mentioned dresses, choosing the furniture for their new home.

David would drive her to town, leaving her to the tender mercies of dressmakers, while he himself attended to his own duties.

Once Mrs. Playden accompanied them, as she also had her own outfit for the wedding to buy, and suggested, a little to Ethne's disappointment, their asking Fenella to meet them some here for lunch.

"Girls always enjoy talking about clothes," she said smilingly, "and Fenella has such wonderful taste, you know, even if she is a little startling at times."

The three of them had a meal at one of the smart West End restaurants, and set off for the shops afterwards.

Mrs. Playden's appointment with her dressmaker duly carried out, the little party found themselves with some spare time on their hands, and at the older woman's suggestion went to inspect some of the furniture which David and Ethne had already selected.

Fenella was filled with secret envy at sight of the beautiful carpets and curtain materials destined to beautify the interior of Green Gates. It seemed to her an outrage that a penniless girl like Ethne should be going to live in such a lovely home.

So it was with difficulty that she prevented herself from displaying her increasing chagrin as, leaving the soft-furnishing department, Ethne took them to see the

handsome pieces she and her husband-to-be had chosen for the downstairs rooms.

The bedroom suites had still to be decided upon, and Mrs. Playden quite casually asked Ethne if she were going to have twin beds or one large double one?

"For myself," she said, "I think twin beds are far the best; for even the most devoted couples have different ideas of how many blankets they prefer, and so on."

A startled look came into Ethne's face, her eyes darkened with what might have been taken for apprehension, had not such an idea been absurd. She did not answer for a moment, and looking at her Fenella caught her expression.

"Come on, Ethne," she pressed. "Don't be shy! Out with it, which is it to be?"

Mrs. Playden looked rather annoyed at the implication in the speaker's words and regretted having put the question. To cover things up she said smoothly—

"I expect you and David will settle all that together when you get round to it, Ethne my dear. In the meantime, my feet are killing me, so what about a cup of tea?"

Ethne forced herself to make some sort of reply and act as if nothing had happened to dislodge her poise.

But it was from that moment that the first doubts about her marriage invaded her mind, and she was so quiet for the rest of the evening—which they spent at a theatre—that David, who had joined them, told his mother that they had allowed the girl to do too much walking about.

"But, my dear boy, if a woman of my age can do it, and come up smiling, surely a young girl like Ethne cannot feel fatigued?" smiled his mother. "Though I must say she does look pale. Are you very tired, my child?"

"No, of course not, Mrs. Playden. I'm just a little over-excited. I expect," was Ethne's reply, but she was glad, when they were once more back at The Coppice, and she could be alone in her own room.

Then, for the first time, the full meaning of what being married was going to involve dawned upon her, and she sat for a long time staring into the future.

NEXT morning it was disturbing to awake without the usual joyous sensation that all was right with her world.

Hardly able to understand her own feelings and to distract her mind, Ethne took the short cut across the fields to Green Gates Cottage, to see what progress the decorators were making.

It was a charming little house, larger than its name implied, for it had four bedrooms and two large living-rooms, as well as good kitchen accommodation.

Installed in the latter room she found Nanny Brock, unpacking large crates of household utensils, shining new pots and pans, pails and brushes and basins, which she was storing away in the conveniently built-in cupboards.

"It's going to be the nicest kitchen I've ever worked in, Miss Ethne, meaning no disrespect to the home we've just left," Nanny remarked, with a beaming smile. "Everything anyone could possibly want, and a proper place to keep them all in. And just look at these lovely tiles? Aren't they grand? And so simple to keep clean. It's looking for work I shall be, that's certain. Now just you come up and have a look at the fine bath they're putting in, you'd almost be afraid to use it for its proper purpose, it's so beautiful!"

When she had admired the very modern and well-equipped bathroom Ethne allowed herself to be led into the bedrooms, each tastefully decorated and newly-papered but so far unfurnished.

"This is the big bedroom that will be yours and Master David's, of course, Miss Ethne," said the old woman. "And just over the landing there's my little room, and a spare one for visitors and—"

"Two spare rooms for visitors, Nanny," Ethne corrected, "one of which my brother will use during the holidays."

"And the other will make a fine nursery for the babies you're going to be blessed with, Miss Ethne. I'll tell the workmen to put some bars across the windows before they go. Dear me," sighed Nanny, "it seems only the other day that you were a baby yourself and by this time next year you may be playing with one of your own, please God."

Ethne said nothing, but once more a sensation of panic filled her, and she had a sudden terrifying sensation of being trapped.

She supposed that she must have gone white for her companion exclaimed anxiously—

"Why, aren't you feeling too good my dear? Is anything wrong?"

Ethne pulled herself together.

"Nothing that a cup of your own special kitchen-brew won't put right," she said, forcing a smile. "No one makes tea like you, Nanny dear. Let's go down to the kitchen and have some. I was up too late last night, I'm not used to London hours, you know."

Nanny seated her solicitously in front of the open window, which looked out on to a pleasant strip of lawn. It was something new for her young mistress to complain of fatigue or physical discomfort, for she had never ailed in her life. But now that she looked at her the old woman thought she could detect signs of strain in the young face.

All this excitement of being engaged was proving too much for her, Nanny thought. It would be a good thing when she was married and living here at Green Gates with her old nurse to look after her.

She had led too quiet and sheltered a life for these bustling modern days. It was like putting a delicate flower out of a hot-house into the rough winds of March to expose her suddenly to the mad rush of present day life.

The tea worked its well-known cure. After two large cups Ethne looked her usual self, and announced her intention of returning to The Coppice.

"Thank you, Nanny," she said, "it's like old times to have had some of your very own brew."

But she did not go straight back to the Playdens. Instead she perched herself upon the top bar of a stile, overlooking a spread of meadowland, and the look of strain returned to her young face.

"Oh dear, what have I done?" she asked herself piteously. "How could I have been so selfishly blind? Oh, what—what can I do?"

All round birds were singing joyously, the sun shone, the sky was blue and cloudless, but in Ethne's heart darkness and despair reigned, for she had suddenly realised that she did not want to marry David. She loved him, but she was not in love with him—a subtle but very important difference to a girl.

She had used him as a means of escape from an unbearable situation without giving thought to all her acceptance of his offer implied. Now—suddenly aware of all that marriage meant, she told herself that she could not go through with it.

Oh, why couldn't they be satisfied just to be engaged? she asked herself desperately. She would be quite happy to go on as she was now till the end of her life.

David was the perfect fiance, she loved him, but not in the way in which she now

realised he loved and wanted her—in the married way!

"What am I to do?" she asked nervously of the blue sky, the green fields, the happy-voiced birds, for there was no one to whom she could open her heart.

In less than two weeks she was to be married, the house was bought, the furniture chosen, the wedding invitations issued.

Already presents for the happy pair were pouring in both at The Coppice and at Eversley Court, where her uncle and aunt had made arrangements for a reception which would do honour to the family.

How could she think of upsetting everything at the last moment? Of humiliating David and disappointing his parents, who had been so good to her?

Once more she had the terrifying sensation of being in a cage from which there was no escape. Once more she tried to shut from her consciousness the error she had committed, but without success.

She recognised the truth only too well. She had given her word to marry a man without in any one way being prepared for what marriage really meant and from which she shrank in panic.

"But I can't back out," she thought. "No, it would be a poor return for all David's kindness and devotion. It is too late for that now, it is a debt I owe and which must be paid."

But how could I have been so thoughtless to have accepted him in the first case?

"But I must be brave, she told herself, and go through with it. David must never guess, no, never, never."

During the few remaining days at The Coppice, before she left to go to her relatives, several people remarked on the change in the young future bride.

Some, like Nanny Brock, accounted for this change as being the result of too much excitement coming on top of her recent sad loss.

The old nurse said this to David, and the young man agreed and tried to shield the girl from as many social activities as he could. Very willingly on his side it may be said, because he hardly ever had a chance to get his fiance alone.

But Ethne would have welcomed the parties, for the numbers would have served to distract her thoughts and to save her from the tender *tete-a-tetes* with David, which, were becoming so unwelcome to her.

For now his ardent kisses frightened her and at the same time filled her with a feeling of guilt for her own unresponsiveness.

Almost hourly it became more and more difficult to prevent her showing openly how she shrank from them.

With all his love the young man had somehow failed to unlock the door of her heart. What she felt for him was the pure spontaneous love of one who was still little more than a child—sisterly love.

And there was no one to whom she could unburden her secret fears—impossible to speak of them to kind Mrs. Playden, unthinkable to imagine taking her aunt into her confidence, and she did not want to burden old Nanny Brock with her troubles.

Also, some obscure feeling of loyalty to David prevented her from discussing such an intensely intimate matter with her friend, Marcia Duncome, who was going to be her only bridesmaid and who had known David for as long as Ethne had.

With each new day bringing her nearer to the wedding Ethne asked herself frantically how she could have been so wicked as to have entered into this one-sided engagement. How was it going to end?

THE final day of her visit to the Playdens dawned at last and the doors of The Coppice were resolutely shut against all other visitors.

"We want to have her to ourselves on this her last evening," Mrs. Playden decreed.

She had grown very fond of her prospective daughter-in-law. Ethne's beauty and unspoiled youth, her pleasing air of gentle deference to her elders, her unselfish love for her brother, all found favour in the other woman's eyes.

Unlike many mothers, she thought that David had done very well for himself, and this attitude was shared by her husband, round whose heart Ethne had twined herself quite effortlessly.

Everything pointed to the success of the suddenly arranged marriage. Even those who privately considered Ethne rather young agreed that time was on her side and that once she was a young wife—and mother—she would soon grow up.

Only the girl herself knew of that nagging fear, that nameless bogey, which had so unexpectedly shattered her joyous anticipation of the future, filling her instead with vague apprehension and dismay.

"How am I going to get through the next few days without you, darling?" David asked on that last evening as, under an almost full moon, they wandered round the grounds.

They had been to have a last look at Green Gates and although Ethne had pleaded fatigue the young man could not bring himself to part with her just yet.

The night was made for lovers, filled with the dreamy silver of moonlight and the perfume of early summer.

Faintly, through an open window of the house, drifted the strains of violins as Mr. and Mrs. Playden listened to their favourite Symphony Orchestra on the radio.

No stage setting could have been more romantically devised, and in every fibre of his being David felt its influence.

"They will soon pass, David dear," Ethne murmured. "Especially when you will be so busy at your office clearing up everything in preparation for our—our honeymoon."

"Even then I shall be longing for you," he said ardently. "You're everything to me, Ethne, you're life itself, I love you with my whole heart."

Deeply touched she looked up at him and then laid her head against his breast.

"How sweet you are to me," she said brokenly. "I don't deserve it, David, indeed I don't."

The touch of her face against his heart gave him a thrill of unbearable happiness.

With a movement, rough in its intensity, he raised her soft face to his and pressed a storm of kisses upon it. Eyes, lips, throat, hair, his mouth sought them all in ardent embrace.

Against her will, hardly knowing what she did, Ethne drew back with a little cry of revulsion.

"No, David, no—" she whispered frantically. "I—I—, oh, darling, I'm sorry, I am indeed. But I can't go on with it, I can't! I never wanted you to know, I have tried so hard to keep it from you, but for some time now it has been a sort of nightmare to me."

Her quivering voice trailed into silence and, white-faced and shocked David looked at her, trying to take in the meaning of all she said.

"A—a nightmare?" he echoed, his voice harsh with the intensity of his feelings. "In what way, darling?"

"Because I know that I don't love you in the right way," she murmured. "Being

engaged to you is wonderful, David, and I have been happier than I can say. But—how can I put it? Married love is different—and I don't want it! I mustn't marry you, David darling, because I ought never to be your wife."

FENELLA'S AMBITION.

COMPLETELY taken aback David stared at the girl's agonised face.

Great tears were welling slowly from her eyes, her mouth was twisted with pain. She had locked her hands over her breast in a convulsive gesture as if trying to steady her quivering nerves.

Even in that moment of his own bewilderment and shock the young man's protective instinct did not desert him.

"Dearest," he murmured, "dry your eyes, and don't look so frightened. Let us sit down for a while and you can tell me all about it."

She let him lead her to a seat, wild feelings of remorse already overwhelming her at having broken her resolve never to let him know the truth.

Although she did not know it she was trembling all over, and a wave of compassion mingled with David's sense of bewilderment.

He made her sit down and then, with his arm around her shoulder, he said:

"Now, what's it all about, Ethne? Will you tell me, sweetheart?"

"There—there is nothing to tell except that we can't be married, David," she faltered, trying to speak calmly. "I thought I loved you enough, but—how can I tell you?—it isn't with the right sort of love. I see that now, I can't expect you to understand, but it would be wrong of me to marry you, feeling as I do. You will never forgive me, I can't expect you to, for I can't forgive myself for having been so blind. And now—now we can never live in that dear little house, never see each other any more. Oh, I am sure that I am the most miserable girl in all the world."

"Then—then you want to end our engagement?" he said dully.

"What else can we do?" she murmured, with a heavy sigh.

He got up and paced the lawn, his feelings in a turmoil, a great bitterness welling up within him.

But not against Ethne, no, he did not, could not blame her, but against the cruel fate which was suddenly depriving him of all his sweetest and most cherished dreams.

Had he been to blame? he wondered. Had he taken her by storm just when she was desperate with unhappiness and dislike of her aunt, too young and inexperienced to know the full seriousness of the step she was taking?

He winced at the recollection of that action of hers just now when she had shrunk from his caresses. Nothing had hurt him quite so much as that. Nothing else could have shown him so plainly that marriage was not possible between them.

And yet—how could he lose her now? How could he condemn her to the tender mercies of her aunt, who would certainly gloat over the failure of the girl's marriage and bitterly resent having to be involved in all the scandal and gossip that would follow the broken engagement.

His poor little Ethne, foolish perhaps and thoughtlessly impulsive, but so helpless and alone should their marriage never take place.

He loved her so devotedly, and was ready to make any sacrifice, for he was not without some blame in the matter himself. He should have realised before now that he had not fully awakened her heart, they should have waited until she was more mature—until she had crossed that brook where

womanhood and childhood meet."

He went and sat down beside her and took her hand.

"It's going to be all right, my darling," he murmured. "We needn't change anything. I want you for my wife under any circumstances, yes, any circumstances," he repeated firmly. "It shall be engaged love between us, darling, not married love. Will that make you happy?"

She peered at him through the moonlight, her lips still trembling piteously.

"The point is—will it make *you* happy?" she asked. "I have wronged you enough, David, I wonder you don't hate me."

"You are going to make me happy just by sharing my life," he said tenderly. "I couldn't do without you now, Ethne. You wait—we'll make a go of things, somehow. Cheer up, and wipe those wet cheeks, or it will look as if we'd been quarrelling."

"How good you are," she breathed, scarcely able to realise that all her fears and anguish had been unnecessary and that, after all, she was not going to lose him. "No one can ever have been so good before. Oh, I never thought that I was going to feel happy again," she continued, her youthful good spirits returning, "and yet you have been able to put everything right and have forgiven me."

"What have I to forgive?" he asked a little sadly. "Is it your fault that you have not yet properly grown up?"

THEIR wedding, though not on a large scale owing to the recent death of the bride's father, met with everyone's approval.

Never had Ethne looked lovelier than in her flimsy white wedding gown, carrying a sheaf of lilies. A little like a lily herself, the guests thought, for excitement had made her pale—the bridegroom, tall and handsome and very devoted, and the single bridesmaid in her rose-pink dress.

The organ throbbed out its grand triumphant notes, choir-boys' voices rose in sweetest melody, and through the stained glass windows the sun gleamed with jewelled rays as David Playden and Ethne Joyce Sinclair were made one.

Even Lady Eversley could not help feeling a little proud of her niece both then, and at the reception which followed.

All her responsibility for the girl had vanished now that she was married, and no one could say that her uncle and aunt had not given her a suitable send-off.

Thus, from all points of view, the self-centred woman was satisfied and could enjoy the whole-hearted admiration her niece received from their friends.

One pair of eyes alone perhaps viewed the proceedings with a look of envy. Fenella Cope, ultra-smart in a dress for which she had not yet paid, regarded the white-clad form of the young bride with open dislike.

She would have given a great deal to have been in Ethne's place, leaning on David's arm while the wedding march's music pealed up to the rafters of the old village church.

Fenella had begun to wonder if that music would ever sound for her, for her admirers were dropping off one by one ever since her callous behaviour to her former fiancé became known.

David would have been very acceptable to her, and in a perfectly illogical way she began to believe that Ethne had robbed her of him. Odd, how men always fell for the clinging, silly, feminine types, she thought resentfully, while girls with brains and ambition were so often left on the shelf.

Meanwhile, for the principal actors in this bridal pageant it was a day of almost perfect happiness. Despite his bitter disappointment David rejoiced at the knowledge that he had won his chosen bride,

while Ethne was convinced that no girl in the world could ever have had such a devoted and completely unselfish husband.

In her inexperience no doubts of the future assailed her. Their lives were going to be one endless engagement, while immediately before them stretched the exciting prospect of long days of pleasure and idleness in those foreign countries she had never yet seen.

Afterwards, she would devote her whole life to making David happy. Nothing that she could do to promote his well-being would be too much. He deserved all the love and affection in the world, for what other man would have taken her on the terms upon which they were starting their matrimonial life?

The wedding-cake was cut, the toasts drunk, the bridal dress changed for a marvellous grey tailor-made. Then the car was at the door, waiting to whisk them away on their honeymoon.

It was all over; for better or worse they belonged to each other, and no one who saw them drive away could doubt that the union would be a happy and successful one.

"And how do you think you are going to like being Mrs. David Playden?" he asked, slipping his arms round his lovely young wife.

"Mrs. David Playden," Ethne echoed softly. "I think she must be the luckiest person in the whole world, darling. Thanks to you there is nothing left for me to wish for."

And if he could not quite echo those sentiments himself, David was, at that moment, quite convinced that just to be her husband, just to have her at his side throughout their lives, was going to satisfy him. For love, when it wishes, can blind itself to facts and feel that no sacrifice is too great to be made for the sake of the one beloved.

There was no one to tell them that they were entering upon a future which only too probably would end in disaster, and at best would be a poor substitute for the marriage which nature meant it to be.

In the weeks which followed the beautiful buildings and shops of the two great cities of Paris and Rome gave Ethne indescribable pleasure.

A new world opened before her dazzled eyes, a world of wonderful art-treasures and exquisite landscapes, of strangely-tasting foods and wonderful clothes.

And through it all she had the companionship of the person dearest to her in all the world, and rapidly becoming dearer with every passing day as, in those warm climates of love and passion, she quickly attained maturity.

She had left England a child, in everything but years, but it was a young woman who returned to Green Gates Cottage, to the waiting Nanny Brock, and Brian just home for the holidays.

And wonderful as everything had been, indescribably lovely as the places she had visited, she still felt that England was her true home; the best and dearest country in the whole wide world.

"How absolutely wonderful to be in our own, our very own home at last," she exclaimed as she looked round the flower-filled garden and heard once more the songs of English birds.

"Can't beat it, can you?" David agreed in tones of satisfaction. "Brian, old fellow, how do you think your sister looks after all her travels?"

"Smashing!" said the boy. "She's grown quite pretty, hasn't she?"

IN the weeks that followed Ethne proved herself a surprisingly capable housekeeper, and thoroughly enjoyed the new role. Nanny Brock was, of course, a tower of strength to any young wife, but

Ethne had no intention of leaving everything in her old nurse's hands.

She found it terribly exciting to pore over cookery books and concoct tasty dishes for David. Exciting also, if at first a trifle alarming, to entertain his friends, and to devise novel ways in which to amuse them.

Thus it was that Green Gates became a popular social centre and the young couple were enthusiastically voted a valuable addition to the neighbourhood.

But no one, with the exception of the old nurse, knew of the existence of the separate rooms and single beds, to which the husband and young wife retired at night, and Nanny Brock was certainly not one to spread a fact of which she so strongly disapproved and which so completely bewildered her.

She had, at first, looked at Ethne many times questioningly and with open consternation, but her unspoken questions had remained unanswered, and remained a problem which cost her many an hour of anxious thought.

On the surface they seemed happy enough he the most attentive of husbands while Ethne left no stone unturned in her efforts to see to his comfort and well-being.

But in a world of ordinary human beings such romantic idylls cannot last for ever, and although, on the surface, everything might appear all that could be desired subtle changes were at work underneath.

Summer faded into autumn, and with its passing it seemed to Ethne that an unseen barrier slowly arose between herself and David.

He became quiet and pre-occupied. No longer was he cross if he had to stay working late at the office. Indeed, it almost seemed as if he were beginning to find the long evenings at home boring, unless they were going out somewhere or entertaining friends.

Soon their former gay companionship was replaced by an artificial atmosphere which really deceived neither of them, although to all outsiders Green Gates still appeared the abode of two perfectly matched and happy people.

It was in vain that Ethne tried to put her finger on the trouble; for truth to tell, the real cause of the barrier which was so slowly but surely dividing them never dawned upon her.

She only knew that the old, adoring David was vanishing, that daily he seemed to alter, until gradually it came to her mind that he no longer loved her.

Never now did he take her in his arms and kiss her, never tell her how wonderful she was, and only when his caresses were no longer forthcoming did she realise how bitterly she missed them.

And there was once a dreadful moment when she thought she could discern that he absolutely shrank back when with one of her impulsive gestures—and Ethne was ever given to impulses—she threw her arm round his neck and hugged him.

She felt his whole body stiffen and grow tense, and although she said nothing a chill sensation warned her that her caress was unwelcome to him.

The fact was that David had undertaken more than he found it easy to carry out. He had let himself in for an impossible situation and the strain on his emotions was becoming more than he could stand.

Could she not guess, he asked himself irritably, that her innocent gestures of affection tried his self-control to the uttermost, that his only chance of keeping to the bargain he had entered into was to refrain from even the most ordinary love-making?

The more he thought of it the more it seemed to him that he had done wrong in marrying her. Who was it had said—"But aren't you marrying a child, David?" It

must have been his cousin Fenella, whom occasionally he saw in Town and had lunch with.

He was sorry for Fenella, she was obviously unhappy, due no doubt to her broken engagement; just then David was in the mood to sympathise with anyone whose love-affairs had not gone right.

ONE evening he came home, after having met Fenella during the lunch hour, with a message from the latter for his wife.

"She wants to know if we can have her for a couple of weeks?" he said, after having described his meeting with the girl. "She's not feeling at all well and has given up her job temporarily. I think a complete rest would do her good, she's looking very much below par at the moment. What do you think, Ethne? I told her I was sure you would be glad to have her, she'd be nice company. After all, you must sometimes find the days rather long, don't you?"

"Oh, of course, she must come." The reply was given with secret lack of enthusiasm, for Ethne knew very well that she and Fenella would never be good company for one another.

Besides, she had a shrewd idea that the other girl rather despised her.

"I'm sorry that she isn't well, David. But are you sure that she will be able to stick the quietness of the country? Won't she be bored?"

"I think quiet is what she needs, for she leads a noisy kind of life in London, you know. As for being bored—" he looked at her curiously—"are you bored with the country, Ethne?"

"I? David, what a question! It's what I've been used to. I love it. Besides, I am often too busy to be bored. I find plenty to do in the house and garden and then on one day every week I have my old people here, you know."

Once weekly Ethne called for four old people living in the village almshouses and drove them back to Green Gates for lunch and tea, a treat to which the old folk looked forward immensely.

Her husband looked at her with sudden tenderness. What a kind-hearted, unselfish girl she was, he mused. Young and inexperienced she might be, but her heart was always full of womanly compassion for anyone who was lonely or unhappy. He thought it unlikely that there were many girls of her age who would, week after week, sacrifice a whole day entertaining four needy old people.

"And you're happy in your present life, Ethne?" he asked, and once more she looked at him in surprise.

"Of course I am. Aren't you, David?"

Before he could answer, the 'phone rang and he went to attend to it.

"That was Fenella," he said, coming back. "I told her that we would put her up for as long as she wanted to stay, and she's very grateful to you. You won't let it make any extra work, will you? She'll want to be treated just like one of the family, you know."

It was not the thought of any extra work which the proposed visit might entail which daunted Ethne.

She was sorry for Fenella, but was rather ashamed to discover that she was not in the least looking forward to having her to stay.

Somehow, the other girl always gave her an inferiority complex. Fenella was so up-to-date, so smart, and worldly-wise. She had a fund of supposedly funny stories, which many people found entertaining, but which occasionally offended Ethne's youthful taste.

And there was a hardness about her, a

flippant, cynical outlook on life which Ethne had never before met and which made her feel very young and inexperienced she must appear.

"She always knows all the answers," she remarked a little plaintively to her friend Marcia, who had dropped in for tea on the afternoon before the day fixed for Fenella's visit. "She has a way of making one feel small."

"She wouldn't make me feel small," Marcia declared stoutly, "and why she should have that effect upon you, Ethne, I can't imagine. Why, you have everything in your favour. I saw her at your wedding, of course, and although she's very smart and all that, she's not as young as she'd like to be, you know. And she's certainly not a quarter as attractive as you are, my dear. Don't let her squash you, Ethne, you're a married woman now, you know, and you've got a husband to back you up, remember, even if he is her cousin."

ETHNE did not think there was anything of the invalid in Fenella's appearance when she arrived the following day.

She was beautifully made-up, wearing clothes which, while being suitable for the country, were ultra-smart, and her manner was as full of self-assurance as ever.

The truth was that Fenella had been dismissed by her long-suffering employer, and being temporarily out of work, and in bad favour with her bank manager, had decided to put in a week or two at Green Gates where she would have no expenses. Where, also, she was anxious to satisfy her curiosity upon one or two matters concerning her host and hostess.

Fenella had not been blind to the alteration in David's looks and manner since his wedding. She thought he looked a far from happy man; he was often in a morose mood when she met him, nervy and preoccupied, as if he had something on his mind.

"And no wonder," she had thought. "Being married to that prize simpleton can't be stimulating to a man of his intelligence. I bet she bores him to tears. It might be rather amusing to pop down there and see for myself how they are getting on."

David, with an unsatisfactory wife, might still be a possibility. Thank goodness divorce was easy to get these days and a disillusioned and bored husband was easy prey.

Men were so easily taken in, she had thought disdainfully. She had only to use a different make-up, one which produced an interesting pallor and to look wistful and large-eyed to gain his pity and solicitude about her well-being.

"How nice of you to have me," she exclaimed as she kissed Ethne. "I know I'm going to adore being here—this darling little house looks so snug and comfortable."

"I hope you'll enjoy your stay with us, Fenella," Ethne said. "We shall both do all we can to make your visit enjoyable."

"Oh, just being here, amongst all you dear simple people will be such a delightful change after town life," Fenella said. "I won't want entertaining, I assure you."

But Ethne found, in the days that followed that unless she was constantly arranging some small festivity or other Fenella betrayed every sign of being at a loose end.

A day without a cocktail-party, or an invitation to dine or lunch, was unthinkable to her and Nanny Brock was kept busy in the kitchen concocting new dishes and expensive delicacies with which to tempt the supposed invalid's taste.

"You're looking better already, Fenella," said David, at the end of the first few days. "And your visit has also brightened up

considerably. We've been quite gay."

"I always think that it's a mistake to get into a rut just because one's married," was the other's reply. "Settling down is such a dull, frumpy business. What I admire about you two," she went on, "is that you've quickly dropped all that lovey-dovey business which is so overdone in the newly-weds. Why, you might have been married for years instead of only so short a time."

"Oh, I dislike people who kiss and cuddle in public," David said coldly.

But to Ethne the other girl's remarks only seemed to confirm what she herself had been conscious of for some time; that David was no longer in love with her.

Nevertheless how Fenella had deduced as much was a mystery, since to most of their friends they appeared a supremely happy and well-matched pair.

But it is impossible to live with people in the same house and not discover things unsuspected by the casual visitor.

It had not taken Fenella long to find out that although there were two twin beds in the large bedroom, one of them was never used!

She knew that David occupied a separate room, for she had heard him enter it night after night and the discovery had given her food for thought.

Malicious by nature, where her own sex was concerned, Fenella was especially so in connection with Ethne whom she so cordially disliked. Quite apart from her own secret designs she was delighted that the marriage was not the success it was supposed to be on the outside.

How to turn her discovery to the best use, from her own point of view, now occupied a great part of Fenella's mind.

Even while accepting Ethne's hospitality, and allowing herself to be waited on and looked after, she had no scruples in searching for a suitable opening to further her malicious designs.

Financially, she was in a bad way, for her passion for smart clothes and expensive cosmetics had led her into spending sums very much in excess of her income.

It was daily becoming necessary for her to marry some man in a good financial position if she were to continue leading the only kind of life which appealed to her—not the sort of existence led by Ethne at Green Gates.

No, if she were to achieve her wished-for ambition, she must induce David to live in London; the only place fit for civilised people in her opinion.

It was rather odd that without ever having had the least encouragement from the man, either before or after his marriage, Fenella should imagine that she would be able to marry him if he and his wife were ever separated.

But she had immense belief in her own powers and an equally large share of disdain for men, who, she considered, were so easily hoodwinked by any clever member of her own sex.

In her own mind she was quite sure that her cousin had grown tired of his childish wife, and would, therefore, turn all the more gladly to a more mature woman of the world, one who knew how to amuse men and was not too much of a prude where naughty jokes were concerned.

This last supposition showed that Fenella was not quite as clever as she thought herself to be. For the one thing David did not care about in his cousin was her lack of delicacy in that respect.

He supposed he was old-fashioned in that way, but he would have hated to hear his own wife say some of the things which

Fenella said in public.

When the day upon which Ethne entertained her elderly friends from the almshouses came round, Fenella was frankly appalled.

She could imagine no more utterly boring prospect than in having to listen to a lot of old women and to be in their company for hours on end. That Ethne could do so only appeared one more instance of her almost incredible simplicity; for surely no one with an ounce of brain could submit oneself to such an ordeal.

Accordingly Fenella suggested that she travel up to Town with David and look up some of her own friends, and it was with a sigh of relief that Ethne saw her depart.

Closer intimacy with her husband's cousin had done nothing to draw the two girls closer and it seemed to Ethne that an atmosphere of peace brooded over Green Gates when she returned from driving the two of them to the station.

How much more did she prefer the society of the dear old people from the almshouses to the smart, artificial Fenella's company, behind whose most casual remark there always lurked a sting.

A SHOCK FOR ETHNE

FENELLA'S visit dragged on to its third week and Ethne was not the only one at Green Gates who wished for her departure.

Nanny Brock was openly tired of the many demands made by the supposed invalid, who, in her opinion, was as robust and healthy as any young woman could be. She did not like the visitor's ungracious manner and her frequent sneers at what Fenella called "the locals".

"I wonder why folks that live in towns look down upon country folk?" she asked Ethne one day when the latter was helping her to make the beds. "We're not the fools they think we are by any means, and yet there's that Miss Fenella always having a sneer at what she calls 'us rustics'."

"It's just her way of speaking. You mustn't pay any attention to it, Nanny," Ethne said soothingly.

"Well, to speak bluntly I shan't be sorry to see her go," the old woman declared. "Never once since she's been here has she lifted a finger to help—not even to make her own bed or take a duster to her hand. I pity the man she marries—if she ever does."

"She's not feeling very well remember, Nanny dear," Ethne said generously, patting down the pillow, "that's why she came here, to have a complete rest."

"Well, it's not much rest she gives other people," grumbled Nanny. "Or herself, neither, if it comes to that. Always wanting to gad here and there and never content to sit quiet and listen to the wireless. As different from Master David as chalk from cheese, if you ask me."

"There are not many people like David," Ethne said quietly, and into her eyes crept the tender, soft expression which so often came into them when she mentioned his name.

It was his bedroom they were in, and Nanny gave her young mistress a sharp look as she ventured hesitantly—

"Seeing that his sort is scarce it's to be hoped that it won't be long before he has some sons and daughters like himself growing up round him."

Ethne made no answer, but all the same she was struck.

A strange, warm sensation arose within her at the picture of children for David—a little boy filling the house with sunshine and the patter of tiny feet—and a sudden

wave of maternal longing swept over her.

By a coincidence that very afternoon, Ethne had a visit from a young married woman who drove over to show off her year-old twins.

There is always something attractive and interesting about twins and Millie Condovery's little boy and girl were no exception. They had pleased their mother by having curly fair hair and big brown eyes, which gazed out upon the world in solemn wonder.

Ethne was charmed with them, and forgetting all about the necessity to keep Fenella amused, spent most of the afternoon on the floor, playing with them, while their mother sat busily employed with her never-ending knitting.

"No sooner is one fitted out with a garment of some sort than I have to start on something for the other," she remarked plaintively. "There's never a moment's leisure with twins, Ethne, take my word for it."

"Oh, but they're worth it," Ethne murmured tenderly, as she watched the little girl trying to swallow her toe while her less adventurous brother looked gravely on. "You wouldn't be without them, Millie."

"Heavens no—I should think not. They have a way of twisting themselves round one's affections in the most ridiculous way. Harry simply adores them."

Such a scene of family life was too much for Fenella. How two good-looking young women, like Ethne and her visitor, could spend their time cooing and gurgling over a couple of babies was something Fenella just could not understand.

So, with the excuse that she really ought to walk over to The Coppice and see her aunt and uncle, she escaped from the house.

"I'd no idea that she was your husband's cousin, Ethne," Millie remarked as she watched Fenella disappearing down the lane. "Some friends of ours in London know her very well, and I must say they don't think much of her, after the way she treated poor young Cartwright."

Ethne looked at her enquiringly.

"How do you mean?" she asked. "Fenella may be David's cousin but really I know hardly anything of her private affairs. Between you and me, Millie, it's a matter of complete indifference what people say about her. She's not my type at all."

"I should think not, indeed," was the fervent reply. "She's just a gold-digger, Ethne, a hard-hearted one at that. Because Tom Cartwright wouldn't give her up to please his wealthy aunt the old lady altered her will and instead of leaving him all her money put him down for a bare pittance. Whereupon, when the will was read following the aunt's death, Fenella Cope broke off the engagement without a scruple. Just left him flat, my dear. That's what I call a dirty trick, if you like."

"Oh, Millie, I should think so," Ethne exclaimed warmly. "I'm sure David can't know—he would never have invited her here if he had. Oh, how could she? What must the poor young man have felt?"

"By now I should think he considers himself extremely lucky," Millie said coolly. "He's had an escape. She'd have got through his money in no time and then divorced him in order to get hold of another poor fish. I know her sort."

With relief Ethne turned to the antics of the twins disporting themselves so happily on the rug. "I do envy you, Millie," she burst out suddenly. "I envy you most frightfully having these lovely children."

Young Mrs. Condovery looked up with

surprise from her knitting.

"But, my dear girl, give yourself a chance," she laughed. "You were only married a few months ago. It was getting on for two years before Harry and I became parents, and then look what happened to us! Two at once and I'd only provided enough garments for one. If my friends hadn't come to the rescue I don't know how we should have managed."

Happiness and satisfaction glowed in her pretty face and rang in her voice.

"I suppose you and David would like your first to be a son? It's usually that way I find," she added.

A sudden squeal from one of the twins saved Ethne the embarrassment of a reply, and as Millie hastily released the lock of hair, which the boy was apparently trying to wrench from his sister's head, their young hostess went out of the room to see how Nanny Brock was getting on with the preparations for tea.

Before the meal was over David made an unexpectedly early appearance, his face lighting up at the sight of the babies.

"Millie, I didn't recognise your car," he exclaimed. "It's new, isn't it? How on earth does Harry manage to buy a new car now that he is a proud father?"

It gave Ethne a queer feeling to see him hoist the little girl up in his arms and hold her closely, looking down at her the while with a wealth of tenderness in his eyes.

"I'll ring for some fresh tea, dear," Ethne said but David shook his head.

"Don't bother, I can have tea any old time," he said. "But it's not often I come back to find my house taken possession of by a couple of fairies. I believe he likes me, Millie," he went on in a tone of gratification as the child stroked his cheek.

Millie laughed.

"That he happens to be a *she*," she told him. "Didn't you spot the pink ribbon? They are pets, aren't they. Harry is quite crazy about them."

"Lucky devil," David murmured and added: "Sorry girls, that slipped out. But honestly, I do congratulate you, Millie, they're a pair of beauties."

"Yes, and you're sweet, too," Ethne was murmuring to the little boy. "We love you both. Come to your Auntie Ethne, darling," and she lifted him up.

Across the room the young husband and wife, each holding a baby, looked at each other and Ethne's eyes dropped before the mingled expression of wounded reproach and longing in David's eyes. It was as if he were accusing her of something, and finding her guilty.

Just then Millie rose to go.

"I like to be back before Harry gets home," she said. "Besides, I mustn't keep the babies out too late."

It was a chilly atmosphere she left behind her. All at once the room seemed oddly empty and lifeless, even though Ethne had turned on the radio in an effort to dispel the sudden quietness.

"Where's Fenella?" David asked, noticing her absence for the first time.

"She's gone to see your parents," was the reply. "I think she was bored with the children."

"I've no use for a girl who doesn't love children," he said sharply. "There's something unnatural in her make-up."

And saying this he went abruptly out of the room leaving Ethne a prey to very mixed emotions.

Although she did not know it, slowly the undeveloped side of her nature was maturing. The sight of Millie's babies, the soft feel of their little limbs, the clinging

touch of their hands, had touched off some spring in Ethne's inner nature, of whose existence she had been unaware.

"I'm wicked," she told herself, "I've deprived David of the parenthood he longs for. I've stolen his love—and now how can he feel anything but dislike and resentment for me?"

TO the secret relief of everyone in the house, Fenella announced, when she returned, that she proposed to leave them in two days' time.

Although she did not say so she felt that she had exhausted all the amenities of the neighbourhood, and a repetition of that afternoon, with its nursery-like atmosphere, would be more than she could stand.

Ethne, with her old almswomen and her squalling kids—what an existence! How bored poor David must be, she thought. He was certainly looking so this evening. Even his mother had remarked to her that afternoon that he had been looking a little out of sorts lately. It was time someone rescued him from such stagnation.

Next day Ethne had a very severe headache, and towards evening it became so bad that she was unable to accompany Fenella and David to a cocktail party which someone was giving as a kind of farewell to their guest.

"Make my excuses, won't you?" she asked David when he came to her room to say good-bye and to see if there was anything he could do for her. "I'd go with you if I could, but I hardly know how to hold my head up."

David disliked the thought of leaving her. Very pale and hollow-eyed she looked as she lay back against the pillows.

He gave her hand a little consoling pat.

"Poor old girl, take it easy," he said. "Don't attempt to get up, Nanny will look after you. I do wish I hadn't to go, but it would look so rude if neither of us put in an appearance."

"And all because I've a headache," Ethne said trying to smile. "I'm better alone, dear, in the morning I shall be myself again."

He lingered for a minute or two as if hoping for something he could do to help, and then said good-bye.

After Nanny had brought her a cup of tea Ethne fell asleep.

Hours later she awoke to hear the murmur of voices below on the verandah—David and Fenella, back from the party.

The night was warm, or else Ethne was a little feverish, for all at once the room felt airless and stuffy, and rising she opened the window wider and rested her throbbing head for a minute against the sash.

"I'm rather glad that's over," she heard David remark to his companion. "I'm afraid you were a bit bored, Fenella. You didn't look too good, I thought."

"I'm so sorry to be leaving to-morrow," the girl murmured. "Back to my lonely flat again, with nothing to look forward to."

"You never told me why you broke your engagement to that nice fellow, Tom Cartwright," David said. "I'm afraid you've never recovered from it. Is it too late for any hope of a reconciliation?"

He was genuinely anxious to know if it were not possible for things to be patched up between her and the young man who, he knew, had been rather cut-up by the affair.

Fenella's re-action to his question startled and horrified him.

Burying her face in her hands she said brokenly—

"If it possible for anyone to be so blind?"

Oh David, haven't you ever guessed? Has it never dawned upon you that you are the reason? That it was because I discovered that it was not Tom I loved, but you?"

For a moment he was taken aback. Then—

"My dear, Fenella, what are you saying? You don't really mean it, you know—why, we've never been anything but the best of pals, cousins and all that——" he added awkwardly, feeling as wretched and uncomfortable as the average decent man feels upon such occasions.

"I know. It was like that for a time, but then—all at once I knew that what I really felt for you was love, David, and I couldn't possibly marry another man once I had found that out."

"But my dear girl—now that I'm a married man myself you've given up all that nonsense long ago, I'm sure," he said, with an assumption of ease he was far from feeling.

"It has made no difference," Fenella said. "I'm mad about you, David, and although you say that you are a married man just what do you mean by that?"

He stiffened. In the half light which came from the room beyond he could hardly discern her features, but her shoulders were shaking as if with sobs.

"I don't get you?" he said coldly.

"Well, it isn't as if you really cared for Ethne or she for you," Fenella exclaimed. "You only married her because she was homeless and a pauper and you were sorry for her."

These words floated clearly up to Ethne and with a shudder of absolute horror she moved back into the room and staggered into bed.

But it was a pity that she did not continue her unintentional eavesdropping, for David spoke and acted promptly and to the point.

"That, if you will forgive my language, is a dam lie, Fenella," he said. "I asked Ethne to marry me because I was in love with her, and always had been, long before her father's death. You have no business to make such an assertion and I resent it deeply."

"Then I suppose you also wish me to believe that she did not take you just to get a home and security?" sneered the girl, who saw now that she had lost all that she had hoped for and that there was no longer any need to put on an act. "It's rather odd, that being so, that she will not admit you to her bedroom, isn't it?"

David's clenched hands and deep breathing showed how stern was the control he had to exercise upon himself. If she were but a man, he thought savagely, he would have knocked her down.

When he could trust himself to speak he said:

"You will be leaving here first thing in the morning. I will ring for a taxi to call for you immediately after breakfast."

"I was going in any case," she said harshly. "Sorry you don't like the truth when you hear it, David," and with that went up to her room.

How dared she? David fumed angrily. What sort of a traitress had they been harbouring these past three weeks, prying and snooping into their private lives?

With shaking hands he poured himself out a stiff drink, and then, when he felt sufficiently in control of himself, went up to his wife's room.

It was in darkness, and from the bed there came no answer to his muffled whisper of her name. She was asleep, poor darling, he told himself, and on tiptoe crept out again, to encounter Nanny Brock

on her way up to bed.

"I've just been in to her, Nanny," he said, "and she's fast asleep. In the morning she'll be quite herself again."

But Ethne was not asleep, neither was she herself when another day dawned.

She had felt incapable of seeing David after hearing Fenella's cruel words, and had feigned sleep. Besides which she was feeling definitely ill in herself.

Her throat was sore, her limbs had begun to ache, and her head felt as if it would burst.

When David came in next day she was in the throes of a severe attack of influenza.

FOR a week she was quite seriously ill, with high temperatures, aching limbs and throbbing head.

Through it all she was nursed assiduously by her old nurse and by her husband, the latter sitting with her at night so as to anticipate her every wish.

Never had she seemed more dear to him than in her hours of pain and discomfort when, with scarlet cheeks and overbright eyes, she turned restlessly to and fro in a vain effort to find the comfort that ever escaped her.

Sometimes she said strange things in her delirium. Once, she begged them not to let Fenella into her room, and not all David's repeated assurances that his cousin was no longer in the house, seemed to penetrate to her troubled mind.

But usually the sick girl accused herself of being wicked, of having done someone a dreadful wrong, and she would cry very piteously and was only to be calmed when David stroked her burning forehead and told her she was dreaming.

It was only from his hand at first that she would take any of the nourishing drinks prepared by Nanny Brock, it was only David's voice which seemed able to rouse her from her delirious fancies and bring her back to reality.

With her hand in his cool, firm grasp she would sometimes fall into a peaceful sleep and wake with a smile as her eyes fell upon his face only to be succeeded by a look of unutterable sadness as full memory returned to her.

In after days Ethne remembered very little of those feverish days of pain and torturing fancies.

It seemed to her that, whenever she awoke in the night, David was always at her side and as her temperature returned to normal she began to understand the loss of proper rest this must be causing him. She felt very weak and the knowledge of his tender care brought the tears to her eyes. She wasn't deserving of it, he was as he ever had been, too good to her.

"David—have you been here all night?" she asked, just as dawn was beginning to show in the slowly brightening sky.

Delighted to hear her speak in her usual voice, he roused himself from the sleepy stupor into which he was sinking.

"Ethne, you're better, darling," he said smilingly. "You've had an undisturbed night for once. Let me heat some milk for you, or would you rather have a cup of tea?"

She looked at him, as heavy-eyed and unshaven he bent over her solicitously and all her heart went out to him in a wave of passionate love.

"How good you've been to me, David," she murmured, "how much too good. I seem to remember seeing you here night after night, it will be your turn to be ill, losing all that sleep."

"I couldn't leave you all alone with your

bad dreams, dearest one," he said gently.

"But David—you shouldn't—I wasn't really ill you know. Not seriously so. I heard the doctor say that it was only 'flu," she said weakly.

"It was a very severe attack and you were ill enough to give poor Nanny and me a fright," he said. "Now, what about a nice hot cup of tea? Do you fancy some?"

"Yes, please David, if you're not too tired to bother," she said, and watched him plug in the electric kettle noticing his worried look.

"You look quite ill yourself," she said piteously, tears once more welling into her eyes.

"I expect I need a shave and a bath," he said, "I shall be all right then. To know that you are on the right road to recovery is well worth one or two sleepless nights. You did take it badly, darling, and no mistake. You've been running the most frightful temperature and accusing yourself of all sorts of crimes and wickednesses. What had you been up to while I was away at work? Stealing the money out of the Poor box at the church?"

She did not answer, but all the problems which had been worrying her for so long, and which must have welled up out of her sub-conscious mind while she slept suddenly returned.

"One cup of boiling hot tea as ordered," he smiled, handing her the cup. "Are you comfy? Can I alter the pillows for you, sweetheart?"

"No, just sit by me and drink yours," she said. And after a minute added—"How long have I been ill, David?"

"Well, it's over a week now," he said. "But it seems like years. I must take better care of you in future. I expect that Fenella's visit caused too much extra work, and you got into a weak condition."

"Fenella," she murmured. "I'm sorry David, but I don't ever want to see Fenella again. You see," she went on, "I heard something she said to you. It was the night before I was taken ill and you and she were talking on the veranda. I was at my window and something she said—oh, David, it wasn't true was it? You didn't marry me just out of pity?"

"Ethne," he cried, alarmed, "you know that isn't true, darling. No one can know better than yourself how deeply I loved you. I can't imagine what made Fenella say what she did. And it was not the only lie she told," he added remembering how his cousin had pretended to be in love with him. "I am sorry that I ever had her here, but surely you didn't believe for a second that what she said was true?"

"I tried not to," Ethne sighed, "but I couldn't forget it."

"Has that been on your mind ever since?" he asked. "Foolish girl, I couldn't have believed you would be so silly."

"I've been worse than silly," she murmured. "But I'll try to make things right, David. When I am quite well again I'll—I'll go away."

"Yes," he said. "You shall have a nice long change. Mother was saying only yesterday that she'd take you away to the South of France. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I wasn't meaning that I'd go away just for a change," Ethne said slowly. "I meant I'd—I'd take myself away for good, David. I've not been a proper wife to you and I can see now how wrong we both were in thinking such a life possible. We were drifting apart, I've felt it for weeks. In spite of all your tender care of me, I know that you do not love me any more, David, and I don't wonder. I don't, indeed."

You must divorce me and get someone more worthy of you, someone—"

She broke off, her voice choked with bitter sobs and with a gesture of infinite tenderness David bent over her and gathered her head against his breast.

"I shall never let you go, Ethne," he murmured tremulously. "Never. I'll keep you on any terms, because you are the only girl I shall ever love. If we have seemed to be drifting apart, if I have been sparing of my kisses, it was because I could not always trust myself to keep my

promise to you, but your illness has proved how more than dear and precious you are to me. Don't worry, darling, it is only because you are emotionally undeveloped that our marriage has been—well, different from other marriages. The time may come when you will feel differently, so do not bother your little self on the matter any more."

"Oh, David, David," she sobbed, but now her tears were those of almost unbearable happiness, "don't you understand? That time has already come. I love you

just as you love me, darling."

She drew his head still closer, putting her arms round his neck with a gesture of utter and complete surrender.

When, a little later on, Nanny Brock appeared to see how the patient was she found her master asleep with his head upon the girl's shoulder, and something in the latter's contented expression told the old woman that all was well with the young master and mistress of Green Gates Cottage.

THE END.

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STRONGER THAN HATE

By Gail London

THE NEW PATIENT

MICHAEL FRASER walked slowly down the hill towards the valley, filling his pipe as he went his gaze calm and faintly meditative as it took in the open countryside laid out before him.

In a little wood to the right wood-pigeons were cooing; a lovely, peaceful sound that seemed to underline the almost unearthly quiet of this remote part of Dorset.

Away to the left could be seen the white-walled cottages of the village of Brackenford, their gardens gay with wallflowers and wistaria; it was lilac time and the trees were just coming into bloom.

Just then London seemed a long way off to Michael Fraser.

For the past ten years, five of them at a medical training school, he had lived in London, in furnished rooms not far from Camberwell Green.

Being country-born and bred he had not hesitated to accept when offered the post of Medical Superintendent at the sanatorium on the outskirts of Brackenford.

During the war it had been a military convalescent centre and was now a home for people suffering from nervous disorders.

Originally a large manor house, it was a gracious old building set in lovely grounds. Tennis courts and a swimming pool provided the "inmates" with plenty to do to occupy their leisure. There was also a well-stocked library and a music-room, while most of the medical staff were housed in a newly-built annexe at the rear of the main building.

From his medical student days Michael had always realised that if he wished to become more than a general practitioner, with a country practice, he must specialise—take up some special branch of medicine.

The one which fascinated him most, was that which dealt with diseases of the brain.

Thus, when the post of Medical Superintendent at Brackenford House had been advertised, he had gone to his old friend and tutor, Sir Roger Black, and asked for a recommendation.

"As you know, I want to become a psychiatrist, Sir Roger," he had said. "For that reason, apart from many others, I want to get as much experience as possible, and this seems to be a good opportunity."

"I agree, my boy," the famous man had said. "But Brackenford isn't an asylum, you know. It is more of a convalescent home—for those who can afford to pay, —" he had added. "Most of the cases

that are dealt with there are either psychological or straightforward breakdowns caused through overwork or worry."

Michael had gone away from that interview armed with a letter of introduction which had secured for him the position he had sought.

That had been two years ago and he had never regretted his decision. Quite apart from anything else Brackenford was situated in some delightful country and the work had been as interesting as he had anticipated it would be.

BUT he was not thinking of either past or future as he walked slowly back to Brackenford House but of the present—and Wendy Richards!

His brow knitted in a frown of deepest concentration, he went back over the interview that had taken place in her room the previous evening, soon after her arrival, seeking to find, in the answers she gave to his numerous questions some clue by which to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

Fresh arrivals were always received by the sister in charge and allotted a separate room, where they were given an opportunity to relax after their journey.

Later, their medical history sheets, and the letter from the doctor or specialist who had previously attended them, were placed on Michael's desk, together with a report from the house-surgeon.

These latter were purely routine, being such items as pulse rate, temperature and blood pressure. It was Michael's practice to study as much of the patient's history as the file revealed before making his own examination.

According to Wendy Richards' file, the case was quite a straightforward one.

Twenty-two years of age, she had been employed as a secretary in the council offices of a small, Midland town, living at home with her widowed mother.

A year ago Mrs. Richards had died suddenly, after a short illness, and the girl, who had apparently been devoted to her mother, had been left prostrate.

There had followed a winter living in furnished rooms and a prolonged attack of influenza; a combination of circumstances which had finally brought her to Brackenford House for attention.

Last night, when Michael had entered the room to which she had been taken, he had experienced a mild shock.

For here was no nerve shattered young woman brought to the edge of a breakdown by self-pity, but a girl with eyes as grey as the northern skies, slender brows and silky-brown hair that framed a piquant face of charming, irregular features.

In addition, her mouth was generous

and provocatively curved; the hands resting on the coverlet small and extremely capable looking.

Michael, whose rugged good looks and penetrating blue-grey eyes inspired confidence, had seated himself beside her bed, the end of his stethoscope sticking out of the pocket of his white gown.

After his customary greeting, designed to put the patient at her ease, he had gone on to ask a few questions, one leading skilfully to another, and all the while he had studied her reactions, and the movements of her hands, rather than the answers she had given him.

At the end he had leaned back in his chair, fingering his chin, and had regarded her steadily.

"According to your own doctor you complain of difficulty in concentrating, Miss Richards," he had said. "Is that the only symptom?"

"Oh, no, doctor!" Wendy's eyes had opened to their widest. "Didn't Dr. Latimer tell you? I keep losing my memory."

"He did mention something of the sort," Michael had said. "But can you tell me what form these attacks take, Miss Richards? Do you merely forget where you are or why you have gone somewhere, or is the loss of memory complete? By that I mean, do you forget *who* you are, for instance?"

The girl in the bed had shaken her head. "It hasn't been as bad as that, doctor," she had said, a little tremor in her voice. "But I began finding myself in places I did not know and which, in ordinary circumstances, I would never have visited. Once I found myself in a town forty miles away without the slightest recollection of having gone there."

"I see." He had glanced at the letter she had brought. "I gather that you had to give up your work. What kind was it exactly?"

"I was a typist in the local rates office," she had answered. "The council were very good to me—they gave me six months leave on full pay but I preferred to resign."

A few minutes later Michael had gathered up his papers and placed them on a table.

Then he had given her a thorough examination, and finally returned to his own surgery, where he had found his chief assistant waiting to consult him.

"Hullo! How's the new patient?" Dr. Brian Watts had enquired jocularly. "From what Sister Latanger tells me she's a peach."

"She's certainly a very nice-looking girl," Michael had replied absently.

He did not actively dislike Brian Watts, but neither did he like him. His dark good

looks and polished manners were in direct contrast to Michael's homely ruggedness and blunt mode of speech. At times his undue familiarity with the junior nurses had caused a certain amount of bad feeling.

"What's the trouble?" had enquired Brian, when he had discussed the case about which he had come to ask his chief's advice. "The Richards girl, I mean."

"I'm not sure," Michael had replied, frowning. He had passed over the letter Wendy had given him. "You can form your own opinion from that."

"H'm! Incipient amnesia—sleeplessness—lack of concentration," had murmured Brian Watts rapidly scanning it. "Sounds like a typical neurosis. The sub-conscious mind trying to bury something she doesn't want to remember. Tha' your opinion doctor?"

"If I had nothing but that letter to go on it might be so," Michael had replied cautiously. "At the present moment, however, lacking other evidence, I would say there's nothing particularly wrong with her."

The other had shown his surprise, then he had laughed.

"An imaginary illness? Surely she's a bit young for that kind of thing?"

"I agree," Michael had said. "All the same there's nothing wrong with her that I can discover."

"Then why has she been sent here?" had enquired Brian Watts. "We get some queer cases, admittedly, and in a great many incidents all that is wrong with them is either an enlarged ego or merely self-pity. Are you suggesting—?"

"She is as normal as you or I," had put in Michael, somewhat impatiently. He had picked up the file and handed it to his assistant. "I would like you to take on the case, if you don't mind. Don't allow anything I have said to prejudice you, but let me have your report at the end of a week. Then, if you think it advisable, we can have a word with her doctor."

FIVE minutes later, entering the grounds of the house by a back entrance, he saw Wendy Richards seated in a deck chair with a book on her lap.

She looked up with a pleasant smile in response to his greeting.

"What a heavenly spot this is, Dr. Fraser," she said. "I had no idea there was anything quite so peaceful in all England."

In a white organdie blouse and flared skirt, she made a charming picture against the background of an ancient yew hedge.

"Brackenford is a very charming place, Miss Richards," he said. "I hope you'll enjoy your holiday here. Later, when you feel like it, there are quite a number of places round about, which would repay a visit. The village itself is very pleasant."

Wendy frowned—

"Holiday, Dr. Fraser?" she enquired softly, then laughed. "I suppose you are being tactful."

"Not at all," he replied, seating himself on the edge of a low wall. "There are worse places than Brackenford in which to spend a few weeks doing nothing." He leaned forward slightly, his legs crossed, nursing one wrist. "Tell me, was it your idea that you should come here, or did Dr. Latimer suggest it?"

Wendy hesitated. Then—

"I—I'm not sure," she murmured evasively. "I've heard of Brackenford, of course—who hasn't? I may have suggested it, but I rather think it was Dr. Latimer's idea. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just wondered," he said casually. His gaze followed the movements of an impertinent sparrow which hopped on to the wall. "How did you sleep last night?"

"Lovely, thank you, doctor. It must have been that medicine you sent up!" She put just the right amount of mingled gratitude and wonder into her voice. "I felt a different person when I woke up this morning."

He nodded, as if he had expected nothing else. But privately he was wondering what she would have said had she known that the sleeping draught had been nothing more than coloured water and had been intended to reveal just what he had suspected.

"I understand your mother died last year, Miss Richards," he continued reflectively. "You were devoted to her, were you not?"

"Very much, doctor," she said warmly, a faint flush stealing up under her skin. "We were everything to each other. My father died when I was eleven, you see, and mother did everything for us."

"When you say 'us', whom do you mean?" he asked.

"My sister and I." Michael noticed the swift clenching and unclenching of her hands as she spoke. "She died last year."

Michael knocked out his pipe.

"Dr. Latimer hinted that there had been something—a further tragedy," he said. "But he did not go into details in his letter. No doubt he considered it would be better if you told me about it in your own way, Miss Richards."

Wendy was silent for a moment. Then—"There really isn't anything to tell you, doctor."

"Just as you wish," he shrugged almost disinterestedly.

She supposed that he was so used to having people bare their innermost secrets to him that they made little real impression on him except as signposts pointing the way to the proper treatment.

Somewhat shortly she said—

"My sister didn't live at home. She was on the stage, so we saw very little of her after she left Lendale. We never knew she was ill until we had a message from the hospital where she had been taken."

She continued without a break.

"She died of pneumonia following shock and exposure. I went to London as soon as we heard but there wasn't any hope. If—if she had wanted to live it might have been different, but—she didn't."

"That was a very terrible thing," he said and there was no mistaking the sympathy in his voice. "Have you no idea why?"

Wendy made a gesture.

"The usual reason. She had been badly let down by a man. She was betrayed, Dr. Fraser," she continued, a note of tension in her voice. "It—it was that which killed mother. I tried to keep the worst of it from her, of course, but she had to know about the inquest."

"There was an inquest then?" he asked.

"Yes." Her voice took on a note of dreary finality. "There had to be. You see, my sister had been taken from the river."

In a dim way she was aware of his muffled exclamation, but she was no longer looking at him.

It was very quiet in that secluded corner of the garden; so quiet that the sound of a car in the distance seemed to underline the stillness rather than break it.

Wendy stared into the distances, remembering.

"IT'S no good preaching, Wendy darling," Mavis had said to her that night two years ago. "I'm sick of this place and I'm getting out while there's still time. Mother isn't going to like it, but I can't help that. I've got talent and I've no intention of wasting my life in Lendale."

She had shrugged young shoulders, the golden dust of dreams in her violet eyes.

"I can sing and dance and I'm not bad looking. What's more to the point, I've got an audition next Monday at the Colossus. They are putting on a new show and they want girls for the chorus."

"Good gracious! How on earth did you manage that?" Wendy had asked in surprise.

"It was easy," Mavis had laughed. "I took the day off last week without telling anyone and went to London. June Trevor is in the show—you remember her, she was at school with me? She gave me the name of an agent who was selecting the girls. I went to see him and he fixed up for me to be at the theatre on Monday morning. There'll be hundreds of others, I suppose, but I'm not worried, I've got a pair of good legs."

"Does mother know?"

"Not yet," had shrugged her sister. "I thought I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. But if I get a chance I'm going to take it, so it isn't the slightest use you trying to stop me."

Poor, stage-struck Mavis, with her heart-shaped face and violet eyes, her nice figure and husky voice. She had been so young, so inexperienced.

For about a year everything had seemed to be working out all right for Mavis. The pay was good and she had shared a kind of flat with another girl who was in the chorus.

One day Wendy had taken her mother to Town to attend a matinee of the show her sister was playing in, and afterwards they had gone to tea at one of the big popular cafes near Piccadilly. Mrs. Richards had been torn between disapproval and pride but secretly, Wendy knew, she disapproved of her daughter being on the stage.

The first hint at a man in Mavis's life came in a letter she had written shortly after the show started on its second year's run. She had been to a party and had met someone there with whom she had struck up a friendship.

"He's different from the rest of the crowd who seem to think that nothing else matters but a good time," Mavis had written. "He has a car and says that if I like he'll run me down to Lendale one Sunday to see you and Mum. I want you to meet him—"

Other letters had followed, but not the man's visit to Lendale. Each time it seemed that something or other cropped up to prevent him coming.

It had gone on like this for a month or two. Then had come a frightened little note saying that Mavis might have to leave the show, but she wasn't sure yet, and not to say anything to mother about it.

Wendy had wanted to go to London to find out what it was all about but her mother had been in bed with a severe cold at the time and she had been unable to leave her.

So she had written to Mavis, saying that if possible she ought to come to Lendale to talk things over, asking if she needed money. To this there had been no reply.

After waiting a week she had sent Mavis a telegram, but before she could follow it

up the hospital authorities had got into touch with her.

With a sudden violent gesture she screwed the handkerchief she had been holding into a ball, remembering the shock of seeing a young policeman at the door.

"I'm afraid I've come with bad news, miss," he had apologised, after enquiring if she were Miss Richards. "But we've had a telephone message from St. Cecila's Hospital in London to say that your sister is dangerously ill. They would like you to go there as soon as you can."

It had been evening before she had reached Mavis's bedside. Just before her sister had died she had opened her eyes and looked up at her.

"I—I'm sorry, Wendy," she had mumbled very faintly. "I've been . . . a trusting little fool. Tell Mum—" She had broken off, her eyes closing, then Wendy had heard the broken whisper that had been the last thing she had said—

"Michael—oh, Michael, I loved you so—"

AFTERWARDS it had been surprisingly easy to find out who "Michael" was. In show business, it seemed, nothing is sacred, nothing private.

Zoe Gaillard, the girl with whom she had shared the tiny flat, had been both blunt and informative.

"I warned your sister she was sticking her neck out," she had said, with a hardening of her young eyes. "In this racket you've got to keep your feet well and truly on the ground if you don't want to go the same way as she did. Anyone could see he was a smooth-tongued customer, playing it soft because she liked it that way. But you know what it is—she was crackers about him and couldn't believe he was the same as all the rest. We're all sorry about it—she was a nice kid."

Wendy had asked more about him.

"I knew the kind of guy he was as soon as I set eyes on him," had said the other cynically. "I saw him once or twice—he used to hang about the stage door for her in a car."

"Mavis mentioned a name—Michael."

"That's right. Michael Fraser I believe. She met him at a party. Once she told me he was a doctor and worked at a place in the country."

From a Medical Directory Wendy had learnt that there was a doctor named Michael Fraser and that his address was an out of the way village in Dorset. It had not told her that he was young and very good looking, or that his eyes were blue-grey and singularly penetrating. She had to come to Brackenford to find that out!

THE days that followed brought Wendy no nearer to achieving that which she had set out to do. She had come to Brackenford with no more definite plans other than the somewhat nebulous one of avenging her sister's betrayal.

So far she had encountered no serious obstacles to the furthering of her plan to become accepted as a full-time patient.

In the beginning it had been quite easy to complain to her own doctor of violent headaches and then, later, of gradually increasing lapses of memory.

When Dr. Latimer had finally suggested that she should go away for at least six months, in order to regain her health amid fresh surroundings, she had looked helpless and had murmured that she would be afraid to go amongst a lot of strangers.

From there it had been quite easy to

lead the discussion round to Brackenford House, though at the mention of the sanatorium, Dr. Latimer had raised his eyebrows.

"That would be rather an expensive rest cure, my dear," he had said. "There is no need to—"

"It would be no more expensive than going to stay at some hotel for six months, doctor," Wendy had argued. "I—I think I would feel safer there."

Ten days later the doctor had arranged for her to be admitted to the sanatorium for observation and such treatment as might be necessary.

The fees were high but that did not worry Wendy. The house in which she had lived all her life, had been her mother's, and had fetched a good price when sold.

They had lived frugally and had no debts, so that almost the entire proceeds went to the girl's bank account. There was plenty to pay for six months at Brackenford.

Not that it would take six months to accomplish all she had set out to do, she told herself bitterly. If what had happened to Mavis was anything to go by it should not prove difficult to get Michael Fraser where she wanted him.

Already the glimmerings of a plan were taking shape in her mind.

As part of it she began taking walks outside the grounds for it was necessary to get the young doctor interested in her as a woman as well as a patient. She bought a local guide book in the village and studied it carefully, making mental notes of the various beauty spots around, with particular reference to the means of getting there.

She also made friends with some of the other patients, played an occasional game of tennis and, on sunny days, basked beside the swimming pool.

There was a girl called Millicent Turner, whose tragic history could be read in her sunken eyes and nervous manner.

She had been a passenger in a two-seater aircraft piloted by her fiancé during an afternoon flight at a local flying club. The machine had stalled and crashed, bursting into flames. The girl had been saved but the pilot had been killed.

Millicent was now slowly recovering from the mental and physical breakdown which had followed and, as Wendy was both kind and sympathetic and never seemed to mind how often her sad story was told, she had developed an admiration for the newcomer that was the nearest thing to heroine-worship that Wendy had never known.

"The board of governors ought to present you with a putty medal, Miss Richards," Brian Watts remarked to her one afternoon. "You've done more for Miss Turner than all the medical treatment in the world. She is actually beginning to take an interest in life again."

"Poor thing," said Wendy sympathetically. "I don't think, in her place, I should have taken an interest in anything! It's a terrible pity, for she is really most attractive, don't you think, Doctor Watts?"

"Yes, if you like that sad-eyed kind of type," he replied, as if Millicent Turner and her affairs were hardly worth a second thought. "What's that book you've got there? Anything good?"

"Oh, it's only a local guide," Wendy said artlessly. "I thought, when I feel a little stronger, that I'd like to visit some of the local beauty spots. The trouble is, some of them are too out of the way unless one has a car."

"That's easily remedied," Brian said,

with a meaning glance. "I have a car. I also have a certain amount of free time! Where would you like to go first—Wendy?"

She looked demure. She had not missed the significance of his sudden use of her Christian name. It had been deliberate, as the pause which had preceded it was intended to convey.

Wendy had early decided that she could make very good use of the antagonism she had sensed in his tone when he spoke of Dr. Fraser.

Before he left her he had arranged to take her to Lichen Tor the following afternoon.

There was, he had said, a delightful old-world cafe on the road back, where they could have tea and still be back by seven o'clock, when he would be on duty.

While speaking his eyes had boldly appraised her, as if discovering new and unexpected qualities which whetted his desires, so that Wendy felt herself flush.

Now, seated alone in a deck chair, she wondered how far she dare go in enlisting Brian's aid in her scheme of revenge.

For a man holding such an important position he was quite young, but there was a kind of cold knowledge behind his dark brown eyes that caused her to shiver.

They were curious eyes, she thought. With his colouring they ought to have been blue; instead, they shone like a piece of highly polished furniture.

So engrossed was she in her thoughts that she did not hear Michael Fraser approaching over the grass. He was quite close to her chair before she realised she was no longer alone. Then she looked up with a start.

"Good afternoon, Miss Richards," he smiled. "I didn't make you jump, did I?"

"You did for the moment," she answered.

Her smile did not reach her eyes, but he seemed unaware of that.

"I'm sorry," he remarked, almost casually, and took her wrist between his finger and thumb. "H'm! Pulse quite steady. You were not startled very much, were you?"

Wendy coloured.

"What are you trying to do, Doctor Fraser?" she enquired resentfully. "Make out that I'm not telling the truth?"

"By no means. I was just testing your reactions," he said, releasing her wrist. He sat on the low wall, regarding her whimsically. "As it happens, I've been studying your case sheet, Miss Richards. And I am wondering why you really came to Brackenford. You're not ill, you know."

"Not ill? Then I never said I was," she protested frowning. "I—I don't understand, Doctor Fraser. What are you trying to tell me?"

"I was hoping that you would tell me," he said quietly. "You see, from my own examination, and from the reports I have received, it seems fairly certain that there is nothing radically wrong with you at all. Actually you ought to be pleased."

"In other words, I imagined the whole thing—my losses of memory—everything?" she said.

He leaned forward, his eyes penetrating.

"Have you had any recurrence of that loss of memory since you've been here, Miss Richards?"

"Well, no," Wendy answered and added: "But then I've only been here just over a fortnight."

"Quite so," he nodded. "The time you said you found yourself in some town with no recollection of having gone there—"

can you remember if you had any reason to visit the place?"

"None that I know of," she said quietly.

"Are you sure it happened?" he probed. Wendy flushed.

"Of course I am sure," she said. "I consulted Doctor Latimer immediately afterwards."

He put a hand to his chin and rubbed it. Then—

"Amnesia is a strange thing, you know, Miss Richards. It can be brought on by a variety of causes, but we have to establish the right one to affect a cure. If you are not the type to imagine something that did not happen, then we must assume that it did. Yet—"

He made a sweeping gesture.

"Let me put it this way," he went on. "Everything one does is intentional. If your mind suddenly obliterates a period in your life, however short, it is because, unconsciously, you wish to forget something connected with it—something unpleasant, may be."

Wendy looked unconvinced.

"I can't think of anything like that I would want to forget, doctor," she said.

"By the way, you mustn't mind if I ask some very personal questions, you know. It's my job to find out what it is that is causing these—er—attacks."

She shrugged.

"What do you want to know exactly?"

"Well, for one thing, have you ever been in love?" he said.

It was so unexpected that for a moment Wendy was nonplussed. Then she shook her head.

"No, doctor. I haven't. I am afraid you won't find any emotional complications of that kind."

"But can you truthfully say that you have never felt even remotely attracted to a member of the opposite sex?" He paused a moment. "Think hard," he added. "I'm not just asking this out of fun."

Wendy smiled.

"I don't suppose anyone could say they haven't, at some time or another," she replied carefully. "In the past I have rather—well—liked someone in the way that one does when one is young, but there was never anything serious."

"You speak as if you were quite old," he laughed. "Anyway, there is nothing of that kind on your mind at the moment, is that so?"

"Nothing at all," she said firmly.

He rose from the wall.

"Well, we will just have to keep on trying." His manner changed. "I see you have a local guide book there. I hope that means you are going to get out and about as much as possible."

"That was what you suggested, doctor."

"Quite so. I think you will find it good advice."

"I'll let you know if it is," she said, with unexpected flippancy. "As it happens, Doctor Watts is taking me to some place called Lichen Tor tomorrow. He said it was well worth a visit."

"It is indeed. Apart from the magnificent view one gets of the surrounding country, it is a very pleasant drive. You will enjoy it, I'm sure."

He remained chatting for a moment or so longer then abruptly left her.

Wendy watched him go, a hint of sadness in her eyes. This was only the second informal conversation she had had with him, yet she was already finding it difficult to reconcile the treachery of which she knew him to be guilty with the other qualities she now believed he possessed.

It had been a strange, almost unnerving experience sitting there in the secluded garden with the man she had made herself hate and had planned to destroy. One half

of her mind rejoiced in the weapon that had been put into her hand, yet with the other half she knew that victory would not bring her either happiness or satisfaction—only sorrow!

UNEXPECTED ALLY.

THE trip to Lichen Tor was followed by others. Brian Watts was by no means backward in coming forward, so to speak, and he made use of every opportunity to further his aim. Just what that was he never revealed, for amongst other things he had learnt in life was the value of patience.

Outwardly he was witty and self-assured, with a fund of amusing stories that made Wendy laugh.

But enough of his real character showed through to tell her that, however lightly he might seem to play at life, he was both shrewd and calculating, and not, she considered, over scrupulous.

Nevertheless, it was a surprise to discover, as she soon did, that he had very little time for Michael Fraser.

Not that he said so: he was far too clever for that. But Wendy was certain that she had not misread the signs, the little indications buried deep in a laugh or hidden behind the veiled contempt which came into his eyes when Dr. Fraser's name was mentioned.

And then, as so often happens, matters were brought into the open as the result of a remark made by a third party, the significance of which had been lost on Wendy at the time.

She had been sitting on the edge of the swimming pool with Millicent, dabbling her toes in the water, when Brian had passed.

Millicent had watched him go, a queer, brooding look coming into her sombre dark eyes.

"I don't like Doctor Watts. Do you?" she said abruptly.

Wendy paused before replying.

"Oh, he seems all right. He's very clever and quite kind," she said cautiously. "What has he done to make you dislike him, Millicent?"

"Nothing," the other had said. "It's just a feeling I have. He reminds me of something slippery."

"Good heavens!" Wendy exclaimed. "You can't really meant that!"

"Yes, I do. He has that effect on me," replied the other girl doggedly. She stared after the young doctor's retreating figure, her eyes smouldering. "I dislike his type in any case. He thinks that every woman is just dying to fall into his arms. I've heard things, I can tell you."

"Really, I don't know what you mean," frowned Wendy.

"Oh, you know. Flirting with the nurses—all that kind of thing. Patients, too." Millicent said the last almost viciously and Wendy coloured.

"If you are referring to me, you needn't worry," she said coolly. She stood up, slim as a lance, in a lilac swim-suit. "Anyway, you always get that kind of gossip in a place like this. It's usually jealousy that starts it."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Millicent said sourly. "You may think he's a second Charles Boyer, but I don't. He's out for himself first, last and all the time. That's why he hates Doctor Fraser."

"Does he hate Doctor Fraser?" Wendy enquired, with affected casualness. She put her hands together, preparing to dive.

Millicent drew a deep breath.

"If you haven't seen that for yourself you must be blind," she said.

THAT evening Brian Watts had arranged to take Wendy for a drive to Wareham and planned to return by a route that would give her a chance to see Corfe Castle.

They had duly set out and had tea in an old world cafe in the little town, afterwards going to Corfe, which they reached just as the sun was sinking.

Brian drew the car up on the top of a rise so that she could see the ancient keep silhouetted against a flaming red sky.

"Grim old place, isn't it?" he said conversationally. "What tales those walls could tell if they could only speak. Do you know it used to be the place where King John lodged the prisoners he took in his wars against France, but I believe it is older than that even, and goes right back to the Norman Conquest."

Wendy stared at the ruins, her brow furrowed.

It must have been obvious to him that she was giving only half her attention to what he was saying; she had been very silent on the drive from Wareham.

"What's worrying you, Wendy?" he enquired suddenly, turning towards her. "Don't tell me there's nothing, for I know better. I can't have my star patient worried, you know?"

She drew in her breath sharply, the hands resting in her lap trembling slightly. Then—"What do you really think of Doctor Fraser, Brian?"

Surprised, he was momentarily taken off his guard. But he was his bland, imperturbable self a moment later.

"As a doctor, do you mean?" he asked. She shook her head.

"No, a man."

"Why do you ask, my dear girl?"

"I merely wanted to know," she said. "Purely feminine interest."

"To tell you the truth," he hesitated a moment. "I don't think very much about him one way or another. He's the Big White Chief at Brackenford, and everybody who matters in the medical world says he's going to get big honours one of these days. Personally, to use a phrase I dislike, I couldn't care less."

Wendy sighed.

"I don't think you understand," she said, her hands clenching. "I can't blame you, of course . . . you have to be careful. But, you see, I hate Doctor Fraser as I never thought it was possible to hate any man. And," she added more slowly, "I think you do, too."

He looked at her with a shocked expression. Then—

"If I didn't know there was nothing wrong with you, I would say you were suffering from delusions," he remarked. "In any case, I'm keen to know how you can possibly hate someone you didn't know until a month ago and with whom you have scarcely exchanged half a dozen words, other than those concerned with your case."

"I hate him for what he did," she said drearily.

Then she told him about Mavis, some inner instinct assuring her that she was on safe ground in doing so.

The whole pitiful story came out, only the whiteness of her knuckles showing through the semi-transparent gloves betraying what the recital cost her.

Barely had she finished than he said—

"What name did your sister appear under when she was on the stage?"

"Mavis Havelock," said Wendy, with a thin smile. "Poor Mavis, she said Richards wasn't out of the ordinary enough

for the stage, and that she might as well be called Mavis Smith."

"Mavis Havelock!" he mused, seeming to be turning the name over in his mind. "I suppose that's why you came to Brackenford House? To get close to Doctor Fraser?"

She nodded.

"Yes. I told Doctor Latimer a lot of lies and he—well, he's known me for a very long time so he probably believed me when he might not have believed someone else. I had found out where Doctor Fraser was and it seemed that the only thing to do was to get myself admitted to Brackenford as a patient."

"To what end?" he asked a little sharply.

"I want to make him suffer as he made my sister suffer," she said fiercely. "I would do anything—anything—to really hurt him."

He gave an odd little smile.

"Aren't you rather dramatising the situation, my dear girl?" he said. "After all, it takes two to make a love affair, just as it takes two to make a quarrel. Your sister—"

"He let Mavis down," Wendy interrupted, in a hard voice. "She may have been a trusting little idiot—I'm quite prepared to grant she was!—but that's no excuse for leaving her to face what she had to face—alone."

"I see. So you're out for revenge, eh?" He took a cigarette from his case but did not light it. "All the same, you know, you've set yourself a stupendous task. Men like Fraser are well-nigh impregnable."

"Are they?" There was a note of mockery in Wendy's tone that caused him to turn his head. "He's still a doctor, isn't he?"

He gave her a wintry smile, and began to light his cigarette.

"And you are, officially at least, his patient? I see what you mean. You know, my dear," he went on, "I'm beginning to feel sorry for our friend Fraser! He's apt to be choosy, but if you set to work the right way he won't stand a chance. And that is where I come in."

Wendy felt her heart beginning to pound. The mask had slipped and in her companion's eyes was nothing but cold, calculating hatred.

He went on:

"You know, he's been puzzled about you from the start. For one thing, he's never quite believed in those odd lapses of memory you spoke about. As a doctor, however, he had to find a reason to account for your insistence that they happened. So far he hasn't done so, but if I put him on the track—well, the rest is up to you."

"You mean—" she breathed.

"I mean that I have to give him a detailed report each week on all the patients in my care. All that is necessary is to drop a hint that he will want to follow up—you can safely leave that part of it to me. Then you can start doing your stuff and, if I am any judge, you'll have Fraser where you want him in no time. After that—"

He shrugged and watched the smoke curl from his cigarette.

"Fraser is a peculiar sort of chap," he continued reflectively. "He's a good psychiatrist, I'll grant him that, but he's as vulnerable as the next. More so, in fact, for that type doesn't go in off the deep end very often, but when they do, they do it thoroughly. All you have to do is to play your part and then, when he's hopelessly committed, you can stage the final act. The General Medical Council take a very dim view of that kind of thing and the fact that you are a patient in his charge will make it worse. By the time they've finished with him Fraser will have plenty to regret."

Though the venom in his voice nauseated her, Wendy steeled herself with the memory of the look she had seen in Mavis's eyes when she had died.

"Why do you hate him so?" she whispered.

He laughed: a mirthless sound.

"I hate him for what he is," he said, speaking through clenched teeth. "But for him I would have been appointed Medical Superintendent at Brackenford when the post fell vacant. But Fraser has powerful friends and did not hesitate to pull all the strings he could. Well, he who laughs last laughs best, they say. Between us, if you play your cards right, we'll make him wish he had never been born. Is it a deal?"

Wendy bowed her head, gripped by emotions she could not have defined.

"Yes," she said flatly.

A RADIOGRAM was being played in the sun-lounge. From her window Wendy could hear the words of an old song being sung in the rich voice of a famous baritone.

*"And the priests talk of Nirvana
And weave their mystic charms . . .
But I only know Nirvana
Within your loving arms—"*

An expression of intolerable hurt came into her eyes and picking up a finger-tip coat lying over the back of a chair she went out of the room and ran down the stairs.

It had been a dull, overcast day, and now at sunset there was a chill in the air. Crossing the deserted terrace and the lawn she made for what had become a sanctuary—the sunken garden.

There Michael found her, her head in her hands, her hair fallen over her forehead, weeping forlornly.

"This won't do, you know," he said gently, bending down and drawing her hands away from her face. She looked at him, her lips quivering, her cheeks tear stained.

"I'm sorry," she murmured shakily. "I—it's nothing. Please don't bother with me, Doctor Fraser."

"But it's my job to bother with you, my dear girl," he said masterfully. He produced a clean handkerchief. "Here, use this. The kind of thing women usually carry isn't much good in an emergency."

She smiled faintly and took the handkerchief, dabbing her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I don't know what you must think of me. But—" She ended with a pathetic little gesture that was far more eloquent than words.

He seated himself close to her side, his eyes, grave and intent, his manner oddly quizzical.

"Never mind what I think," he said unexpectedly. "The thing we have to find out is what is worrying you. There is something, isn't there?"

"I—", began Wendy. She hesitated a second. "It's just that I felt low that's all. It would have been mummy's birthday to-day."

He nodded understandingly.

"Naturally you miss her," he said quietly. "But you mustn't let your sorrow get you down, you know. That's the last thing she would have wanted." He stared reflectively into space. "Now tell me what has happened in the past few days to cause Doctor Watts to give me the kind of report about you that he did?"

"How can I answer that until I know what was in the report," she said on her guard.

"Oh, what he said isn't important," he replied. "It's the cause of the change that

I'm interested in. You see, I was just congratulating myself that you were completely recovered, sorry as I would have been to lose you."

"Why should you be?" Wendy enquired, with a hint of sarcasm. "I'm just another patient."

"But quite a special one," he smiled.

She laughed.

"If that is true, it is only because you don't believe that I ever had lapses of memory. That is so, isn't it, Doctor Fraser?"

"Maybe," he half admitted, laughing in turn. "At the same time I'm quite sure you have—or had—something on your mind. Something that amounted to an obsession, shall we say? It is that which I am trying to track down."

"I've told you there is nothing," she answered a trifle impatiently.

"That's what they all say," he shook his head. "But it doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. You may think it is true, but that's worse. It means, you see, that you've pushed it away—buried it deep down in your subconscious mind because you are afraid to admit it exists. You won't get rid of whatever it is that way, though. Sooner or later it has got to be brought out into the open and faced."

"You seem very sure there is something," she said.

"Very sure," he nodded. "The point is, how far back do I have to go to find out what it is?"

"I couldn't possibly say," she shrugged. "Don't psychologists usually want to know an awful lot of things about one's childhood and all that?"

"Sometimes it's necessary. But not in your case." He took out his pipe and began filling it. "This is all very unorthodox, but I prefer to work on unorthodox lines every now and again. I would say"—he paused deliberately—"that you pretended to have lapses of memory in order to achieve some object you had in mind, and that being admitted here as a patient was a part of a previously laid plan."

Wendy felt as if she were suffocating. She had not counted on her flimsy defences being ruthlessly torn aside in this fashion. She clasped her hands to hide the fact that they were shaking.

"I—I don't see why you should think that," she said, in a voice that was almost sullen. "What it amounts to is that there is nothing whatever the matter with me and—"

"I wouldn't say that," he interrupted. "What I do say, though, is that you are suffering from the effects of some kind of a fixation and that it is causing you a great deal of needless worry. You have made up your mind to do something—I've no idea what it is, of course—but it is something you would never dream of doing in the ordinary way. The result is that one side of your mind is registering a protest. It is like a normally honest person trying to force him or herself to become a thief."

"But I've told you, there is nothing," she protested.

"I'm sorry but that is not true," he said, almost sternly. He never took his eyes off her face. "However, I can't make you confide in me if you refuse to. But unless you do, there is no treatment we can give you here you could not give yourself in some other place. Plenty of exercise—fresh air—all that kind of thing. Also, you ought to mix with people of your own age and with the same interests."

"I see!" Wendy lifted her head proudly. "In other words, you wash your hands of me?"

"What else can I do?" he hunched his shoulders. "You won't co-operate. Doctor Watts complains of the same thing. His

report asks me to take over your case as he feels that he is not making any headway."

Wendy caught her lip between her teeth. That was clever of Brian, she thought. By taking up that line he provided her with a golden opportunity to accomplish what she had set out to do.

She looked up at him, an appealing expression in her eyes.

"It's all so difficult," she murmured, clasping her hands. "It—it isn't that I don't want to co-operate, but one has to feel that the—the other person will understand, don't you think?"

He eyed her shrewdly, a flicker of—was it amusement?—coming into his eyes.

"And you don't feel that way with Doctor Watts?" he suggested. "Strange, because I thought that you had both become quite friendly."

"Oh, he has been very kind," she said evasively. "But—but it is easier to talk to some people than to others. Especially about something that concerns oneself." She rested her elbows on her knees, leaning forward. "Even time and place can be important."

He nodded and said—

"You should have told me before that you were not happy in Doctor Watts's charge."

"Well, you are always so busy, doctor," she said, something studiously artless in her manner. "It didn't seem fair to worry you."

"I should be far more worried if I failed to put matters right," he said, rising to his feet, something hidden in his manner. Then brusquely: "You're fond of walking, aren't you, Miss Richards?"

She looked up.

"Yes, very," she replied, unable to repress a feeling of guilt at the ease with which he had fallen into the trap. "I used to walk a lot when I was at home. There—there wasn't anything very much else to do, you see," she ended, with a faint laugh.

"Good," he answered. "Be ready at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. We'll walk over the moors to a favourite spot of mine. It's a place I often go to when I want to sort things out. Doctor's orders!" he added, with a sudden grin.

Wendy rose, too, an indefinable expression crossing her face. She looked away, the quiet of the place seeming to wrap itself around them.

Then—

"I'll be ready," she said quietly. "It—it's good of you to bother, doctor."

TOYS OF DESTINY.

WENDY slept fitfully that night and dawn brought no easing of the pain in her heart.

The truth was she was finding it increasingly difficult to grapple with the surge of emotions that beset her. The fact that she had gone a long way towards the final accomplishment of her plan of revenge brought no satisfaction to her. Rather the reverse.

For one thing, she was finding that with each day that passed it was becoming increasingly difficult to hate Michael sufficiently to want his ruin. For another she was attempting to do something against which every fibre of her being protested.

Nor had she been helped by the reception given to her news by Brian Watts.

"Clever girl!" he had said, with a triumphant grin, when she had told him that she was going for a walk with Michael. "Now all you have to do is to dangle the

carrot before the donkey's nose and you have him where you want him. Nice work!"

She had turned away without a word and hurried up to her room, trembling all over.

As the morning passed her emotions threatened to gain the upper hand. But she had only to think of Mavis, of the look that had come into her eyes when she had uttered Michael Fraser's name, to give her renewed strength.

By the time Michael met her on the terrace at three o'clock she had herself completely in hand once again.

It was a little over three miles to Rexdale Falls, the place he had mentioned the previous day. A well-known beauty spot, the falls were off the beaten track and except at the height of summer, did not attract the casual tripper.

On this particular day they arrived to find that they had the place to themselves.

The falls tumbled over a lip of rock in a narrow gorge, splashing into a wide pool whose banks were rich with beautiful water plants, amongst them flowering rushes, bright pink against the green of the ferns.

To all sides stretched a wide and rugged heath, golden with gorse the scent of it filling the afternoon air.

Sunlight caused the falling waters to dance and sparkle in a dozen different hues, but the pool was in shadow, a dark, mysterious cavern from whose lower lip a little stream meandered on its way to the sea.

"What a heavenly place," Wendy murmured, seating herself on a lichen covered rock and gazing round. "I never knew there was anything quite like this so near Brakenford."

"I'm glad you like it," Michael said seating himself beside her and taking out his inevitable pipe.

He glanced appreciatively at her as he did so. She wore a flared skirt of tweed fabric with a yellow blouse open at the neck.

"I often come here, as I told you," he went on reflectively, applying a match to his pipe. "If one sits quiet and waits one sees so much that the usual visitor misses. The last time I was here I saw an otter come out of those rushes there and dive into the pool. On another occasion there were a pair of bullfinches on that tree there, and as you know, they are quite shy and fly off at the least sound. By keeping still I was able to watch them for well over half an hour."

She glanced at him curiously and then away again.

Somehow, she had not associated a love of nature, and the simple things of life, with the type of man she imagined him to be, and she found herself wondering wildly if she were not making some hideous mistake. But she soon dismissed the thought.

Puffing at his pipe Michael was acutely aware of the air of reserve which surrounded her. It was something almost tangible, a barrier past which, with all his experience, he was unable to penetrate. For the hundredth time he wondered what had given it birth.

He spoke suddenly, responding to a sudden overwhelming urge brought on by her nearness.

"Do you know what I am thinking?" he murmured, not looking at her.

"I've no idea, Doctor Fraser," she replied, looking up at him in surprise. "Something special?"

"Very special," he said gravely, and turned to smile. "I was thinking that it would be rather nice if we became friends. Real friends, I mean."

She hesitated; everything was going according to plan.

"Why with me? You must have many other friends, Doctor Fraser," she said at length. "Besides, you don't really know anything about me, as you have admitted. When I leave Brackenford House I doubt if we'll ever meet again."

"That doesn't follow," he said, with a slight frown. "I know one doesn't make friends suddenly and in cold blood, as my suggestion seemed to imply, but I can't help feeling that it wasn't just chance that brought you to Brackenford."

How true that was, she thought desperately.

"Why do you want to become friends, Doctor Fraser?" she asked. "As you say, friendship is something that should come about quite naturally. One doesn't decide on that kind of thing."

"True," he nodded. "but the present circumstances are somewhat exceptional. For instance, had we met socially it would—at least I hope it would—have been possible for us to have become friends quite easily. But as it is, it's a case of taking the bull by the horns." His eyes twinkled.

Her colour deepened and she looked away.

"I still don't see why you want to single me out," she said slowly. "So many people pass through your hands at Brackenford—you could make friends with any of them, surely? Why not Millicent Turner, for instance. She is a wonderful pianist—you've heard her play, of course?—and she knows a great deal more about the world than I."

"Miss Turner is a very charming girl and one day, I hope, she'll make some man happy," he smiled. "I, however, am only interested in her as a patient. In your case it is *your* friendship I am seeking, Wendy. You don't mind if I call you Wendy, do you?"

"It doesn't really matter." She gave a slight shrug.

Had she tried to play hard-to-get in order to make him all the keener she could not have gone about it more skillfully, she thought, with a little spasm of self-disgust.

"Well!" He burst out laughing. "No one could accuse you of rushing your fences!"

Wendy laughed as well. There was something engagingly boyish about his reception of the rebuff.

"I'm sorry," she said, almost genuinely contrite. "I don't make friends easily, I'm afraid, Michael."

His eyes gleamed. He had not missed the way she had used his name, without a trace of self-consciousness.

"That's all to the good," he said quietly. "Let's leave it at that, shall we? In the meantime, if we are going to have tea at that place I told you about we ought to be going. Ready?"

"Yes," she answered, getting up. She looked around for a moment, as if storing up an impression. Then, with a suppressed sigh she turned towards him. "I can quite understand why you come here so often. It's a heavenly spot."

THE week that followed was outwardly little different from those which had gone before. But below the surface forces were at work that were destined to have far-reaching effect upon the lives of several people at Brackenford House.

Patients came and went and both the resident doctors were kept very busy. Nevertheless, Michael found time to take Wendy out on two different occasions, to Dorchester, where they spent a pleasant two hours exploring the old town, and to Lulworth Cove.

It was after this last visit that Wendy made the discovery that he did not live in the staff quarters at Brackenford House, but in a delightful old cottage in a secluded part of the grounds.

She came across it on her return from a walk.

There were several ways into the village from the house. One was through the spinney, reached from the sunken garden, another was across a corner of the heath, a third via a footbridge which spanned a stream.

Wendy came back the latter way for the first time and saw the cottage nestling in a fold of the ground. It was a delightful looking place, with a thatched roof and a garden, gay with old-fashioned flowers.

"What a lovely old cottage that is beyond the footbridge," she said, when she met Michael later that day. "Who lives there?"

"I do," he said, with a grin. "I couldn't have found anything that suited me better if I had searched the whole of England."

"I had no idea you lived in such solitary state," she exclaimed. "I imagined you living in the staff quarters."

"For a number of reasons I preferred not to," he explained. "I talked the matter over with Doctor Watts when I came here and he agreed to take over the suite of rooms that had been allotted to me in the house. We arrange it so that if he wants to go away I am on duty here, so there is always a doctor on call. I'm not what Kipling called 'a sociable beast', you see," he added, laughing.

"I don't blame you," she said. "One couldn't help falling in love with a place like that."

"I was very lucky to get it," he said, obviously pleased by her interest. "It had been let to one of the men on the Home Farm, when it belonged to the manor, but he died. His widow went to live with a sister in Lulworth and when I took up my present appointment the place was empty." He eyed her quizzically. "Why not let me show it to you sometime?"

"Would that be wise?" She put on her most artless expression.

Michael's lips tightened.

"You are not suggesting that I may not invite a friend to tea at my own home, are you?" he enquired, his voice a shade sharper than usual.

She laughed.

"Of course not," she said. "But I thought doctors had to be particularly discreet where their patients are concerned?"

He looked hard at her for a moment. Then—

"That," he said deliberately, "depends entirely upon the patient."

Wendy was saved the necessity of replying by the sudden arrival of a nurse who brought a message from Sister Latergan.

Michael excused himself and went off down the corridor towards the duty room, leaving Wendy a prey to feelings she would have given much not to have had.

Fortunately for her peace of mind, Brian Watts was absent on a three-day visit to Torquay, where a conference of medical men from all parts of the world was in session.

A world-famous neurologist was to lecture at one of the meetings, and Dr. Watts had obtained permission to attend.

Thus she was spared the feeling that he was always at her elbow, goading her on to fresh efforts to trap the man she was finding it increasingly difficult to hate.

With a doctor absent she had imagined that Michael's time would be fully occupied, so that it was with surprise that she

saw him crossing the lawn towards her the following afternoon and heard him ask her if she would like to go with him to the village.

"Oh, it's quite all right," he laughed, seeing her expression. "You needn't look so disapproving, my dear Wendy. Even a doctor has to have time off to breathe, and it isn't as if we had any serious surgical cases to deal with. We shan't be gone more than an hour, and Sister Latergan knows where to find me if necessary."

"I'm sure I didn't mean to look disapproving, Michael," she replied, with a slight smile. "In any case, it is not my business what you do. Yes, I'd like to come."

"Good," he said. "I'll meet you at the edge of the spinney in ten minutes' time. We can come back via the footbridge and, if there's time, I'll show you over my cottage."

It was a lovely afternoon, with just enough breeze to take the edge off the early summer heat. Wendy wore a floral dress and white sandals.

Looking at her, Michael knew an overwhelming desire to protect her and to remove, if possible, the cause of the strained look he saw in her eyes in unguarded moments.

And thinking thus, for he was fundamentally honest with himself, he was acutely aware that he had fallen in love for the first time in his life; that henceforth no achievement, however worthy, would mean a thing unless he could lay his heart at her feet.

The cottage was quite a small one, with a dormer window over the porch and a wide, oak-beamed sitting-room extending the width of the building. The floor was of red tiles, highly polished, and covered with carpets.

There was a settee and two comfortable armchairs drawn up in front of the old-fashioned fireplace, to either side of which bookcases had been built in.

"It's perfect," Wendy murmured admiringly, when she entered the room and stood gazing round.

"I had the two front rooms knocked into one," Michael explained. "By taking down the dividing wall it made one large room. There are two rooms upstairs, and that's the kitchen through there."

"It's lovely," she said, walking across to the stone fireplace.

There was a desk in the window embrasure, with a reading lamp and telephone. Next to the latter was a smaller instrument which she guessed was an extension of the house telephone system installed at Brackenford House.

"It is just right for me," he said. "I can get away from the clinic and yet still be in touch. A Mrs. Ellis comes in each day to keep the place clean and order what things I need. She also gets my evening meal."

"So you are completely independent!" she smiled.

"More or less," he affirmed, his eyes twinkling. "I prefer it that way."

There was a *whirr-rr* behind her and a clock on the mantelpiece struck five. As the last note tinkled away she looked across at him.

"Show me the rest of the cottage, Michael, then I must be going," she said.

"So soon?" he said, disappointed. "I planned to have tea here. Don't you think it would be fun?"

Wendy hesitated, feeling as if she were caught in a web of her own weaving and from which, struggle as she might, there

was no escape.

Fighting down a rising sense of panic, which threatened to overcome her, she kept her voice steady with an effort.

"All right, Michael," she said breathlessly. "I—I'll have tea with you!"

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later Wendy crushed out her after-tea cigarette in an ashtray and glanced at the clock.

She had been shown the rest of the cottage and had duly admired the neat, tidy kitchen, with its modern cooker and frigidaire.

Michael had insisted on getting tea, putting a record on the radiogram for her to listen to while he was out of the room.

As she relaxed in a comfortable chair, listening to the music, she had gone over the journey that had brought her, step by painful step, from her sister's bedside to this haven of peace on the edge of a Dorset wood.

She guessed that Michael had not forgotten their talk in the sunken garden; he was biding his time, seeking to win her confidence so that she would find it easy to tell him her secret worry.

The irony of it all had caused a bitter smile to touch her lips for a moment, and she had remembered something she had read about vengeance being a two-edged sword.

It was true, she had reflected, with a little shudder. She had not realised, when she had set out to ruin a man she did not even know, that in doing so she would get hurt herself.

It was as he was clearing away that she realised an essential truth which was that no one has a right to condemn a fellow creature without having first faced the same temptations and resisted them.

She drew a deep, shuddering breath as he went out into the kitchen. Whatever happened, it would make no essential difference. It could not alter the truth, fantastic though that might seem. She loved Michael, and, she more than suspected, he loved her, too.

That being the case, his remorse must therefore be well nigh unbearable, and so it was not for her to add punishment to regret and in so doing, punish herself.

But beyond that she dare not go. If a sardonic Fate decreed that she must fall in love with a man she had intended to hate, then she would not attempt to deceive herself.

But there it must end. She would never surrender to the longing that beset her. Her heart might break, but that was the price she must pay for trying to circumvent destiny.

Even if she wanted to, it would be out of the question. Between them they might close the chapter but they would be bound to return to it in secret, blotting the pages with their tears.

With a start she realised that Michael had returned and was saying something. She looked confused and apologetic.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "You were saying—?"

"You were not in this world, that's evident," he said, seating himself beside her. "Can I know where you had gone?"

"Nowhere in particular," she said, shaking herself. "I was just letting my thoughts wander."

He did not press the point.

"I believe," he said instead, in a quiet, conversational tone, "that one simply can't get anywhere in this world without being completely honest with oneself. Do you believe that, Wendy?"

She sighed.

"I'm not sure what I believe these days, Michael." She gazed past him towards the sunlit fields seen through the window. "When I see the mess some people make of their lives I wonder if anything's worth while."

She paused a moment, then continued—"It's largely our own fault I suppose. We set out to find something that in all probability doesn't exist—some Holy Grail of our own imagining—and when we fail to find it, we grasp at vague shadows instead."

He looked questioningly at her.

"Is that what you did, Wendy?" he asked quietly.

"Perhaps," she conceded, with a faint curl of her lips. Then she laughed, a curiously brittle sound. "But I'm not going to spoil our lovely afternoon by talking about things I want to forget."

"How do you know it would spoil it?" he countered. "Don't you know the old saying—the truth shall set you free?"

"Nothing can set me free," she said drearily. "No, it's kind of you to bother, Michael, but it's no use. The sooner I leave Brackenford the better."

Suddenly his face took on an expression of tenderness and understanding.

"Whatever it is that is riding you, my dear, it is more than you can carry alone," he said gently. "That has been obvious for a long time. Won't you let me help, Wendy?"

"It—it's nothing you can help with, Michael, honestly," she said.

"How can you be sure?" he persisted. Then, as she did not speak, he laid a hand on hers. "Don't you know I love you, dearest?" he added softly.

She stared at him speechlessly for a moment, her lips trembling.

Then, without quite knowing how it happened, she found herself in his arms and felt his lips on her own.

For a moment her senses leapt and she lay passive in his embrace, her eyes closed. Then, with a sick shudder she drew away, the back of one hand pressed to her mouth as if to wipe away the stain of the kiss.

"Oh, don't!" she cried sharply, when he would have taken her in his arms again. "No, Michael—please! I—I can't bear to be touched—like that."

He drew a deep breath and relaxed, his hand falling to his side.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "Evidently I have been taking rather too much for granted. It was very remiss of me."

Getting up, he went to the window, his face a mask.

Wendy hung her head, clasping and unclasping her hands, fighting a temptation as fierce as any she had ever known.

For a long while there was a strained silence in the room, broken only by the solemn ticking of the clock.

At length she looked up.

"Michael!" she whispered.

He turned slowly.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

He took a pace nearer.

"My dear girl, what on earth for?" There was a note of frustration in his voice that made him sound colder than he was. "It was I who made the mistake."

She shook her head.

"No, Michael," she said, in a low voice. "You—you didn't make a mistake. It—it's just impossible, that's all."

He came to her side.

"Wendy! Do you mean—"

"Wait!" She held him off, her lips trembling so that she could scarcely speak. "You said—just now—that the only thing

was to be honest with oneself didn't you? That—that's what I've been trying to be for a long time now. That means I—I've got to be honest with you, too." She twisted her handkerchief into a rag, avoiding his eyes. "Do you—do you want to know why I came to Brackenford?"

"If you think it necessary to tell me, well, yes, I do," he said. "It seems that we've got to clear up this mess somehow. I know, of course, that you were not really ill." His lips twisted in a crooked smile.

She nodded.

"You're right—I pretended all those things so that I could become a patient here," she said painfully. "I—I wanted this to happen. I mean"—her lips twisted spasmodically—"I wanted you to fall in love with me—it was all a part of my plan."

"Plan?" he repeated bewilderedly. "Forgive me if I seem dense, my dear girl, but honestly I haven't the least idea of what you are talking about. What plan?"

"To ruin you," she said, in a dull voice. He stared at her in stark bewilderment, too taken aback to speak.

"And why, may I ask, should you wish to ruin me?" he enquired at length, trying to stifle the doubt and suspicion which rose in his mind.

His tone cut like a lash and for a moment she did not answer.

Then, with a heavy sigh, she looked up.

"Mavis Havelock was my sister," she murmured. "Now do you understand?"

LOVE CLAIMS ITS OWN

FROM somewhere out of the past, from a medley of small things easily forgotten, Michael Fraser plucked the name. Mavis Havelock!

From what he remembered of her she had been a lovely young girl, with violet eyes and burnished hair, combed forward so that when she moved a lock fell over one eye.

There had been a party. He had been in London to attend a lecture at his old hospital and had lunched beforehand with Ralph Mottram, his best friend.

Later, they had met several others, with whom he had been at the medical school, and someone had suggested going to a show. Afterwards they had gone on to dance somewhere with four of the show girls.

Seated next to the girl whom he was partnering, he had thought that, for a chorus girl, she was certainly very shy and unsophisticated.

There had been something almost pitifully child-like and confiding about the way she had talked to him, and despite the enthusiasm with which she spoke of her job, he had felt pretty sure that she was homesick.

It all came back to him now. He had seen her to her flat and had more or less promised to ring her up the next day. But another engagement—lunch with a famous brain specialist—had come along and he had telephoned the girl and made his apologies. He remembered the disappointment in her voice.

But he had felt sorry for her, and had met her again, and on each occasion she had babbled happily about her work, the places she had visited, the people she had met.

He had gathered that she had a mother and sister living somewhere in the Midlands. Had he been interested in her as more than just a casual companion with whom to pass away an evening, he might have learned more, but he had not bothered.

He had known there were other men in her life, who took her about and gave her

presents, and apart from the fact that he was a good listener, and could dance reasonably well, they had had little in common.

Then he recalled that something had happened. He had never worried much about it, but had concluded that she had found some new attraction amongst her numerous men-friends. From that moment he had seen her less and less.

The last occasion had been over a year ago.

They had lunched together, and he had been struck by the change in her. She had seemed nervous and distraught and there had been shadows under her eyes.

To all his attempts to discover what was wrong she had returned evasive answers, saying, amongst other things, that she would be leaving the show and going home for a long rest, possibly quite soon.

Now Wendy's halting account of her sister's death came back to him, word for word.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what all this means," he said, breaking the silence which hung between them like a cloud.

"If Mavis Havelock was your sister I admit I knew her, but that's as far as it goes. I lost touch with her over a year ago when she said she was leaving the show and was going back to the Midlands. She promised to write and tell me her address, but I never heard."

Wendy slowly raised tear-drenched eyes and looked steadily at him.

"I—I don't believe you," she said brokenly. "When—when Mavis died I was with her. She—she called your name and said that—that she loved you. You were to blame for her death!"

He winced as if struck a blow.

"Stop talking such hysterical nonsense," he then said angrily. "What I have told you is the truth. I used to telephone her on the rare occasions when I went to Town and we would meet and have a meal somewhere. I never made love to her, neither did I dream that she regarded me as anything but a casual friend."

"Naturally, you would say that—now," said Wendy dully. She sprang to her feet, her eyes dark with pain. "If you had admitted it—if you had shown the slightest sign of regret—I might have found it in my heart to forgive you. Mavis was very lovely and you could not be blamed for falling in love with her. But you obviously didn't care. You had your fun and left her to face the consequences! I—I think I hate you!"

He stared at her blankly, his face going pale.

"And a few minutes ago you practically admitted that you loved me," he said, speaking with studied calm. "Well, well, maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I have always thought that love went hand in hand with trust. Now you condemn me without a vestige of proof!"

"What further proof do I need?" she asked, confused. "Mavis wouldn't have said that if—if you were not the man responsible for her condition!"

"That doesn't follow," he said. "If she was in love with me she might easily have said something of the kind when she realised that she had placed her trust in the wrong hands."

"The girl she shared a flat with said you used to call for her and take her about. She said she knew your type, and warned Mavis to be careful. Does that sound as if you were just casual acquaintances?"

"I grant it doesn't," he nodded. "But considering I never called for your sister at her flat, but always at a cafe or something, that is easily disproved." He shrugged. "If you would really like to know the truth I suggest we visit the young

lady in question and find out what she said a thing like that for. She must have had a reason."

"What good would that do now?" Wendy muttered drearily.

"Not very much from your point of view," he said. "But for my own satisfaction, I intend to get to the bottom of this. One thing I would like to be clear on, though. What did you hope to gain by coming here with the avowed intention of making me fall in love with you?"

She hesitated, her cheeks pinched. Then—

"I've already told you," she said, with a shuddering breath. "I meant to ruin you."

"I see." He regarded her with a curious kind of dispassionate pity. "You deliberately set out to create a situation where it would be possible to lay a charge of unprofessional conduct at my door—a charge from which I could not, or would not, be able to defend myself? Well, what is there to prevent you from doing that now? We've been alone here in this cottage for the best part of an hour and a half. All you need do is tear your blouse and rush across to Sister Latergan for protection! Or, better still to your pal Brian Watts. Nothing would please *him* better."

Wendy's hands shook so violently that she dropped her handkerchief.

As she bent to retrieve it, she bumped her head on the corner of the mantelpiece as she stood up, and uttered a little cry of pain.

Michael caught her as she swayed.

"Wendy!" he exclaimed. "Wendy darling, look at me! Do—do you really believe that I—"

"Leave me alone! Leave me, do you hear?"

She wrenched herself free and then, her control breaking down, dropped to the settee, and burying her face in her hands, gave way to a storm of weeping.

Michael was at a loss for a moment, then he seated himself at her side and took her wrists, drawing her hands down from her face.

"Please, darling," he said gently. "You'll make yourself ill if you go on like this. I'm telling you the truth—really I am."

There was a little, pain-filled silence, and at length Wendy looked up, her eyes dimmed with grief.

"I—I want to believe you, Michael," she whispered brokenly. "But—"

"Listen to me, my dear," he said quietly, without giving her time to finish. "You say you want to believe me. Well, I'll go further than that and say that you've *got* to believe me. Our whole future—everything—depends on that. I have no doubt that, given time, I will be in a position to prove that, whoever was responsible for what happened to your sister, it was not I. But you must start to believe in me. Love without trust is a house built on sand. And ours must be founded on rock!"

Wendy shook the hair back from her face and stared past him out of the window.

"What time is it?" she asked flatly.

"Nearly seven," he answered, with a glance at the clock.

She rose hurriedly and stood with a hand on the mantelpiece, supporting herself.

"I can't go back. They—they'll know something has happened." That was true enough, Michael conceded, with a sym-

pathetic glance at her swollen eyes. She made a little gesture. "Can—can I stay here for a while?"

"Of course," he said. "As it happens Mrs. Ellis isn't coming this evening—she has gone to Wareham to visit her sister. But I must go, of course."

"Yes," she murmured, almost inaudibly. "I—it's only for a little while. I can walk over later. Sister Latergan won't worry as long as I am in by eight."

The thin sound of the house telephone buzzer interrupted them.

Michael crossed to his desk and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said. There was a pause while he listened to whoever it was at the other end. Then: "Very well. I'll be over in a few minutes. No, I don't think there is anything to worry about—it was more or less to be expected. Yes, do that."

"That was Sister Latergan," he said. "She found Millicent Turner in the dispensary trying to open the drug cupboard. She was in a very excited state and so they have put her to bed and have a nurse sitting with her."

Wendy stared at him in horror.

"You mean she—she—" she began, and broke off.

"Some people find it difficult to face life when it seems to hold nothing more for them," he said. "It's all a question of faith, I imagine. No doubt the poor girl sought to take the easy way out. She couldn't have got anything, of course. Even though the dispensary itself is unlocked anything in the nature of a dangerous drug is kept in a steel cupboard."

Wendy stared into space.

"What good is faith to *her*?" she asked bitterly. "It won't wipe out her memories or bring back her fiancé."

"True. But it can help her to believe that life isn't ended—that there is an ultimate purpose in these things, even though the end is hidden from our eyes."

"And I suppose"—with increasing bitterness—"there was a purpose in Mavis's death?"

"Who knows?" he said tenderly. "Death is not the end—it is only a beginning. And—it brought us together, my dearest."

WENDY sat on after he had gone, trying to think. She felt like someone caught in a maze. There were so many openings but only one of them the right one. Which should she take? Where would it lead?

A sudden impotent rage against the destiny which had thrown her and Michael together gripped her. Even the memory of her mother's heartbreak became something unreal. Even Michael became a shadowy figure, someone whose personality hovered just out of reach, so that with a queer sympathy rising from her own hurt, she understood how he must be suffering.

In a vague kind of way she found herself trying to sort out her emotions, trying to fit them into this new conception that had taken the place of the image she had created in her mind, but without success.

She indulged in no false sentiment on the score of a great love overcoming the difficulties presented by her problem. It could only emerge from such an ordeal scarred and disfigured, its beauty marred for all time by the looming shadow of doubt.

She got up presently and went into the kitchen to make some tea. There was an

electric kettle on a small table next to the cooker. She filled it at the sink and switched on.

It did not strike her as strange that she should be there, in his cottage, making tea. They had progressed far beyond the stage when these things mattered.

She looked idly at her hands, turning them over and inspecting the polished nails. The power to move her fingers did not enter into her consciousness yet she knew she could move them.

Did that mean, translated into an analogy of their lives, that there could be no achievement without faith? Was that what Michael had meant? Something that did not enter into consciousness but which nevertheless one accepted blindly, without question and upon which one acted?

Suppose, suddenly, she found she could not move her fingers, would that be because she had ceased to believe it possible, or would her disbelief arise from her inability to make her muscles obey her will?

And then, quite suddenly, she *knew* what to do, and slowly she went to the telephone.

WHEN Michael returned to the cottage nearly two hours later it was in darkness.

He quietly entered the sitting-room and switched on the light, finding that Wendy was asleep in one of the armchairs, her face flushed, one hand supporting her cheek.

She opened startled eyes and blinked. Then she sat up abruptly, her colour deepening.

"I—I must have fallen asleep," she murmured confusedly.

"Quite the best thing you could have done," he smiled.

Her eyes were no longer red and swollen, he noticed. In fact, she looked more or less herself again. "Did you make yourself some tea?" he added.

"Yes, thank you, Michael." She got up. "Shall I make you some?"

"No, thank you, my dear," he replied, moving to the fireplace and picking up his pipe. He looked thoughtfully down at it, pondering what next to say. Then he looked at her and said abruptly—"What have you decided to do?"

"Nothing." She kept her face studiously turned away. "I mean, I—I've done all that was necessary, Michael. But I'm afraid I have run you up quite a big bill in telephone calls," she added with a trace of confusion.

He looked puzzled and seated himself on the arm of a chair.

"Oh?" he enquired. "I'm afraid I don't get you?"

She made a little gesture, half of appeal, half of apology.

"Before I tell you, I want you to know one thing, Michael. I *do* believe you when you say that you were not responsible for what happened. I—I didn't telephone because of that, though. At least, it was only partly on that account. There—there was something I wanted to get clear, that was all." She sighed and made another gesture. "I—I've been an awful fool, Michael."

"Oh, in what way?" he said gently:

"Oh, heaps of ways," she shrugged. "When you said that I condemned you without proof that was just what I did do. Not only that, I allowed others to influence

me—Doctor Watts amongst them.”

“The dickens you did? Where does he come in?”

She looked wonderingly at him.

“Didn’t you know that he would do anything to injure you if he could?” she asked.

“I knew he had no brotherly love for me,” he answered, with a smile. “But I have no reason to think that he would stoop to anything unethical.”

“That’s all you know,” Wendy returned a trifle scornfully. “He’s jealous because you were put in charge over him. He—he told me what to do when he knew about Mavis and why I had come here. He wanted to see you brought down, Michael.”

“Well, well, well!” he murmured, his eyes hardening. “I always knew friend Watts was not over-scrupulous, but I never thought he’d go that far. What made you confide in him?”

She told him, omitting nothing, nor did she seek to excuse herself.

Michael listened patiently, nodding his head from time to time.

When she ended—

“Forewarned is forearmed, they say. I could probably make things very uncomfortable for that young man—but I won’t bother. I shall ask him to resign, of course, and when he knows what I know, I have an idea he won’t refuse. But that isn’t all, is it?”

“No,” she said, with a swift intake of breath. “It isn’t all, Michael. I telephoned Mark Ingoldstone.”

“And who is he?” he asked, more puzzled.

“The producer of the show Mavis was in. It is still running at the Imperial. I had an awful lot of trouble getting through and at first he wouldn’t say very much, but after I explained a little he—well—opened up.”

“You mean—he knows something?”

“Quite a lot, apparently,” she said, with a sigh. “He was very upset when Mavis died, it seems. He said she had the makings of a good dancer and that he had been watching her carefully. He would have helped her had she gone to him, but when he found out what had been going on, it was too late—she had left the show.”

“Mavis had been going about with someone who used to call for her after the show once or twice a week,” she continued. “Zoe Gaillard, the girl she lived with hadn’t met you, you see, but Mavis had often spoken of you by name. Zoe had seen her with this other man several times, though, and the mistake she made was quite a natural one. She thought he was you.”

“Go on. I think I’m beginning to understand,” he said, a little grimly.

“Well,”—Wendy licked her lips. “After Mavis died Zoe told Mark Ingoldstone all she knew—that Mavis had been foolish, a mean, and that the man responsible had refused to marry her. Mavis had confided in Zoe, but the one thing she had not revealed was the man’s real identity.”

“I see,” Michael said quietly. “In other words, your sister was having an affair with this other man at the same time as she was meeting me. I wonder why she never mentioned him? On the other hand, there was no real reason why she should. Obviously, I wasn’t the only man she knew.”

“There was a very good reason why she didn’t mention him to you,” Wendy said slowly. “I imagine he told her not to do so on any account. It might have been a little awkward for him if you had found out

that he was deliberately trying to cut you out because he thought you were keen on Mavis, and that he had started the whole thing to make you look foolish.”

He got up, his expression stony.

“You mean—Doctor Watts?” he demanded incredulously.

“We’ve no proof,” she said breathlessly. “But it all links up, doesn’t it? No one seems to have heard his name but Mark Ingoldstone said that he used to come to Town once or twice a week and that he always waited for Mavis in a red sports car with a Dorset registration number. Some of the girls had noticed it particularly because it had a mascot of a mermaid on the front.”

Michael drew a deep breath.

“That’s a pretty accurate description of Watts’s car,” he said, “and it would be the kind of thing he would take a keen delight in doing. It would not have been difficult for him to have found out that I had been meeting your sister, or to get an introduction to her, either. Watts knew several of the men at the medical school, attached to St. Marks, and I’ve no doubt that he met Mavis at one of the numerous cocktail parties they were always having. If he happened to mention Brackenford it’s a pound to a penny that she asked him if he knew me. The rest, as far as he is concerned, would be plain sailing!”

“I think that is what happened,” Wendy nodded. “That would account for the way he acted when he found out that I was Mavis’s sister. He guessed it wouldn’t be any use trying to fob me off, so he turned the whole thing to his own ends. He was fairly safe, you see, for I don’t suppose he even told Mavis his real name!”

“There is one thing I don’t quite understand,” Michael said, after thinking deeply for a moment. “You said that Mavis called out and said that she loved me. Yet—”

“I know what you are going to say, Michael, but it isn’t at all difficult to understand,” Wendy said, when he paused. “You don’t know Mavis as I did. She was much too trusting—it was what always worried me about her being on her own like that. Don’t you see? Doctor Watts would have gone to work to poison her mind against you? It was only at the last, when she knew how she had been betrayed, that she realised what she had thrown away—you!”

He walked to the window and stood looking out into the darkness for a moment.

“Poor kid,” he said gently. He pulled back his shoulders purposefully. “Right, I’ll see Watts about this in the morning. Meantime, you’ve got to go back or Sister Lategan will be having a fit.”

“I know,” said Wendy meekly. She stood in the centre of the floor, her hands to her sides like a penitent child. “I—oh, Michael, can you ever forgive me?”

He smiled gently.

“Forgive you for what, my dear?” he asked.

She bowed her head.

“I—I’ve learned my lesson, Michael. Millicent Turner taught me that, though she doesn’t know it. When—when you told me what had happened this afternoon I knew then, that happiness was too precious to be gambled with and that what you said was true. The only thing that matters is faith.”

He took her by the shoulders and held her gently, looking down into her eyes, smiling oddly.

“Do you remember that afternoon when we walked to the falls, and I asked if you

knew what I was thinking?” he said.

She nodded.

“You said you wanted to be friends.”

“Well, do you know what I’m thinking now?”

“How can I?” she sighed.

“I’m thinking, ‘She is the light of my life and without her all will be dark.’ That’s not original, but it expresses what I feel better than I can ever put it into words. Wendy darling, I love you and that, as far as I am concerned, is all that matters.”

She raised her head.

“I love you, too, Michael. I want nothing more than to stand at your side, to help you, to—to be the light of your life.” Her lips curved in a little tremulous smile. “But, please, my dear, don’t put me on a pedestal. I—I have done so many things that I am ashamed of. I made myself hate you—and because I did I told lies and—and—”

He silenced her with a kiss that was at once passionate and tender.

“All that is behind us now, my sweet,” he said tenderly. “We’ve got to look forward, not back. It is what Mavis would want, more, perhaps, than anything. And between us we can make everything—worth while.”

A LITTLE later they walked back to the manor and coming to the edge of the sunken garden, stopped for a moment.

The fragrance of dew-wet flowers hung in the air and a little breeze caused the branches of the trees to rustle gently, like the whispering of voices heard from a long way off.

Wendy hesitated for a moment, then asked the question that had to be asked.

“What will you say to Doctor Watts, Michael?” she asked timidly. “I couldn’t bear it if—if there was any—scandal.”

“Don’t worry, my sweet, there won’t be. I’ll tell him enough to let him know that I know and give him the option of resigning. He won’t hesitate—he knows what the alternative would be. You needn’t waste any sympathy on him my dear. If he’s wise he’ll emigrate to some part of the world where, I have no doubt, he will find plenty of scope for his abilities.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She sighed and leaned against his sleeve. “Oh, Michael do you really think that Mavis knows about us now?”

“I’m sure she does,” he said unsteadily. “That was what you meant when you said you didn’t want any scandal, wasn’t it? It would only hurt—her.”

“Yes” she nodded.

They stood in silence for a time. From the tree tops came a faint breath of wind—or was it a whisper that breathed a prayer and a faintly sighed “Good luck—God bless you?”

Wendy raised her head and looked over the hedge towards the distant stars and her lips moved softly, as if saying “Farewell”.

Then she turned to the man she loved in her eyes a light that banished the last of the shadows that had dwelt there so long.

THE END.

AN AGED PLANT.

Vicar, to one of his parishioners, a venerable old gardener: “You have reached a great age, John.” John: “Deed, ha’e I, sir, for if I leeve till the eleventh o’ next month, I’ll be an octogeranium.”

NO OTHER CHOICE

By Margot Wright

AN UNWELCOME SUITOR

IN the big brick-floored kitchen of Fairlea Farm, Cherry Burchell was busy giving the finishing touches to the bridesmaid's dress which she was to wear next day at her brother's wedding.

Doors and windows were wide open to the gentle breeze that tempered the heat of the September afternoon, and every time Cherry lifted her head she could see miles of undulating countryside stretching away beyond the farm garden, the golden stubble of the cornfields interspersed with the lush green of pastures and the varying tints of the wooded hills.

But Cherry did not look up more often than she could help; she tried to keep her attention fixed on her needlework, tried to banish from her mind the saddening thought that, after the following day, Fairlea Farm would no longer be her home, except in name.

True, she would remain on there for another fortnight, until Jim and Vera returned from their honeymoon. Then she would hand over the reins to her brother's wife, and go away to another part of the country where she had found a job for herself.

Cherry had kept house for her brother since she was seventeen, when their mother died only a year after their father had met with a fatal accident—they had found him lying under the overturned tractor in the upper field, and the tragic shock had undermined Mrs. Burchell's health.

Jim Burchell was then twenty-two, and for three years his sister had kept house for him—Cherry had taken pride in keeping it all just as her mother had done.

Then, early in the summer, Vera Denning, a London girl, had come to spend her holidays with her aunt Mrs. Greenford at a neighbouring farm, and before she returned home, three weeks later, she and Jim had become engaged.

Everyone in the neighbourhood had been surprised at the whirlwind courtship, for Jim Burchell was a quiet young man who appeared to be wrapped up in his work, and took little part in the social activities of the village.

But one evening Cherry had persuaded her brother to accompany her to the village fete, where Mrs. Greenford had introduced them to her niece—a dark, handsome girl with whom Jim had spent the rest of the evening dancing.

After that, it was plain to Cherry that her brother was falling in love with Vera Denning, but she had been wholly unprepared for the announcement that they had become engaged, and planned to be married in September.

"Of course, my dear Cherry, this will still be your home until you marry and have one of your own—that goes without saying," Jim had assured her, when he had brought Vera to tea on the last Sunday of her holiday, and had announced their engagement. "Vera and I are quite in agreement about that—aren't we, darling?"

He had turned to his fiancée with that quiet smile of his, and Vera had nodded. "Yes, of course, Jim dear," she had murmured smilingly.

But Cherry was quick to sense the lack of enthusiasm in the other girl's manner—and after all, she reminded herself, it was only natural that Vera should prefer to have her home to herself when she was married.

So Cherry had replied, with a forced smile—

"It's awfully sweet of you both, and I'm very grateful. But, of course, I couldn't think of staying on here after you are married. You know the old adage—'Two's company', don't you? Besides, I am twenty-one and quite capable of earning my own living. So I shall start looking out for a suitable job—something in the domestic line, as that is the work I understand and like best."

"Well, naturally, if you would prefer to take a job, Cherry, we shall quite understand, of course," Vera had said. "I think I should feel much the same if I were in your place."

"Yes, Cherry, but don't forget that this is your home as well as mine," Jim had protested, a look of blank dismay on his sun-tanned face, "and it wouldn't be fair to turn you out of it. Why, I'd never forgive myself—"

"But, Jim, you wouldn't be 'turning me out', as you term it," Cherry broke in, with a shaky little laugh. "It is only right that you and Vera should have a home to yourselves after you are married. And as for me—well, I don't think I should have much difficulty in finding a suitable job for myself within the next two months."

So, in spite of Jim's reluctance to let his sister leave home, Cherry had her way. She started forthwith to look for a job. In the end, however, it was the vicar who found one for her, through his brother-in-law, who was rector of Mallingsby, a country parish on the Suffolk coast.

The vicar called at the farm one evening to tell Cherry that Mrs. Lynthorpe, the elderly lady who owned Mallingsby Hall was seeking a suitable companion for her seventeen-year-old ward, whose parents—the father was a well-to-do sugar planter in Jamaica—had been killed in an air crash while flying to take the girl home after being at school in Switzerland.

Mrs. Lynthorpe, who was an old friend of the family, had flown to Switzerland to take charge of the orphaned girl, whose name was Anthea Norris, and had brought her to live with her at Mallingsby Hall.

"Mrs. Lynthorpe is an elderly lady," the vicar explained, "and she feels that Miss Norris needs young companionship. So she asked my brother-in-law to help her find someone suitable—a girl who liked country life, and would not want to go 'gallivanting'—to use Mrs. Lynthorpe's own words," he added, his eyes twinkling.

"When my brother-in-law mentioned the matter in a letter I had from him this morning, I at once thought of you, my dear Cherry," he continued. "And if the post appeals to you, I suggest you write to Mrs. Lynthorpe, and I will give you a letter of recommendation to enclose with it."

Cherry had thanked him warmly, and after talking the offer over with her brother, she had applied for the post. Several letters had passed between her and Mrs. Lynthorpe—who was evidently a very strong-minded old lady with determined views about "modern girls"—and finally the matter had been settled.

So, the day after Jim and his bride returned from their honeymoon, Cherry would leave her old home in the Sussex weald and travel one hundred-and-fifty miles to Mallingsby, to begin a new chapter in her life.

For Jim's sake, she hid her secret dread

of the approaching break behind a cheerful smile. Cherry assured her brother that she was quite looking forward to seeing another part of the country and making new friends.

Cherry felt convinced that, in going so far away, she was acting for the best, for she had come to the conclusion that Vera, who had been staying in the village with her aunt to prepare for her wedding, was extremely possessive and inclined to be jealous of her.

Her future sister-in-law also prided herself on being "ultra-modern", and was already making plans to refurbish the farmhouse on up-to-date lines, and introduce many other so-called "improvements".

"The trouble with you and Jim, my dear, is that you're still living in the past!" Vera had remarked laughingly, when Cherry called at Eastbrook Farm to help Mrs. Greenford with the preparations for the wedding breakfast. "You just wait, and see, Cherry; you won't know Fairlea Farm when I've finished with it! I shall make Jim buy me a television set and a washing machine to start with, and—"

"You'd better cut your coat according to your cloth, my girl," Mrs. Greenford had interrupted, in that forthright way of hers. "Jim's no millionaire, let me tell you, but a hard-working young farmer, and he needs a wife that'll set to and help him to get on—not one that'll start spending his money for him faster than he can earn it."

But Vera had merely smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Aunt Emily, Jim and I know what we're doing," she had retorted. "He certainly doesn't expect me to spend my life drudging away as you and Cherry seem quite content to do. In my opinion, a wife should start as she means to go on, and if she makes it plain that she expects the best of everything, her husband will work harder to get it for her. That's the way to make a man successful."

"Maybe—and maybe not!" her aunt had returned drily. "You'll find that marriage means going in double harness, my girl, and keeping in step—not one of you getting up in the wagon and using the whip! That's the surest way to ruin a marriage that I can think of, and I can only hope, my dear, that you'll get a bit more sense before long."

Cherry had kept silent, but her heart was heavy, for she realised that Mrs. Greenford was right.

CHERRY sighed as she lifted her head from her sewing and glanced round the homely kitchen with its gleaming pots and pans, its scrubbed brick floor strewn with rugs, its highly polished stove in which the family bread had been baked for three generations.

Yes, there was always plenty to do in keeping the roomy old house spick and span, she reflected, and for her, as with her mother and grandmother, it had been a labour of love.

Perhaps it was too much to expect that her brother's wife should look at it in the same way—yet Cherry could not help thinking wistfully that the inheritance of quiet happiness which had been handed down in this dear home of hers was infinitely more precious than anything money could buy.

Cherry stood up and shook out the folds of the dainty blue bridesmaid's dress, trimmed with tiny pink rosebuds. Holding

it against her, she gazed at her reflection in the wall-mirror by the window.

The dress was the same forget-me-not blue as her eyes, and made her look almost pretty, she decided modestly. Cherry had no illusions about her looks—she considered herself “insignificant”, with her small, nondescript features, and was thankful for the fact that, at least, her brown hair had a soft natural wave in it.

“Very pretty indeed!” said a voice from the doorway, and Cherry gave a start.

She turned quickly to see a smartly dressed young man with rather florid good looks, dark wavy hair and bold brown eyes standing there grinning at her. It was Tony Levick, the representative of a London wholesale firm to whom Jim sold much of his farm produce.

Cherry disliked the man for his bold, familiar manner, and the impudence with which he persisted in forcing his attentions upon her, in spite of her cool politeness towards him.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Levick,” she said, laying the dress carefully over the back of a chair. “I expect you wish to see my brother—I will go and call him. Please excuse me.”

She moved towards the door, but the man made no attempt to step aside for her to pass.

“Oh, but I’m in no hurry, Miss Burchell,” he told her, the impudent grin on his face broadening. “I’ll be quite content to stay and talk to you till Jim comes in. Why, you haven’t even said you’re pleased to see me yet, have you? And it’s three months since I was here last. Mind if I sit down?”

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped inside, pulled forward a chair and coolly seated himself, tossing his hat on to another chair.

Cherry’s colour deepened, but for Jim’s sake she managed to hide her annoyance, knowing that if she were to offend the man it might have unpleasant consequences for her brother.

In silence she began to fold the white sheet she had laid over the scrubbed deal table to protect her dress, but quite unabashed by her cool manner, the man continued jauntily—

“That’s an awfully pretty dress, isn’t it, Miss Burchell? I suppose it’s for some very special occasion, eh? Don’t tell me that some lucky young man is taking you out to a dance to-night?”

Cherry frowned.

“The dress is to wear at my brother’s wedding to-morrow, Mr. Levick,” she answered, controlling her resentment with difficulty, and gathering up the clouds of blue chiffon she hurried out of the room with it.

She would have preferred to stay upstairs until Jim returned, but out of politeness she felt obliged to return to the kitchen. When she entered she found the man smoking a cigarette and leaning back in the chair with one leg crossed over the other, looking very much at home.

“So Jim’s getting married, eh?” he remarked, watching Cherry with narrowed eyes. “That’s quite a surprise to me, I must say. Who’s the lady, may I ask? Anyone I know?”

“She is Mrs. Greenford’s niece,” Cherry returned briefly.

“Really? I didn’t know Mrs. Greenford had a niece. Well, well, and what about you, Miss Burchell? What will you do when Fairlea Farm gets another mistress?”

Cherry hesitated, wishing fervently that Jim would come in and put an end to the man’s impertinent questions. But as there was no sign of her brother, she answered in a low voice—

“I have taken a post, Mr. Levick.”

“What! You mean to say you are going away?”

Cherry nodded. The man threw the end of his cigarette into the hearth, got up from his chair, and came over to where she was standing tidying up her work-basket.

“I say, that’s bad news,” he muttered. “Fairlea Farm won’t seem the same without you, Cherry. Listen, my dear girl, you must have guessed how I feel about you,” he went on, putting his hand on her shoulder. “You’re different from other girls I know—in fact, you’re the only girl who could make me think of giving up my freedom and settling down to a quiet life. Maybe it’s because you’ve always held me at arms’ length. Anyway, the moment I saw you again to-day, I knew you were the only girl for me. So let’s get married, shall we, my dear Cherry?” he added, with a bold, self-confident smile.

He bent his head as if to kiss her—evidently taking it for granted that she would jump at the chance of marrying him. But Cherry hastily drew away from him, her cheeks scarlet.

“But I—but I couldn’t think of marrying you, Mr. Levick,” she stammered, staring at him in dazed astonishment.

He shrugged his shoulders, and gave a mocking little laugh.

“Oh, come, my dear girl, you know you don’t really mean that,” he said complacently. “Anyway, I’m not going to take ‘No’ for an answer, so you may as well say ‘Yes’ right away,” he added, with his customary self-assurance.

“I have given you my answer, Mr. Levick, and it is quite definite and final,” Cherry said. “I’m sorry, but it is quite impossible for me to marry you. I—I have never even thought of you in that way—and, I may add, I never could!”

She moved away to the other side of the table as she spoke, but he followed her, his face darkening.

“Look here, Cherry,” he said, “I don’t think you quite realise that I’ve paid you a pretty big compliment in asking you to become my wife. Let me tell you this—there are lots of girls who’d jump at the chance, and if you know which side your bread’s buttered, you’ll think again before turning me down. Just imagine all that I can offer you, compared with—with this!”

He made a contemptuous gesture towards the homely surroundings, and went on before she had time to speak—

“I’m doing awfully well in this job of mine, and I mean to do better still. You’d have a smart flat in London, pretty clothes, a car—and you wouldn’t have to do your own housework, either.” He suddenly caught hold of her hands and drew her towards him. “Come, be sensible, my dear girl, and give me the answer I want,” he added. “I’m sure you wouldn’t wish to make things difficult for Jim, and just as he was getting married, would you?”

There was a veiled threat in his last words which made her stare at him in horror. Cherry tried to release her hands from his grasp, but he only laughed and held them tighter.

“Please let me go at once, Mr. Levick!” she cried indignantly, then broke off with a gasp as she caught sight of Jim standing at the open door gazing at them, an angry look on his face.

He strode forward, grasped Levick by the collar of his coat, and sent him staggering towards the door.

“Get out of here at once, you—you rotter!” he muttered, between clenched teeth. “And don’t let me see you in this house again, Levick, or I’ll give you the thrashing you deserve!”

The other man gripped the door post to

steady himself, and stared back at Jim, his face livid.

“If you think you can treat me like this Burchell, you’ve made the biggest mistake of your life,” he said. “You’ll live to regret the day you laid hands on me, I warn you! I’ve finished with you—you’ll get no more orders from my firm, I’ll take good care of that!”

“Very well, do your worst, my dear fellow,” Jim said. “But you’ve forgotten your hat,” he added contemptuously, and sent the hat spinning after the man as he turned and swaggered down the path.

He then closed the door, and standing at the window, they saw Levick drive away in his car, a scowling look on his face.

“Oh, Jim dear!” Cherry laid her hand on his arm. “I—I’m so terribly sorry about this,” she murmured brokenly, “and I’m afraid it means that you have lost your best customer.”

“Don’t worry, my dear girl—Sanbridge’s aren’t the only wholesale firm,” Jim said. “And even if they were, I’d never have that fellow set foot on my land again—the scoundrel! Tell me, Cherry—he didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, Jim. I—I don’t think he really meant any harm,” she said. “But he—but he just couldn’t believe me when I refused point-blank to marry him.”

“And I suppose he tried to blackmail you into accepting him by threatening to ruin me!” Jim suggested in disgust. “Oh, yes, I happened to arrive just in time to hear that veiled threat of his. Well, let him get on with it,” he added, squaring his shoulders, “and I’ll find other markets for my stuff, that’s all. So don’t worry, Cherry.”

“Yes, I—I am sure you will, Jim,” she said, trying to treat the matter more lightly than she felt.

Cherry then started to prepare the tea. She realised only too well what a serious blow it would be to her brother if Sanbridge’s ceased to buy the bulk of his fruit and vegetables, in which he chiefly specialised. It would not be easy to find new markets for the heavy crop of apples and pears which would soon be ready for gathering—especially as Jim was going away on his honeymoon on the following day.

She supposed that Levick, who was chief buyer for the firm, had called that day to inspect the quality of the fruit and make Jim an offer for it. In the ordinary course of events, the deal would have been amicably settled over a cup of tea, and Jim could have gone off on his honeymoon with an easy mind, knowing that the fruit was sold and that he could count on a substantial cheque reaching him when Sanbridge’s lorries had carted away the last of the piled-up market baskets.

Instead, however, it was obvious that Jim was desperately worried when he sat down to tea, though he did his best to hide the fact.

“Jim, perhaps Mr. Levick won’t really carry out his threat, after all,” Cherry suggested hesitantly. “Surely Sanbridge’s would think it rather strange if he suddenly stopped buying from you?”

Jim smiled wryly, and shook his head.

“Oh, but I am only very small fry in their eyes, my dear girl,” he said. “Besides, Levick has a free hand to buy where he likes, so there’s nothing to prevent him from refusing to buy my fruit on the excuse that it isn’t up to the required standard. He can get all he wants elsewhere, of course. It’s a record year for hard fruit, as you know, which means that I’ll probably have to take any price I can get for it—or leave it to rot on the trees.”

Then, seeing his sister’s down-cast ex-

pression, Jim leaned across the table and patted her hand.

"Come, cheer up, my dear Cherry," he rallied her, with a forced smile. "It's no good meeting trouble half-way, is it? There'll be time enough when I get back from my honeymoon to see what arrangements I can make elsewhere about the fruit. Even if I lose on it, I shan't be ruined, you know—though I'm afraid it will mean doing without the various improvements to the house which I had promised Vera—at least, for the time being. However, the dear girl will understand, of course," he added, a tender expression on his lean, brown face.

"Yes, Jim, of course she will," Cherry agreed, resolutely silencing any doubts she might have on the subject.

"Anyway," her brother continued, "I'm not going to let Levick cast a shadow over the happiest day of my life, so let's forget about it, Cherry."

He then went on to discuss the arrangements he had made for his foreman, Bill Hardy, to supervise the work of the farm during his absence.

"And I hope you won't find it too lonely being here by yourself, Cherry," he said. "I'm sure Mrs. Greenford will be only too glad to come and spend a night or two here with you, if you need her, for you're a great favourite of hers, you know."

Cherry smiled.

"Oh, please don't worry about me, Jim—I shall be quite all right," she assured him. "I'm going to enjoy myself while you are away by giving the house a thorough spring-clean so as to have everything nice for Vera when she comes back to her new home. So I shall have plenty to do to keep myself occupied."

"Well, don't work too hard, my dear," Jim said, smiling across the table at her. "You've always kept the house spotless, anyway—and please remember that it will still be your home, too, Cherry, to come back to whenever you wish. You—you won't forget that, will you, Cherry?"

"No, of course not, Jim," she answered, smiling back at him.

Then, because she was afraid of betraying the sadness of her heart at the thought of leaving this dear home of hers, Cherry got up from her chair and said briskly—

"Well, I mustn't sit here wasting time, Jim, must I? I have to press my bridesmaid's dress and attend to lots of other things before bed-time."

Jim nodded, and took his pipe from his pocket.

"Yes, and I must be getting back to my work, too," he said.

THE village church was crowded to the doors next day for Jim's wedding. Everyone agreed that the bride looked very lovely in her gown of ivory satin, her flowing veil held in place on her dark hair with a circlet of orange blossom.

After the ceremony, they all adjourned to Eastbrook Farm, where a real old-fashioned wedding feast was set out on long trestle tables in the spacious kitchen.

Old friends who had known Jim since he was a child gathered round to wish the newly-married couple every happiness. Speeches were made, toasts were drunk, and the solid oak beams echoed to friendly laughter—as they must have done so many times in days long past on similar happy occasions.

There was a lump in Cherry's throat, but not for worlds would she have cast a cloud over Jim's happiness by letting him glimpse the sadness at her heart.

FATEFUL ENCOUNTER

IT was about tea-time, just over a fortnight later, when Cherry alighted from the branch-line train at the little seaside

village of Mallingsby.

Jim had driven her to the station that morning, and his wife, looking very smart in high-heeled shoes and a dainty frilled apron over one of the new washing dresses she had bought for her trousseau, had waved good-bye to her from the doorway of Fairlea Farm.

Over breakfast, Vera had announced her intention of going into Brighton on a shopping expedition that afternoon.

"I simply must have new curtains to start with," she had remarked, with a disparaging glance at the pretty flowered cretonne at the windows, and which Cherry had freshly laundered. "Those curtains are much too old-fashioned for my liking—and they certainly wouldn't go with the new furnishing scheme I have in mind. Will you be able to come into Brighton with me one day this week, Jim dear, and see about the television set you promised me?" she had added, turning to her husband.

Jim pursed his lips.

"Well, we'll discuss that later, my dear, shall we?" he had muttered.

Cherry had guessed from the worried look on her brother's face that he had not yet told Vera that he had lost his contract with Sanbridges'. Naturally, he had not wished to cast a shadow over their honeymoon happiness by mentioning the matter to her.

Vera glanced at the clock, and gave an impatient little laugh.

"Oh, I suppose you're worrying about Cherry catching her train, darling," she had said. "Really, anyone would think Jim was anxious to be rid of you, Cherry!"

"Anyway, I'm quite sure Cherry doesn't think so," Jim had retorted. "She knows that I hate the thought of her leaving here."

Vera frowned.

"Really, Jim, you needn't bite my head off!" she had snapped. "I was only teasing, you know."

At that, Cherry had got up hastily from the breakfast table.

"I'm afraid I must now go and get ready, Vera, if you will excuse me," she said. "If I miss this early morning train, I shall have to wait two hours for another connection from London."

She had then fled upstairs to her room, secretly thankful for the last-minute rush which gave her no time to dwell on the anguish of leaving her old home—until she was alone in the train and straining her eyes for a last glimpse of her beloved Sussex downs as they faded into the distance.

Somehow, she had managed to hold back the tears as she kissed Jim good-bye, for she was anxious not to make things harder for him by giving way.

"You will write often, won't you, dear?" Jim had urged, squeezing his sister's hand affectionately as the train began to move out of the station. "And promise me that if anything goes wrong—I mean, if you don't like this new job of yours, you'll remember that you have a home to come back to, won't you?"

Cherry had promised, her lips trembling as she smiled down at him, despite her efforts at self-control.

Then, the train began to gather speed, and she had left Jim behind, standing hatless on the platform, waving to her . . .

NOW, at last, she had reached her journey's end.

Mrs. Lynthorpe had written to say she would send the car to meet her, and Cherry was expecting to see a man in chauffeur's uniform standing on the platform awaiting her. Instead, however, a hatless young man in grey flannels and a tweed jacket, with rather unruly brown hair came

hurrying towards her.

"Excuse me," he said, with a pleasant smile, "are you Miss Burchell?"

"Yes, I am," Cherry answered.

"My name is Thornton—Clive Thornton," he went on to explain. "I am Mrs. Lynthorpe's estate manager. As her chauffeur is ill, I have come to meet you instead, Miss Burchell."

"That was very kind of you, Mr. Thornton," Cherry murmured, with a shy smile.

"Oh no, not at all—I'm only too delighted to be of use," he returned, a cheerful twinkle in his grey eyes. "Is this your suitcase, Miss Burchell? Have you any other luggage?"

"No, I sent my trunk on in advance," Cherry explained.

The young man nodded, picked up her suitcase, and led the way to the exit, pausing to exchange a friendly word with the porter to whom Cherry handed her ticket.

"Good afternoon, Tom—how are the wife and baby getting on?" he enquired.

"They're doing nicely, thank you, Mr. Clive," the man answered, smiling broadly. "My wife was very pleased with the beautiful flowers you sent her and she asked me to thank you kindly, sir."

"I'm very glad she liked them," Clive Thornton said. "By the way, Tom," he went on, "Miss Anthea is longing to see the baby. So I promised to bring her along to your cottage some time when it would be convenient for your wife."

"Why, I know Mabel would be right glad to see you both any time you care to call, Mr. Clive," the man assured him, a pleased smile on his face.

"Very well, Tom, then we'll probably look in to-morrow afternoon," he said. "And perhaps Miss Burchell, who has come to live at the Hall, would care to accompany us," Clive added, smiling at Cherry.

"The young lady will be very welcome, Mr. Clive," the other answered, touching his cap to Cherry.

She gave him a friendly smile, and murmured "Thank you."

As they drove off in a rather ancient-looking car, Clive Thornton remarked laughingly—

"You would have found Mrs. Lynthorpe's car more comfortable than this one, Miss Burchell, but old George—the chauffeur-handyman—won't let anyone drive it but himself. I had therefore to use my own car. You see, George has been in Mrs. Lynthorpe's service for upwards of forty years, so he enjoys the privileges of an old servant, and is, I'm afraid, a bit inclined to be rather obstinate."

"Mrs. Lynthorpe must be a very good employer if she manages to keep her servants for a long time," Cherry remarked.

"Oh yes, she certainly is," Clive Thornton agreed. "Mrs. Lynthorpe is one of the old school, you see, Miss Burchell. She is a stern disciplinarian, and can be very severe towards those who do not conform to her own high standards of duty. But she is kindness itself to those who earn her liking and respect."

"You may find her manner rather forbidding, just at first," he added, "but I do hope you will not allow it to scare you away, Miss Burchell. I feel quite sure that as you get to know Mrs. Lynthorpe well, you will come to like and admire her."

The young man spoke with a strange earnestness which rather puzzled Cherry. It was almost as if he were desperately anxious that she should like her new post.

"I daresay you are thinking it is no business of mine," he went on, with an apologetic smile. "But the moment I saw you get out of the train, Miss Burchell,

I felt that you would be the ideal companion for Anthea. You see, the dear girl needs someone like you to help her. Naturally, her parents' tragic death was a great shock to her, and—well, I'm afraid she and Mrs. Lynthorpe do not yet quite understand each other."

He broke off abruptly, as if he felt that he had no right to say any more, and Cherry nodded understandingly.

"I will certainly do my best to help Miss Norris in every way I can, Mr. Thornton," she murmured. "I feel very sorry for the poor girl—the death of her parents must have been a shattering blow to her just when she was looking forward to returning home. Of course, it will naturally take time for her to adjust herself to such a complete break in her life, but I very much hope that I shall be able to make it easier for her."

"Yes, I feel quite sure you will, Miss Burchell," he said. "Well, here we are at the Hall," he added, a moment later, as they turned into a drive between wrought-iron gates, guarded by a lodge. "Old George and his wife live at the lodge," he explained. "Their name is Trant, but they are known to everyone as 'Old George' and 'Mrs. George.'"

"I feel as if I know quite a lot about my new environment already, Mr. Thornton—thanks to you," Cherry said, with a rather nervous smile as they came in sight of a large, two-storied house, with the deep crimson of virginia creeper making splashes of colour against its cream walls. "Oh, what a beautiful house!" she added, a little breathlessly.

"Yes, Mallingsby Hall is over two hundred years old," her companion told her, "and it has always been in the hands of the Lynthorpe family. Unfortunately, Mrs. Lynthorpe lost her only son during the war, and shortly afterwards, her husband died, so she is the last of the name."

"Oh, how terribly sad for Mrs. Lynthorpe!" murmured Cherry.

"Yes, it certainly is," Clive Thornton agreed thoughtfully. "But Mrs. Lynthorpe is the last person in the world to indulge in self-pity. She is really a wonderful old lady, as I think you will discover for yourself, Miss Burchell."

"A WONDERFUL old lady!"

That, was Cherry's impression, too, when, a few minutes later, she found herself face to face with her new employer. Mrs. Lynthorpe, a tall, erect figure in black, with a crown of snow-white hair, was descending the stairs when they were admitted by an elderly parlourmaid. She gave Cherry a penetrating look as she came forward and shook hands with her.

"How do you do, Miss Burchell?" she said, in a clear, firm tone, and then broke off, as an exceedingly pretty dark-haired girl came strolling in from the garden. "Ah, here is my ward, Miss Anthea Norris," she went on. "Anthea dear, this is Miss Burchell."

"Oh, but you're not a bit like what I imagined you would be," Anthea cried laughingly. "I told Clive I was sure you would be a plain, plump girl with spectacles—didn't I, Clive?"

"That will do, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe interposed icily. "Now please show Miss Burchell to her room. Tea will be served in my sitting-room in ten minutes' time. You will stay, won't you, Clive?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Lynthorpe, I would like to," the young man returned, with formal politeness.

"Come along, Miss Burchell," the girl invited, leading the way upstairs, a mutinous expression on her pretty face, and as she made no further attempt at conversation, Cherry remarked smilingly—

"I think Mallingsby Hall is a lovely place, don't you, Miss Norris?"

Anthea shrugged.

"No, I don't," she answered petulantly. "It—it's just a prison, and I hate it!"

Cherry glanced at her in astonishment, but the girl bit her lip and turned her head away.

"This is your room," she went on, opening a door for Cherry to enter. "It's next to mine—so that you can keep an eye on me!" she added sarcastically. "That's the real reason Aunt Helen engaged you, Miss Burchell!"

She gave a mirthless laugh, which told Cherry more plainly than words could have done, how lonely and unhappy this seventeen-year-old girl was under the would-be sophisticated manner she tried to assume.

"Oh, come, my dear, I'm sure you are mistaken," Cherry told her gently. "Your Aunt Helen's manner may be rather severe but from the way she wrote about you in her letters to me, I am quite sure that she only wants you to have someone near your own age as a companion. After all, my dear Anthea, why should your aunt wish to make a 'prisoner' of you?"

"Well, she does, anyway!" the girl affirmed, with a toss of her head. "She will never allow me to go out of the grounds by myself, if she can possibly help it. In fact, she seems to think I'm a baby and not capable of looking after myself—yet I shall be eighteen at Christmas. What's more, Miss Burchell," she went on, "I am not even related to Mrs. Lynthorpe, though she likes me to call her 'Aunt Helen'. She is just an old friend of my parents, and—and was one of the executors of my father's will."

The girl's voice trembled a little as she spoke, and her eyes filled with tears—which she tried to hide by walking over to the window and standing there staring out at the sea in the distance.

Cherry gazed at the rigid young figure, and sighed. She felt very sorry for the girl—sorry, too, for the old lady who was trying to do her best for her according to her own lights. It was evident that Anthea was very proud and impulsive, and that she had a strong will of her own.

But Cherry felt certain she was also very sweet and lovable, under that defiant exterior of hers. It was evident, however, that the girl was desperately unhappy, as only the young can be when their own little world collapses, leaving them exposed to the tender mercies of strangers.

DURING the weeks that followed, Cherry would often have felt lonely and discouraged but for Clive Thornton, whose cheery friendship was a tower of strength to her.

The young man was evidently a favourite with Mrs. Lynthorpe, and Cherry sometimes wondered if, for the lonely, reserved old lady, he helped to fill the gap left by the tragic death of her only son.

An enlarged photograph of Roger Lynthorpe, in the uniform of an R.A.F. pilot, hung over the fireplace in Mrs. Lynthorpe's plainly-furnished sitting-room, and whenever Cherry happened to be in the room, she felt an irresistible urge to stand and gaze at it.

In the mornings, when she attended to the flowers—a task which was supposed to be Anthea's, but which Cherry had taken over because the other girl often forgot, or "couldn't be bothered"—she chose the choicest blooms for the vase which stood beneath the portrait, and arranged them with special care.

Then she would stand looking up at the fine, strong face which bore such a marked resemblance to Mrs. Lynthorpe's—

except for the glint of humour in the eyes which seemed to meet hers with a level, challenging gaze. And always there was a strange ache in her heart as she recalled what Clive Thornton had told her—that Roger Lynthorpe had been only twenty when he was shot down in the Mediterranean, while helping to defend Malta from an air attack, shortly before the end of the war.

Clive himself had never known the young man—he had come to Mallingsby only three years ago, and Mrs. Lynthorpe never spoke of her son to anyone. But the woman who came daily from the village to keep house for him in his little cottage in the grounds, had told him all about Roger Lynthorpe, and it appeared that the young man had been greatly beloved by everyone in the district.

Cherry could well believe this, for as time went on, she came to feel that she knew not only that pictured face of Roger Lynthorpe, but the personality behind it—gay and brave and kind, "always with a pleasant word for everyone," as Mrs. White had told Clive.

Cherry always chose a time when Mrs. Lynthorpe was taking her morning walk in the grounds, to do the flowers in the sitting-room; but one morning it started to rain, and the old lady returned sooner than she was expected to do.

She was gazing up at the portrait, so completely absorbed in thought, that Cherry was not aware that Mrs. Lynthorpe had stepped in through the french windows until she heard her say coldly—

"May I ask what you are doing in here, Miss Burchell?"

Cherry swung round, her cheeks suddenly scarlet.

"I—I have been arranging the flowers, Mrs. Lynthorpe," she stammered falteringly.

The old lady's eyes lingered for a moment on the vase of choice white chrysanthemums, tastefully arranged with sprays of red leaves from a copper beech in the grounds.

"But that is Anthea's task," she said. "Since when have you been doing it for her?"

Anxious to protect the other girl from the old lady's displeasure, Cherry murmured—

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lynthorpe. I did not think you would mind my attending to the flowers, as I enjoy doing so very much, and—and Anthea does not."

"Then it is time Anthea learnt to do her duty whether she likes it or not," Mrs. Lynthorpe said, a stern note in her voice. "I gave her the flowers to do because I hoped it would give her an interest in her new home, and help to occupy her time. But it seems that even such a light task as that—a task which most girls would gladly undertake—is too much trouble for her. I suppose she is upstairs in her room reading one of those fashion magazines of hers!" Mrs. Lynthorpe added frowningly.

This was exactly what Anthea was doing, as Cherry was well aware, and she made no reply. Then, with a sigh, Mrs. Lynthorpe seated herself at her bureau. There was a strange weariness in the old lady's face which touched Cherry deeply.

"Mrs. Lynthorpe," she said impulsively, "Anthea is not really so frivolous and selfish as you seem to think. I can assure you that she is devoted to children—we walk down to the village nearly every day to see how Mrs. Grant's baby is getting on, and you may not be aware that Anthea has knitted several dainty garments for the child."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Lynthorpe remarked. "You surprise me, Miss Burchell!" she added, in a gentler tone. "How is it that

Anthea has never mentioned any of this to me?"

Cherry hesitated a moment. Then—"I think perhaps, Mrs. Lynthorpe, it is because Anthea feels that you only see the worst side of her—I mean, the side she shows you. Don't you think most of us are like that?" Cherry ventured to ask. "We only give of our best to those who see the best in us?"

A short silence followed, during which Mrs. Lynthorpe seemed at a loss what to say.

"Then do you think that I am too strict with Anthea?" she asked at last. "If so, I can assure you that it is only because I have the girl's best interests at heart."

"Yes, I am quite sure of that, Mrs. Lynthorpe, and I—and I trust you will forgive me for venturing to speak to you so frankly," Cherry said, apologetically.

Mrs. Lynthorpe smiled, and laid her hand on Cherry's arm.

"I am very glad that I was fortunate enough to engage you as Anthea's companion, Cherry," she said, using the girl's Christian name for the first time. "And while I am about it," she went on, still smiling, "I would like to thank you for the care you have taken over the flowers in this room."

"I have noticed, ever since you have been here, how beautifully they were arranged, and I was surprised and greatly pleased to think that Anthea should take so much trouble with them. But now I realise that it was you who chose the finest blooms to set beside my dear son's portrait. That was most kind and thoughtful of you, and I appreciate it very much, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe added.

Then, breaking into the poignant silence that followed, came Anthea's voice calling impatiently from the garden—

"Cherry! Cherry! Where are you?"

"You had better go, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe murmured, and then started to fumble some papers on her bureau.

Cherry hurried out through the french windows, her mind in a whirl. It seemed impossible to her that Mrs. Lynthorpe had really thanked her as she had done for the trouble she had taken with the flowers—and had called her "my dear!"

"Oh, there you are at last, Cherry! I've been searching everywhere for you!" Anthea exclaimed—she was wearing a crimson mackintosh and hood. "But don't you know it's raining, Cherry?" she added laughingly.

"Yes, of course I do, dear," Cherry said. "Do you want to go for a walk, Anthea?"

"Yes—let's go to the village, as I want something at the shop," the girl replied.

They entered the house together, and Cherry ran upstairs to put on her mackintosh and brogues. A few minutes later, they set off, Cherry wondering why Anthea—who was not particularly fond of exercise—should suddenly decide to walk to the village in the rain.

But she was not left long in doubt, for Anthea announced, in an off-hand manner—

"Do you know, Cherry, I suddenly felt I couldn't exist another moment without a cigarette. It seems ages since I've smoked one—thanks to Aunt Helen's old-fashioned prejudices. So I decided to go to the village and buy a packet, and I shall smoke them, too, whether my aunt likes it or not."

Cherry suppressed a sigh. It was evident that Anthea was in one of her tiresome moods, and was bent on going out of her way to do things of which she knew Mrs. Lynthorpe strongly disapproved. But she knew the girl too well to try and dissuade her from buying the cigarettes, realising that it would only make her more obstinate. So she merely remarked—

"Very well, my dear. But don't you think it is rather silly to waste your money on something you do not really want—and just because your Aunt Helen disapproves of you smoking cigarettes?"

Anthea pouted.

"Well, no, I do not," she said. "I often used to smoke at school with the other older girls, though, of course, we weren't supposed to. But when I went home for the holidays, mummy and daddy never minded—they treated me like a grown-up. We used to have the most wonderful parties, and I was allowed to drink champagne, and dance until all hours of the night—and now I'm cooped up in this dull place and treated like a child!"

"Oh, how thankful I shall be when I am twenty-one," she went on, "and have my own money to spend—and can do as I please! But that won't be for over three years yet—unless I get married before then!"

It was not the first time the girl had talked in a rather similar strain about her home life, when her parents were alive.

But it was difficult to reconcile Anthea's picture of her seemingly irresponsible and pleasure-loving parents with the fact that Mrs. Lynthorpe had been an old friend of the family, for they could certainly have had very little in common with her.

"Not that I'm likely to have much chance of getting married," Anthea went on gloomily. "All Aunt Helen's friends are as old-fashioned and dull as herself—there's hardly a presentable young man in the neighbourhood, except Clive Thornton, and I might as well be as plain as a coot for all the notice he takes of me!"

"But Mr. Thornton is always exceedingly nice to you, my dear," Cherry remarked. Anthea shrugged.

"Oh, yes, in a sort of big-brotherly way," she conceded. "But what's the use of being pretty, if there's no one to admire you, or of having that trunkful of lovely clothes mummy and daddy bought me, if I can't wear them?"

"But, Anthea dear, if only you would try to have a little more patience, and—and be nice to your Aunt Helen, instead of going out of your way to displease her, I feel quite sure that, in time, you would both come to understand each other better," Cherry said. "Then, no doubt, Mrs. Lynthorpe would arrange for you to have more freedom."

Anthea gave a mirthless laugh.

"Yes, such as taking me to the local whist-drive occasionally, I suppose?" she suggested sarcastically. "That may be Aunt Helen's idea of fun, but it isn't mine. I really can't think why daddy made her one of his executors—he had lots of awfully jolly friends, and he only knew Aunt Helen through his mother having been at school with her."

"She's always kept in touch with daddy after grannie died," Anthea added, "because she was his godmother. But I remember daddy saying that when he and mummy stayed with the old lady once, on their way to Paris, they had never been so bored in their lives!"

Cherry bit back the retort that rose to her lips—that perhaps the girl's father had realised, notwithstanding his scoffing at Mrs. Lynthorpe's hospitality, that she was more reliable than any of his more "jolly" friends. In any case, Anthea had unconsciously given her a picture of her upbringing which explained a great deal, Cherry reflected.

They had now entered the village, and Anthea, with one of her swift changes of mood, waved her hand gaily to a group of kiddies who were coming out of the village school on the opposite side of the road.

They waved back gleefully, and one of

the children—a girl—started to run across the road. At that moment, a car came round the bend into the village, and seeing the child's danger, Cherry darted into the road, snatched her up, and turned to go back. But her foot slipped on the wet surface, and she lost her balance and fell.

Anthea screamed, but luckily the car swerved and stopped without touching Cherry or the child—they had rolled to safety. Next moment people came hurrying from the nearby cottages, and there were plenty of willing hands to help Cherry to her feet.

"Oh, Cherry, are you hurt?" Anthea asked anxiously, gazing at her companion's deathly pale face.

"It—it's nothing much, dear, but I think I have twisted my ankle," Cherry answered, wincing as she tried to put her right foot to the ground.

"I think you'd better come indoors and rest a bit, and let me make you a cup of tea, miss," one of the women volunteered.

But before Cherry could answer, the driver of the car came thrusting his way through the group of onlookers.

"Can I be of any help, miss?" he asked, in a tone of deep concern.

Cherry looked up, and for the moment she forgot her pain in the unpleasant shock she received as she recognised him. It was Tony Levick!

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, staring at her incredulously. "Why, it's you, Cherry!"

Anthea looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you mean to say you know each other?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, we know each other very well, don't we, Cherry?" the young man said, quickly recovering his customary aplomb. "Look here, Cherry," he added, "you're hurt, and you had better let me drive you home."

Cherry shook her head, but Anthea chimed in eagerly—

"Yes, that would be the best thing to do, wouldn't it, Cherry? It's evident you won't be able to walk home."

Cherry tried to protest, but the ring of faces round her were beginning to blur, and next moment she found herself being carried to the car.

She let her head fall back against the upholstery and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she saw that the car was speeding along the lane leading to Mallingsby Hall, and Anthea was bending over her, white-faced and anxious.

"We'll soon be home now, Cherry dear," she murmured falteringly.

There was a jubilant gleam in Tony Levick's eyes as he stared ahead at the winding lane. What amazing luck! That he should have met Cherry again, and under such favourable circumstances! he was thinking. It seemed as if fate had given him the upper hand, this time, for the girl was forced to accept his help, whether she wished to or not.

Moreover, he had been very much impressed when that extremely pretty girl who was with Cherry had asked him to drive to Mallingsby Hall, for he knew the house well, having often visited this part of the country on business.

If that was where the damsel lived, then she must be someone pretty important, Levick told himself, and he was certainly going to make the most of this chance acquaintance.

ANTHEA'S FOLLY

CHERRY'S injured ankle had swollen so rapidly by the time they reached the Hall that she could not bear to put her foot to the ground, and much to her chagrin, she was forced to allow

Tony Levick to carry her into the house.

"Please bring her in here," Anthea said, opening the library door, and Cherry gave a sigh of relief as Levick lowered her on to the soft cushions of the settee.

"Thank you," she murmured, though hating to feel herself under an obligation to the man.

"What on earth is the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Lynthorpe, who had now appeared in the doorway.

"It—it's nothing very much, Mrs. Lynthorpe," stammered Cherry. "I—I slipped and twisted my ankle, and—"

"Cherry ran into the road to save little Betty Sanders from being run over, Aunt Helen," Anthea broke in, "and the driver of the car turned out to be a friend of hers, so he very kindly offered to drive us home."

She smiled at the young man, intrigued by his bold good looks and dark, wavy hair, glossy as satin. Then she turned to Cherry and added—

"Won't you introduce your friend to us, dear?"

"Yes, of—of course," Cherry murmured confusedly. "This is Mr. Tony Levick, who is a business acquaintance of my brother's. And this is Mrs. Lynthorpe, my employer, and—and Miss Anthea Norris."

Mrs. Lynthorpe inclined her head.

"How do you do, Mr. Levick?" she said. "I am very much obliged to you for driving Cherry home. I am always pleased to welcome any friend of hers, and I shall be glad if you will stay to lunch, if you are not otherwise engaged."

Levick beamed his delight.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Lynthorpe," he said, with an obsequious bow to the stately old lady.

The hot colour rushed to Cherry's cheeks. She felt extremely uncomfortable that her employer should have invited the man to lunch under the mistaken impression that he was a friend of hers, yet there seemed nothing she could do about it.

"Lunch will be served in half an hour's time," Mrs. Lynthorpe went on, assuming her usual formal manner. "Anthea, please take Mr. Levick into the drawing-room and give him a glass of sherry, while I attend to Cherry's injured ankle. I am sure the poor girl must be in great pain. Oh, yes, and tell Sarah to bring hot and cold water and bandages to me as quickly as possible."

"Very well, Aunt Helen," murmured Anthea.

"See you later, Cherry," Levick said, with an airy wave of the hand, as he followed Anthea from the room.

Delighted at being left to entertain Tony Levick on her own, Anthea put on her most grown-up air as she ushered him into the drawing-room and invited him to sit down.

"Sorry I can't offer you a cocktail, Mr. Levick," she said, smiling at him. "You see, Aunt Helen is rather old-fashioned, and doesn't approve of cocktails, so I'm afraid I can only offer you a glass of sherry."

"Oh, but sherry will do very nicely, thank you, Miss Norris," he answered, smiling back at her. He took out his cigarette case and offered it to her. "Would you care for a cigarette, Miss Norris?" he asked.

Anthea accepted one with a casual "Thanks", and then brought him a glass of sherry.

"But aren't you having a drink too, Miss Norris?" he enquired.

Anthea hesitated—not for worlds would she have admitted that Aunt Helen did not allow her to drink intoxicants. Then, with a casual air, she said—

"Well, yes, perhaps I will, Mr. Levick."

A few minutes later, perched on the arm of a chair, with her glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Anthea was chattering away vivaciously. She was filled with a tingling excitement, due in part to the unaccustomed drink, and also to the bold admiration in Tony Levick's eyes as he leaned back on the settee, apparently enjoying her company as much as she was his.

Feeling greatly flattered at being treated as an equal by the young man, who, in her eyes, seemed very much a man-of-the-world, Anthea was soon telling him all about the exciting life she had led before she lost her parents in an air crash, and became Mrs. Lynthorpe's ward.

She told him of the big sugar plantation in Jamaica; her luxurious style of living there; the extravagant parties; the expensive finishing school in Switzerland to which she had been sent at the age of sixteen; flying home to Jamaica for the holidays; the trips to Paris she made with her parents, and so forth.

Levick's eyes gleamed as he listened. It was evident that her parents must have been very wealthy, and that, as their only child, the girl would eventually come into a considerable fortune.

"I do hope I'm not boring you, Mr. Levick," she went on, "but you can't imagine what a relief it is to be able to talk to someone who—well, who looks at things in the same way as I do! All the people around here are so frightfully dull. They've never been anywhere, or done anything exciting. Of course, it hasn't been quite so bad since Cherry came as my companion. She's an awfully sweet girl, and I am very fond of her. But I am afraid even Cherry does not really understand how I feel about it all."

Anthea sighed, took a puff at her cigarette, and then added, in a nonchalant tone—

"I—I suppose you and Cherry are great friends, Mr. Levick? I can't understand why she has never mentioned you to me."

Levick shrugged.

"Oh, well, we're not as friendly as all that, you know, Miss Norris," he told her laughingly. "It's true that I've known Cherry for some considerable time—you see, my job takes me all over the country, and I used to do business with her brother, so I came to know her fairly well. But I had no idea she was living in this part of the country, and you can imagine my surprise at meeting her the way I did this morning."

"However," he continued, and there was a look in his eyes that brought a vivid flush to Anthea's cheeks—"let's not waste time talking about Cherry. She's a very charming girl, of course, but I'm afraid Cherry and I have little in common, while you and I belong to the same world, Anthea. Our outlook on life is very much the same, I realised that the first moment I saw you."

Anthea smiled delightedly. Her foolish head was completely turned by the young man's subtle flattery, and she was determined to show him that she had as little regard for 'stodgy conventions' as he had.

"You—you don't waste much time, do you, Tony?" she said, with a gay little laugh.

"Well, no, I can't afford to, my dear Anthea—not when we are likely to be interrupted at any moment. Tell me—when may I see you again?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I'm afraid that is quite out of the question," she said. "You see, Tony, my Aunt Helen is awfully strict—I'm never allowed to go out alone."

"Oh, but I'm sure you could slip away

occasionally if you really want to—especially as Cherry is likely to be laid up for several days with that injured ankle of hers."

Levick broke off and considered for a moment, then added, in a low voice—

"Listen, Anthea. I shall be in this district for the next two or three weeks—I'm staying at the Falcon Arms, in Eastridge, which, as you will know, is only a few miles from here. So what about to-morrow afternoon, at two-thirty? I'll be waiting for you at that first turning a little way along the lane, and we'll drive over to the Grand Hotel at Sandbay for the tea-dance. Just think what a thrilling time we could have together."

"Oh, yes, that would be lovely, Tony, but—"

Anthea broke off and sighed wistfully. Levick suddenly took her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"Please don't let me down, my dear Anthea," he pleaded, gazing into her eyes. "I'll be waiting there for you—if necessary, I'll be waiting there every day until you come!"

"Very well, I—I'll see what I can do, Tony," she promised. "Oh, please let go of my hand," she added breathlessly—"there's someone coming."

Next moment, the door opened and Clive Thornton came in.

"Mrs. Lynthorpe asked me to tell you that lunch will be ready in about five minutes, Anthea," he said, glancing from the girl's flushed face to the young man who was leaning back on the settee.

"Oh, thanks, Clive—of course, you're lunching with us to-day, aren't you? I—I had quite forgotten," Anthea stammered confusedly. "Meet Mr. Tony Levick," she added, with forced lightness. "This is Mr. Clive Thornton, who looks after Aunt Helen's estate."

"How do you do?" Clive said smilingly, as the other man rose to shake hands with him. "I understand, Mr. Levick, that you are a friend of Cherry's."

Levick nodded.

"Well, yes, I met Cherry's brother in the way of business," he said. "It—it's a small world, isn't it, Mr. Thornton? By the way I hope the poor girl is feeling better now."

"Oh, yes, I am pleased to say that Cherry's ankle is giving her much less pain since Mrs. Lynthorpe attended to it," Clive answered. "Unfortunately, however, she will not be able to lunch with us to-day. Mrs. Lynthorpe insists on Cherry resting in the library and having lunch sent in on a tray."

"Well, that's just too bad," Levick muttered, with feigned regret. "In that case, it looks as if I shan't be able to enjoy much of her company, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Levick, I'm afraid you will have to make do with my company as a substitute for Cherry's at lunch," Anthea put in, and Clive noticed a meaning smile pass between them which gave him an unpleasant shock.

Good heavens! he was thinking. Why, Anthea had only met the man less than an hour ago, yet she seemed on surprisingly friendly terms with him! Then his glance fell on the two empty glasses on the table, and he realised why the girl was so flushed and excited.

Anthea noticed the surprised look on his face.

"Mr. Levick and I have been having a most interesting chat over a glass of sherry, Clive," she said, smiling defiantly. "Would you care for one, too—a glass of sherry, I mean?"

Clive shook his head, and next moment the luncheon gong sounded.

"Well, come along, Mr. Levick—I'm simply starving, aren't you?" Anthea said,

and then boldly led the way into the dining-room.

It was evident to Clive that she was deliberately doing her best to impress the other man by trying to appear blase and sophisticated—a pose of Anthea's which always amused him. But he had taken an instinctive dislike to Levick, and the girl's foolish behaviour to try to impress such a man greatly annoyed him.

It was certainly anything but a pleasant meal over which Mrs. Lynthorpe presided. With grim politeness, she cast frequent frowning glances at Anthea, who kept up a flow of vivacious chatter with Levick which left little opportunity for general conversation.

"Have you ever been to Paris, Mr. Levick?" she asked. "I think it's really the most exciting city in the world. My mummy and daddy had lots of friends there, and we were invited to the most wonderful parties nearly every night. We used to stay in bed next day until lunch-time, then daddy often took us to Fouquet's, where we had lobster and champagne—and the most thrilling chocolate soufflé!"

Anthea sighed dramatically as she toyed with her homely apple-pie and cream, then launched into further vivid accounts of her wonderful experiences in the "Gay City" to which Levick listened with flattering attention. He smiled at her in a way that made Clive rage inwardly, though he was normally a very even-tempered young man.

Clive became increasingly puzzled by the fact that Levick was a friend of Cherry's. He could not imagine what such a charming girl could possibly have in common with this coarsely handsome young man whose bold, familiar manner jarred upon him so intensely.

When, at last, lunch was over and they all adjourned to the library to have coffee with Cherry, it soon became apparent that on her side, at least, the friendship was not exactly a warm one.

"Hullo, Cherry, and how's that injured ankle of yours getting on?" Levick greeted her in his his free-and-easy way, walking over to the settee where she sat propped up against the cushions with a rug over her legs.

"It is better now, thank you, Mr. Levick," she answered coldly.

"Splendid!" he said, undeterred by the coolness of her manner. "Cigarette?" he added taking out his case and offering it to her.

Cherry shook her head.

"No, thank you," she murmured.

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten you don't smoke, Cherry," he said. "But you do, don't you, Miss Norris?" he went on, smiling at Anthea as he proffered her the case.

Anthea flushed, aware of Mrs. Lynthorpe's gaze upon her as she glanced up from pouring out the coffee. Then, with a defiant little lift of the chin, Anthea accepted a cigarette.

Mrs. Lynthorpe's lips tightened, but her old-world standards of good manners restrained her from reprimanding the girl in the presence of a guest—however uncongenial he might be—so she said nothing.

Clive handed round the coffee, and Levick sank into an easy-chair, while Anthea perched herself on the arm of the settee and gave Clive a vivid account of how Cherry had saved little Betty Saunders from being run over by Mr. Levick's car.

"But didn't you see the 'School' notice as you were approaching the bend, Mr. Levick, and slow down?" Clive asked, a curt note in his voice.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I did," Levick replied. "But I was going pretty fast at the time, and I couldn't brake suddenly on a wet road without risking a

skid, could I, my dear fellow?"

Clive shrugged.

"There's a speed limit sign at the entrance to the village," he said. "It seems to me it was pure luck that there wasn't a very serious accident."

"Anyway, Clive, there wasn't," Anthea chimed in, with a petulant toss of her head, "so I don't see why you need take Mr. Levick to task over it. No doubt he is just as experienced a driver as you are."

Levick grinned.

"Thanks very much for taking up the cudgels on my behalf, Miss Norris," he said. "But please don't worry. I can look after myself all right. It rather looks to me that Mr. Thornton's a bit shaken on Cherry's account. Isn't that so?" he added meaningly, glancing from Clive to Cherry.

Cherry flushed with embarrassment at the man's tactless remark. Anthea stared wonderingly at her, then at Clive. Somehow it had never occurred to her that Clive might have fallen in love with Cherry, and for some reason she did not want to believe it was true.

Mrs. Lynthorpe frowned.

"We are all very fond of Cherry, Mr. Levick, and do not like to think of what might have happened," she remarked icily. "However, it is fortunate that the dear girl sustained nothing worse than a twisted ankle. Would you care for another cup of coffee, Mr. Levick?" she asked.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Lynthorpe," he replied, and as no one else wanted a second cup the hostess rose and said—

"You must excuse me, Mr. Levick, but I have some business matters to discuss with Mr. Thornton, and I expect you are anxious to resume your interrupted journey."

Even Levick could not ignore this strong hint that it was time he took his departure.

"Yes, I suppose I'd better be getting along," he said. "Well, good-bye, Mrs. Lynthorpe, and thanks for your kind hospitality. Good-bye, Cherry," he added, grinning at her, "maybe I'll be seeing you again some time."

"I don't think that is at all likely, Mr. Levick," she said. "Please accept my thanks for driving me home this morning," she added, with formal politeness.

Levick's eyes narrowed as he stood looking down at her. Then, with a faint shrug, he turned away.

Strangely enough, in spite of everything, he still wanted Cherry as he had never wanted any other girl, but if she chose to snub him—well, he told himself, the wealthy young heiress was evidently willing and eager to meet him half way!

He gave Anthea's fingers a tender squeeze as he shook hands with her, and knew from the mischievous smile in her eyes that she would manage to find some way of meeting him on the following afternoon, as he had suggested.

WHEN Levick had left them, Mrs. Lynthorpe retired to her private sitting-room-cum-office with Clive Thornton, leaving the two girls alone together in the library.

"Wasn't it odd, Cherry, your meeting Mr. Levick again like that?" Anthea remarked, taking out her powder compact and inspecting herself in the mirror. "Good gracious!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Why on earth didn't you tell me that my nose was shining like a beacon?"

"But your nose is not shining, dear," Cherry returned smilingly, ignoring the reference to Levick.

"Oh, but it is!" Anthea insisted, still peering into the mirror. "I don't know what Mr. Levick must have thought of me."

Cherry suppressed a sigh.

"Does it really matter what he thought, Anthea?" she asked, as she watched the girl vigorously powdering her nose.

"Of course it matters!" Anthea replied huffily. "Anyone can see that Mr. Levick is the sort of man who admires smart, sophisticated girls—though I must say we got on very well together. Of course, Cherry," she added, with a supercilious smile, "I quite realise he is not your type—in fact, you evidently don't like him very much, do you? At any rate, I noticed that you were rather stand-offish with him."

"Well, no, to be quite frank with you, Anthea, I do not like Mr. Levick, and I would rather not discuss him," Cherry replied. "After all, I don't suppose either of us is likely to see him again."

Anthea lowered her powder compact and stared at Cherry resentfully, a vivid spot of colour in each cheek.

"I certainly thought he was very nice," she said, "and I don't see why you should be so horrid about him, Cherry, even if—if you do prefer very ordinary young men who wear tweeds and smoke pipes, to the man-of-the-world type, like Mr. Levick. Why, he—he's ten times more exciting than—well, than Clive Thornton, for instance."

Cherry stared at the girl incredulously, torn between amusement and dismay.

"But, Anthea dear, as you know quite well, Clive is a thoroughly dependable young man," she said. "He is kind, generous-hearted, and—and by no means as 'ordinary', as you seem to think nor would he stoop to do anything mean and—"

Cherry stopped abruptly, reminding herself that there was no need to tell Anthea that Levick was doing his best to ruin her brother's business, because Jim had caught him forcing his attentions upon her, and had ordered him out of the house.

"Oh yes, Cherry, it's quite evident that Clive is perfect in your eyes," Anthea said, with a cynical laugh. "I suppose I must have been a little blind not to see that—that you and he were so very fond of each other. You will certainly suit each other very well indeed!"

Cherry swallowed hard. Was it possible that the girl really believed Tony Levick's veiled insinuation that there was something between her and Clive, and that Anthea was jealous of her? If so, then Anthea must be more interested in Clive than she cared to admit.

"But, Anthea dear—" Cherry began, then broke off as the door opened and Clive came rushing in, breathless with excitement.

"Why, Clive, what on earth has happened?" Anthea exclaimed, staring at him in surprise. "Have you come into a fortune, or something?"

"I've brought better news than that, my dear girl!" he answered jubilantly. "I know you will both be overjoyed when I tell you that Mrs. Lynthorpe's son is alive!"

The two girls gave him a startled look.

"What?" cried Anthea.

"Yes, it's perfectly true, Anthea," he said. "The vicar has just called to break the news to Mrs. Lynthorpe. As a matter of fact, I've been hoping for this for some little time past, and now it is officially confirmed."

"You see," Clive went on to explain, as they stared at him incredulously, "a few weeks ago Mrs. White, my housekeeper, came to me in a state of great excitement, after a visit to the cinema in Eastridge. She told me she had seen a news film about Morocco, and that she was positive she had recognised 'Mr. Roger' among the crowd in a street scene."

"Of course, I thought at first that Mrs. White had imagined it all, but to satisfy her, I promised to make enquiries. And this I did, after talking the matter over with the vicar. Meantime, I got Mrs. White to promise not to mention it to anyone, in case it reached Mrs. Lynthorpe's ears and turned out to be a mistake.

"Well, to cut a long story short," Clive continued, "we managed to persuade the War Office to make investigations, and the vicar has just received a telephone message to the effect that Roger Lynthorpe had been found, suffering from loss of memory. It is presumed that he was washed ashore on the North coast of Africa after his plane was shot down, and probably he was looked after by tribesmen. Anyway the full details are not yet known, I understand."

"Oh, Clive, what wonderful news!" Cherry murmured. "I can just imagine what it must mean to dear Mrs. Lynthorpe."

Anthea nodded in agreement. "I'm so very glad for Aunt Helen's sake," she said, and for once in a way, Anthea spoke with warm sincerity, straight from her heart. "Tell me, Clive," she added eagerly, "when do you think Roger will be home?"

"He is on his way now, by air," Clive answered, "and is expected to arrive here this evening. From what I can gather, the doctors are hoping that when he sees his mother again his memory will return. I sincerely hope so," Clive added thoughtfully.

"Oh yes, so do I," Cherry murmured. They discussed the thrilling news with eager interest for the next few minutes—or rather, Clive and Anthea did, for Cherry was strangely quiet and thoughtful. Presently Clive rose and said:

"I must now go and find out how the repairs to the Lodge are getting on. Would you care to go for a stroll, Anthea—that is, if Cherry won't be lonely?"

"Oh no, Clive, I shall not be lonely," Cherry said quickly. "So please go, Anthea. It has stopped raining now, and there's no need for you to stay indoors just to keep me company."

Anthea hesitated, glancing from one to the other. Then, with a shrug, she said—

"Oh, very well—it will be something to do, at any rate."

"Thanks for the compliment, my dear girl!" Clive returned laughingly—but Cherry noticed a hurt look in his grey eyes.

As soon as she was alone, Cherry's thoughts reverted to the startling news that Mrs. Lynthorpe's son was alive, after all, and would probably be coming home that evening!

She gazed into the flickering fire with misty eyes, thinking of the photograph in Mrs. Lynthorpe's sitting-room which had always held a strange enchantment for her. In some curious way that pictured face had come to represent an ideal which had taken possession of Cherry's imagination, and now, incredible though it seemed, she was soon to meet the original!

But, she reminded herself, Roger Lynthorpe would no longer be a boy of twenty, but a man of thirty-one, and on whom the intervening years of loneliness and suffering must, no doubt, have left their mark.

Presently the door opened, and Mrs. Lynthorpe came in. She was looking pale, but outwardly composed, and there was a soft light in her eyes which seemed to have melted her customary icy aloofness.

"Where is Anthea, my dear?" she enquired, in a strangely gentle voice.

"She has gone with Clive to see how the men are getting on with the repairs which are being done to the Lodge, Mrs. Lynthorpe," answered Cherry.

Mrs. Lynthorpe nodded, and sat down on the edge of the settee.

"I suppose Clive has told you the wonderful news about my dear boy?" she murmured.

"Yes, Mrs. Lynthorpe, and—and I can't tell you how very pleased I am to hear about it," Cherry replied, impulsively taking one of the old lady's hands and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe murmured, and leaned forward and kissed Cherry on the cheek—a gesture which, hitherto would have seemed utterly unthinkable, and Cherry was conscious of a new bond of affection and understanding between her employer and herself.

"God has been very good to me," Mrs. Lynthorpe went on, in a low voice. "Oh, Cherry, to think that I shall soon have my dear Roger here with me again!" and tears of joy glistened in her eyes as she sat gazing into the fire.

"You will naturally wish to have your son all to yourself when he arrives this evening, Mrs. Lynthorpe," Cherry remarked. "So may I suggest that Anthea and I have dinner served on a tray in here—or wherever you prefer?"

"Yes, I think that would be the best arrangement," Mrs. Lynthorpe murmured. "What a dear, thoughtful girl you are, Cherry!" She paused, and then went on—"Since our conversation this morning, my dear, I have been thinking that, perhaps, I ought to provide more amusement for Anthea. I'm afraid I have been rather too severe in trying to correct the faults in the dear girl's upbringing and have gone to the opposite extreme."

Mrs. Lynthorpe sighed, and paused again, then continued—

"I propose to make amends by giving a really grand ball for Anthea on her eighteenth birthday. But I want it to be a surprise for her, Cherry, so please do not mention anything about it to her just yet. You and I will discuss the details a little later on, my dear. At the moment, I can think of nothing but the homecoming of my son."

Cherry nodded.

"Yes, I can quite understand that, Mrs. Lynthorpe," she said, with a tremulous smile. "I know that Anthea will be terribly thrilled when she hears about your kind plans for her forthcoming birthday. She is of a naturally lively temperament, and if she cannot find a suitable outlet for her high spirits—well, she may be inclined to snatch at the first diversion that comes along. Don't you think so too, Mrs. Lynthorpe?"

"Well, yes, I do, my dear—though I'm afraid I had not realised it until I saw Anthea behaving so foolishly towards your friend, Mr. Levick. I really felt very much annoyed with the child," Mrs. Lynthorpe went on, "and I made up my mind to speak to her very sternly about it when the young man had gone, but on thinking the matter over, I realised that it was largely my own fault for not allowing Anthea to enjoy herself like other girls of her age. By the way, Cherry," she added, "may I ask how you came to be friends with Mr. Levick?"

"But—but—he is not really a friend of mine, Mrs. Lynthorpe," Cherry said quickly. "The young man happens to be a business acquaintance of my brother's, and he pays frequent visits to Fairlea Farm to buy fruit for his firm."

Then, on a sudden impulse, Cherry went on to tell her employer the story about the unpleasant scene that took place when Levick had asked her to marry him, and that her brother had ordered him out of the house.

"As a result of that unfortunate affair," Cherry went on, "my brother has had to

try and sell his fruit crop elsewhere, and has, I'm afraid, lost a considerable sum of money, because of Mr. Levick's action."

"What a disgraceful thing for the young man to do!" Mrs. Lynthorpe commented indignantly. "If I had known this before I would not have allowed him to enter my house. But please don't think that I am blaming you, Cherry," she went on. I quite realise, of course, that when the man offered to bring you home after you had injured your ankle, you had little choice in the matter.

"In any case," she added, "I don't suppose we are likely to see him again. And now, my dear, it is time I put another compress on your ankle. Tell me—how is it feeling now?"

"Oh, very much better, thank you, Mrs. Lynthorpe—and please do not trouble yourself to attend to it now, when you have so many other important things to think about," Cherry urged.

"But I am glad to have something to do my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe said, with a wistful smile. "It helps to make the time pass more quickly, you know."

As Cherry watched her deftly unrolling the bandage, she could not help marvelling at the old lady's wonderful self-control. There was nothing to betray the emotion that must be seething within her as she set about the task.

THAT evening, as Cherry and Anthea sat listening to the radio in the library, they heard a car drive up to the front door. There was a short pause, then came Mrs. Lynthorpe's tremulous voice—

"Oh, Roger—my own darling boy!"

"Mother dear!"

Deep and resonant, that swift response sent a surge of intense relief through Cherry. Suddenly she realised that she had been sitting with clenched hands, her whole body tense, waiting for that fateful moment.

Now she knew that all was well, for Roger Lynthorpe had recognised his mother. The front door had closed, and she heard the soft murmur of voices dwindling into silence as they entered Mrs. Lynthorpe's private sitting-room.

"Why, Cherry, you are crying!" Anthea exclaimed in surprise.

"Am I, dear?" Cherry murmured shakily, smiling through her tears. "Oh, Anthea, isn't it wonderful to think how—how very happy Mrs. Lynthorpe and her son must be feeling at this moment!"

CHERRY did not expect to see Roger Lynthorpe that night, but just as she and Anthea were preparing to go upstairs to bed, the door opened, and Mrs. Lynthorpe came into the room leaning on her son's arm.

Cherry's heart gave a bound as she gazed at the tall, thin young man with the bronzed face and noted the shadow of suffering in his eyes. But they were the same dark piercing eyes that had gazed at her so lovingly from his photograph; the same faint smile lurked about the corners of his mouth, and she could not think of him as a stranger—this handsome young man whose image had dwelt in her heart for so long, and with whom she now found herself face to face.

"Roger dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe remarked smilingly, "this is Anthea—and this is Miss Cherry Burchell—we all call her Cherry, as she is quite one of the family. The dear girl had the misfortune to twist her ankle this morning, and has had to spend most of the day resting on the settee."

As Roger shook hands with her, Cherry felt a strange thrill go through her.

"I am very sorry to hear that, Miss Burchell," he said, in a sympathetic voice. "I hope your ankle is not very painful."

"Oh, no, it is very much better now, thank you, Mr. Lynthorpe," she answered. "Please allow me to offer you my most heartfelt congratulations on your safe return home," Cherry added smilingly.

"Yes, Roger, and that goes for me, too," Anthea chimed in. "Cherry and I were awfully thrilled when Clive Thornton told us you were on the way home, and I especially, as you and I are sort of cousins-by-adoption, aren't we?"

"Well, yes, of—of course," Roger stammered laughingly.

"Well, I have some interesting news for you both," Mrs. Lynthorpe remarked, smiling at her son. She paused, then went on—"Roger tells me that he is engaged to be married to a French young lady whose family has been wonderfully kind to him. They did everything they possibly could for the dear boy when he was washed ashore in Morocco. Instead of handing Roger over to the authorities, they looked after him at considerable risk to themselves, treating him as though he was their own son, and eventually took him into their wine-growing business.

"I feel I can never hope to repay them for their wonderful kindness and generosity to my dear son," Mrs. Lynthorpe continued, her voice vibrating with emotion. "But I hope to persuade Annette and her parents to come and stay with us as soon as it can be arranged, so that I may have an opportunity of expressing my deep gratitude to them—and, of course, of welcoming my future daughter-in-law," she finished, with a shaky smile.

"Oh, how frightfully romantic!" Anthea exclaimed excitedly. "I'm just dying to meet Annette! Do tell us about her, Roger. Is she—is she very pretty?"—with girlish eagerness.

Roger smiled.

"Oh, yes, Annette is extremely pretty and charming," he answered.

"And will she—" Anthea began, when Mrs. Lynthorpe intervened and said firmly—

"No more questions to-night, my dear. Roger is very tired, and I think it is time we all went to bed. Now, Cherry," she added, "let us help you upstairs."

Roger smilingly offered to carry her up the stairs, but Cherry shook her head.

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Lynthorpe," she said shyly. "I can manage quite well with Anthea's help."

Then, having bade Mrs. Lynthorpe and her son good-night, Cherry hobbled out of the room leaning on Anthea's arm, and supporting herself with a walking stick. Her bandaged ankle sent sharp twinges of pain through her every time her foot touched the ground, but she set her teeth and managed to hide the fact—for fear that Roger Lynthorpe might insist on carrying her up the stairs, and the thought of being held in his arms was more than she could endure, she told herself.

For right from the moment of seeing Roger enter the room, Cherry had realised that her ideal was not just a dream, but a living reality—that the young man whose photograph had held such a strange fascination for her was the only man she could ever truly love.

But Roger was engaged to another girl—and Cherry was thankful that no one happened to be looking at her when his mother made the announcement, for she knew that her face must have betrayed the sudden numbing pain that gripped her heart.

A DREAM COME TRUE

THE days that followed held a poignant sweetness for Cherry, which she knew she would remember all her life.

It was nearly a week before her ankle was normal again, and she had been forced

to spend most of her time resting it on the settee in the library, during which she occupied herself knitting a bed-jacket for Mrs. Lynthorpe.

Rather to her surprise, she saw very little of Anthea, who seemed to have no difficulty in occupying her time, though she had never been fond of her own company. She was apt to disappear most afternoons, announcing that she was going to the village to see Mrs. Grant's baby, and knowing the girl's genuine fondness for children, both Cherry and Mrs. Lynthorpe took it for granted that it was so.

Even when, on two occasions, Anthea did not return until long after tea-time, Mrs. Lynthorpe accepted without question her explanation that Mrs. Grant had invited her to stay to tea.

As his mother was in the habit of resting in the afternoon, Roger would often stroll into the library and sit in an armchair by the fire, talking to Cherry while she busied herself with her knitting, never for a moment having even a suspicion of the tumult that was raging her aching heart.

There was something dangerously sweet in that cosy environment which helped their friendship to develop more quickly than it might have done in ordinary circumstances; and it was not long before Roger had persuaded Cherry to tell him all about Fairlea Farm and her brother Jim.

In return, Roger gave her a vivid account of his life in Morocco which held her fascinated. It was all so completely different from anything Cherry had ever known. She never tired of hearing about the big white chateau set in the midst of vineyards, where the Duclos family lived, and about the lavish entertainments which the French settlers gave when the grape harvest was safely gathered in.

The hot sunshine, the vivid blue sky, the teeming, colourful life of North Africa, were in such strange contrast to their present surroundings that Cherry could not help wondering how Annette Duclos would manage to settle down as the wife of an English squire, far from her own people, and the way of life to which she had always been accustomed.

But, her thoughts ran on, two people who really loved each other could be happy together in any surroundings, as Annette and her mother were soon coming to stay at Mallingsby Hall, Roger's future wife would have an opportunity of accustoming herself to the different environment.

Cherry looked forward to the visit with mingled curiosity and dread—sometimes she wondered how she would be able to bear the ordeal of seeing Roger with the girl he loved, and gazing at her with devotion in his eyes. But, Cherry reminded herself, she would have to get used to it, of course. It was all part of the secret heartache she must learn to bear. . . .

IN the tea-lounge of the Grand Hotel at Sandbay, Anthea was sitting at a corner table with Tony Levick, a cigarette poised between her fingers.

It was their third visit to the hotel within a week, and Anthea was vaguely aware of a slight feeling of boredom, though nothing would have induced her to openly admit it. Perhaps this was because Tony did not seem to be quite his normal debonaire self that afternoon—his thoughts appeared to be far away, and he was evidently feeling ill at ease.

The band struck up another tune, and Anthea waited hopefully for her companion to ask her to dance as he continued to stare moodily at the tablecloth. At last, with a touch of impatience, she said—

"Is anything the matter, Tony? Why are

you so downcast this afternoon?"

Levick shrugged.

"I—I'm afraid I'm not very good company to-day, Anthea," he muttered. "I hate to think that this is the last time we shall see each other. As a matter of fact, my dear girl, I've been trying to bring myself to tell you ever since I met you this afternoon that—well, that I am returning to London to-night, and shall be going abroad within the next few days on business for my firm."

Anthea stared at him in dismay.

"Oh, I—I'm very sorry to hear that, Tony," she stammered falteringly. "How long do you expect to be away?"

Levick sighed.

"That's the point, my dear Anthea," he said. "You see, I'm being transferred to the South of France by my firm—we buy a lot of our dessert fruit from there—in place of the present buyer who has been seriously injured in a car crash. It's likely to be a permanent promotion for me, Anthea, and, of course, it will be rather nice living on the Riviera and travelling over Southern France and Italy. But—"

He paused, gazing adoringly into her eyes, then put out his hand and laid it over hers.

"Naturally, I can't bear the thought of leaving you behind, my darling girl," he went on. "I fell madly in love with you the first moment I saw you, and I knew at once that we were made for each other. I—I rather think you realised it, too, didn't you, Anthea?"

She caught her breath.

"Yes, I—I think I did, Tony," she murmured, carried away by the thought that this attractive man-of-the-world was saying such thrilling things to her.

"You—you darling!" he muttered, squeezing her hand tightly, and smiling at her with an expression in his eyes that sent an electric thrill through her.

"Listen, my sweet," he continued, "now that we've found each other, I just can't let you go again. I want you with me always, as my own darling little wife. So please say you will marry me, my dearest. Just think of the wonderful life we could have together living on the Riviera—the sort of life we both want!"

Anthea gasped.

"But—but, Tony, you forget that I—that I am still under age, and—and could not marry without my Aunt Helen's consent," she said tremulously.

"Oh, no, I haven't forgotten that, darling," he said. "It's quite evident to me that Mrs. Lynthorpe still regards you as a child, but we can easily get over that all right by giving your age as twenty-one, can't we? And even if they do find out the truth afterwards, we shall still be married, and neither Mrs. Lynthorpe nor anyone else will be able to part us.

"Listen, my love," he went on persuasively "we could drive straight to London to-night, and you could stay with some friends of mine until I can obtain a special licence. Please don't worry about clothes—you can buy anything you want to-morrow, and it will be my privilege to pay for them. Then, in a few days' time, you will be my own precious wife, won't you, my dearest?"

Anthea's mind was in a whirl—it was so easy to imagine herself in love with Tony Levick when he gazed at her with those adoring brown eyes of his, but—

Tony watched her narrowly, thinking of the large fortune which was coming to her. If only he could persuade the girl to marry him, he would be able to give up his job and live like a gentleman of leisure with his pretty wife.

"Darling, you—you do love me, don't you?" he pleaded, with all the charm at

his command. "You know we were made for each other, as well as I do, don't you, my love?"

But Anthea scarcely heard him. She was staring at a young man who was threading his way purposefully towards them.

It was Clive Thornton!

"So I've found you at last, Anthea!" he said, a little breathlessly. "What on earth are you doing here with this man?" he added, gazing down at the girl's flushed face.

Anthea tossed her head defiantly.

"It's no business of yours what I do, Clive!" she said indignantly. "And I'll thank you not to come spying on me."

"Oh, come, please, don't be silly, Anthea," Clive said. "I happened to be in the village this afternoon, and I called at the Grants' cottage to take you home. It was then that I found out about your deceiving Mrs. Lynthorpe by telling her you were going to visit Mrs. Grant. I then started to make enquiries and ascertained that you had been seen in Levick's car, driving towards Sandbay, and I guessed that I might find you here."

"You are now coming home with me, Anthea," Clive went on. "And as for you, Levick"—he clenched his fists as he glared at the other man—I would deal with you in the only way a man like you understands, if it were not for the scandal in which Miss Norris's name would be involved. Now please come along, Anthea—"

"I'm not coming with you," she broke in angrily. "If—if you really must know, Clive, let me tell you at once that Tony and I are in love with each other, and—and I am going to marry him!"

"What!" Clive gazed fiercely at Levick. "You—you scoundrel!" he muttered, his voice vibrating with anger. "So that's your game, is it? No doubt you imagine that Miss Norris is a wealthy heiress? Well, allow me to inform you that she is nothing of the kind!"

"Anthea," he went on, in a gentler tone, "I am very sorry, but I am now forced to tell you, for your own sake, that after your parents' died it was found that they had left nothing but debts—even their sugar plantation was mortgaged. Mrs. Lynthorpe did not wish you to know the truth just yet—she feared it would be too great a shock to you—but I am taking the responsibility of telling you the true position in order to open your eyes to this man's real character. Now tell me, Levick," he added, with biting scorn, "are you still anxious to make a runaway match with Miss Norris?"

"It—it isn't true!" Levick blustered. "I—I don't believe it! You're relying, Thornton, because you are jealous of me and hope to marry Anthea yourself!"

"But you haven't answered my question, have you?" Clive retorted.

Anthea had risen from her chair, white to the lips.

"Please take me home, Clive," she murmured brokenly, and taking her arm, Clive escorted her out to his car, leaving Levick sitting at the table, his face livid with frustration and rage.

Anthea was in a very subdued mood as she took her seat beside Clive in the car.

"Oh, Clive, what a little idiot I've been!" she muttered sadly. "When I think of—all that Mrs. Lynthorpe has done for me, and the way that I have repaid her, I—I feel I can never forgive myself! And if it hadn't been for you, Clive, I might have ruined my life completely!"

She paused, then went on—

"I—I was never really in love with Tony Levick—it was just that—well, that I was flattered by his attentions. Somehow, he

made me feel grown up, if you understand what I mean, while everyone else seemed to treat me like a child, though I must admit that I have behaved like one. I—I realise that I have forfeited your trust, Clive. Oh, how you must despise me!"

Clive shook his head.

"Oh, no, of course not, my dear Anthea," he said gently. "You have behaved very foolishly, but that is all over and done with now. So let us forget all about it, shall we?"

They drove on in silence for some little time, then Anthea said, hesitating—

"Clive, when—when Tony Levick said that you were jealous of him and that—and that you wanted to marry me, why did you let him think it was true? It—it's Cherry you are in love with, isn't it?"

Clive shook his head again.

"Oh, no, there's only one girl I love, my dear Anthea," he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the road ahead, "and she is wilful and spoilt, warm-hearted and generous—in fact, a bundle of contradictions. But I love her just as she is, and on her nineteenth birthday it is my intention to ask her to marry me! Of course, I know that I am rather dull and just ordinary—"

"Oh, no, Clive dear, you're not!" Anthea protested. "You—you are a darling, and I think the girl you love is the luckiest girl in all the world!"

"Anthea! Do you really mean that?" Clive asked, stopping the car and giving her a questioning look.

"Yes, Clive, of course I mean it," she answered, steadily, a new-born seriousness in her face.

THAT evening, Anthea knocked at the door of Mrs. Lynthorpe's sitting-room and went in. Her guardian was seated at her bureau writing a letter. She looked up and smiled at her.

"Aunt Helen, I—I would like to talk to you, please, if you can spare the time," Anthea said falteringly.

"Yes, yes, of course, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe replied.

Half-an-hour later, they were still there—Mrs. Lynthorpe sitting in an armchair, her ward seated on a footstool at her feet.

"It makes me very happy to know that you have had the courage to come and tell me all this of your own accord, my dear," Mrs. Lynthorpe was saying, as she gently stroked Anthea's dark hair. "You certainly behaved very foolishly, but I feel that I am largely to blame for my lack of understanding. How very fortunate it was that Clive arrived in time to save you from spoiling your life, my child! It is my sincere hope that you will now realise where your true happiness lies, Anthea. It is so fatally easy to overlook the gold lying at our feet, while we pursue some bright will-o'-the-wisp, you know," Mrs. Lynthorpe added, smiling down at her.

Anthea nodded gravely.

"Yes, I—I have already discovered that for myself, Aunt Helen," she murmured.

ON the following morning, while Cherry was arranging the flowers in the drawing-room—she had now quite recovered from the injury to her ankle—a telegram arrived for her.

"Please come at once," it read. "Jim seriously ill. Love—VERA."

Pale with shock, she hurried into Mrs. Lynthorpe's sitting-room and showed her the telegram.

"Oh, dear, I am so very sorry," Mrs. Lynthorpe murmured. "Of course you must go at once, Cherry. Anthea will help you pack a suitcase, and I will order

the car to take you to the station—you will just be in time to catch the ten-thirty train," she added, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Yes, mother, and I'll drive Cherry there," put in Roger, who happened to be in the room at the time.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at the station just as the train was coming in. Roger rushed to the booking office and bought a ticket for Cherry. He helped her into a compartment—there was only time for the briefest handshake, and a tremulous "Thank you very much for your kindness, Mr. Lynthorpe," from Cherry, before the train moved out.

In her anxious frame of mind, the long journey was like a nightmare to Cherry. She could think only of Jim as she stared blankly out of the window, but deep down in her heart was a numbing ache for the man she loved so deeply.

The wintry dusk was falling when the station car deposited Cherry at the door of Fairlea Farm. A few moments later her sister-in-law, looking very pale and distraught, was hugging her warmly.

"Oh, Cherry, I'm so thankful you've come," Vera said. "I'm very glad to be able to tell you that Jim is slightly better, but his condition is still serious. The poor dear caught a bad chill a few days ago when he was out in the fields in a heavy downpour, and it developed into pneumonia. Yesterday he seemed so desperately ill that I thought it best to send for you."

"I'm very glad you did, my dear," Cherry said. "May I go upstairs and see him?"

"Yes, of course," Vera answered. "Aunt Emily is there with him now. She has been wonderfully kind and helpful—really, Cherry, I don't know what I should have done without her."

Mrs. Greenford rose from the bedside chair when the two girls entered the room, and somehow the very sight of her kindly face seemed to ease the chill dread at Cherry's heart.

Jim was lying with his eyes closed, but they opened as Cherry bent forward to kiss him, and the faint glimmer of a smile hovered about his lips.

"Don't worry too much, Cherry dear," Aunt Emily whispered, a hopeful look in her blue eyes. "Jim is going to pull through all right."

JIM did manage to "pull through", but it was several weeks before he was fully recovered.

Cherry wrote to Mrs. Lynthorpe explaining the position and said she would like to stay with her sister-in-law for the time being. In reply, she received a very kind and sympathetic letter saying that, though they all missed her very much, she must not think of returning to Mallingsby until her brother was quite fit again.

She also received frequent letters from Anthea, telling her all about Annette, who had now arrived at Mallingsby Hall with her mother.

"Annette is a very sweet and pretty girl," Anthea wrote. "She wears lovely clothes, though they're utterly unsuitable for the country—especially in winter. Both Annette and her mother sit huddled over the fire during most of the day and won't put their noses out of doors if they can help it. Poor dears! They must find our climate rather a drastic change from what they are used to. Personally, I love these crisp, cold days, and I spend most of my time out on the estate with Clive, tramping about in tweeds and brogues—in fact, I'm becoming a real outdoor girl, my dear, believe it or not."

Cherry smiled wanly. It seemed to her that she was no longer needed at Mallingsby Hall, though Mrs. Lynthorpe was too kind-hearted to tell her so. Moreover, it was evident that Anthea no longer needed a paid companion. Therefore, for her own peace of mind, Cherry told herself sadly, it would be better to write and resign her post and find another elsewhere when Jim was well again.

Perhaps she would find it easier to bear her hopeless love for Roger if she never saw him again.

So, one evening, Cherry sat down and wrote to Mrs. Lynthorpe, resigning her post.

"I shall be very sorry indeed not to see you all again, my dear Mrs. Lynthorpe," she wrote. "I shall always remember the great kindness I received at Mallingsby Hall, but I feel that I can no longer be of any real use to you, now that Anthea appears to be settling down so happily. I therefore intend to look for another post when my brother is quite well again. . . ."

Cherry posted the letter on the following morning, and for the rest of the day she went about her tasks with a heavy heart, though she was convinced that she had acted for the best in cutting herself off, once and for all, from the man she loved so hopelessly. Outwardly, however, she managed to appear her normal self.

"Well, I never thought I should be doing this sort of thing," Vera remarked laughingly, as she and her sister-in-law, clad in jeans and gum-boots, scoured out the milk churns. "It's surprising what you can do when you have to, isn't it, Cherry?" she went on. "Yes, and how much you can learn, too, in so short a time. I had very grand ideas when I married Jim, as you know, and I'll admit that when he told me he wouldn't, after all, be able to

afford to buy all the things he'd promised me, I thought myself a bit hard-done-by. Then, when Jim fell ill, I realised how very much he meant to me, and how little anything else mattered so long as he got well again."

Cherry nodded understandingly.

"Jim's terribly proud of you, Vera," she said. "Only yesterday he was saying what a wonderful wife you were, and how he's planning to buy you all sorts of things next year, now that the new district buyer for Sandbridge's has offered him a permanent contract for all the fruit he can grow. That was a wonderful piece of good fortune, wasn't it, Vera?"

"Yes, indeed it was, and I'm glad for Jim's sake," Vera said. "It will be a great load off his mind, poor dear! But as I told him last night, I'd much rather he put most of the money in the bank, because—well, I'm hoping we'll have someone really very important to provide for next year," she added, with a knowing smile.

"Oh, Vera, dear, I'm awfully pleased to hear that!" Cherry exclaimed delightedly.

"Yes; Jim and I are very delighted, too, my dear," Vera murmured.

ON the following afternoon, Cherry was busily sorting eggs in the kitchen, while Vera sat by the bedroom fire upstairs sewing and talking to Jim, who was now at the convalescent stage.

Soon she would no longer be needed here, Cherry reflected, and a sense of chill went through her as she faced the prospect of setting off once more to live among strangers.

It would be even harder this time, for Mallingsby Hall had become a second home to her. Nor would she ever have a real home of her own, her thoughts ran on, since she could never marry the man to

whom she had lost her heart—and no one else would do.

Cherry paused for a moment, and gazed into the glowing fire with shadowed eyes. Suddenly a knock at the front door scattered her thoughts, and she went to answer it.

For a moment, as she gazed at the tall figure standing there smiling at her, Cherry thought she must be dreaming!

"Roger!" she gasped. "Is it—can it really be you?"

"Yes, my dear Cherry," he said. "I felt I had to come after my mother received your letter this morning to say you had decided not to come back to us." Roger hesitated, then went on—"Annette Duclos has broken off our engagement. It—it was never a love match—actually, her father arranged it because he had no son. You see, he wished me to take over his business, and out of gratitude for all that he had done for me, I fell in with his wishes. Annette and I were fond of each other, but as soon as I met you, my dear Cherry, I realised that I had made a grave mistake."

Roger had stepped into the hall, and was looking deep into her eyes.

"Cherry, my dearest," he went on, his voice vibrant with emotion, "do you think you can bring yourself to care for me enough to marry me?"

Cherry drew a quivering breath.

"Oh, Roger, dear, I—I fell in love with you even before I met you!" she stammered shyly. "I—I fell in love with your photograph!" she added, a radiant look in her eyes.

"My own darling love!" Roger breathed ecstatically, and next moment Cherry found herself nestled in his arms, her head against his shoulder, her heart singing with joy. . . .

THE END.

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THE DARK ROAD

By Sheila Storm

GIRL FROM NOWHERE

IT was a cold, damp morning, with a pale autumn sun breaking through the mists rising from the sea, when a tall, slender girl of about nineteen left the narrow-fronted lodging house, and turned to the right, went swiftly down the steep, winding street to the centre of the town.

From that height she had a clear view of her surroundings, mainly roof-tops, from which the smoke of countless chimneys rose slowly upwards in the windless air, creating an illusion of the unhurried tempo of life which characterised the little Northumberland fishing port.

Biting her lips, she hurried on, her mind busy with the problem which occupied it, scarcely noticing where she was going, much less the admiring glances of several young men she passed.

Yet she was the kind of girl who would always attract a second glance.

Her dark, wavy hair had golden lights in it, her features were classical and her candid grey eyes held a wistful look.

She wore a light, three-quarter length coat and a tweed skirt. She was hatless and clasped a coach hide bag to her with a nervous tension that would have revealed, to the discerning observer, that she had come very near to breaking point.

At the bottom of the slope, she came to a square from which other streets radiated in various directions. Facing her was St. Mary's Church, with its famous clock tower, and to the right a narrow lane led to the Mary Gate, set in the ancient walls of the town.

Past the church the street led down to the harbour's edge, where the coasters and fishing smacks were moored. Behind were the Customs House and harbour authority offices.

Pausing, she looked at the shops which surrounded the rest of the square—the linen draper's on the corner, the ironmonger's next to the ship's chandler, the cafe which advertised "Morning Coffee".

There was a certain amount of traffic about, including some single-decker buses which connected Crathmyle to the outlying villages scattered along that rocky Northumberland coast.

Next to the ironmonger's was a haberdashery shop which sold newspapers and stationery. In the centre of the window a notice read: "Staff Vacancies. Lady Assistant required. Good wages. Apply Within."

As she read this a curious, sick feeling started somewhere far down inside her.

She badly wanted a job—any kind of a job—and here, it seemed, was one ready-made. All she had to do was to go into the

shop and ask for an interview. It was as easy as that. Yet her feet were cold and her heart was pounding so that she had difficulty in getting her breath.

With a sudden movement, as if to put temptation behind her, she turned and hurried away, walking almost blindly to the far side of the square, where she stopped again, feeling as if she had escaped from something unpleasant, though she did not know what it was.

Then, seeing a policeman coming towards her, she went up to him, her lips trembling so that for a moment she was not sure that she would be able to frame her question.

"You want a doctor, miss?" he said helpfully. "Well, there's Dr. Harrison. He's got a surgery in Crathie Street. That's it there on the right. Third house along—you can't miss it."

"Thank you, officer."

She turned quickly away, lest he might ask why she wanted a doctor.

Reaching the corner she found the house where the doctor had his surgery, a worn brass plate on the gate informing her that she had two hours to wait before he came.

For a moment she stood looking at the plate indicated, then, with a sigh, she walked slowly back to the square.

HALF an hour later she came out of St. Mary's Church feeling somewhat strengthened and fortified; some of her earlier panic had left her and there was a trace of colour in her cheeks.

Turning down past the church she followed the winding street to the water front and paused to look round.

Away to the left, white-capped waves were breaking over the sand-bar, which made the entrance to Crathmyle harbour a very tricky one.

Nearer at hand, herring drifters lay moored in pairs alongside the wharves, their deck planking still wet, the smoke rising lazily from a galley here and there.

Nets were hung in graceful loops from the stumpy masts, the otter-boards—these kept the trawls extended when in the water—were laid out on the foredecks. Altogether a scene worthy of any painter's brush, one which conveyed as nothing else could do a feeling of orderly peace and security.

A diesel-engined ketch, its wheel-house astern, was moored beyond the last of the drifters. It was similar in build and appearance but there were no nets hanging from its masts.

A well-built, sturdy young man in a fisherman's blue jersey and high sea boots, was seated on the starboard bulwarks, a spanner in hand, intent on dismantling what looked like a part of some machine. He wore a peaked cap, pushed back far on his head, and the girl saw that his hair was auburn and that his forearms, tanned by wind and sun, were freckled.

He looked up as she approached and met her vacant stare.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly, noticing how her glance strayed along the line of boats. "Were you looking for someone?"

She shook her head, fighting down that queer sensation of panic which came whenever anyone spoke to her.

"No, no thank you. I—I was just looking at the harbour."

He gazed at her intently. Then—

"You're a stranger here, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes." She looked a trifle startled, and he wondered why. "I only arrived last night. How—how did you know?"

Bill Ferguson grinned.

"Crathmyle is only a small town," he explained, a hint of amusement in his grey-blue eyes. "One notices anyone who doesn't belong, partly from the way they speak, but mostly because they are interested in the things we locals take for granted. Besides, you haven't an accent."

"Oh! As—as a matter of fact I'm from London," she said lamely.

"That, by Crathmyle standards, is about as far away as the North Pole and just as remote," he said. "On holiday?"

"I—I—er, yes, I'm on holiday." She flushed, and Bill got the impression that she wanted to run away and hide.

"Forgive me if I appear curious," he said and then laughed. "The truth is, I've come to the conclusion that people who come to Crathmyle can be divided into two types—those who come for business or for family reasons, and those who have been told it is a nice, quiet place in which to spend a holiday. Far from the madding crowd and all that kind of thing, you know."

For the first time the girl smiled.

"It's very lovely. All those roof tops rising against the hill there in tiers, and all different in colour—they make a wonderful picture. Even the suspension bridge doesn't spoil it."

"You're right," he agreed, looking towards the railway bridge. "They could have supported it on piles, but decided to make it a suspension instead, so you get quite a

graceful sweep with the long wide arch giving a view of the river beyond. Those are the old castle battlements on the right—quite worth a visit."

She could not have said why, but it was a relief to stand there talking to someone she did not know and might never see again. But merely doing so helped to push back the ugly panic which threatened to overwhelm her when she allowed her thoughts free rein.

"Why haven't you got nets like the others?" she enquired, more for something to say than because she was interested. "It's a fishing boat, isn't it?"

"No, the *Seamew* is a survey vessel," he answered. "Our job is to keep a check on all marks and buoys between Tynemouth and the Farne Islands. It's quite a big area and includes the Coquets—that's another group of islands, farther south. All the channels are marked, you see, some by bell buoys and others have lights. After a gale we have to see that none of them have broken adrift, otherwise there would be a lot of work for the Receiver of Wrecks."

"How interesting," she murmured.

"It's the most exciting job in the world," Bill answered, his eyes lighting up. "It means going out in all weathers, of course, but that's just a part of it." He looked at her enquiringly. "If you've nothing better to do why not come aboard and have a look round?"

For a moment she hesitated, having an odd feeling of being suspended in space. In the ordinary way she would never have dreamt of accepting such an invitation, but what he really offered was protection from her thoughts.

"Are—are you sure you don't mind?" she asked doubtfully.

"It'll be a privilege," he said eagerly.

He put out his hand to help her down the narrow gangway that led from the wharf, and after the briefest of hesitations she took it.

Next moment she stepped lightly on to the deck, aware of a strange feeling of breathlessness, as if in doing so she had crossed some private Rubicon of her own.

HER companion, was apparently the only one aboard. He showed her round, explaining the complicated gears which crammed every available inch of space and laughed when she marvelled at the tiny living quarters.

"Oh, we manage all right," he said. "There are only four in the crew, including me, you see, and there are always two on duty—one steering and one making himself generally useful in various ways."

"Do you go to sea for long periods?" she enquired.

"It varies," he said. "A trip down to the Coquets will keep us busy for three or four days, according to circumstances, whereas we can manage to cover the whole of the Farne Islands in two. Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, is where Grace Darling did her brave deed, as you know."

The girl said nothing but it seemed to Bill Ferguson that a slight shadow crossed her face, wiping away some of its momentarily regained animation. Being a discerning person he sensed that she was keyed up, almost to breaking point.

"And this is the galley," he said, opening a door in the bulkhead and revealing a tiny space which served as the cookhouse.

"When you came along I was just going to have my morning cup of tea. Will you join me?"

Involuntarily her lips framed the beginning of a polite refusal, but he began to make preparations for boiling the kettle.

"It—it's very kind of you," she murmured glancing round as if seeking some means of escape. But—"

"I expect you could do with a biscuit, too," he broke in, ignoring her protest. "Let me see, there ought to be some about—ah, I thought so. They're real ship's biscuits, by the way. Bit hard, perhaps."

Without quite knowing how it happened she found herself seated at a table, a cup of tea in one hand and a hard biscuit in the other.

In the course of the past half hour she had learned quite a lot about her host. She knew he was in charge of the boat, had lodgings in Crathmyle, and that he had been a naval officer before taking up his present post.

It seemed strange to be sitting there, talking about remote, impersonal matters with a complete stranger when all the time she—"Forgive me if I'm rushing in where angels fear to tread," he said, "but—you're in trouble of some kind, aren't you?"

His voice, a note of gentle understanding in his tones, broke through the uneasy wall of her silence. He sensed rather than felt her recoil, so that he was more or less prepared for a rebuff.

"I don't know what you mean," she said distantly, and pushing her cup from her, started to rise. "I—I'm afraid I must be going. Thank you for showing me round."

He eyed her speculatively making no attempt to get up himself. Then—

"You know, if I were in danger of drowning, and someone threw me a rope, I don't think I'd stop to question his motives—I'd just grab it."

Sighing, she sank back into her seat, her hands locked in her lap, staring at the opposite porthole.

"Are you throwing me a rope, then?" she asked, in a muffled kind of voice. "Is that why you invited me on board?"

"More or less, maybe," he said a thoughtful expression in his eyes. "When you've spent most of your life at sea you get to be able to sense when things aren't right. It's like steering a ship through dense fog—you know there's something wrong somewhere and yet you can't tell what it is. Though you can't afford to make a mistake. As a result, you learn to trust your own judgment."

"I see." She picked up her cup and sipped the remains of the tea, using the action to cover up her thoughts and give herself time.

Then—

"What good would it do if I told you?" she asked. "It can't possibly matter to you whether I'm in trouble or not."

"I'm not prepared to argue about that," he said quietly. "I think it always matters when you find someone in a jam, but it's beside the point. As for what good it could do, well"—he shrugged—"that, surely, remains to be seen?"

She bowed her head, toying idly with her spoon, her cheeks flushed. Glancing at her, Bill could have sworn there were tears in her eyes.

"But I don't even know you," she faltered.

"We—we hadn't even met an hour ago."

"That's easily remedied," he smiled. "I've told you I was in the Navy and I'm pretty well-known in Crathmyle. My name is Ferguson—Bill to my friends. What's yours?"

There was another little silence, and to Bill it seemed that she was having a struggle with some emotion that threatened to get the upper hand.

Then, drawing a deep breath, she forced her lips to utter the words which epitomised the tragedy which had overtaken her with such appalling suddenness.

"I don't know," she said in a whisper. "I don't know who I am or anything about

myself. I don't even know what I am doing on this boat."

TWENTY minutes later Bill Ferguson frowned into space and lit a pipe.

"Well, it's certainly a queer story," he said at last, breaking a short silence. "You say you found yourself at King's Cross station two nights ago with no idea who you were or why you had gone there?"

She made a little gesture and clasped her empty cup in both hands.

"I don't expect you to believe me but it happens to be the truth! I honestly *don't* know."

"I see no reason why I shouldn't believe you," he said quietly. "What I can't understand is why it happened, that's all. I mean to say, you must have had a shock or something to cause you suddenly to lose your memory like that. What else was in your handbag beside the return ticket to Crathmyle?"

"Only what you would expect to find—my powder compact, two hankies, a comb and my purse."

"No letters, old bills, or anything like that?"

"No." She sighed wearily. "There was seventeen pounds and some silver in my purse, though."

"What was in the suitcase that was beside your seat?" he asked.

"Nothing but clothing—the kind of things you would expect to find packed for a week-end away."

"No name tags or laundry marks that would help?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Nothing at all. The suitcase was a new one, and hadn't an initial on it."

"H'm! Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would say!" he said. "What made you decide to come to Crathmyle then?"

"It seemed the obvious thing to do," she replied. "I had a return ticket, unused, and it had been issued that day. It certainly looked as if I had bought it with the object of coming here, doesn't it?"

"Why didn't you go to the police in London?"

"I didn't want to unless I was forced," she said. "I hoped that my memory would come back when I got here—that it was only temporary, whatever it was. It struck me that my people might live here, you see."

"That's possible, of course," he agreed thoughtfully. "When you arrived last night what did you do first?"

"I asked a porter where I could get some cheap lodgings and he sent me to a house in Brede Road. It was too late to do anything last night, you see."

"And you say you haven't any kind of a clue, however slender, that would serve as a starting point?"

"I'm afraid not," she shook her head.

"At least—"

"Yes?" he prompted.

She made another little gesture.

"It sounds ridiculous, but I find myself thinking that I am called Ronnie. But that doesn't make sense, does it? I mean. Ronnie is a man's name, isn't it?"

"It could be short for Veronica," Bill said. "At any rate, it'll do to be going on with. The point is, what's the next move?"

She got up.

"I made enquiries. There is a Dr. Harrison who has a surgery in Crathie Street. His surgery hours are from eleven to twelve."

"You mean to consult him?"

"Don't you think it a good idea?"

"Perhaps," he said, rising. "He can probably tell you what's wrong with you but that seems only incidental to finding out who you are. If you take my advice you'll go to the police. Seventeen pounds ten isn't going to last you for ever and you

can hardly spend your time walking round Crathmyle hoping to be recognised by someone."

"But there must be someone who knows me here," she cried desperately.

"In that case, you would have thought someone would have begun making enquiries by now," he said. "If your theory is correct and you *have* got people here, they would have done something about it when you failed to turn up on time. No, I'm afraid the police are the only people who can help you—they've got ways and means of tracing people that are not available to the general public." He glanced at his watch. "Anyhow, we can discuss that later. It's ten to eleven, so we'd better start moving."

She stood stock still with surprise and looked at him.

"We?" she enquired.

Bill grinned.

"Yes, 'we,'" he answered cheerfully, taking her arm to help her up the companion way. "It strikes me you need a friend pretty badly."

THEY walked in silence up the steep hill to the surgery in Crathie Street, where Bill paced up and down outside, while Ronnie, as he thought of her, went in.

She was gone the best part of three-quarters of an hour before she appeared in the doorway and stood looking about her uncertainly.

"Well?" Bill enquired. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he wasn't very helpful," she answered, with a sigh. Bill thought she seemed faintly surprised to find that he had waited. "He said that it looked like a typical case of am—am—"

"Amnesia?" he supplied.

"That's it," she nodded. "He said it wasn't anything to worry about and that I must rest and try not to remember anything. He gave me some stuff to take to help me sleep—I've got the prescription in my bag."

Bill smiled.

"Precisely what I imagined he would say," he declared. "To be fair, though, you weren't able to give him very much to go on—not knowing your own background didn't help. Still, it might be a good idea to get the prescription made up in case you have difficulty in sleeping. We can leave it at the chemist's on the corner while we go to collect your things."

She stopped dead and turned to look at him in amazement.

"Collect my things?" she repeated. "I don't understand."

"It's all right," he grinned. "While you were in with the doctor I did a spot of telephoning. I live with a very nice family on the other side of the town, and I've arranged for you to have a room there. You'll have to share it with Maggie Johnson—she's my landlady's daughter—but I said I felt sure you wouldn't mind that. Maggie's a nice girl—she's seventeen and works at one of the shops here. The point is, you'll be adequately looked after and if there's anyone who can help you find out where you fit into the scheme of things, it is Mrs. Johnson. She knows pretty well everybody in Crathmyle and can tell you the history of every family in the place."

"B-but—" she protested.

"No 'buts' now," he interrupted. "You'll go crazy if you have to sit and mope in a cheap lodging house with no one to talk to but yourself! Mrs. Johnson is just dying to mother you and you'll feel perfectly safe there. Besides, it'll make it much easier all round if we can discuss day to day developments without having to meet in some cafe or other."

Ronnie stared towards the end of the street, where a bus was passing.

"I can't see why you bother," she said wearily.

Bill smiled.

"I bother because I want to," he said. "Besides, I happen to believe there's a pattern in all these things. Otherwise why should I decide, quite suddenly and for no apparent reason, to go down to the *Seamew* and overhaul the compass when this afternoon would have done just as well? If you ask me, I was *intended* to go there just to be on hand when you came along."

"If you can believe that," she said obstinately, "you'll believe anything."

"Well, I do believe it all the same," he said. "It wasn't just chance that made you decide to walk down to the harbour while you waited for the doctor's surgery to open. Neither was it chance that made you decide to tell me what was wrong. Or was it?"

Her colour mounted.

"I—well—no," she admitted, after a struggle. "You—you seemed as if you would understand and I—I had to tell someone. You have no idea how frightened I have been."

"I think I can guess," he said gently, taking her arm and guiding her across the street. "That is why I have taken the liberty of arranging for you to stay with the Johnsons. You won't feel quite so much alone there."

MRS. JOHNSON took Ronnie straight to her heart.

A grey-haired, middle aged woman with fading blue eyes, she had brought up her two children to fear God and speak the truth. George, her husband, was a foreman at the oil depot on the other side of the river. The rest consisted of Maggie, the seventeen-year old daughter, and Duncan, a stockily-built lad of fourteen who was still at school. They lived in a terraced house at the lower end of the town and supplemented Mr. Johnson's wages by letting the front room to Bill Ferguson.

"We've only the one spare room and that's the one Bill has, but if you don't mind sharing another room with our Maggie you're welcome to stay as long as you like," Mrs. Johnson said. She smiled and added: "But what are we going to call you, my dear?"

"You'll have to call me Ronnie. It's the only name I've got, though I don't even know if it is mine," the girl said wistfully. She glanced round the homely living room. "Are you quite sure you don't mind having me?"

"I said you were welcome, my dear, and I mean it," Mrs. Johnson replied briskly. "You poor lamb! Do you think I don't know how you feel? But never mind! God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, and one day, if it be His will, you'll remember who you are and all about yourself! And then, mebbe, you'll understand why this had to happen."

Ronnie turned her head sharply. The unexpected kindness and sympathy succeeded where fear and panic had failed. Suddenly and terribly she broke down, sinking into a chair, her face in her hands, crying like a lost child.

Mrs. Johnson went to her, looking at Bill as she did so. With a quick movement of her head she indicated the door and Bill, with a nod of understanding, went quietly out.

What transpired in the room he could only guess, but whatever it was that Mrs. Johnson had said by way of comfort to the stricken girl, it was effective. By the time the three of them sat down to a late lunch Ronnie was almost recovered.

Most of the simple meal was given up to discussing their next move. Bill repeated

his assertion that Ronnie should go to the police and in this he was backed up by Mrs. Johnson.

"You didn't buy a ticket to Crathmyle just for the fun of it, my dear," she said, with practical common sense. "That means that *someone* was expecting you to arrive. The police will make discreet enquiries and find out. After all, it's their job."

"Yes, I suppose so," Ronnie murmured hesitantly. She crumbled a piece of bread on to her plate. "It's the sensible thing to do, of course, yet—"

Bill exchanged glances with Mrs. Johnson. As plainly as if he had spoken he told her he understood Ronnie's reluctance to go to the police for help. It was only natural, he reflected. She was like someone trying to grope her way out of a maze, afraid of being trapped and even more afraid of what the next opening might reveal.

"The only alternative that I can see is to wait, like Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up," he said quietly. "If you are content to do that, all right! But have you stopped to consider what that might mean? You may have friends or relations who are nearly off their heads with anxiety, wondering what has happened to you. Again, you've got to face the possibility that, unless you can pick up the broken threads your memory may never come back. Unaided, that is."

There was a little silence, then Ronnie looked up and sighed.

"You are quite right, of course," she said. "It's cowardly of me to shrink from doing anything that will tell me who I am. If—you like I will go with you to the police this afternoon."

FACING IT TOGETHER

TWO months later Ronnie stood at the window of the Johnson's living-room, a deeply thoughtful expression in her eyes.

From here she could see beyond the harbour to where a low cloud on the horizon indicated the Farne Islands. A stiff breeze was driving the white spume off the tops of the waves, causing the fishing boats to rock at their moorings. In the west, a heavy bank of dull-coloured cloud heralded a coming storm.

With a little shiver she turned away, and going back to the chair drawn up by the fire, picked up the jumper she was knitting.

As the needles clicked she thought of all that had happened since the morning when she had walked down to the docks and met Bill Ferguson for the first time. It seemed incredible that time should pass as quickly as had the last two months. Even more incredible, that it should do so without producing anything that offered the least solution to whom she really was.

What was it that made it possible to forget so much that was important, yet leave other faculties unimpaired? The more one thought about it, the more confused one became.

Yet it remained a fact that, while she had forgotten everything that related to the life she had previously lived, she had not forgotten how to knit, to read and to write. Yet no echo of the past came back to provide a single clue as to her identity.

She had slipped into a niche in the Johnson household as if it had been made for her.

The rest of the family—all knew her story—had accepted her as one of themselves and in their unexpressed sympathy and understanding she had found a sense of security without which she could never have survived the agonies of frustration that came over her in waves.

That their sympathy took a practical

form as well was something to be thankful for, she reflected.

She had insisted on paying her way and, knowing that the money she had with her would not last for ever, she had been glad to avail herself of the job that Maggie had put in her way.

Maggie, a plump, pleasant girl, had come back from work one evening with the news that there was a vacancy for an assistant in the shop where she worked.

"Maybe it's not what you've been used to," she had said, in her blunt, forthright way, "but it's no' a bad job and the brass is good. I spoke to Miss Wells about you and said you were a friend of mine, so she said for you to go an' see her."

She had got the job and the sense of independence that it gave her went a long way towards restoring her confidence, besides removing the anxiety which came from wondering what she could do when her money ran out.

No one at the shop knew her story except Maggie, who was the soul of discretion, and acting on the advice of the others, she adopted a name which, Bill humorously pointed out, was so common that it might easily have belonged to her. As Veronica Smith, therefore, she was duly entered on the pay-roll of Derwent Limited, general outfitters.

Now she put down her knitting and stared into the glowing heart of the fire. To-day was early closing so that she had come home after lunch.

Duncan was out playing football and Maggie had gone out with her boy-friend, so that Ronnie and Mrs. Johnson were alone.

From the kitchen she heard sounds that meant the older woman was getting tea and she glanced up at the clock, thinking that Bill would be in soon.

It had been Bill Ferguson who had smoothed the way for her when she had been compelled to go to the Labour Exchange for a temporary insurance and employment card.

After explaining the position to the local manager, they had waited while he had contacted the sergeant in charge of the police station, on the telephone. After that a temporary card had been issued to her in the name of Veronica Smith.

So far the police had unearthed nothing. A photograph, specially taken, and a description of her had been sent to Scotland Yard, with a request that enquiries be made but without result. It seemed no one had reported that she was missing, neither had it been possible to trace her movements previous to her arrival at King's Cross station, where she had found herself that fateful day.

All that had come out of it had been a statement obtained from the booking-office clerk who had sold her the ticket to Crathmyle. Thus it merely confirmed that she had bought the ticket herself and, as far as the clerk could say, she had been by herself.

The clock in the corner whirled and struck five. As the last tinkling notes died away she heard the click of the latch and footsteps in the narrow hall. Then the door of Bill's room opened and shut.

A few minutes later, when he came into the sitting-room, Ronnie got up. His face wore the expression she had come to recognise—anxious and sympathetic.

"Hullo, Ronnie!" he said smilingly.

"Hello, Bill." She bent and picked up the poker, thrusting a piece of coal more firmly on to the fire, aware of a curious tension that seemed to come into the room with his entrance. "Did you have a good trip?"

"So-so," he answered, coming to the fire and spreading his hands to the blaze. "It was a bit choppy in the channel but nothing

to write home about. We went on a wild goose chase, as a matter of fact. The buoy that was reported damaged was quite all right when we got there."

That happened quite often, it seemed. Some passing ship would radio a report that a certain marker buoy had not been seen, or that a light had become extinguished, and the message would be passed on to Bill for action.

Quite often it would turn out that the buoy in question was still safely moored in its proper place. But as Bill so often said, they had to go and make sure.

A few minutes later Mr. Johnson and Duncan came in, the latter eager for his tea.

They had it in the roomy old kitchen, and Duncan entertained them with a detailed description of the match he had played in.

Bill said very little, but appeared to be listening intently, though Ronnie felt sure that his thoughts were miles away.

When she had helped Mrs. Johnson wash up Bill came in search of her.

"What about a stroll as far as the castle walls, Ronnie?" he said. "I reckon a breath of sea air will do us both good."

Ronnie laughed.

"After being out in it all day?" she said. "I would have thought you'd had enough fresh air."

"Oh, well, one excuse is as good as another," he grinned. "But how about it? Do you feel like a walk?"

"Very much, Bill," she nodded. "Wait till I get my coat."

Ten minutes later they came to the old castle wall, and met the full force of the wind.

Bill tucked her hand into his arm and together they set out to walk towards the point where the ramparts turned sharply to the left. There was an old cannon there, and the remains of a watch-tower that would afford shelter from the wind.

"You know, Ronnie," said Bill, when conversation became easier. "I think this is my favourite haunt. Look at that view—you can see Holy Island and the whole of the estuary, and if you turn round you've got the town. I don't suppose there's a more picturesque vista in all Northumberland."

"It's a very lovely county," Ronnie agreed, looking round. "One so often thinks of the North as being bleak and inhospitable, but it isn't a bit like that."

"Mind you, the coast can be pretty grim in places," he said. "There's not much chance for a ship if it goes ashore under the cliffs. Over towards Dunster they run up to four hundred feet in height and are sheer black rock all the way. You haven't seen what I call a real blow yet."

She shook her head.

"Mrs. Johnson was telling me about the great storm you had last year, when several ships were wrecked."

"They'll talk about that for the next hundred years, I expect," he said. "It was a pretty bad show, taken all round. We were kept busy for weeks rounding up buoys that had broken away and salvaging floating mines that had been washed up from the depths. I didn't have my clothes off for the best part of a fortnight."

"You've forgotten to mention that you took the *Seamew* out to the rescue of a Swedish coaster with its engines broken down and managed to tow it into harbour," she said.

"Oh, that!" He shrugged modestly.

"I suppose Mrs. Johnson told you?"

"She also said that you had received the Royal Lifeboat Institute's Gold Medal for swimming to the coaster with a line," the girl said, and sighed. "It must be wonderful to be as brave as all that. Never to be afraid, I mean."

"That's where you're quite wrong, my

dear girl," he said. "About not being afraid, I mean. I was never so scared in my life."

"Then that makes it all the braver," she said, a wistful note in her voice. "It makes me feel a horrid little coward."

He smiled gently.

"You are anything but that, my dear," he said. "There are not many people who could have taken it on the chin as you have obviously done. We all admire you tremendously—I know I do!—and Maggie thinks the sun shines out of the back of your neck."

Ronnie smiled and looked out to where the waves were breaking over the sand-bar.

"There isn't much else I can do, is there?" she said. "I mean, it's no good going about wringing my hands. All the same, there are times when I have a job not to give way. But you know that, don't you?"

Bill nodded.

"What I can't understand is why no one has come forward to claim you, so to speak," he said. "You can't tell me that you haven't a friend or a relative in the world to miss you, for I simply won't believe it. Apart from that, you must have lived somewhere. You would think that your landlady, or someone like that, would have reported to the police that you had vanished. It just beats me."

"There is a possible explanation to that," she said. "I may have told people I was going abroad—anything—so that they would not worry unnecessarily. They might wonder why I hadn't written, perhaps, or it may have been that I had said I wasn't going to do so. It's only two months since I 'disappeared'—it may be six before anyone begins to think of doing something about it."

"True, but that doesn't account for your ticket to Crathmyle," he argued, knowing that they had been over the same ground before. "You didn't just stick a pin into a guide-book and pick on this place for a holiday, that's obvious. Yet no one has come forward to say he or she knows you. One of the reasons I urged you to take that job with Derwents was because pretty well everybody in the place goes there at some time or another and would be bound to see you. Yet nothing has come of it. I'm still convinced that you did come here for a holiday or something of that kind, though."

"Oh?" She looked at him in surprise. "You've never said that before, Bill."

"No." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his reefer jacket. "But I ran into Mr. Leekie, the manager of the Labour Exchange, a few days ago and he asked me if anything had happened about you. He was naturally interested, you see. And it started me thinking."

"In what way, Bill?"

"Well, about your not finding any cards or letters in your bag," he explained. "If, as I thought at first you had been coming here about a job of some kind you would have had your insurance cards with you, surely?"

"Not necessarily," she pointed out. "I may have been coming for an interview—the fact that I had taken a return ticket rather points to that, doesn't it? In that case, I wouldn't have to produce my cards for stamping until I actually started work. When you come to think of it, that's very likely, for a prospective employer wouldn't know what I looked like. Whoever it was would just conclude that I hadn't turned up and leave it at that. There would be no connection, as far as an outsider was concerned, between the real me and the Veronica Smith who

works at Derwents."

He nodded again and sighed.

"We simply go round and round in circles and get nowhere," he said. "It seems to me that if your memory is ever going to return—it will do so when we least expect it. On the other hand, it may never do so." He paused a moment, allowing his words to sink in. "That's something you've got to face up to sooner or later, Ronnie. That it may never come back, I mean."

There was a little silence during which Ronnie stared straight in front, her eyes shadowed. Did he think she had not faced it—that she was not continually facing it when she served customers in the shop, or lay awake through the long hours of darkness, listening to Maggie's even breathing?

And then, while she stood there, wondering what to say she heard him speak, his voice charged with a new and deeper meaning, answering all the questions she had been unconsciously asking in her heart.

"I—I think you have guessed for some time now that your happiness means everything to me, Ronnie dear," he said quietly. "In fact, if I hadn't been afraid of appearing presumptuous I would have told you so before this. But now—well—I want you to know that I have loved you since the day you came on board the *Seamew* for the first time and—I shall love you for the rest of my life. That gives me some kind of a right to stand by you, I think."

Ronnie felt herself trembling and turned her head, looking at him through eyes that were misted with tears.

"Oh, Bill!" she whispered brokenly. "What—what am I to say to you?"

"Just say that you love me a bit, too," he said with a sudden smile. "Remember that day when I told you I had fixed up for you to go to the Johnsons? You asked me then why I bothered, didn't you? Well, now you know."

"Oh, Bill!" she murmured.

His eyes were alight with tender longing and very gently he took her wrists and turned her towards him.

"Can't you say anything but 'Oh, Bill? my sweet?'" he said, half teasingly. "It would please me more if you said that you loved me, you know."

She drew a deep breath.

"I—I—oh, Bill, I wish this had not happened," she murmured. "You see, I—"

"Well, it has and that's all there is to it, my darling," he broke in gently. "I told you, long ago that I believed there is a pattern in all this—we were intended to meet. Now tell me what I want to hear!"

"Yes, I—I do love you, Bill," she murmured tremulously, her head bowed. "But—" Again she broke off in helpless confusion.

"I think I can guess what you are going to say, my sweet," he murmured. "But the first and most important thing to remember is that we love each other and nothing—nothing, do you hear?—is going to alter that."

He would have taken her into his arms but she held him off, her hands fluttering in his grasp.

"You don't understand, Bill," she gasped. "I—I never thought this would happen—I hoped you just liked me as a friend—otherwise I would have gone away!"

"My dearest," he said, his eyes never leaving her face. "Don't you understand—I am asking you to marry me—to give me the privilege of caring for you for the rest of our lives. Doesn't that mean some-

thing to you?"

"Oh, yes, Bill, of course it does," she cried, breaking away and putting her hands to her cheeks. "But it's impossible—you must see that, Bill. How can I marry you when—when—I don't even know my own name?"

"Is knowing your own name going to make any difference to your loving me?" he murmured gently. "Listen, my love," he went on, taking her hands again. "You may or may not recover your memory but one thing is certain—once you really love a person, nothing can alter that. So what are you afraid of?"

Ronnie drew in her breath sharply, furtively, like someone who has been struck a sudden blow. It would be easy—fatally easy—to surrender to the longing that beset her, but she knew that if she did so she would live for ever afterwards under the shadow of a fear greater than any she had known.

So slowly she said—

"I'm sorry, Bill darling. Terribly sorry. Not only for you, but for myself." She smiled, a little crooked smile that was more eloquent than tears. "If things had been different I would have been very proud to hear you say that you loved me. As it is, it only makes things harder for both of us."

Bill sternly suppressed an urge to take her into his arms and stifle her arguments with kisses. To have done so might have won him the day, but only at the expense of her pride.

"What is it you are afraid of, Ronnie darling?" he asked quietly. "If you love me, as you say you do, nothing else matters, surely?"

"But it does, Bill," she moaned, turning her head away. "Don't you see—I'm a nobody! I haven't an existence that goes back beyond the night I found myself alone at King's Cross." She laughed drearily. "How can I make a declaration and swear that I am not married and that I *am* over twenty-one? Why, if you asked him I am quite sure the minister would refuse to publish the banns." She choked back a sob. "Can't you hear him? Veronica Smith—spinster of this parish—when there isn't such a person!"

For a moment he did not speak but his expression hardened slightly and his eyes became frosty looking.

"I know there may be difficulties in that way, my sweet," he said. "But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I haven't a clue as to the means that may exist for getting round your loss of memory, but I'm quite sure there *are* means. Meanwhile, the first thing to do is to become engaged and after that we'll decide what we are going to do."

"But what can we do, Bill?" she whispered miserably.

"For one thing you can stop worrying about a lot of probabilities that do not exist," he said. "If you are afraid of waking up one morning to find that you've got a tame husband or a fiance lurking in the background—I'm not. You were not wearing a ring of any kind and for another, I don't believe that anyone could forget a thing like that. I know I couldn't."

Ronnie bowed her head, unable to find words to reply.

"It's out of our hands," he went on remorselessly. "Suppose—just suppose—that your memory never comes back! Are you going to squander our love—waste our lives—for a scruple that may not have any justification at all? And if it does come back—what then? Is it going to make one scrap of difference to you and me? Of course it isn't."

He put up his hands and cupped her

face, feeling the warmth of her cheeks in his palms.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Ronnie darling," he said, making it sound like an oath. "Do you think that, knowing we truly love each other, that you have the right to refuse?"

She felt the hot colour steal up into her face. She had not expected him to take this line, but then she had never known him in a mood like this.

The Bill, whose intent gaze was seeking out the secret places of her heart, was a different person from the one who made a jest of life, and laughed at difficulties and dangers.

Temptation rose in her like a flood, so that she felt as if she were being swept away on a tide of emotion that was the most poignant she had ever known.

"Well, darling, what's the answer?" he enquired after a moment. "Can't you trust me?"

"Oh, Bill!" Her lips quivered and she made a little gesture. "It isn't that. You know I trust you. But—I can't decide all in a moment like this. You must give me time."

He smiled down at her and bending his head, kissed her on the lips. As he did so all her frustrated longing rose to meet his own, so that life, with all its problems and secret fears seemed to dissolve in a rosy mist in which all that was real was the miracle of their love.

A long time later she stirred in his arms.

"Bill?"

"Yes, my love?"

"What are we going to tell the—the others?"

"We'll tell them that we are engaged and leave it at that for the moment," he said wisely. "As a matter of fact I don't expect it will be any surprise, particularly where Mrs. Johnson is concerned. After that—we'll see. The main thing is not to worry about anything. Will you try not to?"

She nodded and he kissed her again, gently and reassuringly, without the least trace of possessiveness.

"You—you'll be very patient with me, won't you, Bill darling? You see," she went on haltingly, "I want to be quite, quite sure that nothing can ever come between us."

"Nothing ever shall, my sweet," he said gently.

"You—you believe that, don't you, Bill?" She looked up at him, her soul in her eyes.

He smiled.

"Of course I do, darling. Why, you're crying!"

"I—I know," she sobbed, pressing her face into his sleeve. "It—it's s-stupid of me but I c-can't help it. If only I knew who I *am*! I wouldn't care—then. But to be nameless—like something thrown up on a beach—oh, Bill, Bill darling, what have I done to be like this?"

He held her close till the storm had passed too wise to say anything, but letting her weep. Then, very gently, he wiped away her tears and spoke with a wisdom that was inspired.

What he said was little more than the simple truth, but it was uttered with a quiet conviction that could not fail to bring Ronnie the comfort she needed. His concluding words would, she felt, remain with her for all time.

"It is not a question of whether you have forgotten your name or not, my darling. Those things are only labels, when all is said and done. It is you who counts—the essential you that I fell in love with before I even knew why you had come to Crathmyle or whether you had a name or not. The you that looks

out of your eyes when they meet mine—the you that makes you scorn to tell a lie or do anything mean or underhand.

"And that is all that matters, for nothing—neither loss of memory nor death itself—can make you otherwise than what you are. Hang on to that, my sweet and remember, always, that however dark the road in front of us may be, nothing can harm you so long as we walk it—together."

THE GAP IN THE CURTAIN

DESPITE her unfortunate position the days that followed were happy ones for Ronnie. Happier than she would have believed possible.

To begin with she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had made Bill happy. Added to which was the knowledge that, whatever the future might hold, she no longer had it to face alone.

Everybody had been kindness itself. When she had heard the news Mrs. Johnson had given Ronnie a hug and an affectionate kiss, saying that it was the very best thing that could have happened.

Maggie, who had scented a romance, slyly remarked that no doubt she would be having her room to herself again in the near future. Ronnie blushing vividly, had thrown a cushion at her in fun.

With Bill she had again visited the police station and had been granted an interview with the Superintendent.

"To be quite frank with you, Miss Smith," he had said. "I see no way in which we can help you unless, of course, someone reports that you are missing. As you know, Scotland Yard has been asked to help, but without success. Thousands of people go missing every year in Great Britain and the majority of them are traced, but only because friends or relatives notify the police and provide a description of the missing person. In your case the position is reversed and short of tracing your movements, there is little or nothing we can do."

"Isn't there any way in which we could find out whether she has anyone belonging to her, then? Bill had enquired.

The Superintendent had nodded.

"Unofficially, there is, Mr. Ferguson," he had answered. "As you know, one of the leading Sunday newspapers runs a kind of missing persons bureau. If you were to send a photograph of Miss Smith to the editor, and give him the necessary particulars, I have no doubt that he would arrange for the photograph to be published, together with the story. You know the kind of thing I mean—they would probably caption it with something like, 'Do You Know This Girl' and invite readers to write to the paper. The snag is, of course, that Miss Smith may come in for a great deal of undesirable publicity."

"I see," Bill had said flatly. "Well, thank you very much, Superintendent. We'll think over what you have said."

Outside he had given Ronnie a quizzical glance.

"Well, darling, and what do you think of the Superintendent's idea?" he had asked.

"Not very much, Bill," she had answered frankly. "I want to find out who I am, of course, but—"

"I know," he had cut in. "Don't worry! We'll think of some other way, and keep that as a last resort. Personally, I only mind about it for your sake. As far as I am concerned it isn't important."

That was the wonderful thing about Bill, she thought gratefully. He really did not mind, one way or another. All that mattered to him was the future and that, as he said quite often when she was more than usually depressed, was theirs

to mould as they wished.

It was not in Ronnie's nature to allow matters to drift, however, and a few days after the interview with the Superintendent she visited Dr. Harrison again.

"The trouble with amnesia is that it can be caused by so many things, you see," the doctor said. "Sudden illness, shock, worry—in fact, the list is endless. The real cause, of course, is that the mind is trying to wipe out the memory of something it is essential to forget—something disgusting or hateful, for example—with the result that the subconscious mind takes charge and obliterates everything that could serve as a reminder."

"Does that mean I'll never regain my memory, doctor?" Ronnie asked bravely.

He placed the palms of his hands against each other as if in prayer and looked benignly at her through horn-rimmed glasses.

"Not at all, my dear young lady," he said encouragingly. "Anything may bring your memory back at any time, such as the hearing of a familiar tune or visiting some place that has associations with the past. If your loss of memory was caused by shock, a similar shock might bring it back, but in that case it is more than likely that you will forget everything that has happened in between!"

Before she left he gave her a letter to a psychiatrist in Newcastle who, he said, would help her if anyone could.

"If you send my letter to the hospital you'll be told when to attend," he said. "Don't build on anything very spectacular happening, though. These things take time and all one can really do is to possess one's soul in patience!"

SHE told Bill what the doctor had said. The *Seamew* had come in earlier from a routine inspection of some of the buoys, and after supper they had gone for a stroll along the castle ramparts.

It was a mild, still night, with a late moon casting its pale light upon the sea.

"He didn't actually say so, but I could tell that he thought it was pretty hopeless to expect my memory to come back," Ronnie concluded, with a sigh.

She leaned back against the muzzle of the old cannon, hands thrust into the deep pockets of her coat.

"He practically told me that I would have to get used to the idea—but I know I can't. It's like being in a maze without any openings. Sometimes it makes me feel that I want to bang my head on the ground."

"You poor darling!" Bill said softly.

"Do you mind so terribly, then?" She felt his arm round her shoulders, bringing comfort and reassurance.

"I mind for your sake, Bill dear. I mean, you're taking an awful risk, aren't you?"

He smiled in the darkness.

"It's a risk I am gladly taking, my sweet. Besides, you'll remember all right."

She turned a pair of troubled eyes.

"Yes," she said, with a catch of her breath. "But what will I remember? Perhaps I oughtn't to marry Bill."

He smiled and kissed her.

"Don't be foolish, darling. Whoever you are it can't make any difference. And—it won't be anything to worry about, you'll see."

They walked back slowly without speaking. At the end of the ramparts they stopped and looked back. There was something curiously symbolical in the little pause, as if unconsciously, they were both storing up a memory that would sustain them in the days to come.

But all he said was—

"It will be foggy in the morning, that means work for me. All the same it's a good life! We're going to be very happy, my sweet."

She turned to him quickly and impulsively.

"Oh, Bill! Doesn't it *really* worry you? Don't you sometimes—just sometimes—wonder?"

"No," he said simply, "I don't. I love you and that, to me, is the beginning and end of everything."

THE fog Bill had predicted cleared soon after eleven the following morning and the sun shone clear and bright, lighting up the damp macadam of the streets.

Soon the air was like wine, so that as she crossed the square in front of St. Mary's Church, Ronnie was conscious of a sense of uplift such as she had not known for days.

The clocks were striking twelve-thirty when she went into the chemist's shop, where she usually bought her face powder; her lunch hour was from twelve to one, so that she had plenty of time.

When she came out, she paused a moment wondering whether to walk through to the Mary Gate, from where she could see the harbour, or whether to go into the church gardens and sit in the sun.

After a moment she decided on the gardens, and turned to the left along the pavement.

A few yards further along a shooting brake was drawn up at the kerb, and as Ronnie neared it a girl about her own age, got out, wearing a polo-neck pullover and pleated skirt.

She gave Ronnie a casual glance as the distance between them narrowed and then, as she was about to turn away, her eyes widened and became dark with the shock of recognition.

Then a little gasp escaped her and she stood stock-still, too taken aback to be able to decide what she must do.

But Ronnie had noticed nothing. She had glanced at the brake and then away again, and though her eyes fell full upon the other girl there was no recognition in them.

And she would have passed on had not the other girl put out a detaining hand.

"Ronnie!" she said shakily. "Ronnie! What—what are you doing *here*?"

For a moment Ronnie could only stare at her in blank astonishment. Somewhere deep down in her mind she registered the fact that she had evidently been recognised by someone who had known her in the past but beyond that she was unable to go. It was as if her sense of things had become numbed so that they would only function slowly.

"Ronnie!" said the other girl again, a pleading note in her voice. "Ronnie, dear, don't you know me? Or is it that you don't want to have anything to do with me now?" I'm Helen!"

It may have happened at that moment, or perhaps it had really happened a second or so earlier—she did not know and it did not matter—but, seeing the other girl standing there, and hearing her voice, brought everything back to focus. The walls of the maze fell away and Ronnie remembered the girl before her—and why she had come to Crathmyle.

"Why, Helen!" she murmured.

She started to say something else but checked herself, looking puzzled. She had gone white without knowing it, and her eyes were dark and unfathomable, so that she looked like someone whose emotions had been pent up too long.

As memory came flooding back it was as if a veil had been rent, and she remembered everything up to the time she had gone to

King's Cross station, her world in ruins a her feet.

In those few pain-filled seconds Ronnie went back on her journey into the past—the past that held Derek Armstrong and his sister Helen; the whirlwind courtship that had ended as dramatically at King's Cross station—two months ago!

Helen Armstrong's voice penetrated the mists whirling round her.

"Look, Ronnie, we can't stand here," she said, urgently. She glanced sideways and saw the iron gates leading to the gardens. "Let's go in there—there are things we've got to talk about."

Ronnie nodded dumbly, looking round as if seeing the square for the first time.

Then, without consciously knowing it, she accompanied the other girl the few yards that separated them from the entrance to the gardens, to a seat at the far end.

There was scarcely anyone about; just a woman and a child making for the ornamental pond in the centre.

Helen sat down abruptly, twisting a handkerchief nervously between her fingers.

"I—we've been wondering what happened to you, Ronnie," she began jerkily, unsure of herself. "As soon as I heard what had happened I rushed up to town, but your landlady could only say that you had gone away for the week-end and hadn't come back. She was inclined to be a bit sticky, but that was only to be expected. I mean, she knew that you and Derek were engaged, didn't she?"

"Yes," Ronnie nodded.

In a flood it all came back to her. Yet, it was as if it had all happened to someone else, to a girl named Veronica Wyndham who had nothing in common with Ronnie Smith, who sat on a bench listening to an echo of the past.

Something momentous had happened to her at King's Cross station when she had seen Derek Armstrong led away to the police car, between two detectives, who had arrested him just as she and Derek were about to board the train for Newcastle.

It was something which had changed her out of all recognition, leaving her drained of emotion, conscious of nothing but disillusionment and heartbreak.

An hour later—after he had gone—she had still been seated in the King's Cross restaurant, to which she had made her way, staring into space, a half-tasted cup of tea cold in front of her.

How it all came back now—

What had happened to her had happened to others and would happen again. One offered hostages to fortune, laid bare one's hopes and dreams on the altar of love, only to find that one had been betrayed.

She had been lonely and alone when Derek Armstrong had swum into her orbit with all the scintillating brilliance of a shooting star. At the time their love had seemed the only thing in life, but now she could almost bring herself to smile at her gullibility.

Once the scales had fallen from her eyes she had seen him as he really was—handsome and gay, with a superficial charm that concealed a character both weak and disolute. He had been robbing his firm for months to get money to pay off his gambling debts.

And Helen was Derek's sister. She lived a few miles out of Crathmyle, with her mother, in an ivy-covered cottage with just enough ground for the garden and kennels where Helen bred pedigree Bull-terriers.

Derek had worked in London, as an accountant, and had told Ronnie about his home in the north and the farm that had once belonged to the family.

Helen had come to London several times on business and she and Ronnie had met.

Derek had taken them out to dinner and on to a show afterwards and the two girls had become friendly.

But when she and Derek had become engaged Ronnie had sensed a reserve behind the other girl's congratulations that, at the time, had caused her no little uneasiness. Now, of course, she understood!

"I never expected to run into you in Crathmyle, of all places," said Helen. "Why didn't you answer my letters, Ronnie? What have you been doing with yourself all this time?"

Ronnie put a hand to her cheek, the puzzled expression in her eyes deepening.

"I—I didn't know you had written, Helen," she stammered, striving to bridge the gap of time. "I mean—I don't understand—it's all so confusing. What—what am I doing *here*?"

Helen stared.

"What—what do you mean?" she demanded, as if not sure she had heard aright. "You ought to know, if anyone does. In fact, that's what I'm asking *you*."

"But I don't *know*!" Ronnie cried desperately. "I—"

"Listen," said Helen, when she broke off with a gesture of despair. "You and Derek were supposed to be coming for the week-end so that you could meet mother and"—she swallowed hard—"he was arrested at King's Cross just as you were getting into the train. He told me that himself when I was allowed to see him at the prison. He gave me a message for you—that's why I went round to your digs only, as I've told you, your landlady said you hadn't come back. Well, you must have been *some*where."

"I know," Ronnie twisted her hands together and looked piteously at the other girl. "What—what was Derek's message?"

Helen laughed satirically.

"He said I was to tell you not to worry—that it was all a mistake and that everything would be all right." She laughed again, a dry, mirthless sound that made Ronnie shiver. "But it wasn't a mistake and it didn't come right. It nearly killed mother."

"You mean—?" Ronnie asked, groping in a mental fog that left her confused and without sense of direction.

"I mean that Derek was sentenced to eighteen months with hard labour for fraud and conspiracy," said Helen shortly. She stared at Ronnie. "But you know that, surely? It was in all the papers."

Ronnie shook her head.

"I didn't know," she said in a low, shaken voice. "All I can remember is seeing those officers taking Derek away. I had got to the station before him and had bought my ticket—I didn't want him to pay for it, you see, and I knew that he would unless I got it first. I waited in the booking hall until he came. And then, while I was speaking to him a police car drove up—" Her voice trailed off into silence and she covered her face with her hands.

Helen hesitated a moment before speaking.

"What happened after that?" she then enquired gently.

Ronnie lifted her head.

"I don't know," she said brokenly. "I don't know. I can't remember a thing between then and seeing you outside McLeod's shop ten minutes ago."

"Oh, my aunt!" exclaimed Helen softly, as the truth dawned on her. "You poor girl! Does that mean you can't remember where you've been living or what you've been doing?"

Ronnie twisted her hands together in an anguished fashion, the knuckles showing white through the skin.

"There is a place, but I can't think where," she said dully. "Everything seems a blank after seeing Derek arrested." She

turned suddenly to Helen. "What day is it? I mean,"—her lips trembled—"how long—?"

Helen took her hand and held it tightly, as if trying to protect her from further shock.

"It's the thirty-first of October," she said gently. "It is over two months since Derek was arrested . . . a month since he was tried and sentenced. Heavens! What a lot he has to answer for!"

"You mustn't be too hard on him, Helen," said Ronnie slowly. "He—"

"Derek's a rotter and we might as well face it," interrupted Helen blankly. She sprang to her feet and stood looking curiously down at the other. "I suppose the best thing would be for you to come back with me. You can't go wandering about Crathmyle with nothing but what you stand up in, that's certain. Then when you feel more up to it, we can decide what is the best thing to do."

Ronnie rose.

"What about your mother?" she asked doubtfully. "Will—will she mind?"

"Of course not, my dear. She feels as I do about it all. I mean to say, Derek let you down pretty badly, didn't he? The least we can do is to help in what way we can. Besides, you haven't any money or anything, have you?"

"No," Ronnie looked dazedly at the small, brown paper parcel sealed with red wax that she was carrying and felt in the pockets of her coat. She pulled out a purse containing a few coins and a used bus ticket. "I must have left my bag somewhere—I wonder where?"

THAT evening an urgent family conference took place in the Johnson's home.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were present, the latter looking very worried, and Maggie and Duncan were also there.

It was Maggie who brought back the news that Ronnie had disappeared. Bill who had not been long in, sat on the arm of a chair, his brows furrowed.

"You say Ronnie didn't take her handbag with her when she went out to lunch, Maggie?" he asked, breaking a little silence. "I suppose you've no idea *where* she went?"

"She said she was just going to pop over to the chemist to get some more face powder," Maggie replied. "She took her purse out of her bag and slipped it into her coat pocket—I saw her myself. We don't take our lunch at the same time, you see, Bill, otherwise I might have gone with her."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "And that's all you know?"

"Except that when she didn't come back by three o'clock I told Miss Snape," said Maggie frankly. "I knew she wouldn't stop away from her counter all that time without a good reason and I was worried. I mean, she might easily have met with an accident or something."

"Quite so." He nodded. "Miss Snape telephoned the local hospital and the police didn't see?"

"Right away, she did. But they hadn't heard of any accident. Sergeant Wilkie came round a little later and asked if she had turned up. When I told him about the handbag he said he would take it with him, so I had to give it to him."

"Perhaps her memory has come back and she's taken the first train to London," suggested Duncan, from his place by the fire.

"Her memory might have come back, but Ronnie wouldn't do a thing like that," answered his mother shortly. "Besides, Maggie has told you she left her bag behind—how would she get to London without money?"

Bill sighed.

"I think it's fairly obvious that her

memory has come back," he said. "It's quite on the cards therefore, that she has completely forgotten the period in between. That happens sometimes, I believe."

Mrs. Johnson put down her knitting and gazed at him in perplexity.

"But, Bill, she can't have forgotten all of us, especially you."

He smiled wryly.

"Why not?" he said. "If the past could be wiped out as completely as it was in Ronnie's case, the same thing could happen in reverse. In that case, she would remember everything that happened up to the time she found herself at King's Cross with a return ticket for Crathmyle in her handbag—and nothing else."

There was a stunned silence and Mr. Johnson was the first to break it.

"What are you going to do Bill?" he asked.

"I think I'll go along to the police station and have a chat with the Superintendent first thing in the morning," Bill said. "In the meantime, I'll make a few enquiries on my own account."

"I'll come with you," Maggie volunteered, getting up.

"Thanks a lot, Maggie, but I think I'll go by myself," he said, smiling at her. "I've a hunch that Ronnie met someone connected with her past life during the time she was out and that she isn't very far away. I'll try the station first," he went on, turning towards the door.

There was another silence when he had gone. Then Maggie sighed and went to the window.

"Poor Bill," she said. "I just hated telling him."

"You couldn't help yourself, lass," said her father understandingly. "He's taking it hard, though—anyone can see that. Still, I suppose it had to happen some time or other. Just as well they're not married, if you ask me. Then it might have been real serious."

BILL let himself out of the house and walked steadily up the steep, curving street to Crathmyle station. He had no doubt in his mind that what he had told the Johnsons was the true explanation behind Ronnie's disappearance. Short of an accident, there was no other way to account for her failure to return to the shop.

He tried to remember all that he had read up about loss of memory, but it did not help much. No two cases were alike, apparently, so there was nothing to guide him.

It did not always follow that the intervening period was forgotten in turn, of course, but it *did* happen and when it did, it seemed that nothing less than a miracle would join the two periods together.

Yet he could not bring himself to believe that their love for each other was so frail a thing that it could fail to leave a lasting impression.

Even if she had forgotten everything else, surely she would remember that? For love was something that became a part of oneself, not a thing that could be wiped out—like writing on a slate.

At the station he drew a blank. The booking clerk, who had been on duty during the afternoon, had gone off, but the result of Bill's enquiries brought forth the information that no one had taken a ticket for London since early morning. He turned away, depression flooding over him like a wave.

There was so little he could do. He stood at a street corner for a while, looking across

the square to the dark portico of St. Mary's Church.

There was scarcely anyone about. A solitary bus turned out of Crathie Street and dropped its passengers opposite the gardens. He watched them break up and disperse—two old people, a young man in battle-dress, several couples who drifted away arm in arm towards the cinema.

He lit his pipe, trying to reason calmly

Ronnie had come to Crathmyle because she had found an unused return ticket in her bag. From that starting point she had reasoned that there was someone she knew in the town or living near it. Yet, in all the time she had been here, working at Derwents, no one had come forward to say they knew her.

Yet Bill could not get away from that ticket. One did not go to a place like King's Cross and buy a ticket for a long rail journey without good reason. Therefore, Ronnie was probably correct in thinking that she had bought it because Crathmyle was where she wanted to go.

From there it was but a short step to arguing that, by sheer chance, whoever she had been coming to meet had encountered her after she left the shop and that recognition had brought her memory flooding back. There was no other explanation!

Bill jerked his shoulders impatiently. Standing under a street lamp wasn't going to get him anywhere. The Superintendent would have gone off duty by now but it was just possible that the station sergeant might have some information.

He stepped down from the kerb and hurried across to the police station.

Turning under the blue lamp he entered the brightly-lit charge room.

As it happened, an Inspector he knew was standing at the counter talking to the Superintendent who, apparently, had not gone off duty after all.

"Hullo, Bill," said the Inspector, the note of sympathy in his voice telling Bill that he knew why he had come. "I suppose you want to know if we have any news for you. I'm sorry to say we haven't."

"You haven't?" Sarcasm sharpened Bill's tone. "In other words, a girl can walk out of a shop in broad daylight and just vanish, like that!"

"That's not fair, Bill," protested the Inspector. "We've made all possible enquiries—at the garages, the bus depots—everywhere, in fact. No one has reported having seen anyone answering to Miss Smith's description anywhere. If she has left Crathmyle she hasn't done so on any of the local buses, neither has she taken a taxi or hired a car. She hasn't been seen at the railway station, either."

"We have to be careful, you know, Mr. Ferguson," the Superintendent put in. "Miss Smith is a free agent and is at perfect liberty to walk out of anywhere if she chooses to do so. For that reason we can hardly circulate a description of her as a wanted person, you see! You can rest assured that we will continue to make enquiries—discreetly, of course—and that if we learn anything we will let you know."

Bill stared woodenly before him. It was only what he had expected, yet the Superintendent's words spelt the death-knell of his hopes. It was with difficulty that he quelled his rising anger. There was an air about the Superintendent which, to his overwrought imagination, seemed to infer that the whole thing was relatively unimportant and that the police had something better to do than chase shadows.

"We are doing all we can, Mr. Ferguson," the Superintendent said. "Unfortunately, we have very little to go on. If I were you I would go home and try to get a good night's

rest. You won't do any good by knocking yourself up."

The words, kindly meant, made no impact. Bill turned without speaking. The Inspector was saying something but he did not want to listen. It was a mere matter of routine to them but to him it was the end of the world.

He turned and went blindly out of the room and down the steps to the street.

"COME HOME, MY LOVE"

A WEEK later Ronnie travelled to London on the night train from Newcastle, innocently unaware of the heartache and bewilderment she was leaving behind at the Johnson home.

Helen and Mrs. Armstrong had been kindness itself, but their very eagerness to make amends was an embarrassment, so that Ronnie was glad to leave the supercharged atmosphere of the cottage behind her.

In any case, she had to attempt to pick up the threads of her old life again, so that Helen, who had a puppy to deliver to a client in Newcastle, had driven her there at the same time.

"Derek is allowed to receive a letter a month, so I shall be writing to him next week," Helen had said. "Do you want me to say that I have seen you, Ronnie?"

Ronnie had shuddered, feeling as if an icy wind had blown through the station and picked on her specially.

"No," she had said, almost sharply. "I would much rather you didn't, Helen. I—I'm sorry—he's your brother, I know—but I don't think I ever want to see or hear of him again."

"I can't blame you. I would feel the same in your place," had said Helen. "That's no reason why we shouldn't keep in touch, though. You'll write and let me know how you get on, won't you?"

"Of course—"

Helen had lent her ten pounds as well as buying her ticket. In Newcastle they had stopped for Ronnie to buy a few necessities for the journey and she had sent a telegram to her landlady saying that she would be arriving the following morning.

"It will give Mrs. Weekes a shock, but it wouldn't be fair just to walk in on her," she had explained, when Helen queried the necessity. "I don't know whether she'll have kept my room or what has happened, but in any case, I won't remain there."

She didn't say so, but Helen knew what she meant. She wanted to make a clean break from the past, and finding lodgings, where no one knew anything about Derek, was the first step.

Now, with the train's departure, she was severing her last link with the past and both of them knew it. She would write, of course—she would have to do in any case, for there was Helen's ten pounds to send back. But after that—

For most of the journey Ronnie sat upright in her corner, staring out at the darkened countryside flying past, but towards morning she dozed a little, waking just before they reached London. She took a taxi to her old lodgings, where she was received with scarcely veiled hostility by her landlady, whose thin, tightly compressed lips told Ronnie all that she was thinking.

"You couldn't expect me to keep your room for you when I didn't know whether you were coming back again or not, Miss Wyndham," she said defensively, when Ronnie asked about her things. "I waited two weeks and that was long enough. I've got to pay my way and—"

"That's all right, Mrs. Weekes," Ronnie interrupted wearily. "I will pay you for the

fortnight the room stood empty, of course. All I want is to collect my things and arrange for them to be taken to the station."

"Well, you'll find they're all right," said the woman sullenly. "I had to put your trunks in the basement but they've come to no harm. If you want to open them while you're here, you're welcome, I'm sure. I don't hold with such goings on, but then it takes all sorts to make a world, I say, and—"

"Thank you," Ronnie interrupted hastily. "If you will just show me where everything is I won't bother you any further."

Outside again she stood on the pavement for a moment, her brow knitted.

It was queer, she thought, how chance played such an important part in the shaping of one's life.

Until she actually went up the steps of the house she had just left, she had not stopped to think, to plan. If she had been able to go back to her room, to find everything as she had left it, there is no doubt she would have slipped back into her old life and finished up by going to see Mr. Wainwright at the office. Once she explained that she had lost her memory, and that it was only a week ago that she had remembered who she was, the firm would take her back.

But it hadn't worked out that way. Mrs. Weekes had been hostile, on the defensive, and the fact that her old room was occupied by a stranger, her own things bundled into the basement, had proved a turning point. She knew now where she must go and what she must do. With sudden resolution she tucked her borrowed handbag under her arm and crossed the road to the post office.

MERSTON MALLOW was the tiny village tucked away in a fold of the Kentish hills. From the garden of Ivycot, a trim bungalow on the outskirts of the place, one could see the Westerham ridge in the distance and, a little to the left, the dark line of Ashdown Forest dominated by Crowborough beacon.

It was a peaceful spot, and to Ronnie at that time it was even more—a refuge.

She got out of the train and after arranging for her trunk to be collected later, walked up between the cottages past the church, carrying the small suitcase she had gone back to her old lodgings to pack.

She had no doubts about her welcome, for she was going to the one person she could trust to sympathise and understand.

Penny, or Miss Penelope Perkins, had been Ronnie's nanny and had remained to keep house for her father when Mrs. Wyndham had died. There were no secrets that had to be kept from Penny, whose heart was almost too big for her body.

Ronnie came to the bungalow and walked round to the back. She lifted the latch of the door and walked into the kitchen.

Miss Perkins, stout and rosy in a print overall, stepped from the gas cooker.

"Miss Veronica! Oh, my dear! I've been so worried about you. Where have you been?"

Ronnie kissed her and stood for a moment holding her hands.

"It's a long story, Penny darling," she said, with a sigh. "I'll tell you all about it later. But just now I want nothing so much as a cup of tea."

"Well, sit you there and I'll get you something in a jiffy," said Penny, her practical nature asserting itself. She glanced critically at Ronnie as she put a kettle on. "You're looking pale, my dear," she went on. "What ails you?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired, that's all, Penny dear." Ronnie smiled, feeling as if she had come home. "Can I stay with you for a little while?" She laughed suddenly. "I've no-

where else to go, you see."

"Stay? Of course you can stay, my dear," Penny replied vigorously. "Where else would you stay but here? But come along, you'll want to take your things off. There's plenty of hot water, so you needn't stint yourself. By the time you've done I'll have a meal ready for you."

FOR two whole days Ronnie did nothing except write two letters.

One was to Helen, returning the money she had been lent, the other was to the manager of the firm of chartered accountants where she had worked before losing her memory.

Of the two, the latter was the most difficult to write, and she made several false starts before she was finally satisfied.

She addressed it to "J. Wainwright Esq" and marked it "Personal".

Penny, who had listened in silence while Ronnie told her all that had happened, was at once practical and sympathetic.

"You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you like—there's nothing I would wish for more, Miss Veronica," she said. "But that wouldn't suit you, I suppose. You were always independent, even as a child. Have you made any plans?"

"Not so far." Ronnie had stared into the fire near which they were seated at the time. "I have written to Mr. Wainwright explaining everything and told him that I'm not coming back. It would be utterly impossible after all that has happened, you see, and it wouldn't be fair to put him in an embarrassing position. They are sure to have engaged somebody else in my place, for one thing, and for another, I don't want to work where they know about Derek."

"That's natural," said Penny wisely. "You've got money in the post office, you say, so you can manage for a bit, can't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Ronnie. "I—I was saving up to get married, as you know." Her voice faltered for a moment and she felt the prick of sudden tears. "But I've got to get something to do sooner or later, Penny. I was wondering about Sevenoaks."

"I don't see why you couldn't get a job there," said Penny hopefully. "Then you could go on living here where I could look after you. No one you don't want to find you is likely to come here, either" she added shrewdly.

It was left at that for the time being. Ronnie was suffering violently from reaction and felt too weary to make up her own mind about anything.

She had an answer to her letter from Mr. Wainwright, thanking her for having written and expressing the writer's sympathy in what he called "her unfortunate predicament". Reading between the lines, however, Ronnie could tell that her decision not to ask for her job back had been a relief, and she was profoundly thankful that she had acted as she had done.

There was a letter from Helen as well, thanking her for the return of the money, and telling her such news as there was about her mother and the dogs.

She did not mention Derek and Ronnie did not write again.

Three weeks later, she began work as a shorthand typist in the office of a big corn chandler in Sevenoaks, whose advertisement had appeared in one of the local papers.

NEXT Winter gradually gave way to spring, and day followed day in uneventful procession across the calendar.

Ronnie had resolutely put the past behind her, and though it was a graver, more mature girl who got off the bus from Sevenoaks each evening, the colour had come

back into her cheeks and now and again a hint of the old, spontaneous laughter returned to her eyes.

If it were not for one secret, nagging worry she might have found the quiet happiness she sought, but in unguarded moments it would catch her unawares, bringing a shadow to dwell in her eyes, so that Penny would look anxiously at her charge and try to think up some fresh way to divert her mind.

But it was no use. Try as she might, Ronnie could not forget that there was a period of over two months that had been taken out of her life, a period during which she must have possessed *some* kind of identity, had *some* kind of existence. But where—and what?

Sometimes she was tempted to throw everything up and return to Crathmyle, where Helen had found her. But something held her back.

Whether it was a deep-seated fear of what she might learn, or whether it was due to some other cause, she could not tell. But the result was that she was mentally looking over her shoulder the whole time, afraid to put her thoughts into words.

Helen had written again. Derek had earned a remission of his sentence for good conduct and would shortly be released from prison.

They were planning to help him to emigrate to Australia where he could make a new start and Helen was coming up to London to make enquiries. She wondered if she and Ronnie could meet somewhere.

The day the letter came was a Saturday. After lunch Ronnie put on a leather jacket in dark green, and told Penny she was going for a long walk. The Downs were bluer than ever in the distance and there was a keen wind blowing, piling up masses of cumulus clouds until they looked like giant mountain ranges.

A good walker, she liked nothing better than a day of this kind, and strode out determinedly, revelling in the freshness of the keen air.

She returned to the house in time for tea, hungry and healthily tired, but still unable to make up her mind whether to meet Helen in London or not.

It would seem churlish to refuse, yet she shrank from re-opening old wounds. She could not talk it over with Penny, as she did most things, either, for it was not to be expected that the older woman would understand just how she felt.

Penny had met Derek once, when he had driven Ronnie down to see her old nurse, and her "Good riddance to bad rubbish" summarised her attitude.

Ronnie awoke the following morning, tired and unrefreshed, having lain awake most of the night grappling with her problem. She got up and putting on a dressing-gown, went out to make tea for Penny and herself.

The Sunday papers had been delivered and were protruding through the letter box.

Ronnie took them into the kitchen and idly scanned the headlines while waiting for the kettle to boil.

One, the most prominent in the paper she opened, seemed to leap out of the pages at her.

THRILLING RESCUE DRAMA IN NORTH SEA.

There followed an account of the salvaging of a Norwegian tanker that had been disabled in a storm the previous night. Despite the high seas that were running, a salvage tug had put out from Amble, as well as the lifeboat from Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Help from them would have come too late, however, for the tanker was drifting on to the dangerous shoals surrounding the Coquets, but the Government survey vessel *Seamew* had put out from Crathmyle as soon as the first S.O.S. had been received.

Being nearer, the *Seamew* had reached the disabled vessel much sooner and after heroic efforts on the part of skipper and crew, a line had been made fast. By the time the salvage tug arrived on the scene the disabled tanker had been towed out of danger and four hours later was safely berthed in the harbour at Crathmyle.

There was a blurred photograph of the *Seamew*, another of the captain and crew of the Norwegian tanker and, below them, a photograph of the man responsible for the rescue.

Ronnie stared down at it, the paper rustling in her hands, her mouth dry as if she had swallowed ashes.

Like someone in a dream she read the caption below the smaller photograph, her lips moving soundlessly as she formed the words: "Skipper William Ferguson, D.S.O., whose gallantry and seamanship saved fourteen lives."

Skipper William Ferguson. *Bill*—

Everything clicked into place as she stared down at the photograph of the man she loved. *Bill*—the *Seamew*—the Johnsons—the shop at Crathmyle.

She had been going across the square to buy some face powder from the chemist when she had seen Helen. It was all clear now. All she had to do was to get dressed and go to the nearest telephone box and ring up in order to hear *Bill*'s voice!

She swallowed something that wasn't there and blinked back the tears that filled her eyes. In a queer, choking voice she said: "Oh, *Bill darling*," and bowed her head in her hands.

ON the day the tanker had got into trouble *Bill* had awakened from an exhausted slumber to find Mrs. Johnson shaking him, grey-faced in the early dawn. "*Bill!* Wake up. There's a call for you on the telephone. It's urgent."

Shaking the mists from his mind he had flung back the covers and pulled on a dressing gown. It seemed that he had only just fallen asleep after tramping the streets for the greater part of the afternoon and evening, hoping against hope that to-day he would find Ronnie.

He had picked up the receiver in the hall and heard his mate's voice.

"Skipper, the coastguards have reported a ship making distress signals about eight miles south-east of the Coquets," he had said. "There's a tug gone out from Amble on the lifeboat from Berwick, but she'll be ashore long before they can get there."

"Right, Fred. Get the rest of the crew together as quickly as you can—I'll be right down," *Bill* had ordered tersely.

A storm had blown up during the night and from the direction and force of the wind he could tell exactly how the seas would be running. Any vessel broken down in the position his mate had indicated would stand very little chance unless help came before she grounded.

Mrs. Johnson had appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, her dressing gown wrapped tightly round her, her hair in curlers.

"I've put the kettle on, son. There'll be a cup of tea ready by the time you're dressed," she had said.

Bill had given her a fleeting smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Johnson," he had said gratefully. "I won't be more than two minutes."

The rest had been a nightmare of human endeavour against the merciless onslaught of the sea.

It had been nearly noon by the time the battered *Seamew* had accompanied the salvage tug and the rescued tanker into harbour.

When they tied up and looked round to assess the damage, they had been met by a small army of reporters and press photographers, eager for a first hand account of the rescue. It had been nearly tea-time before *Bill*, grey-faced with exhaustion, had finally escaped, for his first care had been for his ship and his crew.

Now, many hours later he walked slowly along the ramparts to where the old cannon pointed rigidly out to sea.

The storm had blown itself out, but there was a heavy swell running and from where he stood he could hear the hollow boom of the waves breaking on the sand-bar.

He was in a state of abnormal consciousness, so that everything irritated him.

He had very nearly slept the clock round and awoke feeling guilty because he had wasted so much precious time. He had rounded on Maggie, whose wide-eyed hero-worship had been just about the last straw. She had kept the papers for him to see, thinking he would be pleased, but he had flung them aside with a muttered exclamation of disgust.

Nothing mattered any more. For months he had spent all his time searching vainly for some trace of Ronnie, some faint clue that would tell him where she had gone.

Sometimes, his hopes had been raised by the sight of a figure in a beige coat walking along the pavement, only to be dashed again when he saw that he had been deceived by some fleeting resemblance to the girl he loved. But it had all ended in frustration and despair.

There were times, as now, when he seemed to feel that she was near him and that he would only have to turn round to see her there to stretch out his arms to feel the slenderness of her body in his embrace, and hear her voice murmuring the words that echoed in his mind.

But for the faint hope that one day he would come round a corner to see her walking towards him, her eyes alight with love and longing, he would have resigned his command and sought an outlet for his frustrated emotions elsewhere. But so long as there remained any hope at all he could not leave . . .

He wondered where she was and what she was doing. Did no echo of the vanished period of her life come back to her? Was it really possible that love, which came with such sweetness and such promise, could fail to pierce the veil?

Perhaps she had gone back to some other happiness, something in which he had no part.

The memory of her voice, the look in her eyes, came back to him now, so that his body ached as if he had been sleeping on stones.

He drew a deep breath that was akin to a shudder. Before him the harbour stretched to the estuary beyond, with the surf pounding on the sand-bar as if eager

to reach the ships anchored in the basin. It no longer had any appeal for him, but had become, instead, the symbol of a servitude that galled worse than any chains.

A footfall sounded behind him.

"Bill!"

Slowly he turned, like a man whose muscles have become stiff with disuse.

Ronnie was standing there, dressed as he had seen her last, the setting sun catching the lights in her hair.

He put out a hand, gropingly, as if afraid that she was only the figment of a dream and would vanish at a touch.

"Ronnie!" he said huskily. "Ronnie! Is—is it really you?"

"Oh, Bill darling!"

There were tears and laughter in her eyes. She came forward and laid her hands in his, looking at him as she had done so often in the past, seeing the frozen despair in his face turn to a white, passionate tenderness.

And then she was in his arms, crying with her face buried in the roughness of his sleeve, feeling the tautness of his body as he held her close, as if he would never let her go.

"Oh, Bill, Bill," she sobbed brokenly. "I can't tell you all the things I want to say to you. Just hold me tight and tell me that you still love me as much as ever."

"Of course I love you as much as ever, my darling," he said, still dazed by the wonder of it all. "I've never stopped loving you for a single moment. But it's been a long time, Ronnie. A lifetime!"

"I know. I can guess. But it was only yesterday—when I saw the Sunday papers—that I understood. Bill. I knew, then, what had happened and where I had been during the time I was here. I—I caught the first train I could and arrived about an hour ago. Mrs. Johnson told me you had gone out so I guessed where I would find you. You came here because it was here that we found each other."

"I come here quite often," he said. He drew in his breath, holding her a little away from him, looking wonderingly down at her. "Your memory came back, didn't it?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I went out to do some shopping and ran into Helen Armstrong. She—I knew her before and—and she recognised me. We went into the gardens by the church to talk and it was only then that I discovered I had forgotten where I had been in the meantime."

"It doesn't matter dear," he said, stroking her hair. "Nothing matters now that we have found each other." He glanced across to where the Norwegian tanker was moored alongside the graving dock. "I suppose you saw an account of the *Seamew's* rescue trip in the papers?"

"Yes, Bill. It was queer. I read the whole story but it was only when I saw your photograph that everything came back. I knew, then, that we loved each other and were going to be married! It was the strangest thing—I mean—oh, I can't explain. It was as if two halves of my mind suddenly came together and everything was made clear." She paused and put up a questing finger, tracing the lines of care and worry on his face. "You've got thin dearest," she added inconsequently. "Oh, Bill, Bill, what have I done to you?"

"You've brought me back to life, my

sweet," he said gently, kissing her. "I never gave up hope, but—well, you know the old saying, don't you?"

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick!" She sighed tremulously. "Mrs. Johnson told me how you've tramped the streets day after day hoping to see me. I know, too, how you've been eating and sleeping badly and—oh, everything."

"It doesn't matter now," he said again. "We must look forward—not back. I never doubted you, Ronnie. I knew, you see, that there was only one possible explanation and so I prayed for a miracle. Well, my prayers have been answered!"

LATER they walked slowly back to the town together and though Ronnie's eyes were shining, it was not with tears.

Simply, omitting nothing, seeking neither to extenuate or excuse, she had told Bill her story, beginning at the beginning and going right through to the bitter end.

"I suppose it was only natural for me to be attracted by Derek," she had concluded. "After my parents died I lived in a boarding-house in London and worked in an office as a typist, with only an occasional week-end at Penny's place to look forward to. Then I met Derek at one of the staff affairs got up by one of the firms we did business with, and he began to take me about. After that—" She shrugged.

Bill smiled at her.

"You can forget him," he said gently. "You were in love with love, that's all. He must be a rank outsider, to put it mildly, so you owe him no loyalty. It strikes me that his sister must be a pretty good sort, though."

"She is Bill. I would like you to meet Helen. I want her to know that I—that we are happy." She blushed vividly and looked anxiously at him. "You are, aren't you, darling? You don't mind about Derek, do you? Truly?"

"Truly," he answered, drawing her to her feet. "What makes me want to kick myself is that for a whole week after you vanished you were, apparently, less than five miles away and I didn't know it! Do you realise that even the railway station was watched?"

"I left from Newcastle. Helen had business to do there so she said she might as well run me in instead of to Crathmyle. She didn't actually say so but I gathered she didn't come here more often than she was forced because of Derek. People knew, you see, and she felt that they were pitying her. That is why we hadn't run into each other before."

"So that's how it was," he said. He tucked her arm in his and they walked a little way in silence. Then he stopped and put his hands on her shoulders, looking down into her eyes. "Ronnie darling, when will you marry me?"

She met his gaze fearlessly.

"Whenever you like, Bill. I—there's nothing to wait for."

"What about this job you have?"

"I haven't got it any more. I telephoned Mr. Simmonds last night and explained everything to him. He was most awfully decent and said it was quite all right and that he would get someone else in. They aren't very busy just now, so I haven't let him down at all."

"That's the best news I've had for a long time," he said, with a sudden grin.

"We'll go and see the vicar to-morrow! In the meantime I presume you will be staying here?"

"Yes. Mrs. Johnson said she would have my bed ready by the time I got back." She gave him a sudden teasing glance. "Where are we going to live?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" he asked, with pretended innocence. "I've been given the chance of one of the new coastguard cottages—The Moorings. Sounds good, doesn't it? Mr. and Mrs. Bill Fer—"

"Bill, no!" She put a hand to his mouth, looking suddenly frightened. "I'm terribly superstitious about things like that. Don't say it, please. I couldn't bear it if anything were to go wrong now."

"Nothing is going to go wrong, my darling," he murmured gathering her into his arms. "I told you long ago what I believed in, and events have proved that it is true. There is a pattern in all these things, otherwise God in His wisdom would not have brought you back to me."

"I know." She nodded and put up her hands, drawing his head down to kiss him on the lips. "It's true, Bill darling. We—we had to go through all we have done in order to teach us how much we love each other." She smiled through sudden tears. "Oh, darling, we are so rich! It—it's up to us to be worthy of what we have been given."

"Amen to that, my dearest," said Bill quietly, and kissed her again.

They walked back to the house together. To both of them it was home, for that is what happiness makes of a place.

It was not just four walls and a roof, but a place that had become hallowed for both of them.

Coming into the narrow hall with Bill, Ronnie got the feeling she always had when she stepped over the threshold—the feeling of safety, of something shared, the feeling of *belonging*. She could not put it into words. She could only smile mistily at Bill and put up her lips for his kiss.

THE END.

A QUICK CURE.

A man went to see his doctor about a pain in his back which had been troubling him all day. The doctor examined him and after a few seconds the pain vanished. The man was very relieved and said: "That's quick work, doctor. Was it rheumatism?" "No," the doctor replied. "Your braces were twisted."

* * *

ETIQUETTE.

Two women, previously unacquainted, were conversing at a reception. After a few conventional remarks, the younger exclaimed, "I cannot think what has upset that tall man over there. He was so attentive a little while ago, but he won't look at me now." "Perhaps," said the other, "he saw me come in. He's my husband."

* * *

WEEP FOR NATURE.

The rejected suitor was standing before her, listening to her elaborate explanations of her decision. "I trust I have made myself quite plain," she said. He sighed. "It's only fair to give nature the credit for that."

RISK ALL FOR LOVE

By Gloria Hayden

MYSTERY MAN AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

IT was a morning in early winter when autumn seems still to be lingering as though loth to go, when the air is not yet sharp with frost and even the seaborne wind is soft as if the warmth of the summer sun had not yet gone.

All over the moorland on the landward side of the cliffs, the furze was showing its golden blossom, purple was still to be seen among the browning heather and the sky was blue.

Walking along the path which skirted the towering cliffs, was a girl of about twenty, her fair hair blowing about her shoulders in the light sea breeze, her cheeks aglow, her blue eyes seeming to reflect the sky above, her head thrown back as if to greet and welcome the disorderly wind.

Down far below the sea flung itself against the granite rocks, to be hurled back again in a smother of sparkling spray. Some of it, reaching high, was blown into the girl's face, much to her delight, for she greatly enjoyed the experience. She seemed the very embodiment of youth and life and tingling vivacity—a very Diana of the wind-swept moorland, in fact, as free as the wind itself and as lovely as the apple-perfumed gorse all around her.

To Julie Lester, immured in a city office for the last nine months or so, this seemed like Paradise, and she was glad now that she had been prevented from taking her annual holiday till late in the year.

On rounding a lichen-covered mass of rock that lay in her path, she paused to look at a lighthouse a short distance ahead of her. As she knew, it was no longer functioning, having been replaced by a new lighthouse on the rocky peninsular farther to the west; she knew, too, that it had been rented by a man who, so far as the little town of Seacombe was concerned, remained a mystery.

"Some say he's an artist or a writer, and others reckon he's engaged on some sort of Government work that's terribly secret." Julie's aunt had told her on the first day of her arrival. "Nobody knows for certain what he is, so you can believe whichever you like."

"But what," Julie had asked, somewhat intrigued by this mystery man, "does he look like, Aunt Mary?"

"Well, I've only seen him once, my dear," her aunt had replied. "I'd say he was rather good-looking if it hadn't been for the scowl on his face as if he hated the sight of his fellow creatures."

"Is he young or old, auntie?"

"Oh, I'd say he's about twenty-five—much too young to look as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. I'm told his name is Roger Dale. He's seldom ever seen in the town." Aunt Mary added. "When he does leave the lighthouse, it's in a sports car and he drives at an alarming speed over the moorland roads."

Now, as she stood with her back against the sun-warmed rock, gazing at the lighthouse, it seemed to Julie a queer sort of place for a person to live in. It must be rather frightening for anyone to be there alone on a dark winter's night with a gale howling about it and a turbulent sea raging below.

Suddenly she became aware of a man coming towards her. In one hand he carried a number of fish strung together; in the other a coil of line. Tall and well-built, he

was darkly handsome in a Spanish sort of way, with brown eyes and raven-black hair.

Julie recognised him at once as Alec Wrexham whom she had met at a local dance on the previous night. He was now wearing the blue knitted jersey and the coarse serge trousers of a fisherman.

"Good morning, Miss Lester," he greeted her as he drew near. "It's a bit blowy up here this morning, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's very delightful all the same," Julie replied smilingly.

"Aye, it's pleasant enough now," he said. "But when the weather breaks—as it's likely to pretty soon—and the wind comes blustering in from the sea, it's not exactly the place you'd choose for a walk."

His eyes, sombre and brooding at first, had now lighted up and Julie could not help but read admiration in them. She had not as yet fallen in love with the young man, but she admitted to herself that it would be quite easy for her to do so. According to what her aunt had told her, almost every marriageable girl in Seacombe had fallen for him, but so far he appeared to be heart-whole.

For Alec Wrexham was not just an ordinary fisherman who lived by his trade. He owned two boats which, in the summer months, he used for taking passengers on pleasure trips, and in the winter for fishing. Moreover, he was the owner of several houses in the town and was what local folk called a "warm man", though there were some who wondered how he managed to make so much money out of his two boats.

"It must be very lonely in that old lighthouse," Julie remarked. "Not too bad in the summer, I suppose, but rather terrifying in the winter."

"Oh, but I don't suppose Mr. Dale will remain there over the winter," said Alec. "He'll probably go back to London as soon as this fine spell breaks."

"Who and what is the young man?" Julie asked curiously. "I've heard different things from different people."

Wrexham shrugged.

"Some say one thing, some another," he answered evasively. "If you ask my opinion, he's just daft."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Wrexham?"

"Well, who in his right senses would live in an old lighthouse, I should like to know?" he countered. "Can't be very comfortable living there, especially in bad weather with a nor-easter howling round it."

"Perhaps the young man can't afford to live anywhere else," Julie suggested.

"Oh no, it's not that," said Wrexham. "He's got a car—and plenty of money, too, by all accounts. Sometimes he goes around looking like a tramp and at other times he's dressed up to the nines. No, he's just daft, I reckon, Miss Lester."

"But quite harmless, apparently," Julie remarked jestingly.

"Aye, he's harmless enough so far," muttered Wrexham. "Are you walking back to the town, Miss Lester?"

"Not yet," she answered. "It's too early for lunch, and it's so lovely up here that I should hate to lose a moment of it."

"I expect you'll miss it all very much when you go back to London, Miss Lester?"

"Yes, indeed I shall," Julie said. "The thought of going back to dreary office work makes me shudder."

"Would you like to live here in Seacombe?" Wrexham queried, smiling at her.

"Yes, I certainly should, Mr. Wrexham,

but that's impossible, I'm afraid. I have my living to earn, you see."

"Aye, but you wouldn't if you were married, would you?"

"But—I'm not married, Mr. Wrexham," she returned laughingly.

"Nor even engaged, if it's not an impertinent question to ask?" he probed.

"Well, if it interests you, the answer is no," she replied.

"Most of those London chaps must have pretty poor eyesight, I reckon," he said, grinning at her.

Julie laughed. It might have been a clumsy compliment, but it was a compliment, all the same, Julie told herself.

"I'm in no hurry," he went on. "Let's sit down for a few minutes since you're not in any hurry, either, shall we, Miss Lester?"

Julie tried to think of some excuse not to accede to his suggestion, but could find none. So she sat down on the springy turf.

"I rather think I can guess what is passing in your mind," he said, smiling at her quizzically, as he settled down beside her.

"You're not going to tell me you're a thought-reader, are you?" she asked, with a forced little laugh.

"Oh, no, I'm no more a thought-reader than anyone else with eyes in their head," he said.

"Well, and what was I thinking?" she challenged.

"You were thinking that I'd be a nicer chap to know if I wasn't just an ordinary fisherman, weren't you?" he answered bluntly.

"No, of course not," she exclaimed laughingly, and felt her cheeks grow hot because he had divined her thoughts so accurately.

"That's what you say, but it's not what you think," he said, grinning at her. "Anyway, I am a fisherman part of my time, not because I have to be, but because it suits me." He paused, then went on—"As a matter of fact, I could buy up a good part of Seacombe if I chose to do so. People hereabouts know that I've got a bit of money, but they'd get a shock if they knew how much," he added confidentially.

"What a fortunate young man you are, Mr. Wrexham!" she remarked jestingly. "But why do you wish to confide such a secret to me, may I ask?"

He did not answer for a moment, but sat staring out to sea, his eyes narrowed. Then, turning to her, he said—

"Because, Miss Lester, I want you to know that I'm not a chap who depends on the sea for a living. When I marry, my wife will have all the money she needs—aye, and a good deal more besides."

Julie was now beginning to regret that she had consented to stay there with him, for the conversation had suddenly become very embarrassing and she tried hard to think of some way of breaking it off. Even so, she was not quite indifferent to his swarthy handsomeness, and his almost aggressive masculinity.

"How very interesting, Mr. Wrexham!" she remarked smilingly.

"I'm not one of those city chaps who can talk smoothly and say pretty things," he continued. "It's not my way to beat about the bush. When I want a thing, I lay a straight course for it. I don't know very much about you, Miss Lester, nor you about me. But one thing I do know and it is this—I've fallen in love with you!"

"Mr. Wrexham!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Nay, please don't go up in the air like that," he said. "After all, to tell a girl you love her isn't an insult, you know."

"No, of course not, but I—but I——" Julie began when he interrupted her.

"I let out my secret too suddenly, eh?" he said, grinning at her. "I suppose I should have felt my way, taking soundings first, so to speak. Well, I reckon it would come to the same thing in the end, however much I tacked and veered. But look, Miss Lester, I'm not expecting you to give me a straight answer now, for that wouldn't be quite fair of me. All I ask is that you should think it over."

Slowly he rose to his feet and picked up his fishing-tackle.

"Well, I'll be getting along now," he said, smiling down at her. "Please don't take offence at what I've told you Miss Lester."

"No, of course not," she murmured, a little shakily. "On the contrary, I—I'm very much flattered Mr. Wrexham."

"Now listen," he went on, "can't we do away with this 'Mister' and 'Miss' business? Sounds a bit Victorian to me. My name is Alec, and yours is Julie. Have you any objection?"

Julie shook her head.

"Good," he said, his face lighting up. "Then I'll be seeing you later on, Julie." "Very well—Alec," she returned smilingly.

She watched him as he walked along the cliff path with that slightly rolling gait common to seamen. A fine figure of a man—the sort of man any girl might feel proud to call her fiancé. And he could be hers if she wanted him, Julie reflected, smiling to herself.

But she wasn't quite sure about it yet. In the meantime she must be careful not to give him too much encouragement, for instinct told her that Alec Wrexham could be a very dangerous man if he felt that he had been tricked or made a fool of.

Presently Julie rose to her feet and continued on her way towards the lighthouse, wondering about the strange man who had elected to live in such a stark, pillar of a place ahead of her.

"But perhaps he has made it quite snug and cosy inside," she murmured to herself.

There was no garden of any sort, no visible attempt to soften the grim austerity of the place unless it were a small wooden shed near the entrance that gave it a slight domestic touch. On ground level was a low, squat door, evidently built to withstand the fiercest of gales.

Julie wondered if the mysterious tenant were in there now, but there was no means of telling. Having stood staring at the place for a short time, she walked on until she came to what looked like some rough steps hewn out of the rock and leading to a stretch of golden sand below. Being in an adventurous mood, she climbed down the steps and reached the sand.

Here she lingered for awhile, watching tiny crabs scuttle back into the sea as though overtaken by sudden panic, and peering into the pools which had been left by the tide in the fragments of rock. Suddenly a wavelet came tumbling in farther than the rest and swirled round her ankles.

It was then that she realised the tide was coming in fast, and feeling suddenly alarmed at the thought of being cut off, Julie ran towards the steps. Still a little panicky, she started to climb them, but she found it was harder going up than it had been coming down, and far more exacting. She wondered desperately whether she would be able to reach the cliff top which seemed so far above her head.

She had nearly reached it, when her foot slipped and she only saved herself from falling by grasping a piece of rock that

jutted out within her reach. At the same moment, a sharp pain shot through her ankle and she involuntarily uttered a shrill cry.

Julie feared that she must have wrenched her ankle or sprained it, for when she tried ever so gingerly to put a little weight on it, her ankle gave way and the same agonising pain shot through it again. How was she going to manage to reach the top of the cliff, she asked herself in desperation.

For it needed two feet to negotiate those steep, rugged steps, and two hands to cling on while doing it.

Fighting back the panic which threatened to possess her, Julie shouted at the top of her voice in the hope that someone might be passing and would hear her. But the only reply she got was the raucous screaming of a swarm of gulls circling overhead.

"Oh dear, I can't cling on here for ever," she muttered to herself, in an agony of despair. "Soon I shall fall and either be drowned or smashed on the rocks."

For now she could hear the waves splashing against the foot of the cliffs below, and remembered that the tide came in with startling rapidity. The sands where she had stood a few minutes ago would, no doubt, be now submerged to a depth of several feet and the water was still rising.

She shouted again, but only to hear the mocking cries of the gulls in response. Despairing sobs broke from her as she realised that she could stay there for the rest of the day without being discovered.

Even if some fishing boat passed within sight on its way to or from the harbour, it was scarcely likely that anyone would see her, and the overhang of the cliffs would prevent her from being noticed by anyone walking along the path above.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she moaned. "My strength will soon give out!"

In desperation, she shouted once more, and this time she heard a voice call—

"Hullo, there!"

"Help!" Julie yelled. "I—I'm on the steps and can't get back! Oh, please come and rescue me!"

Next moment she became aware of a man's face peering down at her over the edge of the cliff.

"Hang on a moment longer and I'll fetch a rope," he cried, and then disappeared.

Then, a few moments later, the free end of a stout rope came swaying down towards her.

"Make the rope fast round your waist and then hang on to it," the man shouted.

Julie did this, and partly by her own efforts, and partly by those of the unknown rescuer, she succeeded in reaching the top of the cliff. She lay quite still for several moments to regain her breath, and the man unfastened the rope around her waist. Then, forgetting her injured ankle, she made to rise, but only to fall back with a gasp of pain.

"Hurt your ankle, eh?" the man said, and almost before she knew what was happening to her, Julie found herself caught up in a pair of strong arms.

Now she could see her rescuer's face. It was ruggedly handsome, with a firm, square chin and a pair of piercing blue eyes. It suddenly dawned on her that he must be the mysterious tenant of the lighthouse.

He carried her through a door into a sort of vestibule and placed her on a wooden couch.

"Now let me have a look and find out what's wrong?" he said, kneeling down and examining the injured ankle.

Strangely enough, his probing fingers did not cause her any pain.

"No bones broken, fortunately," he announced. "You have probably wrenched your ankle," he added, "and that is sometimes worse than breaking it. Where do you

live, may I ask? You're not a native of Seacombe, are you?"

"No," Julie murmured, and gave him the address of her aunt's house.

"This should be a lesson to you, my girl," he said, as he rose to his feet. "I don't think you will want to try scaling a perpendicular cliff again in a hurry."

"No, I certainly shan't," Julie agreed. "I really don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come to my rescue."

"Nor do I," he said grimly. "Now if you'll wait here for a moment or two, I'll get out my car and drive you to your home."

He then left her, and she glanced round about her. The room—if it could be called such—was bare of anything that afforded a clue as to how he occupied himself, or what his domestic arrangements were like.

Julie found herself contrasting him with Alec Wrexham. The two men were totally unlike in every respect, except in the matter of age. One was dark and the other fair, and their manner and speech were distinctly different. While Alec spoke in the way a fisherman might be expected to do, this man spoke with a cultured accent.

Presently, Julie heard the sound of a car draw up outside, and a moment later, the young man entered and stood for a second gazing down at her.

"You haven't told me your name yet, have you?" he remarked, smilingly. "Mine is Roger Dale."

"And mine is Julie Lester," she said, smiling back at him.

"Good," he said. "Now we know each other. Are you ready?"

Julie nodded, and once more he placed his arms around her and lifted her up as easily as though she were a child.

Outside a small, red sports car was waiting, and having placed her in the seat next the driver's, he asked if she were comfortable.

"Quite, thank you, Mr. Dale," she answered, with a wan smile.

"Because if not," he said. "I could remove one of the seats so that you could stretch out your leg."

"No, I'm quite comfortable as I am," she quickly assured him.

"Might be a good idea to take you straight to a doctor," he suggested, regarding her meditatively. "I happen to know a little about doctoring myself, but an injured ankle is sometimes a rather tricky job."

"You mean, I suppose, that you're not quite a doctor yet?" she remarked jestingly.

He laughed.

"It was once my intention to become one, and I was a medical student," he answered. "But I gave it up because I found a job I liked better."

"I see," Julie said. "I thought there was something rather professional in the way you felt my ankle," she added, a mischievous gleam in her blue eyes.

"Thanks for the compliment, even though it is undeserved," he returned with a grin. "By the way," he went on, pausing as he was about to climb in beside her, "what on earth were you up to, climbing that dangerous cliff?"

"I wasn't up to anything. I just thought I'd like to walk along the sands as the tide was out," she answered.

"About as futile a reason as anyone could imagine," he muttered, sliding under the steering wheel.

"That's not very polite of you, Mr. Dale," she said.

"It's true, anyway, seeing that you risked your life," he retorted, pressing the self-starter.

The car moved forward over the path rendered bumpy by clumps of heather and the exposed roots of gorse bushes, though he drove slowly in order to avoid these as much as possible. Even so, Julie was unable

to stifle a little gasp of pain whenever the car gave a lurch.

"Sorry," Dale murmured. "It'll be easier when we reach a proper road."

"Oh, but I think you're managing wonderfully," said Julie.

"Are you holidaying down here?" he asked suddenly. "If so, it seems a queer time of the year to choose."

"I didn't choose it," she said, and then proceeded to tell him how it had come about that she had been forced to take her holiday so late in the year. "And I couldn't transfer this year's holiday to next year and so make it twice as long, because that would have upset all the office arrangements," she further explained.

"And do you like it down here, Miss Lester?"

"Oh, yes, I love it," she answered enthusiastically, "I think I'd like to live here always."

"I expect you'd soon get fed up and yearn for the bright lights of London," he said.

"All I see of the 'bright lights', as you call them, is a glimpse as I join the rush-hour crowds for the Tube. You see, I live—or rather, I have my digs—at Finchley."

"Never been there. It's a little beyond Highgate, isn't it?" he questioned.

"Two stations past," she told him.

Now they had reached a proper road and the violent bumping stopped. Once or twice before then they had been jerked against each other as the car lurched and Julie had experienced a strange and rather disquieting little thrill.

He pulled up in front of a doctor's house and carried Julie into the surgery. The doctor confirmed Roger's diagnosis of a wrenched ankle, and did what was necessary with strappings and bandages. Then, in spite of her protests, Roger carried her out to his car again.

"You heard the doctor say you mustn't put any weight on your foot for the time being, didn't you?" he said, "and how can you walk without doing that?"

"I could have leaned on your shoulder and hopped on one leg," Julie suggested.

"Very well, we'll try that next time," he promised, as the car moved off.

A few minutes later they stopped outside her Aunt Mary's house, and Julie hoisted herself out of the car. By placing one arm round Roger's neck and resting her weight on him, she managed to reach the front door.

She was just about to knock when a voice she recognised as Alec Wrexham's reached her. Turning her head, she saw him standing at the garden gate, a scowling look on his face.

"What's happened?" he demanded gruffly, hurrying towards them.

"This young lady has met with an accident while trying to scale the cliff near the lighthouse," Roger answered for her.

"What made you do such a silly thing as that?" Alec asked.

"Because it was what I wanted to do," Julie answered, resenting his hectoring tone.

"And you've broken your ankle by the look of it?" he queried.

"Not broken, just wrenched," Roger politely explained.

Julie had knocked at the door and it was answered by her aunt.

"It's all right, Aunt Mary, I've only hurt my ankle a little," Julie said quickly, seeing the scared look on her aunt's face.

Roger was about to help her indoors, when Wrexham rudely brushed him aside, and picked her up and carried her into the front room.

"Thank you, Mr. Wrexham," said Aunt Mary, as he placed her niece on the couch.

"I think you behaved outrageously, Mr. Wrexham!" Julie muttered angrily. "Fancy

brushing Mr. Dale aside like that!"

Wrexham shrugged, then turned and walked out of the house.

SHOCKS FOR JULIE

THE injury to Julie's ankle proved less serious than was at first thought, and in a day or two she was able to get about again.

One morning, while she was sitting in the harbour watching the fishing boats preparing for sea, Alec Wrexham came up to her. She had not seen him since his rude behaviour to Roger Dale, and her anger had now cooled down somewhat.

Though she would never have admitted it, Julie had been secretly flattered at his eagerness to carry her indoors himself. As for Roger Dale, she had not yet made up her mind about him. It was true that he had rescued her from a perilous position—as, of course, any other man who had chanced to come along at the right moment would have done.

"Look, Julie," said Alec, as he sat down by her side on the wooden bench, "I'm sorry I was a bit abrupt with you the other day."

"Abrupt?" she repeated. "You were more than that—you were positively offensive. Mr. Dale had practically saved my life, and—"

"He didn't do any more than anyone else would have done," Wrexham broke in. "It wasn't as if he'd risked his life. It was just a matter of fetching a rope and lowering to you."

"All the same, that doesn't excuse your behaviour, Alec," she retorted.

He looked so woebegone—rather like a small boy being punished—that Julie's heart softened towards him. She knew, of course, that he was jealous of Roger Dale, but how could she blame him for that? If Alec really was in love with her, it was only natural that he should be jealous.

"In any case, Alec, I think you ought to apologise to Mr. Dale," she said.

"Oh, no, I've apologised to you, and I'm not going to apologise to Dale! Anyway," Alec added, a little tactlessly, "I had a better right than he had to carry you indoors."

"What right?" demanded Julie.

"Well, you're my girl, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, I'm certainly not," she declared.

"I know you told me that you were in love with me, but I never said I was in love with you."

Wrexham made a despairing gesture.

"I—I seem to be saying and doing everything wrong," he said. "I reckon it's because I've never loved a girl before and don't know the right way to act."

Sitting there looking so dejected with the wind stirring his curly black hair, Julie's heart was stirred. He was so handsome, too, in that robust, almost savage way of his, she told herself.

She compared him in her mind to Roger Dale. Roger was good-looking, too, but in a different way—less aggressively, as she put it to herself. You didn't have to look twice at Alec to see that he was handsome, but in Roger's case, it seemed to dawn on you gradually. It was, perhaps, something more inward than outward.

"I think it would be better not to talk about the matter any more, Alec," she said.

"Does that mean you've forgiven me, Julie?" he asked eagerly.

"I have nothing to forgive, Mr. Dale was the injured party," she said.

"Oh, well Dale can look after himself," Alec muttered belligerently. "If he didn't like my shoving him aside, he knows what he can do about it."

"Please don't talk like a bully!" Julie protested, repelled by his arrogance.

"Come to that, Julie, if a girl's worth

anything, she's worth fighting for," he said.

"Fighting for!" she repeated. "I had no idea you could be so foolish, Alec. What makes you think that Mr. Dale would want to fight for me? He had never even seen me until he came to my rescue that day."

"Yes, but that doesn't make any difference," he returned doggedly. "A chap can fall in love with a girl the first moment he sets eyes on her."

"Oh, come, you are being absurdly jealous and without any cause," Julie told him laughingly. "Neither of us has the slightest reason to believe that Mr. Dale has given me a single thought since then. Besides I'm not yours to be jealous about, you know. Please remember that, Mr. Wrexham."

She saw his face redden and his eyes glow with a fierce light that sent a little shudder through her. For the first time Julie felt a little frightened of him.

"I see the idea now," he rapped. "You think you can play me off against Dale, don't you? Well, let me tell you this, my girl, if I see Dale talking to you again, I'll give him something to think about!"

Julie rose to her feet and turned on him.

"How dare you talk to me like this?" she demanded indignantly. "As if I belonged to you, as if you had any rights over me! I—I don't want to speak to you again or have anything more to do with you, Alec Wrexham!"

As she was about to walk on, he reached out and caught her by the arm. His face was white beneath its tan, and there was a threatening look in his eyes.

"Don't think you can play that game with me, my girl," he hissed. "I'm not a dog to be patted one moment and kicked the next, you know. You can keep those tricks for fellows like Dale, or one of your tame city clerks!"

"Let me go!" Julie cried, vainly trying to free her arm from his grip.

She looked wildly about her wondering if she dared call for help. But they were hidden from view of the people on the quay by the tall groyne under which they had been seated.

"Let me go, I tell you!" she cried again, and this time there was a note of panic in her voice.

Wrexham gave a sarcastic laugh and drew her to him.

"Now is the time for Roger Dale to come along and rescue you like the hero does in the cinema!" he mocked. "And if he did come, I'd knock him cold in two seconds."

"Oh, let me go!" she pleaded breathlessly, but he only laughed and held her to him tighter still.

"Yes, I'll let you go, when it suits me—when I've had my fill of kisses," he said. "No woman ever really loves a man till he's mastered her, and that's what I'm going to do to you," he added forcing her head back so that she was obliged to look up into his face. "You'll love me all the more for it presently, my girl."

Julie tried to loosen his hold by pressing both hands against his chest, but she might as well have tried to free herself from steel bands.

"Oh, I hate you—!" she breathed. "I hate you!"

"Aye, you think you do at the moment maybe, but hate's only love turned inside out," he said, with a triumphant grin. "Now kiss me."

"No, I'd rather die first!" she gasped, and tried desperately to turn her head aside but all to no purpose.

"You think so, but before you die I'm going to show you how to live!" he told her savagely. "And you don't know what that's like yet, shut up in an office with a typewriter for a pal."

Suddenly his lips were pressed hard on

hers, bruising them with feverish, burning kisses that filled her with loathing. But Julie was too exhausted even to struggle.

"That's how a girl should be kissed, and how every girl wants to be kissed," he muttered, when, at last, he drew his face away from hers.

"You—you beast!" she gasped. "I never thought it possible to hate anyone as I hate you!"

"Hate me as much as you like, my dear girl, because presently that hate will turn to love," he said, his eyes seeming to bore into her very soul. "When I've mastered you, as I mean to do, you'll come creeping into my arms."

He then let go of her so suddenly that she staggered and nearly fell. She was trembling with humiliation and rage at the affront he had put upon her. He stood gazing at her for a moment, amusement and triumph in his eyes.

"Well, I must go now," he said, "but I shall be seeing you again quite soon, and you're going to love me, don't forget!" he added, then climbed over the groin and was gone.

Still dazed and trembling, Julie picked up her handbag which had fallen to the ground, took a handkerchief from it and started to wipe her lips furiously, as if in doing so, she could wipe away the memory of the man's hateful kisses.

"Oh, how I hate the brute!" she kept muttering to herself, and then she sat down once more to regain control of herself before meeting anyone.

At last, having repaired her complexion and regained something of her composure, Julie rose to her feet. Her first impulse was to invent some excuse for going back to London on the following day. Then her spirit rebelled at the thought. No, she told herself, she would not curtail her holiday on Wrexham's account and give him the satisfaction of thinking she was afraid of meeting him again.

She had another reason for staying on there, too. She wanted to see Roger Dale again. He was so unlike this other man, and would never for a moment dream of treating her as Wrexham had done. She recalled how gently he had felt her injured ankle, and how carefully he had carried her in his arms so as to avoid causing her pain.

"I WOULDN'T go very far this afternoon, if I were you, Julie dear," Aunt Mary advised. "It looks to me as if we'd be in for a storm before long. This warm weather we've been having lately isn't seasonable, and I'm afraid we'll be bound to pay for it later."

Three days had passed since that desperate encounter with Alec Wrexham, and Julie had not met him since, though she had caught sight of him several times in the harbour working with the other fishermen. But if she had taken pains to avoid him, he seemed to have been equally careful to avoid meeting her.

Julie tried to bring herself to believe that this was because he was thoroughly ashamed of himself, and was hoping that she would forget all about it—at any rate, to forgive him if he only gave her time.

Yet instinct warned her that this was not really the case, and that his avoidance of her was not due to remorse, but probably to the realization that he could never win her now, however hard he tried.

"Very well, auntie, I'll just walk a short way along the cliffs," Julie said. "Anyway," she added, glancing out of the window, "I don't see any black clouds at present."

"But they come in quickly over the sea, my dear, so you had better take a raincoat with you," Aunt Mary warned.

But the weather looked so bright, and it was so warm, that Julie decided not to take a raincoat with her when she set off for her walk along the cliffs. She had not been in that direction since her accident, nor had she seen anything of Roger Dale.

Anyway, she told herself, there would be no harm in strolling as far as the lighthouse and if she did chance to meet the young man again, she could thank him properly for having rescued her and taken her home.

But by the time she reached the top of the cliffs, Julie began to wish she had brought a raincoat, for the sun, was now dipping westwards and there was a chilly nip in the wind as it blew in from the sea. So she quickened her pace in order to keep warm until she reached the boulder under which she and Alec Wrexham had sat when he first spoke of his love for her.

On arriving there, she sat down under the lee of the boulder and gazed out to sea. She noticed that several fishing boats were making for the harbour, which rather surprised her as they had only put out that morning. Yet the sun was still shining and the sea quite calm.

Julie supposed that she must have dozed off to sleep, for when she opened her eyes, the scene had completely changed. Now there were purplish-black clouds building up in the sky the sun had disappeared and the wind dropped. Also, it had become hot and oppressive and she now guessed that the fishing boats had been hurrying home in order to escape a storm.

She rose to her feet with the intention of hastening back home before the storm broke. Suddenly there was a dazzling flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder which seemed to shake the cliffs. Next moment, the skies opened to let fall a deluge of tropical intensity, and Julie was drenched to the skin.

There came another vivid lightning flash, followed by a shattering peal of thunder. Julie hated thunderstorms—they terrified her—and here she was on the cliff-top with no possible shelter and nearly two miles away from home.

Suddenly she remembered the lighthouse, which was only a hundred yards or so distant.

Should she go there and ask Roger Dale if she might shelter till the worst of the storm had passed? Julie asked herself.

Another blinding flash of lightning decided her. Almost hysterical now with terror, she set off through the downpour, stumbling along and scarcely able to see where she was going. At last she reached the lighthouse and hammered at the solid-looking door.

There was no answer, so she hammered at it again with her clenched fists. But still there was no response.

"Oh dear, what am I to do?" she cried despairingly, and hammered frantically once more on the door.

Another flash of lightning almost blinded her for a moment, and then came the crash of thunder that roared and boomed and crackled overhead like the opening of a terrific bombardment.

In sheer desperation, Julie seized the handle of the door and turned it, and, to her astonishment, the door opened.

She stepped inside, then slammed it shut quickly before the next flash of lightning came. For a few moments she stood quite still, recovering her breath and seeking to steady her jangled nerves. It was so dark that she could only see the stairs that went up to the rooms above. She supposed that Roger must be somewhere up there and that the noise of the storm had prevented him from hearing her knocking on the door.

The question now was—should she go up

and announce her presence, or should she wait till the storm was over and then creep quietly away? But the storm might last a long time, she reminded herself, even into the night perhaps, so she decided to risk going up and let Roger know she was there.

She climbed the stairs, and opening a door at the top, found herself gazing into a circular room very much like the one below, but there was no sign of Roger or anyone else. She hesitated to go up the next flight of stairs, thinking that they may lead to his bedroom and he might be in there fast asleep.

She took another look round the room. There was a desk with a typewriter on it, a table and several chairs. Two book-cases, slightly circular to fit the walls, were filled with books, and everywhere, including the floor, were papers, magazines and pages of typescript lying about.

Reassured now by finding herself under shelter and no longer exposed to the storm, Julie's courage and her spirits began to rise, and she decided to venture up the next flight of stairs.

This she did and knocked on the door at the top of the stairway, but without getting an answer. Then she tried the handle, and the door opened. Peering in cautiously, she saw that the room was unoccupied, and that there was a camp bed against the wall.

Julie shut the door again and made her way down the stairs. Clearly Roger was out, but since he had not locked the outer door, it seemed obvious that he had not gone far and would soon be back.

"Well, now that I'm here, I may as well try and make myself as comfortable as possible," she told herself philosophically.

The storm had not abated. Every few seconds the room was lit up by lightning flashes and the whole lighthouse seemed to vibrate with each deafening clap of thunder. So Julie decided to go upstairs again.

She found a warm dressing-gown in a hanging cupboard, and taking off her drenched garments she gave herself a brisk rub down with one of Roger's towels, and slipped into the dressing-gown.

Now feeling more comfortable—and a little reckless—she climbed up the next flight of stairs and found herself in a small, circular kitchenette. In a few moments she had the kettle boiling on the primus stove and made herself a cup of tea.

"I wonder what Roger will say when he comes back and finds me here and sees how I've been making free with his abode?" she asked herself a little anxiously.

But he would understand, of course, when she had explained everything to him. All the same, she hoped the storm would soon die down so that she could get back home. Poor Aunt Mary would be frantic with anxiety if she didn't return before nightfall.

But the storm did not die down. It continued with unabated fierceness until afternoon gave place to evening, and evening to night. Julie's nerves became edgy once more. It had been bad enough in daylight, but now that night had fallen and the room was lit up every few seconds by bluish—white streaks of lightning, and the very place itself quivering to each thunder clap, she was terrified.

No one would dream of seeking for her in the lighthouse, of course, and she dared not leave while the storm was still at its height. If only Roger would return, it wouldn't be so bad, she told herself. They could at least keep each other company. But if he, too, had been caught in the storm, he would probably have put up for the night at some hotel.

AFTER a night of fitful, uneasy "cat-naps", Julie woke to find that the

storm had passed and that a wet-looking sun was penetrating fragments of storm-rent cloud scurrying overhead. She made herself another cup of tea, and put on her still-damp clothes, hoping she would be able to reach home before a search had been set afoot for her.

She went down the stairs, but when she tried to open the outer door, she was dismayed to find she could not do so. It had been locked—and from the outside!

Julie felt as if her brain were reeling. The door couldn't have locked itself, and who would have come through last night's awful storm to lock it? Had it been Roger, surely he would have come inside! He would not have just locked the door and gone away again.

She shook the door in the hope that the lock might give, but all in vain.

In the depths of despair, she climbed the stairs again, and through one of the tiny windows she could see boats putting out from the harbour.

Suddenly she heard the sound of a car and ran down the stairs, thinking that it might be Roger. The key grated in the lock and the door opened.

Roger gasped when he saw her standing there. He stared at her for a long moment as though she were a ghost.

"Julie!" he exclaimed at last. "What on earth is the meaning of this?"

Breathlessly she told him how she had been overtaken by the storm, and having found the lighthouse door unlocked she had gone in.

"And—when I tried to let myself out this morning," she stammered on. "I found the door locked and I was unable to open it."

Roger nodded thoughtfully.

"I had to go into Blessington to meet a friend from London who was arriving by the afternoon train," he explained. "And when I had gone some little distance, I suddenly remembered that I had not locked the outer door of this place, and I didn't like the idea of anyone entering in my absence. So I turned back."

"Then it must have been while you were on your way back here that I found the door unlocked and went in," Julie said.

"Yes, that is so, apparently," Roger agreed. "So I locked the door—not dreaming that there was anybody inside, of course—and then set out for Blessington again."

"But, Roger, what prevented you from coming back here last night?" Julie asked.

"Well, my friend did not arrive by that train after all," he said, "and I waited till the next. But he did not come by that either, so I decided to return home. About three miles from Blessington, however, I had a puncture, and I couldn't do anything about it because of the dreadful downpour. Fortunately, there was a barn close at hand, so I took shelter in that, hoping the storm would soon lift."

"But the rain didn't stop," he added, "and I fell asleep on a bale of hay. When I woke up, it was daylight and the storm had passed. Then when I had attended to the puncture, I drove home and found you here."

"Yes, Roger, I—I had to find shelter somewhere," she said, "and this was the only place. I was in despair when I knocked on the door and no one answered. It was only by chance that I happened to turn the handle and found that the door was not locked."

"I see," he said. "Well, perhaps it's a good thing, that I did forget to lock the door when I went out. Goodness knows what might have happened to you, my dear girl, if you'd had to spend the night out there on the cliffs."

"I think I should have died of fright," Julie murmured.

"Well, I suppose I'd better make a cup of tea for you and get you something to eat," he said. "Then I'll drive you home, as I expect your aunt will be feeling very anxious about you."

"Yes, I'm quite sure she will," Julie agreed.

"Tell me, Julie," he went on, "how are you going to account for your absence all night?"

"By telling the truth, of course—that I found shelter from the storm in this lighthouse," she replied.

"Yes, but how about me?" he asked. "Supposing, when the story gets out, people think that I was here too and that we spent the night together? No one saw me go into that barn or leave it. No one, as far as I am aware, saw me after I left the railway station at Blessington last night. In fact, Julie, I have no sort of an alibi whatever."

They stared at each other for a moment or two, each aware that Julie's good name was in the gravest danger. Then Roger spoke again:

"There's only one thing to do, as far as I can see, Julie," he said. "You had better make up your mind to—to marry me."

At first, she thought Roger was joking, then, from the grave look on his face, she realised that he was perfectly serious. Her heart leapt with joy for a moment, then sank again as she remembered that, though he had suggested that he would marry her, he had not even hinted that he was in love with her.

"No, Roger," she said, calling on her pride. "I can't let you do that."

Before he had time to reply, there was a loud knock at the outer door.

"Quick, up there!" Roger ordered, pointing to the staircase, and without stopping to think Julie darted up the winding stairs.

She heard the door open, and next moment, recognised Alec Wrexham's voice.

"Well, what can I do for you, Wrexham?" she heard Roger ask.

"I want to know where Julie is?" the other man replied, a menacing note in his voice.

"Is that so?" Roger said. "And what makes you think she is here? As a matter of fact, I only got back from Blessington a few moments ago."

"But that doesn't answer my question," Wrexham said. "Julie Lester was seen going up the cliff path yesterday afternoon just before the storm broke. So, unless she's fallen over the cliffs, she must have spent the night here."

"Anyway, I wasn't here last night, so I don't know what happened to the girl," Roger retorted.

"All the same, how do you account for that?" Wrexham shot back at him, pointing to the handbag which Julie had forgotten in her haste to rush up the stairs.

Roger then noticed the bag for the first time.

"It's Miss Lester's bag," Wrexham went on accusingly. "I've seen her carrying it several times."

"What business is it of yours, anyway?" demanded Roger, beginning to lose his temper. "Who the devil are you to come here with your bluster and start cross-examining me? Get out of here at once!"

"I'll get out when I've seen Julie, and not before," Wrexham said defiantly.

"You'll get out now," growled Roger.

Julie, peering from the landing above, saw the two men set about each other. At first, the odds looked all in the burly fisherman's favour. He was taller and of much heavier build than Roger. On the other hand, Roger was much more agile, and though Julie was not aware of it—

had been an amateur light-weight boxer at his university.

So although a heavy blow from Wrexham might easily have knocked his opponent out, he failed to "contact" and instead he received a vicious punch on the chin which sent him sprawling on the floor.

Roger made to help him up, but brushing aside his proffered hand, Wrexham managed to stagger to his feet.

"I'll make you pay for this if it's the last thing I ever do," he hissed at Roger between clenched teeth.

"All right, but get out of here," snapped Roger.

Cursing under his breath, he turned and hurried off, when the door had closed on him Julie came running down the stairs, her face white with strain and apprehension.

"You had better go away from here at once, Roger," she said shakily. "If you don't, that man will do you some harm."

Roger shrugged.

"Not so much harm as I've done him, I fancy," he muttered, looking at his bruised knuckles.

"You—you don't understand, Roger. He won't want to fight you, he'll revenge himself in some other way—some underhand way," Julie warned.

"Have no fear, my dear girl," Roger said laughingly. "Wrexham can do me no harm. You're not suggesting he'll take a pot shot at me one dark night, are you?"

"Oh, Roger, I'm not joking. You evidently don't know the man as well as I do. He's absolutely ruthless and will never forgive you for getting the better of him. So do please listen to me," Julie pleaded.

"I am listening to you, my dear Julie, but you're overwrought and scarcely know what you're saying. I have no doubt that the rotter hates me, but I don't mind that. Now you must let me take you home," Roger added, smiling at her.

Julie sighed. It was obvious that he did not take her warning seriously. Yet she felt quite certain that Wrexham would plot to do Roger some grievous harm.

"Well, now, how about this proposal of marriage of mine?" Roger asked, as they went out to the car. "It's the only way I can see for preventing scandal and saving your good name, Julie."

Though she knew now that she loved him, no word of love for her had passed his lips. He was offering to marry her out of charity, Julie told herself, and no girl with any vestige of pride could agree to such a thing.

"No, Roger," she said, hesitatingly. "I—I cannot marry you. Not," she added, trying to steady her voice, "that I'm ungrateful to you, or that I do not appreciate your chivalry."

"There's no chivalry about it," he said, as he opened the door of the car for her. "Still, if you won't marry me, Julie, I can't make you."

He pressed the self-starter, and the car moved off, bumping and lurching over the uneven ground. Again Julie thrilled whenever they were jerked against each other, and her heart cried out to him to say that he loved her. If only he would do that, and she could believe him, she would marry him whenever he liked, and with joy in her heart.

"Roger," she said presently, "couldn't you make it convenient to go away for a while?"

He laughed.

"Is that bug still biting you, Julie?" he asked. "You make it all sound rather like some film story—with me as the hero, I suppose, and Wrexham as the villain. Cloak-and-dagger stuff, eh?"

"I—I am serious, Roger, I really am," she said.

"Yes, I've no doubt you are, Julie. But that's because you have just had a pretty bad time of it and your nerves are still all on edge. You'll feel better when you've had a good sleep in a comfortable bed. And so shall I," Roger added, stifling a yawn. "Last night was one of the worst nights I've ever spent."

She realised it was quite useless to try and persuade him that he was in any danger, but if Roger wouldn't do anything to safeguard himself, then she must do it for him. The question was—how? It would be no use pleading with Wrexham, for that would only make matters worse and inflame his jealousy still more.

His jealousy! Yes, perhaps that was the answer to her problem, Julie told herself. Evidently, Alec Wrexham hated the other man because he was jealous of him, and his hatred had been intensified by the sound thrashing he had received at Roger's hands. And if she could only appease that jealousy and could convince Wrexham that there was no reason for it, his chief motive for revenging himself on Roger would be removed.

Julie had no idea as to how it was to be done, however. She would have to sink her pride and disguise her detestation of the man, and act a part she hated. But if it meant saving Roger from violence—then it would be well worth the sacrifice.

And what was love if it was not sacrifice?

"YOU swear that what you've told me is true, Julie?" demanded Alec Wrexham.

They had met by chance on the quay. Wrexham had been about to pass her with a scowl, but Julie had stopped him and insisted on his listening to her story of how she came to pass that night of the storm in the lighthouse.

"Yes, Alec, I swear it's true, every word of it," she said. "Roger Dale did not appear until a few minutes before you arrived that morning. He had been detained all night at a place near Blessington because of a punctured tyre."

Wrexham shook his head dubiously. "Can he bring forward proof of that?" he asked.

"Well, no, Alec, and I've already told you why he can't," Julie replied. "Everything happened in the worst possible way—my being locked in the lighthouse, and you and Roger arriving when you did. Of course," she added despairingly, "if you won't believe me, you won't."

"I'd like to, Julie, if I were sure you weren't telling me all this to shield that fellow," muttered Wrexham.

"Why should I want to shield Roger Dale?" she countered. "All I want is that you should be fair to him, Alec."

"But why did Dale tell me you were not in the lighthouse when he knew quite well you were?" he demanded.

"Don't be silly, Alec! Wouldn't you have done the same if you'd been in his place? He knew I'd been there alone all night, but how could he prove that to you? Mr. Dale's one hope was to get me away from there without anybody seeing me."

"And I arrived just at the wrong moment, eh?" jeered Wrexham.

"Well, yes, you did, though you weren't to know that. I ask you again, Alec, what would you have done if you'd been in Roger Dale's place?"

"I reckon I'd have done much the same," he admitted. "But that doesn't prove anything, does it?"

"In other words, Alec, you believe I'm lying to you!" Julie challenged.

"I didn't say that," he said. "I want to believe you, Julie. You know I'm crazy

about you, don't you? If I were sure you hadn't fallen for that other fellow, I'd not worry about anything else."

Evidently, he was beginning to soften. Julie told herself. A little more persuasion and he might forget all about Roger Dale. But he still needed careful handling. A wrong word and all his hatred and jealousy would flare up again.

"Come, Alec," she said smilingly, "let's make it up, shall we? As a matter of fact, both you and Roger Dale lost your tempers, and it was all my fault. If I hadn't gone into the lighthouse to shelter from the storm, there would have been no quarrel, would there?"

Although he smiled back at her, there was still a lingering glint of suspicion in his eyes. If only, Julie thought, she could remove that suspicion, everything would be all right and he would not try and revenge himself on Roger.

"Well, is it a bargain, Alec?" she asked brightly.

"All right," he answered. "I'm beginning to believe what you've told me."

"And it was the truth, Alec, every word of it," she said still smiling at him.

He nodded and they walked on along the quay to which a number of boats were moored. Among them was one of Wrexham's own boats, the *Susan*, which was the smaller of the two he owned.

"Look, Julie," he said, pausing beside the boat. "I'm going out fishing for bait after tea. So what about coming with me? We shan't be away more than a couple of hours or so."

Julie hesitated a moment, wondering whether she dared trust herself with him. Then she realised that if she refused, his suspicions would flare up again and, perhaps, with dire results for Roger. Then—

"All right, Alec," she said, "but I mustn't be back late, especially after the fright I gave Aunt Mary the other night."

"Oh, we'll be back before it's dark," he promised. "Put on a warm coat and meet me on the quay here at five o'clock."

When Julie returned home and told her aunt that she was going out fishing for bait with Alec Wrexham, the old lady seemed quite pleased. Alec, in her eyes, was a most desirable suitor for her niece.

"I hope you won't be late, my dear," she remarked, with a pleased smile. "It gets quite cold about sundown now, though otherwise it's amazingly mild for the time of year."

"Alec has promised me we shan't be late," said Julie.

After tea, she put on a warm coat and went down to the quay. She tried not to feel uneasy about this coming trip with Alec. After all, she told herself, there was nothing to be afraid of, or any reason to believe that he would not behave properly.

He was standing waiting for her beside the boat when she arrived, and the engine was running.

"Welcome aboard the *Susan*!" he said jubilantly, as he helped her to step on to the deck from the quay. "You'd better go and sit aft there in the lee of the wheelhouse where you'll be sheltered from the wind."

Julie made her way aft and found a stool placed ready for her. Wrexham then cast off the mooring rope and stepped into the wheelhouse, leaving the door open so that they could talk.

"I usually have two or three chaps with me when I go fishing," he said, as they edged away from the quay. "But with only bait lines, I can manage all right by myself. The engine doesn't need any looking after once it's warmed up."

Soon they were making for the mouth of the harbour and past other boats riding

at anchor, and with her nose pointing towards the westering sun, the *Susan* began to roll slightly.

"Are you all right?" asked Alec, looking over his shoulder at her from the wheelhouse.

"Yes, thanks," she answered brightly. "What a wonderful view we get from here, Alec!"

To the left and right of the town the cliffs soared up in rugged heights with the sea rolling in and sending up a curtain of foam. The harbour itself looked quite tiny at this distance, almost toy-like, Julie thought. To the westward on top of the cliffs stood the tall, gaunt lighthouse where she had spent that terrible night of the storm.

"Wonder if Roger Dale's there now," Wrexham remarked, following the direction of her gaze. "If he looked out of one of those windows with a telescope he'd be able to see us quite plainly."

Julie was wondering whether, by any chance, Roger was standing at one of the windows at that moment watching the *Susan*. But she didn't think so. She had an idea that he wasted little of his time looking out of the window.

"Well, now, I reckon we'll anchor here and cast the lines," said Wrexham, coming out of the wheelhouse.

Having shut off the engine, he dropped anchor, and released the baited lines, which were coiled up in a tub. This done, he sat down on the deck beside Julie, his back resting against the wheelhouse, and started to fill his pipe.

Now the sun—a great flaming ball of red—was sinking below the horizon and there was a breeze getting up. The boat, rolling rather more steeply, tugged at her anchor with little jerks. The sky, outside the radius of the setting sun, was clouding over and the breeze was developing into a wind. Also it was growing colder.

Presently, Julie remarked, a little nervously—

"Don't you think we'd better be getting back, Alec?"

"Plenty of time," he muttered. "It won't take more than half an hour to make harbour."

"But it's getting cold."

"Aye, but what did you expect this time of year with autumn gone. Just wait a minute."

He rose, fetched a square of tarpaulin and put it over her knees.

"That will keep you warm," he said. "If it gets much colder, you can go and sit in the wheelhouse. The *Susan* hasn't got a cabin, as we use all the available space for fish."

Dusk was coming on apace. The new lighthouse at the end of the reef to westward—the one which had replaced the old one on the cliff—was already casting its revolving beam across the sea. The wind was now rising, and the towering cliffs to leeward were becoming shadowy and indistinct.

"Oh, Alec, surely it's time we made for the harbour!" suggested Julie, who was becoming increasingly nervous.

"There's no hurry," he said coolly.

"But the sea is getting quite rough," she protested.

"Ay, but the *Susan's* a good sea-boat, and she'll ride out any storm."

"Storm?" Julie repeated in alarm.

"Shouldn't wonder," he answered. "I didn't like that sunset. It looked a bit threatening and the wind's blowing off the sea."

"Then why don't we make for the harbour at once instead of waiting for the storm?" she asked.

"I told you, didn't I, that the *Susan* will

ride out any storm. Don't worry, we'll be safe enough."

"But, Alec, it's nearly dark and Aunt Mary will be getting very anxious about me," Julie protested. "Besides, you promised that we wouldn't be back late, didn't you?"

"Depends on what you call late, my dear girl," he told her laughingly. "All the same, it's about time I hoisted the riding light."

He went into the wheelhouse and returned with a lighted lantern, which he attached to a halyard and hoisted it to the masthead.

"There we are!" he said, grinning down at her. "All snug and cosy, but I reckon you'd be more comfortable in the wheelhouse."

"I'm not going into the wheelhouse," Julie declared, now thoroughly alarmed. "I demand to be taken back to the harbour at once."

"Demand' is a strong word, you know, and it's one I'm not used to Julie," he said. "But I may just as well tell you right away that we shan't be back in harbour this side of dawn."

"Then—then you tricked me into coming with you!" she stammered, with an icy feeling at her heart. "It was a mean and cowardly thing to do, Alec, and I'll never forgive you!"

He laughed.

"You can talk about forgiving me when I ask you to," he said. "You spent a night in that lighthouse with Roger Dale, so now you're going to spend a night on the *Susan* with me, my girl. Fair's fair, you know. What's sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander."

"So you—so you lied to me," she breathed. "I trusted you, and you have betrayed my trust, Alec Wrexham. Oh, what a fool I was not to guess that your word was worth nothing, that you were without any sense of honour!"

"Like Dale, eh?" he sneered. "Do you think I believed that cock-and-bull story about your getting locked in the lighthouse by mistake, and his having spent the night in a barn? I'm not quite such a fool as all that, you know!"

"But it was true," she cried. "Every word of it!"

"Then why did Dale lie to me in the first place and pretend he hadn't seen you? Why didn't he tell me the truth, if it was the truth?"

"You know quite well why he didn't do it," she retorted. "Roger Dale knew you wouldn't have believed him. You would have done the same in his place—you have already admitted it."

"Anyway, we've been over all that before," he told her roughly. "Now you'd better come into the wheelhouse where it's warm."

It was quite dark now, and the *Susan* was rolling so violently that they both had to cling to the handrail outside the wheelhouse. They could feel the sting of the spray on their faces and see, in the uncertain light of the swinging lamp overhead, the white capped waves rolling past.

The storm had now set in, and there was nothing for her to do but obey his behest. Moreover, she was shivering with cold as the wind swept past them shorewards. Fortunately for her, the tiny wheelhouse was too small to accommodate more than one person at a time.

Peering through the thick glass windows, Julie could see a speck of light high up on the cliffs. That could only be from one of the windows of the old lighthouse, she told herself, and showed that Roger was still there.

"Oh, Roger dear, if only you knew that I was out here in the darkness and could

come to my help!" Julie breathed, as though it were a prayer.

She knew he had a motor-boat which he kept in a cove close to the lighthouse, but since he hadn't the slightest suspicion of her present predicament, Roger could not come to her rescue. Her only hope was that the storm would last till after day-break, thus keeping Wrexham outside on the deck. In any case, he would have to return to the harbour as soon as it was daylight, or other boats would put out to help, thinking he had engine trouble.

Suddenly she felt the boat give an extra vicious tug at the anchor and fall away to windward. At the same moment Wrexham wrenched open the wheelhouse door and thrust his head in.

"Put the helm hard down!" he shouted at her. "Turn the wheel to your right. The anchor's dragging, and I must get the engine going or we'll be thrown on to the rocks!"

The door slammed to, and Julie managed to get the wheel round. She had heard enough talk from the local fishermen to realise that with the wind blowing in from the sea on one side, and the jagged rocks on the other, the boat was in deadly peril unless Wrexham quickly got the engine started.

Impatiently she waited to feel the vibration of the engine under her feet, but it did not come, and Julie knew the anchor was still dragging, for otherwise the *Susan* would have been pulled up with a sudden jerk. She was aware of something else, too—the yellow glimmer from the lighthouse had grown larger and seemed to be nearer. That obviously meant that the boat was being swept closer to the rocks.

Again the door of the wheelhouse was flung open, and Wrexham panted—

"Can't start the darned engine. Water must have got into it or something. Put the wheel amidships."

Julie guessed that he was referring to the wheel with a little knob on, and exerting all her strength she managed to bring it round. This brought the *Susan* head on to the wind instead of exposing her beam, thus lessening the pace of her drift shorewards.

Nevertheless, the drift continued and the yellow gleam of the lighthouse window grew larger. Now she could hear the thunder of the waves against the jagged face of the cliffs, and it seemed to her that they were in imminent peril.

Suddenly Julie saw through the streaming window a reeling, tossing light approaching them at a great speed, obviously the light of some boat coming to their rescue. Then, more uncertainly, because of the mounting and descending waves, she caught the glimmer of her port and starboard lights.

It was then that it dawned upon Julie that it could be no other than Roger's motor-boat, for she was not coming from the direction of the harbour to the east of them, but from the west—from the direction of the cove where Roger kept his boat. Evidently, he must have glanced out of one of the lighthouse windows and seen the *Susan's* riding light drifting nearer and nearer to the cliffs.

Wrexham had seen the approaching boat too, and was hastily making one end of a rope fast to the mainmast. Then, as the two boats came within hailing distance, Julie heard the two men shouting to each other. Standing in the *Susan's* bows, Wrexham flung the free end of the rope he had fastened to the mast and it fell across the bows of the other boat.

Nothing happened for a moment or two. Then came a sudden jerk, a falling away, and then another jerk. Though she could not see it, Julie felt the rope connecting the two boats stiffen.

Then the wheelhouse door opened.

"Keep the helm amidships," Wrexham shouted. "I'm going to discard the anchor, then have another go at the engine."

With the anchor cut free, the *Susan* seemed to follow more easily in the wake of the boat towing her. Soon the light which Roger must have left burning in the lighthouse window, was growing fainter and more distant, and the shadowy cliffs became merged in the darkness.

Presently Julie felt the engine vibrate under her feet and knew that Wrexham had, at last, succeeded in getting it going again. She heard him shout something to the man in the other boat, then saw him rush to the mainmast and start to undo the rope, which he flung overboard.

A little puzzled that the other boat should not have cast off since the rope belonged to the *Susan*, Julie did not realise what had happened till she saw the lights of the motor boat drifting past and in the direction of the cliffs.

Then it came to her in a flash—the motor had ceased to function and the boat was being carried towards the rocks just as the *Susan* had been a short while ago.

Flinging open the wheelhouse door, she called out to Wrexham, thinking he was unaware of what was happening.

"Alec, look!" she cried excitedly. "The engine of that other boat must have failed, and she's drifting towards the rocks!"

Wrexham came aft and thrust his head into the wheelhouse. In the faint glimmer of the binacle lamp, Julie saw that his face had expanded in an evil grin.

"Well, let it drift," he shouted. "Roger Dale will get what's coming to him—and it won't be to his liking!"

A RIVAL'S VILLAINY

JULIE stared at him aghast. "You—you don't understand!" she cried. "That boat's engine has failed and—"

"I know what I'm doing," Wrexham growled, pushing past her and taking the tiller.

Julie thought the must be going to manoeuvre so as to get to leeward of the other boat. Instead, however, he turned the *Susan's* nose towards the harbour.

"You—you despicable monster!" Julie flung at him, when she realised his intention. "I'll let everyone in Seacombe know how you left a boat to founder on the rocks and ran for safety yourself."

"And if I deny it, who'll believe you?" he muttered jeeringly over his shoulder. "It'll be your word against mine. Anyway, I'll report having seen a drifting boat when we get back."

"But it will be too late then," Julie protested. "The boat will probably have been smashed to pieces before we reach the harbour."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it has," he said callously.

"Murderer!" she rasped out between clenched teeth. "You—you contemptible beast!"

"Getting a bit hysterical, aren't you?" he grated. "Don't you think you had better try to calm down a bit?"

They were now entering the harbour and the *Susan* glided up to the quay with her engine shut off. Julie leapt ashore almost before the boat had made fast.

"Hullo, there, where are you going?" Wrexham shouted angrily.

"To the police!" she called back.

"Don't be a fool, my dear girl!" he cried. "I'm going to report to the lifeboat cox'n," he added, climbing on to the quay.

Julie hesitated. After all, what use would there be in going to the police? she asked

herself. Perhaps if the lifeboat put out—

She followed Wrexham to the cottage facing the harbour where the coxswain lived. He knocked at the door and it was answered immediately by the cox'n himself. Joe Roberts.

"I say, Joe, there's a motor boat drifting just west of the old lighthouse," Wrexham said. "I tried to take her in tow, but—"

"That's a lie!" Julie cried indignantly. "Mr. Roger Dale was in that boat. He came to the *Susan's* rescue when her engine broke down. Then the engine of his motor boat gave out and Mr. Wrexham refused him a tow."

Wrexham grinned.

"Miss Lester is a bit hysterical, Joe," he said. "So don't pay any heed to what she says. I tried to get a rope aboard the other boat, but I couldn't manage it, not in the darkness and a rising sea."

"It's a lie!" Julie cried again.

The cox'n looked from one to the other and shook his head.

"Alec Wrexham's an experienced seaman, miss," he said, "and if he couldn't get a line aboard that other boat then I don't think anybody could."

"But he didn't try!" Julie declared defiantly.

Again the cox'n shook his head. It was against the unwritten law of the sea that one boat should desert another in distress, and it was obvious that the man didn't imagine for a moment Alec Wrexham capable of doing such a thing.

"I reckon, miss, you don't know the difficulty of getting a rope aboard a boat when its dark and she's on a lee shore," he said. "You don't understand these things, of course."

"I understand enough to know that Alec Wrexham let that other boat drift towards the rocks when he could easily have saved her," Julie asserted, refusing to be brow-beaten by him.

Wrexham shrugged.

"It's like you say, Joe, the girl doesn't understand," he said.

"Aye, I can see that, Alec," agreed the cox'n. "Well, you can't expect shore folks, and especially a woman, to understand such things. Anyway," he went on, "I'll call the lifeboat out and we'll steer west in case we can sight the boat. Mr. Dale might have got his engine going again, or he might have managed to anchor. How far off shore would he have been?"

"About half a mile as far as I can reckon," Wrexham replied.

"And the tide coming in with the wind behind it, of course," muttered the cox'n, shaking his head ominously. "Well, we'll do our best," he added, then hurried off.

"Well, now, what did I tell you?" Wrexham demanded, glaring at Julie. "Who's going to believe your story—a landlubber's story and a girl's at that?"

"You—you are a cold-blooded murderer, Alec Wrexham, and I hate you!" Julie hissed.

"I wouldn't go about calling a chap that, if I were you," he said jeeringly. "Murderer is a nasty word to fix on a man when you can't prove it, you know. And you can see for yourself now that nobody's going to believe your stupid story."

"You are a murderer all the same, and you know it!" she flung at him. "Even if

I am not able to prove it—"

She broke off as the maroon sounded summoning the lifeboat crew.

Wrexham gave a malicious laugh.

"Maybe they'll sight some bits of Roger Dale's boat floating about," he said.

"You contemptible monster!" Julie cried. "You contaminate the very air you breathe with your villainy!"

"Is that the way of it?" he rasped, catching hold of her arm. "So Dale could do what he liked with you, but I mustn't—"

"How dare you say that! You know it's a foul lie!" she said fiercely, trying to free herself from his grip.

"Not such a lie as your pretending you spent that night in the lighthouse alone," he said sarcastically. "You must think me an outside fool to believe that."

"It was the truth. Now let me go!"

But instead of releasing his grip on her arm, he jerked her to him and held her in a vice-like grip. In vain she twisted her head this way and that, but his lips fastened upon hers and he pressed savage kisses on them.

At last, he raised his head and Julie made a desperate effort to push him away from her, but all to no purpose.

"You might as well give in, you know," he muttered, a triumphant look in his eyes.

"You—you beast!" she gasped. "Let me go."

"And suppose I don't?" he taunted.

Anger, terror and disgust swept over her, and Julie gave him a resounding slap on the face. Taken aback by the suddenness of the blow, he loosened his hold, Julie wrested herself free and ran as fast as she could.

"I'll make the little vixen pay for that," Wrexham muttered angrily, and then started to walk away from the quay.

Julie got little sleep that night. She was haunted by the vision of Roger in his boat drifting through the darkness on to those terrible rocks. And Alec Wrexham was to blame for it all.

"I'll go to the police and tell them exactly what happened," she muttered to herself.

But in her heart of hearts, Julie knew it would be useless. For no one would accept her word against Wrexham's. Hadn't the lifeboat cox'n already openly discredited her story about what had happened?

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, she went down to the harbour in the hope that the lifeboat had returned with some news of Roger. The lifeboat was there, drawn up outside the shed which housed it, and one of its crew was standing there gazing out to sea.

"Excuse me," Julie said. "Could you tell me if—if Mr. Dale's boat was found last night?"

The man shook his head.

"No, miss, we found no sign of it at all," he answered. "But we're going out again this morning to search for any wreckage."

"Do you think Mr. Dale might have reached the cove where he keeps his boat?" she asked, with a faint flicker of hope.

"I'm afraid not, miss, unless he got his engine going again. If he'd done that and reached the cove, I reckon he'd have let us know."

"But supposing Mr. Dale didn't know the lifeboat had put out in search of him?" Julie said.

The man shrugged.

"Tisn't likely he wouldn't have known, miss," he said. "He couldn't have missed seeing our lights, you know."

Julie hesitated a moment. Then—

"Everything would have been all right if—if Alec Wrexham had taken the boat in tow," she blurted out. "But he refused—and after being towed out of danger himself by Mr. Dale."

"Oh, but Alec wouldn't have refused if it had been anyways possible, Miss. I can assure you that no seaman would do a thing like that."

"But it was possible!" Julie declared vehemently. "If it wasn't, how did Mr. Dale manage to come to our rescue?"

The man shrugged again.

"Not having been there, I can't say, miss," he said. "Conditions alter quickly at sea, you know. What's safe one minute, mayn't be safe the next—especially on a lee-shore with a freshening wind."

Julie made a gesture of despair. Obviously, no one would believe her, no one would hear a word against Alec Wrexham. Her word counted for nothing against his. It was all turning out just as Wrexham had said it would, she told herself, and then walked on.

In case Roger should, by some miracle, have got back safely, she decided to call at the lighthouse. On arriving there she found the door was unlocked and she entered.

"Roger!" she called, but there was no answer, and she climbed up the twisting staircase to the room which he used as a study.

There was a lamp, still burning, standing on the table. This, she told herself, must have been the light she had seen from the sea. And it must have been from this room that Roger, peering through the window, had seen the *Susan's* lights as she was being carried towards the rocks. Without stopping to put out the lamp, Roger must have rushed down to the cove and put out to sea in his motor boat.

Julie then climbed up the stairs to the room above. This, as she had anticipated, turned out to be Roger's bedroom, but the bed had not been slept in. No, Roger had certainly not been back. With a heavy heart she descended to the room below.

"Roger is dead," she murmured brokenly, "and Alec Wrexham is responsible for his death!"

Her heart was aflame with anger against the man who was virtually his murderer, and sinking onto a chair, Julie buried her face in her hands, overcome by the thought of her own helplessness.

"If it hadn't been for Roger, I should be dead, too!" she sobbed. "And so would Alec Wrexham, and his boat would be nothing but battered timbers strewn among the rocks—as Roger's boat must be by now!"

Presently, she rose, and going to the window, she saw the Seacombe lifeboat moving slowly westward and as close to the cliffs as possible. Evidently they were searching for traces of Roger's boat.

She watched for a while, then turned away and descended the stairs to the entrance. Here she paused, wondering who Roger's relatives were and when they would learn about his death.

Ought she to search among his papers for names and addresses? she wondered. But, on second thoughts, it seemed an intrusion on her part to do such a thing.

On leaving the lighthouse, Julie walked slowly back along the cliff path to the har-

bour. She saw that the lifeboat was coming in.

As it drew near the quay to make fast, Julie caught sight of some shattered fragments of timber on her deck. She waited anxiously for the cox'n to step ashore.

"Are—those pieces of wood I see on deck from Mr. Dale's motor boat, Mr. Roberts?" she asked tremulously.

"Aye, miss, they are, by the look of it," he answered gravely. "No more than what we expected to find. As for the poor gentleman himself, the odds are his body has been swept into some submerged cave and we'll never find it."

"And—will you go on searching for him?" Julie stammered.

"What would be the good, miss? We know now that the boat was smashed to pieces and can only guess the fate of the poor chap. It was a very brave action on the part of Mr. Dale to put out to sea when he saw the *Susan* drifting shorewards," the cox'n added. "If he hadn't done so, I reckon neither you nor Alec Wrexham would be alive to-day."

"And yet you refuse to believe me when I tell you that Alec Wrexham refused to take Mr. Dale's boat in tow when his engine broke down," Julie murmured brokenly.

"Now look, miss," Joe Roberts said, "you were probably too excited and upset at the time to know what really happened. As I think I told you before, no seaman would let another boat drift on to the rocks if he could save her. You can take it from me that if Alec Wrexham didn't take Mr. Dale's boat in tow, it was because it was impossible for him to do so."

Julie sighed.

"I can see it's no use my telling the truth, for no one will believe me," she said.

"I'm not saying you're not telling the truth, miss. What I am saying is that what may have seemed to you an easy matter, just couldn't be done. It takes a seaman to judge these things, you know," the cox'n added, and then turned away.

Sick at heart, Julie walked on. Would no one help her? Would no one believe she was telling the truth? Because she was a girl, and knew very little about the sea, they appeared to think she was just imagining things, she reflected despairingly.

"But I won't be silenced!" she told herself. "I'll go to the police and tell them about it all."

She did go to the police station and told her story to the sergeant in charge. He listened without interruption and made notes on a pad now and again.

The sergeant nodded thoughtfully when she had finished, and Julie had the idea that he actually did believe what she had told him.

"And there's another thing," she went on, suddenly remembering. "The *Susan* was towed out of danger by her own rope which Alec Wrexham had fastened to the mainmast. But when we got safely away, he undid the rope and let it fall into the sea."

"Did he signal Mr. Dale to cast off?" asked the sergeant.

"I think so," Julie replied.

"In that case, they'd have both cast off and the rope would be lost," mused the sergeant. "Looks a bit queer to me, miss. Why did Mr. Wrexham chuck the rope overboard? He could easily have hauled it in, I take it?"

"Of course," agreed Julie.

"Well, I'm not saying the story you have told me is true, and I'm not saying it isn't. But you've no witnesses, that's the trouble, miss. It's your word against Wrexham's, isn't it?"

Julie sighed.

"Yes, I know," she said.

"So, from the police point of view——" the sergeant began, then broke off as the telephone bell rang.

He picked up the receiver and carried on a mumbled conversation for some little time. Then, turning to Julie, he said—

"That was the cox'n of the lifeboat. He reports having found a number of fragments of what appears to be Roger Dale's motor boat." He paused, then added—"Tell me, Miss Lester, did you happen to know Mr. Dale?"

"Well, yes, I've met him several times," Julie replied.

"And I suppose you knew that he lived in the old lighthouse?" the sergeant said. "Have you ever been there?"

"Yes, on several occasions," she answered. "In fact, I went there this morning in the faint hope that I might find him there."

"Have you a key to the outer door, may I ask, Miss Lester?"

"No, I found the door unlocked," she said.

The sergeant pursed his lips.

"Is that so?" he said. "Then we had better do something about it or people will be entering the place. I'll send a constable there at once. Perhaps you wouldn't mind going with him, Miss Lester. Do you think you would know if anything was missing from there?"

"Well, yes, I think so," she replied.

"Did you know that Mr. Dale was a writer?"

"No, but I rather suspected that he was, though he never told me so," Julie said.

"Well, from what I can gather, he wrote novels and plays and so forth," the sergeant went on, "and that's why he lived in the old lighthouse part of the year in order to be free from interruption of any kind. Well, now, Miss Lester, perhaps you wouldn't mind going there with a police constable right away and find out whether or not, so far as you know, anything is missing since the door of the place was left unlocked."

"Yes, of course I will, sergeant," Julie readily agreed.

The result was that a few minutes later, she found herself walking along the cliff path in the direction of the lighthouse with Police-constable Nettlefold.

When they arrived at the lighthouse the constable made to open the door.

"It's locked," he exclaimed in surprise. "I understood from Sergeant Wilson that you told him the door was unlocked when you came here this morning, miss."

"Yes, so it was," Julie said. "Can it be possible that Mr. Dale is still alive after all and has come back?" she added, her heart beating high with hope.

"We'll soon find out," the constable said, and gave a sharp rat-tat on the door, but there was no response.

"Perhaps Mr. Dale is sound asleep," suggested Julie.

The constable nodded.

"Are you quite sure you left the door unlocked when you left here this morning,

Miss Lester?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I hadn't a key," she replied.

"Well, I'll try again," muttered the constable, and hammered on the door with his fist.

But still there was no response. The constable frowned.

"It looks to me that someone's been here since you left this morning, miss, and that the someone had a key," he said. "I don't think it can have been Mr. Dale, for it's scarcely likely he'd come here and then go away again almost at once."

"No, of course not," Julie murmured.

The constable stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"It looks to me that there's some mystery about this affair," he said. "Would you mind waiting here, Miss Lester, while I go back to the police station? We've got keys there that will fit almost any lock."

"Yes, of course I'll wait, constable," Julie readily agreed.

"You see," he went on to explain, "if anyone should happen to call here I want to know who it is. There's been some queer goings on along this part of the coast of late," he added confidentially.

"What sort of goings on do you mean?" asked Julie curiously.

"Smuggling, Miss, that's what I mean. We have our suspicion regarding certain people, but we haven't sufficient evidence to prove anything against them. That's why I'm anxious to get into this lighthouse."

"But surely, you are not suggesting that Mr. Dale had anything to do with it, are you?" exclaimed Julie.

"It's not my business to suggest anything, Miss," the constable replied. "Now please keep a good look out, while I'm gone. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He then started to walk rapidly along the cliff path. That Roger Dale should be suspected of being concerned in smuggling—for there was no other interpretation to put on the constable's words—seemed to Julie to be utterly unbelievable. Roger was a literary man and had lived in the lighthouse in order to be free from interruptions.

But supposing this had been merely a "blind" to conceal his real occupation? But no, she told herself. Roger Dale had been brave and chivalrous and kind. Had he not risked his life—and lost it—by rushing to the rescue of the *Susan*?

When the constable returned, he took a bunch of odd-looking keys from his pocket, and after trying several of them he succeeded in opening the door.

He stepped inside, followed by Julie. There was nothing in the lower room to suggest that anyone had been there, so they climbed up to the room above. As they entered it, Julie gave a gasp of surprise.

"That—that typewriter on the table had a sheet of paper in it when I was here this morning, and now it's covered up," she stammered excitedly.

"Are you sure of that?" the constable asked.

"Yes, quite sure," Julie replied.

"That's very queer," the constable muttered. "I think we'd better go up the stairs and have a look there," he added, and led the way up the curving staircase.

But the bedroom looked to Julie just the same as when she had seen it that morning, and having told him so, they returned to the ground-floor room.

"Well, there seems to be nothing unusual about the place, bar the matter of the typewriter, Miss—and you *could* have been mistaken about it, you know," the constable remarked, grinning at Julie.

"Well, yes, I suppose I could have been," she admitted, thinking that she might have been mistaken.

They stepped out of the lighthouse, and having locked the door, the constable left her and returned to the police-station.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

JULIE wanted to be alone to think, and she sat down to bask in the warm sunshine and closed her eyes. Suddenly she heard a voice, and looking up was startled to see Roger gazing down at her.

"Oh, Roger!" she cried excitedly, springing to her feet. "Surely it—it can't really be you!"

"But it is," he said, smilingly. "It actually is me and not my ghost, as you appear to think, my dear Julie."

For a moment or two, she could only stand and stare at him in wide-eyed incredulity. It seemed utterly impossible that he could really be Roger. Hadn't his boat been smashed on the rocks? Surely she must be dreaming! she told herself.

He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"There, are you now satisfied that I'm not a wraith?" he asked.

Julie nodded.

"But—but your boat was reported to be smashed on the rocks, Roger," she stammered, breathlessly.

"Yes, and so it was," he agreed, "and I owe a little debt to our friend, Alec Wrexham. I must see what I can do to pay it off," he added, with a grim smile.

"The—the monster!" Julie muttered fiercely. "I'll never forgive him for leaving you the way he did, Roger, after you had risked your life to save his and mine. It was the most cowardly act—"

"Not cowardly," Roger broke in—"treacherous" is a better word, Julie. To give the devil his due, Wrexham is no coward. Oh no, he had his own reasons for abandoning me—as he hoped—to certain death."

"But how—but how did you manage to escape, Roger?"

"By sheer luck," he answered. "When my boat was swept on to the rocks, I managed to cling to a shelf of rock just overhead and to haul myself up on to it. I can assure you that it was not at all comfortable there."

"And—and then?" Julie prompted.

"Well, I remained there till daylight, and then scrambled up on to another ledge. Presently I discovered a small cave just above high-water mark and crawled into it."

"And did you return to the lighthouse this morning, Roger?"

"Yes, I did," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I went there this morning in the hope—the very faintest possible hope, Roger—that you might somehow have survived and that I might find you there. The door was unlocked and I went in. The lamp was still alight in an upper room and I turned it out."

"That must have been before I returned," he said.

"But if you came back, why didn't you stay, Roger? When a policeman and I—"

"A policeman?" he interrupted.

"Yes, Roger, a policeman, and we found the lighthouse door locked. Therefore we knew that someone must have been there after I had called this morning. So the constable went back to the police-station and got some keys. One of them fitted the lock and we went in."

"Yes, and what happened?" Roger asked.

"Well, I noticed the lid had been put on your typewriter," Julie replied, "and when I was there earlier on, it was uncovered and a sheet of paper was in it."

"I see," Roger said. "And did the policeman tell you what he was going to do about it?"

Julie shook her head.

"Do you expect him to do anything?" she asked.

Roger's eyes narrowed.

"I wish I'd been there when the intruder paid that visit to the lighthouse, that's all," Roger hesitated, then added—"Tell me, Julie, do you trust me?"

"Trust you?" she repeated, staring at him in surprise. "Of course I trust you, Roger. You—you saved my life and Alec Wrexham's as well, didn't you?"

"That has nothing to do with it," he said. "Any other man would have done the same."

"Yes, but why do you ask me if I trust you, Roger?"

"Because I love you, my dear Julie, that's why," he answered, a trifle huskily.

"Oh, Roger!" she breathed. "Do you—do you really mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it with all my heart, darling," he said. "I think I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you."

Julie's heart gave a sudden bound.

"And I—and I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you, Roger," she said.

"But how about Alec Wrexham?" he asked, smiling wryly.

"I rather liked him at first," she admitted, "but now I loathe and despise the man. But you haven't told me your reason for asking me if I trusted you have you, Roger? Why shouldn't I trust you?"

"Because, my dear Julie, I rather think you will soon have reason to—well, to think pretty badly of me," he said.

Suddenly Julie remembered the hint which the policeman had let drop about smuggling.

"Is it—is it something to do with smuggling, Roger?" she stammered.

"And supposing it is?" he countered, looking straight into her eyes.

"I—I shall still love you, Roger," she murmured tremulously.

At that he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Thank you, darling," he said. "Now please tell me again that you love me."

"I love you, Roger dear, and shall always love you whatever happens," she said. "You—you will never leave me now, will you?" she pleaded wistfully.

"Not if I can help it, darling," he said. "But I may have to leave you for a short time, and if I do, you will go on believing in me and trusting me, won't you, my love?"

"Yes, of course, Roger dear," she whispered. "Nothing can ever shake my trust in you, unless you do it yourself. I mean, unless you should ever cease to love me and—"

"That will never, never happen, my darling," he broke in. "There has never been another girl in my life, and there never will be."

"In that case nothing else matters, does it, Roger?"

"No, darling, nothing else matters," he agreed.

"Tell me, Roger dear—why did you go back to the lighthouse this morning, and then leave again, locking the door after you?" she asked.

"Because I had to put through an urgent telephone call to London, my dear Julie," Roger paused, then added—"And now I'm going to the police-station, darling, as I don't want them to come footling about with my papers—and I'm afraid that's what they will do if I don't intercept them."

Julie's heart sank.

"You—you mean Roger—"

"I mean, darling, that I'm going to take the police into my confidence," he broke in smiling at her.

"But when shall I see you again, Roger?" she asked unsteadily. "Shall I—shall I come with you?"

Roger shook his head.

"No, you must keep out of this, my dear Julie," he said. "I don't want you mixed up in an affair of this sort."

Julie sighed.

"Well, you know best, Roger, of course," she murmured.

"Right, then I'll be off before the police start nosing around again," he said, with a cheerfulness she thought must be assumed.

Julie watched him stride along the path that led to the town, her heart heavy and cold within her. She could no longer doubt that Roger had been engaged in a smuggling enterprise of some sort, and that the police or the Customs authorities were on his trail.

She began to walk slowly back, and as she descended the path leading to the harbour, she came face to face with Alec Wrexham.

"So I understand your precious Mr. Dale is to be had up for smuggling," he said, with a malicious grin.

Julie winced.

"How—how do you know that, may I ask?" she stammered.

"The news is all round the town, and he's with the police now," he replied. "A proper bad hat is that fine young gentleman," he added leeringly.

"How dare you say that of the man when he saved your life!" Julie cried indignantly—"you who deserted him when he was sorely in need of help. You—you are not only a cad Alec Wrexham, you are a coward!"

He flushed a dark red, and for a moment Julie thought he was going to strike her. Instead, he seized her roughly by the arm.

"That's enough of that, my girl," he muttered menacingly. "You don't know what you're talking about. I couldn't have taken him in tow if I'd wanted to, for the tow rope had gone."

"Yes, because you had thrown it overboard yourself," she flung back at him. "I saw you undo your end of the rope and let it slip into the sea."

"That's a lie!" he gritted. "Anyway, nobody's going to believe that and what's more, you are going to find yourself in for a bit of trouble, too, if you are not careful, my girl."

"What do you mean?" Julie demanded. "Well, if Dale is in the smuggling racket how about you?"

"Me?" she said, puzzled.

"Yes, you, Julie Lester. You've been hanging about the lighthouse, haven't you? You went along the cliffs every day, so how are the authorities to know that you weren't keeping a look-out so as to warn Dale if any Customs men were about?"

"You must be stark mad!" Julie cried. "I'm a stranger in the town and I only met Mr. Dale by chance."

"Oh yes, that's your story," he retorted sneeringly.

"You can't frighten me by talking such rubbish!" she said contemptuously. "You'd better try and think of something else, Mr. Wrexham."

"Very well, I'll tell you something else," he went on. "When Dale saw the *Susan's* lights, he evidently thought it must be one of the smuggling boats with a cargo of contraband. Else why was he keeping watch in the lighthouse? Oh yes, that's why he put out in his own boat to try and save the other boat from being driven ashore. He thought it was a boat he'd been expecting—probably from some French port."

"I don't believe a word of what you say," Julie declared fiercely.

"Don't you?" he mocked. "Then why is Dale with the police now? I'll tell you—he knows the game is up and thinks he may get off more lightly if he owns up to his share in it."

"I still don't believe it," Julie protested. "Now please let me go" she added angrily, trying to shake her arm free of his grasp.

Wrexham gave a jeering laugh.

"Not before I've told you what I've got to say and not before," he said. "For all his fine London manners, Roger Dale is a crook, and you can't deny it, my dear girl. So why not cut the painter and have done with him? I can give you a good home, Julie—yes and luxuries if you want them. I'm far better off than some people think, even if I do dress and act like an ordinary fisherman."

"I wouldn't marry you on any account, Alec Wrexham," she said contemptuously.

"That's what you say now, my girl, but it wasn't always so, was it? Why did you come out with me in the *Susan* if you disliked me so much?" he challenged.

"I—I had my reasons."

"Yes, you thought you could play me off against Dale, didn't you?" he said bitterly. "You thought you'd like to have two strings to your bow, and if one failed, there'd still be another! But when Roger Dale gets what's coming to him and you see you've backed a loser, no doubt you'll start making up to me again!"

"Will you please let me go?" Julie cried, ignoring his taunts. "I've told you what I think of you, and isn't that enough?"

"Enough to go on with, maybe," he muttered, with a derisive laugh. "But you can take it from me that you'll change your mind before long, my girl—and I may change mine, too."

He then released his hold on her arm, and burning with anger and humiliation, Julie hurried on down the path. By the time she reached her aunt's house, however, she had regained her self-control.

She found that her Aunt Mary had already heard the gossip about Roger Dale and his alleged "smuggling racket".

"And such a nice young man as he seemed," mourned Aunt Mary, when telling Julie about it. "It only goes to show, doesn't it, my dear, that you can't trust anybody? I suppose the young man will be brought before the magistrate and then we shall know all about it."

"But we don't know that Mr. Dale has been arrested, do we, auntie," objected Julie.

"Well, he was seen to go to the police station, my dear, and I don't suppose they will let him go again now," Aunt Mary suggested, as though that concluded the matter.

When, later in the afternoon, Julie strolled down to the harbour, there was an air of repressed excitement. All sorts of rumours were current, one being that the Customs authorities had raided the old lighthouse and found large quantities of contraband hidden there; another that Roger Dale had been taken to London for questioning at Scotland Yard—in fact, there were so many rumours that they contradicted one another.

JULIE had very little sleep that night, and even when she did doze off, she had frightening nightmares.

Soon after seven o'clock next morning, she was awakened by her aunt who brought her a cup of tea.

"Well, my dear," she said, in a tone of satisfaction, "the whole gang of miscreants were captured during the night, and I'm told that thousands of pounds worth of smuggled goods were found in a cave."

"Who told you, auntie?" Julie asked excitedly.

"The milkman, my dear. He told me all about it. Customs and police officers raided the lighthouse, and while they were doing that, Revenue officers intercepted a boat that was going to land more contraband. The milkman told me that it was the biggest smuggling haul that has ever been known on this coast."

"The milkman!" exclaimed Julie. "What does he know about it? Did he see it all happen?"

"No, I don't suppose so, dear, but he would have heard," returned Aunt Mary. "You see, these people seem to get to know everything that's happening."

"Yes, of course," Julie murmured pensively.

After breakfast, she went out, and avoiding going in the direction of the harbour for fear of meeting Alec Wrexham, she set off along the path that skirted the top of the cliffs.

Presently she sat down against the lichen-covered rock where she had so often sat before, once with Alec, once with Roger, and gazed sadly out to sea. Soon her holiday would be over, she reflected, and she would have to go back to London to face the dreary routine of office work and the rush-hour scrambles.

She supposed she would never see Roger again. The thought brought tears to her eyes.

"I love him," she murmured brokenly, "and shall always love him, no matter what he has done."

Suddenly she gave a start as she caught sight of Roger hurrying towards her.

"Hello Julie," he said with a cheerful smile.

"Oh, Roger!" she said chokily, rising to her feet. "I—I had begun to think I should never see you again."

"Had you, darling?" he said. "Well,

some very strange things have been happening, you know. I told you, didn't I, that when my boat got smashed, I managed to cling to a ledge of rock and then found a cave just above high-water mark. Well, I discovered that the cave was full of contraband goods—that it was a smugglers' cache, in fact."

"You remember that when you went to the lighthouse the next morning, you found the door unlocked, but no one there, and that when you went back with a policeman the place was locked up again, don't you? But I needn't go over all that again. What I actually did," Roger went on, "was to inform the police of my find. They got into touch with the Customs people at once, and between them they hatched up a plot to catch the smugglers, using me as what you might call the 'bait'."

"The bait?" Julie repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, darling," he answered smilingly. "You see, if the real smugglers thought I had been arrested, it would divert suspicion from themselves and would leave the coast clear to run another cargo, also, perhaps, enable them to remove some of the stuff from the cave."

"The police didn't actually say they had arrested me, of course," Roger continued, "nor did they contradict the rumour that I had been placed under lock and key. As I daresay you know, the report was all over the town in less than no time, together with stories to the effect that a lot of smuggled goods had been found in the lighthouse. In fact," he added with a grin, "everything went 'according to plan'. It went so well that even Wrexham fell into the trap."

"You—you mean, Roger, that he was one of the smugglers?"

"Not one of them, Julie dear—he was the actual boss!" Roger said. "Apparently, he organised the whole thing, and it had been going on for quite a long time. The police knew it, and the Revenue authorities knew it, but they could never catch him in the act or find out where the stuff was hidden after it was landed—and they probably never would have found out if I hadn't discovered that cave by the merest chance."

"Then if Alec Wrexham had taken you in tow that night, instead of letting you drift to what looked like certain death, he would never have been found out," murmured Julie, in an awed whisper.

"No, most likely not; my dear Julie," agreed Roger. "Queer when you come to think of it, isn't it?"

"And what's going to happen now, Roger?" she asked eagerly.

"You mean, to us, darling? Well, I'm going to get a special licence so that we can be married as soon as I've settled about a new play of mine which is shortly to be produced in London. Then we'll go off for our honeymoon," he added, drawing her to him. "Any objections, my love?"

Julie answered the question with her lips, and in a way that left not the slightest shadow of doubt.

THE END.

SHOCKING.

The model husband arrived home one evening and found his six-year-old son lighting a cigar. He raced into the kitchen, where his wife was preparing dinner. "Margie," he announced breathlessly "this is terrible. I just caught Tommy lighting a cigar!" His wife was shocked, too. "I'll put a stop to it right now," she cried. "That boy is altogether too young to be playing with matches."

Valerie's Swagger Guest

VALERIE was what she termed "throwing a party".

She and her sister Cora shared a flat at the top of a big block of buildings and to this was added the use of the roof, which they had converted into a kind of garden, with the aid of boxes of shrubs and flowering plants.

On this particular occasion Cora had been remonstrating with her sister on the advisability of one of the guests she had asked. The two girls held decent positions, Cora in a well-known dress designers, and Valerie in a big firm of publishers. The man to whom Cora took exception was one Morton Starne, whom she had met in the course of business.

"Why you asked him I can't think. You don't know anything about the man and the mere fact that he took you out to lunch, doesn't warrant his inclusion among our pals," said Cora.

"He's all right," said Valerie. "He's got pots of money and a topping car. Besides, in these days you get to know people without enquiring into their ancestry and if you are only nice to him, you'll find Morton a real jolly sort."

"I don't feel like being nice to him," said Cora, "and I am sure our jolly crowd won't either, especially Jim Rogers. Anyway I suppose you'll go your own way whatever I say, so it's useless wasting my breath."

Valerie went to her room. These were not evening dress affairs, because many of the guests possibly did not possess such conventions, but they were as Cora had said, a jolly crowd.

Jim Rogers was among the first of the guests to arrive, and there was no doubt that the rising young electrician's heart had been captured by Valerie. Not that he said anything, or that his conduct was one of appropriation of his idol, but there was that in his eyes, when he watched her every movement, that told the old, old tale.

Valerie had no eyes for him to-night—she was listening for every rap on the front door, and always when the visitor entered, to find disappointment.

The evening was hot and close, just such an evening as sometimes comes to London in late autumn. The night was dark, up on the roof, whither the young folk speedily repaired. To the music of a gramophone, a merry crowd was dancing when Valerie heard the last rat-tat at the door she had been hoping for all the evening.

She flew to open the door and there was a man immaculately attired in evening dress.

"Oh, I didn't mean you to dress," she said. "We're—we're only just a mob who come anyhow."

"My dear child," he said, patronisingly, "I've been dining, hence my attire. Don't let that spoil your evening. I want to see you young folks as you are, and, of course, you most of all."

The glance that accompanied the words was admiring, and there was a soft, caressing tone that brought the colour to Valerie's cheeks, as she hurriedly led the way to the roof garden. A dance was in full swing, therefore any introductions were delayed till its close, and then somehow Jim Rogers' name was omitted, though he started visibly when he heard Valerie introducing the newcomer to Cora.

From the moment of his entry, it was as if a cold chill had suddenly pervaded the atmosphere. Dancing went on, and of course, he danced with Valerie, but the gay laughter and jokes had died away.

"Little pleasures do amuse you," Starne whispered to his partner. "What an innocent little maid you are."

"I suppose the girls in your set," she retorted, "would want a big London ballroom to amuse them. Those in mine have to put up with what they can afford."

"Just so," he said, "and very nice, too—'tis like a peep of another world, to find a group of young people so happy."

This was more cold water, and in her secret heart Valerie wished she had never asked him to join them.

"This confounded floor is a bit difficult to get accustomed to," he said.

"We're so used to it, we don't notice it, I suppose, the concrete is a bit rough, but it does duty for a ballroom all the same."

When a halt was called and the party repaired downstairs to the sitting-room, their numbers overflowing actually into the kitchen, Valerie felt a certain diffidence when she and Cora brought in the harmless drinks, and though the sandwiches and coffee were daintily prepared and served, she felt that her new acquaintance must be laughing at them up his sleeve.

In the glare of the electric light, Jim took stock of what he privately termed "the invader," and Morton gave him a supercilious nod in return, but no words passed between the two men, who had obviously met on some former occasion. Morton, large of stature in his evening clothes, looked strangely out of keeping with the rest of the crowd.

The warmth of the room, added to the fact that he had dined not wisely but too well, brought a hectic colour to the man's face, and Valerie noticed that his speech was getting even more indistinct. He lit a cigar and its fumes coupled to that good dinner with its choice wines quickly went to his head, and Morton Starne subsided into an easy chair.

"Better be going," he muttered thickly, when they talked of going on the roof again. He staggered to his feet. "Can't you get me a taxi, Rogers," he said.

"Sorry, I'm dancing," was Jim's retort. "Pity you don't learn how to treat your betters," Starne said angrily. "I want a taxi."

"There are no betters or best here," said Jim. "We're all equal, and I'm not your lackey to come and go at your bidding."

The two men faced each other, Jim, in his young manhood, the other now plainly showing definite signs of drink. What might have happened, no one could guess, but a youth of the party stepped forward and said—

"I'll get you a taxi, sir, if you'll come with me."

With a glare at Jim, and not even a farewell to Valerie, Starne stumbled out of the room, and they heard his uncertain steps descending the stairs.

Valerie was almost overwhelmed with shame—her big ideas of showing this grand new friend off to her own pals, had fallen more than flat.

They went on dancing, but broke up at an unusually early hour, for the episode had left a nasty impression behind it.

"So much for your grand friend," said Cora, when she was tidying up the debris of the feast. "Pon my word, Valerie, how you could pick up with a creature like that passes my understanding."

"He goes about in Society quite a lot," said Valerie, "and I suppose his big dinner party made him—"

"Drunk," interrupted Cora. "He's only fit for the backwoods, and you'd better mind who you take on with in future."

"D'you think I'm not going to have any more to do with him because of this?" said Valerie. "One would think you'd come out of the backwoods, the way you talk. All men get excited, and if that's what you call drunk, it shows what little you know of the world."

"If he wasn't drunk, his hateful conduct made everybody think he was, and for your own sake, I hope you'll have no more to do with such a rotter," insisted Cora.

Valerie retired to bed. She knew all her sister said was true, but, after all, Morton Starne was a cut above them all, and what if he had been indiscreet enough to take too much to drink.

Next day at lunch time, she found Jim Rogers waiting outside her office with a humble invitation to lunch with him.

They went to an inexpensive restaurant, and Jim chose a menu that he knew would appeal to the girl he loved, but it was not until they were nearly through the meal that he blurted out—

"I was very sorry for you, Val, last night, but I guessed how it would be directly I heard Starne's name, and—"

"Of course," interrupted Valerie, "he doesn't go to little affairs like ours."

"No, thank goodness," said the boy. "But he's not what you think, Valerie. He's just a traveller for an ink firm and makes good money, but he spends it all on high living that he cannot afford. There is a wife and little daughter living with her people, and—"

"A wife?" echoed Valerie excitedly.

"Yes. I don't suppose he told you he was married—it's his little game to keep that secret, but I knew the girl he married. She was a great friend of my sister's, and so this is no hearsay story I am telling you, but the truth as I know it."

Valerie was silent. This bombshell was disillusion upon disillusion, and she wearily got up from her chair to go back to work, accompanied by a thoughtful Jim.

She did not say a word to Cora of what Jim had told her, but she was very quiet and said no more about throwing another party in the immediate future.

Jim came round during the evening and suggested going to the pictures, but Valerie declined, and the three spent an hour or two chatting on general topics, with never a mention of the previous night.

Two days later, Morton Starne appeared in the office, and with easy nonchalance, as though nothing had happened asked Valerie out to lunch.

"No thank you," said Valerie politely.

He laughed.

"Jim Rogers objects, eh?" he said. "I suppose he has spun you a yarn about my misdemeanours."

"He certainly told me a great deal I was sorry to hear," said Valerie, "and I never wish to see you again."

He turned on his heel. What did it matter to him that a little chit like that should flaunt righteous indignation at him. Girls were not so scarce that he could not find amusement when and where he would, and so Morton Starne disappeared from the horizon of her life.

It took Valerie some time to get over her disappointment in her "grand friend," but when she threw her next party it was to make the startling announcement that she and Jim Rogers were going to get married early in the New Year.

THE END.

LOVE AND SANTA CLAUS

By Leslie Winter

LOVE'S GOLDEN DREAMS

"If all goes well, darling, we'll be married next Christmas," declared Frank Bartrum enthusiastically to the girl by his side. "I shall have perfected my invention before then and it will be just a matter of arranging terms for its manufacture."

Monica Vale tried hard to look as enthusiastic as her fiance sounded. But partly because of what he had said sounded almost too good to be true, and partly because she did not in the very least understand what his invention was, she was secretly a little doubtful.

Frank was employed by a firm who made radio and television equipment, and his invention would, so he had tried to explain to her, revolutionise television. But his explanations were far too technical for Monica to grasp, so all she could do was to nod her head and try to look as if she did understand.

"Old Cotter," Frank went on, referring to the head of the firm, "is frightfully keen on the thing. He says that if it comes up to their expectations, they'll pay me a substantial royalty—in fact, I might even be offered a partnership in the firm."

"Oh, Frank, wouldn't that be simply wonderful?" murmured Monica.

He laughed.

"You're telling me!" he said. "Then instead of being one of the employees, I should be one of the bosses. There'd be no more clocking in for me, no more 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir', to the partners, because I'd be one of them. I shall then be able to buy you a motor car, a mink coat and—"

"But, darling," Monica interrupted laughingly, "I really don't want a mink coat. I only want—"

"What I mean is," Frank broke in, "that we'd be able to afford luxuries that normally would be quite beyond our reach. A nice house, smart car and—why not?—a cottage in the country."

"Oh, but I should be content with much less than that, dear," Monica remarked, thoughtfully, for it seemed to her that, so long as they went on loving each other, nothing else really mattered.

They were sitting on a bench in the gardens on the Thames Embankment near Charing Cross. It was late autumn, but the air was balmy and the sun had not yet lost its warmth. It was rather difficult to believe that winter was just round the corner, ready to show its icy nose, especially, as there were many flowers still in bloom.

Monica Vale was nineteen. She had lovely violet-blue eyes, and her hair was that pale gold which, somehow, looks as if it held imprisoned sunbeams. Her heart-shaped face was delicately formed and her complexion was such that it called for only the slightest touch of make-up. Most men who passed her gave her an admiring glance.

Orphaned at an early age, Monica had been brought up by her grandmother who had recently died, and she earned her living as a shorthand-typist in the office of a firm of importers.

"I'm afraid I'll have to be getting back to the office now, Frank dear," she remarked, glancing at the little gold wrist-watch which her fiance had given her for a birthday present.

"Well, that's how matters stand, darling," he said. "When my invention is perfected, there'll be no more rushing back to the office for you. You'll be your own mistress then. No more rushing to catch the bus, morning and night, no more banging on a typewriter! Gosh, how I wish it could happen to-morrow!"

His enthusiasm was so infectious that Monica found herself sharing it. It was not that she did not believe in his invention, though she understood so little about it, but Frank's high hopes seemed to her somewhat exaggerated and his grandiose talk about a car and a mink coat a trifle unreal.

"Oh well, darling, if you must go, you must, I suppose," Frank grumbled, as they rose to their feet. "Anyway," he added, drawing her arm through his, "this time next year I hope we shall be lunching at some posh hotel on the Riviera."

Monica smiled.

"Oh, but you would need to earn an awful lot of money to be able to afford that, Frank," she said.

"Yes, I know, my dear girl," he agreed. "But once my invention is put on the market, the money will start rolling in. It's one of those things that no owner of a television set will be able to do without, as I've already told you. By the way, darling," he went on, giving her arm a tender squeeze, "I suppose you could be ready to marry me by Christmas, couldn't you?"

"Yes, of course, Frank," she answered.

"Good!" he said. "It has occurred to me, Monica, that even if my invention has not been launched by then, there's no reason why we should delay getting married. As you know, I'm pulling down a pretty good salary as it is, and I've put a little nest-egg away as well. So why put off being happy?"

Monica nodded.

"I quite agree," she said.

"It would have to be a rather short honeymoon. I'm afraid, darling," he went on. "We wouldn't have time to go abroad."

"I know, Frank—why shouldn't we go to Torbeach for our honeymoon?" suggested Monica. "I have been told that it's quite mild there, even in winter, and I could write to my aunt and fix everything up if we decided to go there."

"Your aunt?" he repeated, giving her a puzzled look.

"Yes, Frank, you've heard me speak of Aunt Linda who keeps a boarding-house at Torbeach, haven't you?"

"Yes, now you mention it, I do," he admitted. "But you don't know her very well, do you, Monica?"

"Well, no, but we write each other occasionally," she said. "And, as far as I know, Jim and I are her only living relatives. Jim spent his summer holidays there last year, and he seems to have had a splendid time."

Jim was Monica's brother, and, like her, had been brought up by their grandmother. He was employed in the clerical department of the firm for which Frank worked, and it was through him that Monica had met her fiance.

"But we'll have to decide very soon," Monica went on, "because Aunt Linda always has a lot of visitors for Christmas and all the rooms are booked well ahead."

"Very well, darling, I'll let you know something definite about it on Saturday, after I've had a talk with Jim," said Frank. "All the same," he added doubtfully, "I don't much care for the idea of spending a honeymoon with a relative of yours."

"Why on earth not, Frank?"

"Oh, I don't know, darling. It's rather difficult to explain, just a feeling, that's all, I suppose. Still, we needn't decide this at the moment, need we?" Frank added.

"No, of course not," Monica agreed, feeling a little puzzled and disappointed.

They took leave of each other in the Strand, and Monica returned to her office and Frank to the laboratories in a large building in Kingsway.

Monica found it difficult to concentrate on her work that afternoon. The thought that she and Frank would be getting married at Christmas, filled her with happy excitement. After all, she reflected, even though she liked her job, it was not much fun sitting day after day pounding a typewriter and feeling that she was little more than an automaton.

"I'll write to Aunt Linda when I get home this evening," she promised herself, as she started to type "Dear Sirs, Further to your letter of the—"

But when she returned to her lodgings that evening, Monica found a letter awaiting her with the Torbeach postmark on it.

"Why, it must be from Aunt Linda," she murmured to herself as she slit open the envelope.

The letter began by hoping that everything was well with her, and after a few commonplace remarks about the glorious weather, Aunt Linda continued—

"I am very sorry to have to tell you, dear, that next week I have to go into hospital for an operation—a rather serious one, I am afraid. I understand that even with the best of luck, it may be several months before I shall be able to take charge here again. I could, of course, engage someone to run 'Seaview' during my absence, but I dislike the idea of entrusting everything to a stranger, even someone with the highest credentials.

"My suggestion is, therefore, that you should come here and take my place, Monica dear. If you came down next Saturday, I could show you round and explain what has to be done. It would be mostly supervision, as my housekeeper, Mrs. Tarrant, knows all about the practical work. But, reliable though she is in these matters, she is not exactly the sort of person who could play the part of hostess, if you see what I mean, nor, I think, would she care to undertake such a responsibility.

"I know this is very short notice, my dear, but this unfortunate crisis has been sprung upon me quite suddenly by my doctor, giving me scarcely any time to make all the necessary arrangements. I suppose you will have to forfeit a week's salary at your office in lieu of notice, but I will see to it that . . ."

Monica skimmed through the rest of the letter, feeling a little dazed and bewildered. It was the proverbial "bolt from the blue". Surely Aunt Linda must know that she had no experience of running a house, let alone a private hotel. What on earth could she have been thinking about even

to suggest such a thing?

She read the letter through again, this time more slowly. But there it was in black and white—Aunt Linda wanted her to take over control of "Seaview"—and at once. What was more, she had made it sound an inescapable duty, even hinting that she herself might not survive the coming operation.

When her brother, who shared the lodgings with her, came home, Monica showed him the letter. Jim read it and then gave a low whistle.

"Well, and what are you going to do about it, Monica?" he asked.

"I really don't know what to do, Jim," she answered. "It's one of the most startling things that has ever happened to me. You see, I don't know a thing about such a job."

Jim shrugged.

"Anyway, Aunt Linda has promised to show you the ropes, my dear girl, and it seems that the housekeeper will attend to the practical side, which, I suppose, means the catering and so on," he said. Mrs. Tarrant is quite a nice, friendly woman, but not exactly the sort of person to entertain the guests, if you understand what I mean."

"But, Jim, it means throwing up my present job and without even giving a week's notice," complained Monica.

"Yes, I know, but if you show this letter to your boss, I think he will realise the urgency of the matter and make no fuss about your leaving at such short notice," Jim suggested hopefully.

"But that isn't all," Monica said. "You see, Frank and I have practically arranged to get married at Christmas, and this is going to upset everything."

"Well, show Frank the letter, Monica, and see what he has to say about it."

"He'll be furious, of course," Monica said. "Frank has set his heart on our getting married this Christmas. Oh, Jim, I really don't know what to do."

"Fraid you haven't much option, my dear girl," Jim said. "You are Aunt Linda's only female relative, as far as we know, and you can't very well turn your back on her in her hour of need, can you? Besides, Monnie, it may be worth your while."

"What do you mean by that, Jim?" she asked.

"Oh well, one's got to be practical, hasn't one?" he said. "Aunt Linda must be pretty well off, Monnie, and if you turn her down now, she'll probably leave everything to a cat's home or something of the kind."

"As to that, Jim, I don't think it would influence me in any way."

"All the same, one has to think of such things," admonished her brother. "I don't want Aunt Linda to pass out any more than you do, for she's quite a good sort. But there's no point in acting so that her money goes to strangers, is there, Monnie?"

Monica sighed.

"I'll talk it over with Frank when I meet him during the lunch-hour tomorrow," she said. "But I'm afraid he'll be all against it."

"Yes, but the old lady isn't his aunt," Jim remarked drily. "I don't see that you have any choice in the matter."

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," murmured Monica. "I'm also afraid that if I take on such a job, I shall make an awful hash

of things, and Aunt Linda will be sorry the idea ever occurred to her."

"I, for one, don't think you will 'make a hash of things'," Jim said. "You're a very attractive looking girl, you know, Monnie, and will make a ideal hostess for Aunt Linda's guests during her absence."

Monica laughed in spite of herself.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to write Aunt Linda to-night," she said, "for in view of the fact that she's going into hospital so soon, she'll expect an answer by return."

"Yes, no doubt she will," agreed Jim. "And if you face Frank with a *fait accompli*, he'll have to accept it, of course."

So Monica then sat down and wrote her aunt informing her that she would come to Torbeach on the following Thursday. She added that she was doubtful whether or not she was capable of undertaking the job successfully, as she had never had any experience of such matters.

She met Frank in the luncheon-hour as usual next day in the Thames Embankment gardens. He noticed at once that she was looking rather worried, and before he had time to ask for an explanation, Monica handed him her aunt's letter to read.

"Oh, but this is utterly ridiculous, my dear Monica!" he exclaimed, as he handed her back the letter. "How can you throw up your present job at a moment's notice? And as for running a private hotel, it just doesn't make sense."

"Yes, I'm quite aware of that, Frank," she said. "But in the circumstances, how can I refuse? My aunt has no one else whom she can depend on, you know."

"Anyway, that's not your fault is it, my dear girl?" he said. "Just write to your aunt and say you are very sorry, but it's quite impossible for you to do as she suggests."

Monica shook her head.

"No, Frank," she said, "I feel that it is my duty to go. Supposing—well, supposing Aunt Linda did not recover from her operation? I'd never forgive myself if I had let her down."

"Well, if you do decide to go to Torbeach, it will mean that we won't be able to get married at Christmas, won't it?" he growled.

"But auntie might be back from hospital by then, Frank," she suggested lamely.

"I doubt it," he muttered. "In any case, it would leave us no time to make all the necessary arrangements—it could actually put our marriage back a whole year."

They were now sitting down gazing at the flowers, and Monica sighed. Queer, she thought, that so much could happen in so short a time. Only on the previous day she and Frank had agreed to get married at Christmas, and now—

"Your aunt has never done anything for you, has she?" Frank went on, breaking in upon her thoughts. "So why should you put yourself out for her? Surely I'm more important than an aunt you scarcely ever see?"

"Of course you're more important, Frank dear. All the same, I—"

"Then do as I say, Monica," he broke in. "Write and tell your aunt that it can't be done."

Monica sighed again. After all, she didn't really owe her aunt a duty, she told herself—at least, not as much as she owed to the man she loved. On the other hand, if she refused her aunt's request and her aunt died, it would always weigh on her conscience.

"Well?" he prompted, impatiently.

"I—I'm afraid I shall have to go, Frank," she stammered.

"That means we'll have to put off our marriage indefinitely. You realise that, don't you?" he said harshly.

"Yes, of course," Monica murmured.

"Well, if your aunt is more important than I am, Monica, there's nothing more to be said. But I certainly thought you loved me enough to—"

"I do, Frank," she broke in piteously. "Oh, do please try and understand, dear!"

"I am trying to understand, but without much success," he retorted. "The fact remains that your aunt must come first, that she means more to you than I do."

"Oh, Frank, you know that is not true," she said reproachfully.

"Isn't it? Well, you have a curious way of proving it, my dear girl, that's all I can say. Anyhow, it's not my idea of love. Still, if that's the way you want it—"

He rose abruptly and made as if to leave her, but Monica sprang to her feet and caught him by the arm.

"Frank dear," she pleaded, "do try and see it from my point of view."

"And what about you seeing it from my point of view?" he countered. "Or aren't I supposed to have one?"

A feeling of despair suddenly took possession of Monica. What was the use of arguing with him while he was in this mood? Frank might be more reasonable when he'd had time to think it over, she told herself hopefully.

"I—I'm very sorry, Frank," she managed to say, then turned away and walked slowly on, hoping he would take her by the arm and tell her that everything was all right between them.

But he did not come after her, and when she reached the street leading to the Strand, tears came into her eyes, but with an effort she managed to force them back.

When her brother returned home that evening, Monica told him what had happened, and Jim nodded understandingly.

"I thought he was looking pretty grim when I saw him this afternoon," he said. "Not surprising either, when you come to think of it, Monnie. All Frank's plans knocked on the head and the marriage put off for goodness knows how long."

"But I tried to explain everything to him, Jim."

"Yes, but when a chap's feeling as sore as Frank must have been, explanations don't cut much ice, my dear girl," Jim said. He paused, then went on—"Listen, Monnie, why can't you and Frank get married by special licence? You could run up to Town for the day and return to Torbeach as soon as the ceremony was over. You'd have to postpone the honeymoon, of course, but wouldn't rather very much, would it?"

"There's another thing too," Jim went on, with growing enthusiasm. "Frank could come down to Torbeach for the week-ends, couldn't he? You could easily manage to put up at 'Seaview', of course. How about that, Monica?"

She pondered this for a moment or two. It certainly did sound practical, and she and Frank would be together over the week-ends. Yes, it might be the answer to their problem, Monica told herself.

"Write to Frank to-night and suggest it," Jim continued. "There is no question of pride being involved. You had decided to get married at Christmas, hadn't you.

So it will only be a matter of altering the date, but Frank won't mind that, of course."

It did seem a reasonable way to solve their problem put that way, and after supper Monica wrote her fiancé telling him of Jim's suggestion. She gave Torbeach as her address, since she would be there by the time Frank's answer was on its way. This done, she gave the letter to Sheila, the girl who came in daily to help the landlady, to post on her way home.

MONICA arrived at Torbeach the following day in time to see her aunt before she was taken to hospital.

"I'm very sorry to have given you such short notice, my dear," Aunt Linda said, "but I only knew about the operation the day I wrote to you. I knew it would have to come, sooner or later, but I was given to understand that it might be weeks before there would be a bed vacant at the hospital."

Monica learnt from her aunt that her boarders were mostly well-to-do old ladies. But there were two elderly gentlemen, one a widower, the other a bachelor.

After she had seen her aunt off in the ambulance, Monica set to work to make herself acquainted with the routine of the establishment. This proved less difficult than she had anticipated, especially as Mrs. Tarrant, the housekeeper, was responsible for the catering and the domestic staff, Monica's chief duties consisted in keeping the books, checking the bills and seeing that the boarders were happy and contented.

The hoped-for letter from Frank, however, did not come, and his silence made Monica desperately unhappy. She felt it to be a bitter affront.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that she was too busy to dwell on her unhappiness and wounded pride. She soon became very popular with the boarders, but she had to be extremely careful not to seem more attentive to one than to the rest, otherwise, as Aunt Linda had warned Monica, there would be jealousy.

"I suppose, Miss Vale, we'd better be thinking about Christmas," the housekeeper remarked, as they were clearing the tables one evening. "There's a lot of planning to be done, what with one thing and another. We always have a Christmas Tree and a Santa Claus to distribute gifts. Mr. Danby, the postman, is always our Santa Claus, and he gets a pound for it."

"I see," Monica said. "Then will you fix everything up, Mrs. Tarrant? How about the gifts?"

"Well, I usually buy a few things at one of the stores," the housekeeper answered. "They don't cost much. The important thing is to see that nobody feels they've been neglected. It's the fact of each of the guests being remembered that counts."

"Yes, I realise that," Monica remarked thoughtfully. "It must be dreadful to feel old and forgotten even if you have got money."

Mrs. Tarrant nodded.

"That's true, Miss," she said. "But I'm afraid it's mostly their own fault. Judging by what I hear from one and another of them, they've fallen out with their relatives and made themselves properly objectionable all round."

"Oh well, we must do our best to give them a happy Christmas," said Monica.

Yes, she would try and give these old people a happy Christmas, though it would be far from happy for her, Monica

reflected sadly. She and Frank were to have been married this Christmas and she would have been preparing for it all now if things had turned out differently. But, evidently, Frank did not want to marry her, otherwise he would have answered her letter.

She tried to harden her heart against him, but it was not much use, for love cannot be dismissed so easily. Even affronts and neglect cannot always kill it, nor can pride still the yearning of the heart. She knew that she still loved Frank in spite of everything.

CHRISTMAS DAY at "Seaview" proved a great success. Everybody seemed happy, and even the most cantankerous of the old ladies forgot their grievances in the prevailing spirit of good will. Monica alone was sad, though she did not show it and laughed and joked with the rest of them.

After dinner "Santa Claus" appeared with his sack of gifts, and everybody received one. Though costing next to nothing, the gifts gave enormous pleasure and were the cause of much excitement and laughter.

Presently, Monica stole away in order to visit her aunt at the cottage hospital. The operation had been a success, and the patient was now well on the way to recovery. She might even, the doctor had told her, be back at "Seaview" early in the New Year.

Two days later, Monica received a letter from her brother, who had been spending Christmas with some friends.

"We've had a burglary at the works—or rather, an attempted one," Jim wrote. "Frank happened to be working late one night, and hearing a noise in the office, he went to investigate. He found a chap tampering with the safe and promptly tackled him. There was a bit of a scrum and the would-be thief managed to make his escape after dotting poor old Frank on the head with a jemmy."

"The alarm was raised and Frank was taken to hospital. Fortunately, his injuries were not very serious, and he was able to leave the hospital in a couple of days. So there's nothing to worry about, Monnie. It appears that his lab-assistant, Stella Bradley, became a bit hysterical when she heard about it, but she calmed down when she got to know that Frank was not seriously hurt . . ."

As she replaced the letter in the envelope, Monica began to wonder if Jim had told the whole truth about Frank's condition, or whether he had made light of the affair so as not to alarm her. She decided to write a note to Frank wishing him a speedy recovery. Not to do so, would seem callous.

But why, she could not help wondering had this girl, Stella Bradley been so upset at the news of Frank getting hurt? Could it be that they were in love with each other?

"Oh no," Monica muttered to herself, "Frank can't possibly have forgotten me as quickly as all that!"

PRIDE'S STRATAGEM

NEXT day, Monica wrote Frank a postcard expressing her sorrow that he should have received an injury and hoping that he would soon recover. A postcard, she decided, would seem more casual than a letter, and she did not wish

to give him the idea that she was fishing for a reconciliation on his own terms.

In any case, a postcard would give him an excuse to reply if he wanted to, and that might, of course, eventually lead to their coming together again. And that was the hope deep down in Monica's heart, though she refused to admit it even to herself.

The days passed, and there was no response from Frank. Feeling hurt and humiliated by his seeming discourtesy, Monica told herself that she would put him out of her mind for ever, that he wasn't worth a second thought. If his love for her was such a transient thing as it seemed to be, then she was lucky to have discovered it now, rather than after they were married!

Had she but know it, however, Frank was every bit as unhappy as she was, and he felt tempted more than once to write her and suggest a reconciliation. But, he asked himself, what was the good? Monica would either ignore his letter, or else write a curt note telling him that a reconciliation was quite out of the question.

Then came the evening when, working late in the laboratory, he heard a noise in the office and as a result of tackling the intruder, he had been knocked senseless and taken to hospital, suffering from shock and concussion.

Then, when he returned to the laboratory, he received the heartfelt sympathy of Stella Bradley—a strikingly good-looking brunette and extremely efficient.

"Oh, it is so nice to have you back here again, Mr. Bartrum!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I would have come to see you while you were in hospital, only they said you weren't on any account to be disturbed."

"That—er—that was very kind of you, Miss Bradley," he said.

"I did leave some flowers for you, though" she told him smilingly.

"Yes, I noticed some flowers on the bedside table," he said, "but I wasn't told who sent them. Thank you very much, Miss Bradley. It was most kind and thoughtful of you."

Feeling utterly depressed and miserable because of the quarrel he had had with Monica, the girl's sympathy seemed very sweet to him, and for the first time, Frank's interest in her was awakened.

"I do think you ought to take it easy for the time being, Mr. Bartrum," she said solicitously.

Frank's head was aching rather badly, but he grinned.

"My work on this invention is now practically finished," he said.

"Really! And do you think it's going to be a success, Mr. Bartram?" she asked eagerly.

"Well yes, I think so," Frank replied. "That chap who was trying to force the office safe, proved it to me—not that he knew anything about it, of course. It was worth that knock on the head he gave me."

"I—I don't understand, Mr. Bartrum."

"Well, you see, I was wondering how I could test that new tube I've been working on," Frank explained. "As you know, my aim was to be able to televise happenings without all the elaborate apparatus of cameras and powerful lights. Nobody believed it could be done, nobody believed an instrument could be made sufficiently sensitive as to register and transmit light vibrations without all the paraphernalia we are accustomed to use now."

Stella Bradley nodded, her eyes lighting up. She knew enough about the science of television to realise that if Frank had indeed succeeded with his experiments, then his fortune was made.

Warmed by her eagerness and enthusiasm, no less than her sympathy, Frank proceeded to divulge more than he had intended.

"Actually," he went on, "I didn't hear any noise in the office that night. But I gave out that I had done so in order to account for my discovering the chap at work on the safe. Had I blurted out the truth, I would have had to tell a lot more than I wanted to disclose."

Bartram paused, then continued—

"I had got my apparatus all connected up and was trying to focus the vibrations—rather as you try and focus a camera. Then, by a mere chance, I picked up the office next door—and I couldn't have done that, of course, if there hadn't been a light there. Except for in the laboratory where I was working, it was the only lighted room in the building."

"But as all the staff had left, Mr. Bartrum, there shouldn't have been a light on at all," Stella remarked.

"Yes, I know, and that's what startled me, Miss Bradley. All I got at first was a dark blur such as you might see on a radar screen. I did a lot more focusing, and at last the blur became a distinct image of a man kneeling in front of the safe. For a moment or two, I was too flabbergasted to realise what he was up to, so I kept the image in focus."

"But when the man turned round to pick up a tool, I woke up to what was really going on," Frank added. "So I rushed into the office, grappled with the fellow, and in the struggle received that blow on the head which knocked me out."

Stella shuddered.

"Oh it—it might have killed you, Mr. Bartrum," she murmured.

"Well, as it happened, it didn't," he said. "But if ever I set eyes on that chap again, I shall recognise him, all right."

"Really, Mr. Bartrum, this invention of yours is simply wonderful," Stella said. "I knew, of course, that you were working on something very secret, but I thought it might be just an improved tube or something of the sort."

"In effect, that's just what it is, my dear girl," he told her laughingly.

"You are going to take out a patent, of course," she suggested.

"Yes, I certainly am," he said. "In fact, it has been applied for already."

Frank was feeling more cheerful than he had done since his parting with Monica, and it was not altogether due to the success of his invention. He needed someone to talk to, to confide in, someone sympathetic and understanding. Apart from the fact that he loved her, his fiancée had always filled that need.

But now, almost without his being aware of it, Stella Bradley had stepped into Monica's place, not entirely filling it, but lessening his sense of loneliness.

Then, late one afternoon just before the day's work was over, Frank invited his assistant to have dinner with him.

Stella's eyes lit up.

"Oh, thank you very much, Mr. Bartrum," she said.

It would be the first time Frank had dined out since his quarrel with Monica, and he felt a spasm of pain as he recalled

the many happy evenings he had spent with the girl he loved but who now, apparently, no longer loved him. For if she was still in love with him, surely she would have written to him, after what had happened, as she was bound to have heard all about it from Jim.

No, Frank told himself, Monica had evidently finished with him, and whether it was because of his fault or hers—or both—made no difference.

So he took his assistant out to dinner, and afterwards they went to the theatre. Stella was bright and entertaining and her gay chatter helped him to forget the dull ache in his heart.

"I had no idea you could be such good company, Stella," he remarked, smiling at her as he drove her home in a taxi.

"But until to-night you have given me the opportunity to show what sort of company I am, have you, Mr. Bartrum?" she said, smiling back at him.

"Oh, cut out the 'Mr. Bartrum', my dear girl, and call me 'Frank'," he said. "We're not in the lab now, you know."

"Very well, Frank," she returned, snuggling up to him.

He was wondering whether he ought to venture to kiss her, though he had no fear of her resenting it if he did. But Frank could not rid himself of the feeling that he was being disloyal to Monica, for even though she no longer had any claim on his loyalty, he was unable to dismiss that sweet, piquant face of hers from his mind's eye.

"You know, Stella," he remarked, "you are an exceedingly attractive girl."

"Am I, Frank?" she said demurely. "It's awfully sweet of you to say that."

The conversation was becoming dangerous, and Frank knew it. But hadn't he encouraged it in order to forget Monica? Wasn't this the anodyne against heart-ache which he had been seeking? So why reject it now that it was his for the taking?

Furtively, he slipped his arm round Stella's shoulders.

"Oh, Frank, it's lovely to spend an evening with you like this," she whispered. "You are awfully nice, you know."

"Am I, Stella" he whispered back.

"Yes, Frank, you are the nicest man I have ever known," she said, taking his hand and pressing it to her lips. "Won't you kiss me, Frank dear?" she purred.

It was a challenge beyond his powers of resistance, and next moment their lips met in a fierce, passionate kiss. It was not the way he had been wont to kiss Monica. Always his kisses had been soft and tender and sweet, just as hers had been.

Presently their heads drew apart, both a little breathless and overwrought by the emotions they had kindled. In the girl's eyes there was a look of triumph; in the man's a look of satisfaction mingled with despair.

The taxi drew up outside the house where Stella lodged and they got out.

"Let me come in with you just for a little while," Frank urged.

A feeling of recklessness had come over him; a feeling that nothing mattered any longer now that he had lost Monica.

Stella shook her head.

"No, Frank dear!" she said agitatedly. "It's very late, you know."

"You asked me to kiss you, didn't you?" he challenged, placing his hand on her shoulder and gazing into her eyes. "A girl

doesn't do that unless—well, unless she's prepared to go a step farther. I want to take you in my arms and hold you to me. But one can't do that on the doorstep."

"No," she breathed, "not to-night, Frank. Some other night perhaps."

He frowned. His mood of recklessness was passing, and he was now beginning to feel a little glad that she had refused his request. Had she not done so, he would have committed himself irretrievably, and the girl would have had a hold over him.

As his brain cleared and he regained control of himself, Frank breathed a little sigh of relief. He had been saved in spite of himself.

"Very well, Stella," he said, "we'll say good-night now. I'm sorry if my behaviour has offended you. I promise you that it won't happen again."

Stella sighed. Had she quenched the very passions she had tried to evoke in order that she might have him in her power? she asked herself.

"Perhaps—perhaps I've been unkind to you, Frank," she murmured.

"Not unkind, only merciful, Stella," he said, but the irony of his words escaped her.

"I'm so sorry, Frank," she went on contritely. "I—I'm afraid I've been rather unkind to you. Would you really like to come upstairs to my room?"

"No, thanks," he muttered, despising himself for his temporary lack of self-control. "I'm sorry, Stella. I can't imagine what came over me. Anyway, please try and forget all about it."

She saw that she had lost him, at least for the time being, and could have cried with vexation at her own stupidity. Why hadn't she agreed to his suggestion? Why had she been fool enough to play him like an angler playing a fish, when she had already as good as landed him?

Stella made a last desperate attempt to retrieve her error.

"I feel that I have behaved rather badly, Frank," she said sorrowfully. "So do please come in and kiss me good night in my room."

He shook his head.

"No thanks," he said again. "Good-night, Stella—and thank you for giving me such a pleasant evening."

"Good-night, Frank," she murmured, doing her best to conceal her bitter disappointment.

He then turned and walked rapidly away. Stella opened the door and slowly climbed the stairs to her room.

"What an utter fool I've been!" she muttered to herself. "You had a golden opportunity, Stella Bradley, and you let it slip. You could have had him in your power and made him do whatever you wished, had you played your cards properly."

She flung herself down upon the bed in her rage and mortification. As a result of his invention, Frank Bartrum would almost certainly be made a partner in the firm—in any case, he was bound to become a rich man when the royalties started to come in.

And she had let him go! In all probability, she would never again have such a chance as she had had that night. By over-playing her hand, she had put Frank on his guard and given him time to think, to let his passion cool.

Even so, Stella tried to comfort herself

with the thought that if she played her cards more carefully in future, he might eventually want to marry her. Of course there was that other girl—she had never met Monica, though she had seen her photograph—and she might prove the biggest obstacle of all.

MONICA sat in the little room which served both as office and her own private sitting-room, reading a letter she had received from her brother. Jim did not waste time on trying to be tactful, or in hiding disagreeable truths. Moreover, he had come to believe that his sister and Frank Bartrum had ceased to love each other and, therefore, that Monica would be amused rather than hurt by such tidbits of gossip as he was able to send her.

After telling her about the success of Frank's invention and his prospect of being made a partner in the firm, the letter continued—

"By all accounts, Frank is having a good time with Stella Bradley, his lab-assistant. She's not a bad-looking piece—rather the gypsy type, if you know what I mean—and seemingly he's fallen for her in quite a big way. Anyway, it's whispered in the office that they're going about together quite a lot—dining out, theatres and so on.

"We all think they'll announce their engagement before long. You missed a fine chance when you gave Frank his conge, my dear girl. He has become the Big Man in radar and television work, and if he isn't rolling in money pretty soon, you may call me a Dutchman! Anyway, Stella Bradley appears to have him properly hooked. Of course, much of what I am telling you is office gossip, but there's no smoke without fire, as the saying goes.

"By the way, my dear, how is Aunt Linda? Improving, I hope. Give her my love when you see her. I expect I shall spend the New Year with my pal, Jack Potter. He's got rather a pretty sister named Dulcie whom I'm pretty keen on at the moment. I'm hoping for the best and keeping my fingers crossed. Anyway, wish me luck, Monnie.

"Your affectionate brother Jim."

Monica did not pay much attention to her brother's suggested love affair. Jim was always falling in and out of love, and she had learnt not to take him too seriously. But his news about Frank was a different matter altogether.

Her heart constricted and her pride flared as she re-read Jim's account of Frank's seeming attachment to Stella Bradley. It might be only office gossip, of course, but as Jim had pointed out, there appeared to be some truth in it, for gossip didn't start out of nothing.

Monica tried to convince herself that she did not care, that Frank meant no more to her now than the boy who delivered the milk. But in her heart of hearts, she knew this was not true, that she still was in love with him. What hurt her most, was the thought that Frank had forgotten her so soon and so completely. It was so unlike what she had always thought him, so foreign to his character as she had conceived it.

Suddenly the urge came over her to prove to Frank that he meant as little to her now as she did to him. If he thought she was breaking her heart on his account, she would somehow see to it that he was deprived of this satisfaction. But how?

Well, for one thing, she could let him believe that she had become engaged to some man—or was, at any rate, about to

become engaged. But what man? Anyway, she need only pretend. There would be no one to contradict her story, she reminded herself.

She had only to write Jim hinting that she had a love affair with some man. She felt pretty sure that the news would quickly reach Frank's ears, since he and Jim were still on friendly terms.

Monica took a sheet of notepaper from a drawer and began to write. She tore up the several rough drafts before she was satisfied. She did not want to tell a deliberate lie, but only to drop a few hints which would be construed the way she intended they should be. Frank had forgotten her so easily that she would try and give him the impression that she had forgotten him with equal ease.

At last, she commenced the letter with news about Aunt Linda, telling Jim that the operation had been successful, but that Aunt Linda would not be out of hospital before the New Year.

"By the way, Jim dear," she continued, "there is ever such a nice man living here. I think he is a Lieutenant-commander in the Navy. He is very handsome in a robust sort of way. I like him very much, and I think he likes me—I'm not sure it doesn't even go much deeper than that. Anyway, don't be surprised if there is a hint of wedding bells in my next letter!"

Then, to make sure that Frank would hear about it—

"In case Frank Bartrum is feeling a little ill at ease over the matter of our parting, you might give him a hint that there is no need for this—and you can tell him why. I mention this because your news about him and Stella Bradley has come as a great relief to me, and, of course, my news may be a relief to him, too. Now we can each go our own way with perfect freedom.

"I wish you every success with the dazzling Dulcie and hope that happiness will usher in your New Year, and I know you wish me the same, Jim dear. Love and best wishes from

"Your affectionate sister Monica."

On reading the letter through carefully, Monica felt quite pleased with her efforts.

THERE were the usual New Year festivities at "Seaview", though on a less elaborate than at Christmas, for which both Monica and Mrs. Tarfant were grateful.

Every day Monica was hoping to hear from her brother and find out how Frank had received the hints of her forthcoming "engagement". But Jim was not much given to letter-writing, and a fortnight elapsed before she heard from him.

But he made no reference whatever to Frank. After expressing the hope Aunt Linda would soon be out of hospital, the letter continued—

"I don't suppose, after what I told you in my last letter, that you'll be surprised to learn that Dulcie Potter and I are engaged. She's really a smashing girl, Monnie and I'm perfectly sure that you will like her . . ."

Monica gave an impatient shrug. Had he dropped those hints of hers to Frank about herself and her imaginary Lieutenant-commander?

As a matter of fact, Jim had done so,

though in his enthusiasm about his own love affair, he had forgotten to mention this in his letter. Frank had received the news with a grim nod. It had come as a bitter blow to him, for in his heart of hearts, he had kept alive the hope that, in some way or other, he and Monica would become reconciled.

But, he told himself, if she was soon to become engaged to another man, it meant that there was no longer any hope for him. That being so, why shouldn't he become engaged to Stella Bradley? It would show Monica that he was not breaking his heart over her as perhaps, she was flattering herself he was doing. And he would take jolly good care, he promised himself, that she should get to know of his engagement.

CROSS CURRENTS.

"BY the way, Stella, would you care to come and have dinner with me to-night!" Frank remarked, smiling at her, as they were leaving the laboratory together on the following evening.

"Yes, of course, Frank," she answered delightedly.

Since their parting that night outside the house where she lived, Stella had almost given up hope of capturing Frank. Their attitude towards each other had been cool and aloof as though each wanted to forget what had happened.

Frank hailed a taxi, and took her to a well-known restaurant in Soho. Stella's only regret was that she had not had time to go home and put on a more becoming frock for the occasion. The manager escorted them to a corner table, and Frank gave his order.

"I say, Stella," he said, smiling at her across the table when they had been served with the first course, "you know that until a short while ago I was engaged, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, Frank. You were engaged to Jim Vale's sister, weren't you?" murmured Stella.

"Well, in case you do not know, it's all off," he said. "Miss Vale and I—well, we sort of quarrelled, and now I understand she is about to become engaged to someone else. That means I'm free, of course."

It was a rather tactless way of putting it, suggesting as it did that Stella was a second-best chance or, as she put it to herself, a sort of "consolation prize," but she concealed her pique with a forced smile.

"So," Frank went on, still smiling at her, "what about you and me making a match of it?"

Stella flushed. Was he merely using her as a means to vindicate his injured pride? she asked herself. But she managed to swallow her chagrin and smiled at him as sweetly as ever.

"You have sprung this on me very suddenly, haven't you, Frank?" she said.

"Well, yes, maybe I have, my dear Stella," he answered, filling their glasses from a bottle of sparkling wine.

So, thought Stella, he had evidently been hoping all along for a chance to make it up with Monica Vale, and now he was seeking balm for his injured dignity by proposing to her. But what did it matter to her?

"Then my answer is yes, Frank dear," she said, with an alluring smile, and watching him closely from under her lowered lashes.

"Thanks, Stella," was all he said.

Obviously he was still in love with that other girl, Stella was thinking, her vanity deeply wounded, and that meant the danger was still there. She would never be sure of him until she was actually married to him, for something might happen to put things right between him and his former fiancée. But she would do her best to see to it that nothing of the sort did happen.

"Tell me, Stella where would you like to go when we leave here?" Frank asked, when coffee had been served. "It's a bit too early to take you home, isn't it?"

"Well, yes it is, Frank," she agreed. "Let's go to a cinema, shall we?"

"Very well," he said, and they went to the Casino.

Frank drove her home in a taxi, and outside the house, Stella, on a sudden impulse, flung her arms around his neck and kissed him, hoping to provoke the emotions of that other night when, had she played her cards properly, she might have had him completely in her power.

Now, however, success again eluded her. Frank gave her a perfunctory kiss, wished her good-night and left her.

IN the meantime, Jim had answered his sister's note. Having told her that he had passed on her hints to Frank, he went on—

"Frank seemed a bit astonished when I told him about that sailor man of yours, Monnie, and he seemed anything but pleased on hearing the news. But he asked me to convey his congratulations to you if, and when, they were called for. Then, the very next day, we learnt in the office that he'd become engaged to Stella Bradley."

"Between ourselves, Monica I have a suspicion that he was clinging to the hope that you and he might make it up, but what I told him put the lid on it. Honestly, Monnie, I don't believe he's in love with that Bradley girl, though admittedly she's a good-looker. I have an idea that he became engaged to her just to show you he didn't care."

"By the way, Monnie, I'm getting a week off at Easter. So if you are still at 'Seaview', what about my coming down to see you? Unfortunately, Dulcie won't be able to come with me, as she only gets the usual two days at Easter . . ."

The letter greatly puzzled Monica. Could her brother be right in thinking that Frank had been hoping for a reconciliation? If that were so, why hadn't he written to her? After all, it was up to him to make the first move. Besides, she had sent him a postcard when he was in hospital, and wasn't that a hint if he had cared to take it?

Monica sighed. Anyway, it was too late to do anything about it now that Frank had become engaged to Stella Bradley, she reflected sadly, blinking back the tears that came to her eyes.

Unfortunately, Aunt Linda had suffered a relapse and was not yet out of hospital, so Monica had still to carry on. Oddly enough, she was beginning to like her job at "Seaview." It had its drawbacks, but in spite of these, she was her own mistress and was not bound by office hours, or compelled to travel in crowded buses and trains twice a day.

The boarders had taken a great liking to her too, so on the whole, things were going remarkably smoothly and Monica had every reason to be pleased with herself. But for the ache in her heart, which would

not be stilled, she would have been quite happy.

Easter arrived, and so did her brother Jim. There was no room for him at "Seaview," but Monica had managed to secure accommodation for him at a neighbouring boarding-house.

"Well, Monica," he said, after she had given him a hearty greeting, "where's the fiancée?"

"Fiance?" she repeated, forgetting for a moment the story she had invented about her supposed admirer.

"I mean that naval chap you told me about in your letter," Jim said. "What did you say his name was?"

Monica thought quickly, then gave a forced little laugh.

"Oh yes, of course," she said. "You are referring to Lieutenant-Commander Denby. He—he is away just now."

"With his ship, I suppose?" Jim suggested, grinning at her, for he had begun to have his suspicions.

"Yes, of—of course," she stammered.

"That's too bad," Jim said, "for I should have liked to meet him."

He eyed her critically, and told himself that his sister was not as happy as she had pretended to be in her letters to him. Could it be that, in spite of everything, she was still in love with Frank Bertrum?

"Tell me," said Monica, trying to sound casual, "is—is Frank happy with his new fiancée?"

Jim shrugged.

"Can't say, Monnie," he replied, giving her a quizzical look. "I don't see as much of Frank as I did when you and he were engaged. But, somehow, Stella Bradley is not the sort of girl I'd have thought he'd have fallen for. But one can never tell, of course. She may be all right, and I may be all wrong."

"Do you happen to know when they are to get married?" Monica asked, after a short pause.

"No, I don't, Monnie, but I shouldn't think it would be yet awhile," Jim said. "Apparently, Frank is up to his neck in work arranging for the mass production of his invention. It means a new epoch in television—at least, so the scientific blokes say. One thing is certain, though—Frank will be worth oodles of money before long, and everybody seems to think that he'll be made a director of our firm."

"I'm glad to know that he has succeeded at last," murmured Monica. "He has certainly worked hard enough on that invention of his."

"Yes, I quite agree," Jim remarked thoughtfully.

He still had his suspicions as to the reality of Lieutenant-Commander Denby, and next day he went to the public library and consulted the Navy List. Search as he would, however, he could find no Lieutenant-Commander of that name, and he was forced to the conclusion that Monica had invented her supposed admirer.

Jim was very fond of his sister, and the fact that he was happy in love himself, made him all the more anxious that Monica should be happy too.

"It's pretty obvious to me that the dear girl is still in love with Frank Bartrum," he murmured to himself. "That's the trouble with Monica. And I wouldn't be surprised if Frank is still in love with her,

in spite of his becoming engaged to Stella Bradley."

But engagements could be broken, of course. Hadn't Monica's engagement to Frank been broken off? All the same, a broken engagement could also be mended, he reminded himself, and when he got back to his lodgings that night, Jim wrote a long letter to his fiancée, telling her all about Monica's broken engagement.

"Girls know how to manage these things better than men," he reflected, smiling to himself, "so perhaps Dulcie will be able to think of some plan to solve the baffling problem."

Dulcie answered by return. She told Jim that it was clear from what he had told her, that his sister and Frank Bartrum were still in love with each other, and that if they could be brought together again, she felt quite sure that everything would come right between them, that love would conquer in the end. She strongly advised Jim to do his best to arrange a meeting between the young couple.

Jim pondered this suggestion. He had promised to take Monica to a concert at the Winter Gardens that evening. If only he could arrange a meeting between his sister and Frank—it would have to be done very tactfully, of course—Dulcie's suggested plan might work out all right. He knew that it would be impossible to inveigle Frank to come down to Torbeach, so couldn't be somehow induce Monica to go to London?

Turning this over in his mind, as he and his sister sat at a table in the Winter Gardens that evening, Jim paid little attention to the concert. During one of the items, the conductor left the platform and wandered about among the audience seated at the small tables, playing his violin. He paused at their table and smiled at Monica as he played.

He was dark and good-looking in a rather sinister way, and Jim took a great dislike to him.

"Didn't care much for that chap, Monnie," he muttered, when the man had passed on to another table.

"Oh, but I thought he played very nicely, Jim," she said.

"I see that the programme gives his name as Jules Legarde," said Jim. "I thought it a confounded cheek of him stopping in front of our table the way he did."

Monica laughed.

"Don't be silly, Jim, it was a compliment," she said. "I believe it's the sort of thing they do in some of the fashionable London restaurants and cabarets."

"Is that so?" Jim mumbled. He paused, then added—"Talking of London, Monnie, when do you think you'll be able to come back to Town?"

"Not until Aunt Linda is quite well again," she answered. "But I think I shall have to go to London one day next week to attend to a business affair for auntie."

"What day?" Jim asked.

"Probably next Monday," Monica replied.

"Well, as I'm returning on Saturday, I could meet you on Monday afternoon and we could have tea somewhere, couldn't we, Monnie?"

"Yes, of course, Jim. That would be very nice if you could manage it."

"Then supposing we meet at 'The Orpington'?" Jim said. "You know, Monnie—that quiet little cafe near the British Museum."

Monica nodded.

"Oh yes, I often used to go there with Frank," she said, with a little lurch of the heart as she thought of the many happy meetings she had spent there with the man she loved.

"All right," Jim said, "then I'll be there at four-thirty, Monnie. Don't mind if I'm just a little late, though I'll try not to be. I might get held up at the last moment, you know."

"And if by any chance I can't get away on Monday, I'll send you a wire," Monica promised.

Jim was already beginning to work out a plan in his mind for bringing his sister and Frank Bartrum together again. He dismissed Frank's engagement to Stella Bradley as something that could be broken off at any moment.

"By the way, Jim," Monica remarked as they were leaving the Winter Gardens after the concert, "I want you to come and have tea at 'Seaview' on Saturday before you leave for London."

"You mean just with you alone?" he asked.

"No, Jim, with the other guests," she answered. "You see," she went on, with a forced little laugh, "I've been rather bragging about my big, handsome brother, and I'm afraid that unless I produce you, they will think you're a myth—that I have invented you, in fact."

The thought of meeting a bevy of middle-aged ladies, rather filled Jim with dismay.

"Oh, but must I, Monnie?" he murmured, grinning at her.

"Yes, of course," she said. "You see, it will give the dear old ladies a good excuse to put on their finery and show themselves off to you."

"And shall I be the only male person there?" he asked.

"Oh no, we have two gentlemen boarders Colonel Fistaff and Mr. Cranby."

"Museum pieces, eh?" queried Jim.

"Not quite, but getting on that way," Monica answered laughingly. "So you will come, won't you, Jim dear?"

"I suppose I must," he said. "Okay, the sooner it's over the better, my dear girl."

The truth was that Monica's hand had been forced. It had somehow got about that her brother was staying in the town, and this seemed to have excited the curiosity of the lady boarders at "Seaview".

So, when Jim arrived for tea on Saturday afternoon, all the ladies had decked themselves out for the occasion. The tea party was quite a success—Jim even indulging in a mild flirtation with one of the old ladies.

WHEN, that evening, Monica saw her brother off at the station, Jim reminded her of their appointment to have tea on Monday at "The Orpington" cafe.

On his arrival in London, Jim saw his fiancée and explained his plan to bring Monica and Frank together. But somewhat to his chagrin, Dulcie seemed to be a little doubtful as to its chances of success.

"They might resent your interference, Jim," she warned.

"Oh no, I don't think so, darling," Jim said.

"But how are you going to manage it, Jim dear?"

"Well, I've got Monica fixed all right,"

he said. "So I think I'll send Frank a note saying that I have something important to tell him and suggesting we meet at 'The Orpington' on Monday at a quarter to five."

"And do you think he will be there, Jim?"

"Yes, I think so, darling. He'll be wondering what it is that I have to tell him that's so important."

"And you'll just let them meet as if by chance?"

Jim nodded, a broad grin on his face.

"You see, darling, their defences will be down," he said, "and it will be 'the moment of truth'. They won't have had time to don the armour of pride. think it's a smashing idea. Dulcie. In any case it can't make things any worse than they are, can it?"

"No, I suppose not," Dulcie murmured. "Oh Jim," she added, "I hope nothing like that will ever happen to us."

Jim laughed.

"No need to worry about that, sweetheart," he quickly assured her. "It takes two to make a quarrel, you know, and nothing will ever make me quarrel with you."

"And nothing will ever make me quarrel with you, Jim dear."

"Is that a promise, my darling?" he teased.

"Yes, of course, Jim," and the promise was promptly sealed in the most satisfactory way known to lovers.

Jim wrote a note to Frank suggesting their meeting at "The Orpington" cafe on Monday afternoon, as he had something very important to tell him, and handed it to one of the messengers to take to Frank.

It so happened that he was not in the laboratory at the moment so the messenger laid the note on Frank's desk. But Stella Bradley was there, and as soon as the messenger had closed the door behind him, she picked up the note and eyed it curiously for a moment or two, then slipped it into the pocket of her overall, intending to read it later on.

When Frank returned, he told her he had to go and see the managing director, and the moment he left the room again, Stella opened the note and read it. Her first impression was that it seemed harmless enough. Then she remembered that Jim Vale was Monica's brother, and her suspicions were aroused.

Was this an attempt by Jim—probably with the connivance of his sister, if not at her instigation—to patch up the quarrel with Frank? she wondered. If this happened, Stella told herself, her hope of becoming Mrs. Frank Bartrum would be shattered for ever.

For she had not deluded herself into thinking that Frank was in love with her. She knew perfectly well that, as far as he was concerned, she was merely a substitute, a salve for his pride. She was fully aware, too, that she had not even caught his heart on the rebound, because his heart was still with Monica Vale.

Well, Stella decided, something would have to be done to defeat Jim Vale's plan, whatever it might be. Yet she could do nothing till she knew what that plan was. Therefore, she would hold on to the note and turn up at "The Orpington" cafe in Frank's place!

Jim had received a letter from his sister on the Monday morning.

"I do wish you could have stayed a few days longer, Jim," Monica wrote. "Colonel Fistaff suddenly discovered that he had a birthday due to him on Sunday, and decided to celebrate it by giving us all a surprise. He took me into his confidence, and I aided and abetted, knowing how delighted all the dear old ladies would be."

"To begin with, he hired Jules Legarde's orchestra to come and play in the drawing-room while tea was in progress. This was followed by a conjuring entertainment which was a great success."

"And my word, didn't the old darlings deck themselves out! I think they managed to display all the jewellery they possessed. And to finish up the evening, the gallant colonel took us all to a concert in the Winter Gardens. Anyway, a good time was had by all, as the saying goes, and that was all that mattered. With love, and looking forward to seeing you on Monday."

"MONICA."

Feeling a little nervous now that he was going to put his plan into operation, Jim met his sister at "The Orpington". He ordered tea and then, on the plea of wanting to buy some cigarettes, slipped out and left her. If all went well, he told himself, Frank would come along in a few minutes, and on entering the cafe, would come face to face with Monica.

But, to his dismay, it was not Frank whom he now saw approaching the cafe, but Stella Bradley. Evidently something had "come unstuck", but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it.

Cursing himself for having made a mess of things, he turned and walked away.

Stella Bradley gave a quick glance round the cafe and recognised Monica. She deliberately sat down by the other girl.

"You are Miss Vale, I believe," she said belligerently.

Monica nodded. She realised at once that this girl must be Stella Bradley. Jim's description of her was very apt, she thought.

"I'd like you to read this, Miss Vale," Stella said, taking a note from her bag. "Though, no doubt," she added maliciously, "you already know its contents."

Monica read her brother's note to Frank, a puzzled expression on her face.

"I—I don't understand," she said. "My brother has said nothing to me about meeting Frank—about meeting Mr. Bartrum—here. I have come here to have tea with Jim, and he has just gone out to buy some cigarettes."

"So you expect me to believe that do you?" sneered Stella.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," retorted Monica. "Besides, I see that this note is addressed to Mr. Bartrum. How does it happen to be in your possession, may I ask?" she added, handing her back the note.

Smiling to herself, Stella replaced the note in her bag.

"It was a clever move on your part, Miss Vale," she said, "but not quite clever enough. You hoped that by tricking Frank into meeting you here, you could persuade him to make it up with you, and break off his engagement to me, didn't you? I saw through your little scheme at once, of course. Well, it hasn't come off, Miss Vale."

Monica gazed at her in wide-eyed astonishment, and Stella gave a mocking little laugh.

"Well, you can take it from me that Frank won't be coming here, so you needn't waste your time waiting for him,"

she said. "I am his fiancée now, so please don't think you're going to get him back, Miss Vale, for you are not," she added, then rose to her feet and left the café, her eyes gleaming with malicious triumph.

Monica watched her go. She was dumbfounded by what had happened. Presently she rose, paid the bill, and took a bus to the railway station.

"Jim must be utterly mad!" Monica muttered to herself. "I'll never forgive him for subjecting me to this humiliation."

TURMOIL AND DISTRESS

JIM'S letter of explanation, telling her how he had hoped to bring about a reconciliation between her and Frank, only made Monica more furious than ever. Now dare he try and interfere in her affairs? What right had he to suppose that she was secretly breaking her heart over Frank Bartrum, as he evidently must have done?

She could not trust herself to answer Jim's apologetic letter, fearing that if she did so she might, in her anger, say something she would regret later on, but what troubled her most was the fear that Frank would have heard about it all from Stella Bradley.

The thought that he might be under the impression that she had tried to inveigle him into meeting her in the hope of making it up, made Monica boil with indignation and hurt pride. She told herself that something must be done to cure him of that impression, to prove to him that he no longer mattered to her in the very least.

She must therefore abandon the silly story she had invented about an imaginary Lieutenant - Commander and become engaged—really engaged—to some real man, and in her present mood Monica did not very much care who the man might be.

It was at this critical stage in her life that the man appeared in the person of Jules Legarde, the conductor of the orchestra at the Winter Gardens. One afternoon, shortly after her unfortunate visits to London, Monica met him on her way back from doing some shopping in the town.

"Good afternoon, Miss Vale," he greeted her, smiling and raising his hat, and noticing that she was carrying a shopping basket, he asked to be allowed to carry it for her.

Monica smiling agreed, and they walked on together, chatting and laughing as though they were old friends. Jules seemed very interested in the boarders at "Seaview" whom he had met at Colonel Fistall's birthday party.

"The old ladies amused me very much with all their display of artificial jewellery," remarked laughingly.

"Oh, but you are mistaken, Mr. Legarde," Monica said. "I can assure you that the jewellery you saw is quite genuine. Old fashioned most of it, no doubt, but certainly not artificial. Please remember that 'Seaview' is a high-class and very exclusive establishment."

"And you run it all by yourself apparently," he remarked.

Monica explained that she was deputising for her aunt who was in hospital recovering from a serious operation.

"And when your aunt is able to return, will you be leaving Torbeach, Miss Vale?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," she replied. "But I have no idea when that will be. The doctor has advised my aunt to go to the South of France for a month or two."

"Which means, I suppose, that you will

have to remain in Torbeach until your aunt returns?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Monica agreed. "Not that I mind that, as I like being at 'Seaview'. I find it much more interesting work than having to sit in a London office typing business letters."

They had now reached the door at "Seaview", and Legarde handed the shopping basket to her. Monica thanked him, and was about to open the door when he suggested she might like to go to a matinee at the Torbeach repertory theatre.

"You see, Miss Vale," he explained, noticing her hesitation, "I have a number of complimentary tickets, and in return, I give the members of the company free tickets for my concerts at the Winter Gardens."

"I see," Monica said. "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Legarde," she added smilingly, as he handed her two tickets.

From then on, whenever they happened to meet, they greeted each other as friends. Jules contrived to meet her as often as possible when Monica was out shopping, and it soon became an accepted thing that they should walk back to "Seaview" together.

So, little by little, and without any direct questioning, he learnt quite a lot of what he wanted to know. When Aunt Linda was discharged from the hospital, she obeyed the doctor's orders and went to the South of France to spend the ensuing winter. She did this all the more readily because her niece was not only very popular with the boarders, but was proving an excellent manageress.

"I should think, Miss Vale, that 'Seaview' must be quite a paying concern," Jules remarked, when he was walking back to the house with her one day.

"Oh yes, it is," agreed Monica enthusiastically. "I think it must be the best paying boarding-house in Torbeach."

"And I expect your aunt will eventually leave it all to you in her will," he suggested jokingly.

"Do you, Mr. Legarde?" she returned laughingly.

Although she was not in love with the man, Monica liked him and found him amusing. In fact, if he asked her to become engaged to him, she would probably consent to do so, she told herself, but she would warn him that she had lost her heart to another man whom she could never marry. But if she did become engaged to Jules Legarde, she would take good care that Frank Bartrum got to know about it.

Then one evening it happened. Monica had been to the concert at the Winter Gardens, and as she was about to leave, she heard someone call her name. Turning, she saw Jules Legarde hurrying towards her.

"I was hoping that I should catch you," he said. "Well, and what is the latest news from your aunt?" he asked, falling into step with her.

"I'm sorry to say that the last letter I received from her was not too encouraging," Monica replied. "Signs of the old trouble are reappearing apparently, and my aunt hinted that there might have to be another operation."

"Oh dear, I'm very sorry to hear that," murmured Jules sympathetically. "This means, I suppose, that you will still have to carry on at 'Seaview'."

"I am afraid so," Monica murmured.

"I don't like the idea of your having to bear such a heavy responsibility alone," he said. "You are getting nothing out of life, are you? What you need, my dear Monica, is a husband, someone to take the weight off your shoulders. So how about becoming engaged to me?" he added,

taking her hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze.

"But I—but I am not in love with you, Jules!" she stammered.

"That is not to say you never will be, my dear Monica," he said. "Once you are engaged and you think of me as your future husband, you will gradually come to love me. In any case, do please let us become engaged, my darling girl," he pleaded.

"But it would not be fair to you, Jules," she said, after a pause, "as I do not love you and, I'm afraid, I never shall."

"So there's some other man, is there?" he muttered morosely.

"Yes, but I—but I can never marry him," Monica said. "Even so, I cannot stop loving him. That being so, it would be unfair to you if I accepted your proposal."

They continued to argue the matter until, at last, Monica gave in and consented to become engaged to him.

IT was with a feeling of triumph that she wrote and told Jim of her engagement. She knew he would pass the news on to Frank Bartrum.

Jim was furious when he read the letter, and he lost no time in answering it.

"My dear Monnie, have you suddenly gone stark crazy?" he wrote. "You know nothing about this Legarde fellow except that he conducts an orchestra at the Winter Gardens. He may be a crook for all you know—in fact, I always thought he looked like one. So please take my advice and send the chap about his business before it's too late."

"I shall try and come down to Torbeach next week-end to talk things over with you. Don't tell me you're in love with Legarde, because I'm quite sure you are not. What's the big idea, my dear girl? As your brother I have a right to have a say in this affair, and I tell you quite plainly that you are not going to marry that gigolo."

"By the way, Monnie, it rather looks to me that there's going to be a rift between Frank and Stella Bradley. Naturally, I told Frank about the trick the girl played on him that day you came to London, and though he didn't say much at the time, I'm pretty sure that he gave her a good ticking off. But more when we meet on Saturday."

So Frank had learnt about that girl's deception! No doubt Stella Bradley had hoped to defend herself by saying it was all because she loved him so deeply and that love justified any extreme! Monica told herself.

"But," she reflected sadly, "it is obvious that Frank does not love me any more. So there is nothing I have to hope for, even if Frank does break it off with Stella Bradley."

When she met Jules Legarde that evening, Monica noticed that he was looking worried.

"Has something happened to upset you, Jules?" she asked.

"Yes, those confounded fellows in my orchestra have been accusing me of cheating them," he muttered angrily, "and it's a lie, a foul lie!"

"But Jules, how could you cheat the men?" Monica asked.

"Well, you see, I have to pay them a certain percentage out of the money I receive from the Torbeach Corporation," he explained, "and they are accusing me of keeping some of it back. They even threaten to take the matter to court."

"But, Jules, you are doing nothing of the sort, of course, are you?" Monica said.

"Well, no, but it's true that the Corporation is paying me a little more than was originally agreed upon," he confessed. "But my expenses have gone up enor-

mously, and the extra payment barely covers them."

"In that case, I suppose you are quite justified in—"

"Yes, Monica," he broke in, "but a clever lawyer might be able to make it appear that I was actually cheating the members of the orchestra by not giving them a share of that extra money which has been paid to me."

"But if it's swallowed up in expenses, Jules, I don't see how you can be accused of cheating," said Monica.

Legarde sighed.

"Anyway, I don't feel at all happy about it," he muttered gloomily. "It's going to cause a bit of a scandal I'm afraid, and I shouldn't be surprised if the Corporation cancelled my contract."

"Oh dear, I'm awfully sorry," Monica murmured sympathetically. "But please don't worry too much about it, Jules. I feel sure everything will turn out all right for you in the end," she added optimistically.

JIM came down to Torbeach on the following Saturday. He was still angry and amazed at his sister's engagement to Jules Legarde.

"Does he know about Aunt Linda—I mean, about her having to undergo another operation?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Monica replied.

"Why?"

"Well, isn't it obvious, my dear girl? If the worst happens to Aunt Linda, it's pretty certain that you'll inherit 'Seaview'. Yes, and I'll bet you what you like that Legarde knows this as well as you do, Monnie."

Monica frowned.

"I think you are being both unfair and uncharitable, Jim," she retorted. "Just because you have taken a dislike to Jules Legarde, you've made up your mind that he's some sort of a crook. People might say the same thing of you, if they took a dislike to you."

"So you are determined to marry the man, are you, Monnie?"

"Why shouldn't I marry him?" she countered. "In any case, Jim, I have no intention of breaking off the engagement because of your ridiculous attitude towards Jules."

"Well, then, I'll tell you something to make you sit up and think," Jim said. "Frank and Stella Bradley have definitely broken off their engagement. It's not an idle rumour, for Frank told me himself."

Monica caught her breath, and her heart seemed to give a sudden leap of joy.

"I—I never thought that Stella Bradley was the sort of girl to make Frank happy," she murmured, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Of course she wasn't," Jim agreed. "Frank only became engaged to her out of pique, just as I suspect you became engaged to that gigolo friend of yours."

"But Frank never answered the letter I sent to him," Monica protested. "You remember your suggestion that he and I should get married by special licence, don't you, Jim?"

"Yes, and that has always puzzled me," Jim said. "Several times I've been tempted to mention it to Frank, but somehow I didn't want to embarrass him."

"Well, I'm very glad you didn't mention it, Jim, as Frank might have thought I had suggested that you should do so."

"Yes, Monnie, that's what I thought, too, and it helped me to keep my mouth shut. I wonder why he never took the trouble to answer your letter?" Jim mused.

"Tell me, did you post it yourself, Monnie?"

"No, Jim, I gave it to the maid to post."

"I see," Jim said thoughtfully. "I wonder if the girl forgot to post it?"

"Oh no, I don't think so," Monica replied. "Sheila is a very reliable girl, and she wouldn't have forgotten to post the letter. I'm quite sure of that."

"Anyway, I'm not," Jim commented rily. "I happen to know that Sheila had fallen out with her boy friend at the time and was feeling very much upset about it."

"But apart from the letter, I sent Frank a postcard when he was in hospital, and he never acknowledged that—and I posted it myself," Monica said.

"Yes, Monnie, but don't forget that he might have been too ill at the time to read it, and that one of the nurses in clearing away might have swept it—"

"Oh no," Monica broke in impatiently, "that would be too much of a coincidence, Jim."

"I don't see why, my dear girl. The nurse might have taken it for granted that Frank had read the postcard. You know what a passion they have in hospitals for tidiness," Jim added, and there the argument ended.

ON the evening following her brother's return to London, Monica happened to meet Jules Legarde on his way to the Winter Gardens. He was still looking very downcast.

"It's come, as I had expected," he told her gloomily. "When my contract with the Corporation expires, it is not going to be renewed, and that means I'll be out of a job, Monica."

"But, Jules, haven't you explained the matter to them?" she asked.

"Yes, but the chairman of the Entertainments Committee wasn't interested in the rights or wrongs of the case, but only in doing his best to avoid unpleasant publicity which, he said, would do untold harm to the town. Anyway," Legarde added, with a wry grin, "I've been in a few tight corners before and have managed to get out of them so I expect I shall this time."

"Yes, of course you will," Monica said. "You can always get a job, can't you, Jules?"

"As an ordinary musician, yes, but that's no good to me," he answered. "I want my own band. It needs a bit of money, though, and I'll have to raise it somehow. Still, I've done it before and I can do it again."

Monica sighed.

"Well, I wish you the best of good luck, Jules," she murmured.

"Thanks, my dear," he said, giving her a pathetic look. "I shall need all the luck I can get." He paused, then added—"I suppose, Monica, 'Seaview' is still flourishing as much as ever?"

"Well, yes, we still have the same people—we don't often lose any of our old clientele, you know," Monica said, a note of pride in her voice.

"And the opulent old ladies are still parading in their grand display of jewellery, I suppose?" Legarde remarked jestingly.

Monica smiled.

"Oh yes, they love to make a display of their wealth occasionally," she said. "After all, it is one of the few joys left to them, you know. But tell me, Jules," she added, to change the subject "what are your plans for the future?"

He shrugged.

"Well, as I have already told you, Monica, my contract with the Corporation doesn't take me beyond Christmas, so I'll have to start thinking about getting an engagement

for the New Year," he answered. "I may fix up something with one of the West End hotels or a London night club. And what about you, darling?"

"Oh, I'm a fixture here until my aunt returns and takes over again at 'Seaview'," Monica replied.

"That being so, we shan't have to part before Christmas, shall we, Monica?" he said. "I suppose you'll be doing your usual Father Christmas stunt at 'Seaview'?"

"Yes, of course—it has become quite a tradition," she answered laughingly. "The old dears look forward to it very much—it's their biggest treat of the year."

"Oh well, it affords them an opportunity to doll themselves up, doesn't it, Monica?"

"Naturally," she agreed. "That's part of the fun. Tell me, Jules—when do you give your last concert at the Winter Gardens?" Monica asked.

"On Christmas Eve," he answered. "I expect a new orchestra will take over in the New Year. Anyway, I'm about fed up with this little dead-and-alive hole, and shan't be sorry to leave here," he added, and then hurried on to the Winter Gardens.

THE weeks passed swiftly, and soon it would be necessary to start preparing for Christmas again. Monica was astonished at how quickly the year had passed.

Then, one morning, she received a letter from her brother which filled her with mingled bitterness and dismay. After telling her that he and his fiancée had arranged to get married in the spring, Jim's letter went on—

"By the way, Monnie, I'm afraid that what I am going to tell you will come as a bit of a shock for you, my dear girl. You remember that letter you wrote to Frank, at my suggestion, pointing out that you and he could get married by special licence, and to which he never replied, don't you? Well, he never got the letter. That wretched little Sheila admits that she forgot to post it."

"I tackled her on the subject, because it seemed to me so unlike Frank to ignore a letter of that sort. The thought has been nagging me ever since you and he parted. But Sheila is leaving at Christmas to get married and is in rather a defiant mood. At first, she denied that you had ever given her a letter to post, and when I insisted that you had, she admitted that she had posted it."

"I then put her through a sort of third degree and eventually she broke down and confessed. It appears that having quarrelled with her boy friend, she was 'all het up' at the time and forgot about the letter until some weeks later, when she found it between the leaves of a magazine she had been reading. So she burned the letter, hoping no one would question her about it."

"However, I suppose it's too late to do anything about it now, worse luck, but it does absolve dear old Frank, doesn't it? And as for that postcard you sent him when he was in hospital, I think it must have arrived while he was still suffering from concussion and was accidentally mislaid before he recovered. Probably by some ward maid."

"I am hoping to run down to Torbeach to see you between now and Christmas, Monnie. So good-bye for the present. Yours as ever, Jim."

Monica put the letter down and buried her face in her hands. Grief and despair almost overwhelmed her. If only she had gone out and posted that letter herself, instead of entrusting it to Sheila Williams! If only . . .

SANTA CLAUS—WITH A DIFFERENCE.

"I really cannot understand why you got engaged to that crook," Jim said.

They were sitting in Monica's private room at "Seaview," and Jim had just arrived from London.

"Please remember Jules Legarde is my fiancé, whatever your own opinion of him may be," Monica said, with heightened colour.

"But, my dear girl, you must have been crazy," Jim went on. "Or was it just to show Frank Bartram that you didn't care?" he added accusingly.

"I had my reasons. That's all I can tell you," Monica retorted.

"And to think Monnie, that you could go back to Frank now that he's broken it off with Stella Bradley! I told you about that, didn't I?"

"Whatever you told me can make no difference," Monica said.

Jim sighed. There seemed to be nothing more he could say. He knew that when his sister was in one of her obstinate moods, there was no moving her. But, he promised himself, he was not going to let her ruin her life by marrying a "dago fiddler"—at least, not if he could help it.

So far, Jim reminded himself, Frank knew only half the story, but he would take good care that he now heard it all.

So when he returned to the office on Monday he contrived to meet Frank Bartram as he was leaving the laboratories at lunch-time—they had remained good friends in spite of everything.

"By the way, Frank, I have something to tell you," Jim remarked, as they emerged into the street. He hesitated, then added—

"Tell me, are you still keen on Monica?"

"Keen on her?" Frank exclaimed. "Of course I am, my dear chap, and I would give everything I possess to win her back."

Jim then told him about the letter which Monica had written him and which Sheila Williams had forgotten to post; also, about the postcard Monica had sent to him when he was in hospital.

"Good heavens, the fates have been against us all the time!" groaned Frank. "But it's all my fault, for if I hadn't—" "No good moaning about the past, my dear chap," Jim broke in. "What you and my sister have to do is to straighten things out. And to do that, you will have to meet each other, and there lies the difficulty. I tried to fix a meeting for you both some time ago, and you know what happened, didn't you?"

Frank nodded glumly.

"Then what do you suggest, Jim?"

"Well, I'm trying to think up some scheme," Jim said. "But just at present, Monica seems to have got herself entangled with a fiddler chap who runs the orchestra at the Torbeach Winter Gardens."

"You—you mean, Monica is engaged to him?" Frank stammered.

"As far as I can make out, the answer is yes," replied Jim. "But Monica didn't tell me much—as a matter of fact, she told me that I had no right to butt in on her private affairs. It's all very puzzling to me."

"Do you think it would be any use my going down to Torbeach for the Christmas holidays?" Frank asked.

"Well, yes, I certainly do, old chap, but I don't think we'd better let Monica know," Jim said. "It would put her on her guard, if you see what I mean. Monica's pride has been wounded pretty badly, as you know, and it's not going to be an easy matter to heal the wound."

Jim paused, then went on—

"Listen Frank, suppose we both go down to Torbeach for Christmas? We could put up at one of the hotels. I should

be seeing my sister every day, of course, and at first, I needn't, let her know you were there."

"You mean, you would try to arrange a meeting between Monica and me?" Frank asked quickly.

"Yes, of course, but it would have to appear accidental, and not a 'put up job'," replied Jim. "You see, Frank, the chief thing is for you to be ready and on the spot."

Frank nodded.

"Very well, then it's settled, Jim," he said. "You and I will go down to Torbeach for Christmas. I leave the rest in your hands."

IT was a week before Christmas, and Jim had written to his sister to tell her he would be coming down to spend the holiday with her. He said he would be staying at the little hotel known as "The Hawbush" and Monica had replied saying how very pleased she was to know that he had decided to spend the holiday at Torbeach.

"It's awfully decent of you, Jim, to arrange all this," Frank remarked delightedly, when they were seated in the train on the way to Torbeach, "for I know you'd much rather be spending Christmas with your fiancée and her people."

"I certainly would," Jim frankly admitted. "I talked the matter over with Dulcie, and she insisted that it was up to me to try and put things right between you and my sister, Dulcie knows all about the unhappy affair, of course, and is as anxious to see a happy ending to it all as we are."

"That is awfully good of Dulcie, old chap," Frank said.

"Oh yes, Dulcie is one of the best," Jim returned proudly. "In fact, the dear girl is one in a thousand!"

They arrived at Torbeach late in the afternoon, and as the Hawbush Hotel was not far from the station, they set out to walk the short distance.

Suddenly, Jim gave Frank a nudge.

"See that chap coming towards us?" he muttered, in a low voice. "That's Jules Legarde, the chap Monica has got tangled up with. I've only met him once, so I don't suppose he'll recognise me."

Legarde passed without even glancing at them.

"I say, Jim, are you quite certain he's the man?" Frank asked, a little breathlessly.

"Yes, quite certain," Jim replied.

"Why?"

"Well, he's the chap I saw on my television screen in the laboratory tampering with the office safe that night," Frank declared excitedly.

Jim gasped.

"Oh no, surely not, Frank," he said, "you must be mistaken, my dear boy."

"Oh no, I'm not," Frank protested. "I had a good view of him, and I'm absolutely certain he's the man."

Jim shook his head doubtfully.

"But this man Legarde who has just passed us is a musician," he said. "He's the conductor of the orchestra at the Winter Gardens here."

"I don't care who or what he is, he's the man all right," Frank persisted. "And now I come to think of it, don't you remember that some months ago the newspapers were writing about 'The Musical Burglar'? I forget the details, but I recall that a man was arrested for attempted burglary and described himself in court as a musician."

"Well, yes, I certainly do seem to remember something about it," murmured Jim. "He got off though, didn't he?"

"Yes, on some legal quibble, I think it

was," said Frank. "But the name was different, of course—the bouncer has half-a-dozen aliases. But it's the same man, right enough. Don't you see, Jim, how it all fits in?"

"Supposing it does, what can you do about it, old chap?" Jim asked. "Are you going to report the affair to the police?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be any use," Frank replied. "It would be my word against his, and I haven't definite proof, have I?"

"I wonder if I ought to drop a hint to Monica about it?" mused Jim. "If she thought her fiancé was a—"

"No, Jim, I think it would be advisable not to say anything about it to anyone for the time being," Frank broke in. "In the meantime, I've got to do some thinking and make a few inquiries. Fortunately, the scoundrel didn't recognise either of us."

"Very well, Frank, I'll say nothing about it to Monica when I call on her to-night," Jim said. "Nor will I say anything about your being here, of course," he added, as they entered the hotel.

"Righto! I think I'll get into touch with a pal of mine at Scotland Yard," Frank said. "He may have some useful suggestions to make . . ."

MONICA was delighted to see her brother when he called at "Seaview", after dinner that night. She expressed surprise that he was not spending Christmas with his fiancée, but Jim had a plausible explanation ready for her.

"We are going to put up the Christmas decorations to-night," Monica told him smilingly, "and I'd be glad if you would give us a hand, Jim."

"Yes, of course I will, my dear girl," Jim said. "What's the latest news from Aunt Linda?"

"Oh, she is getting better, I'm glad to say—in fact, auntie thinks the doctors will consent to her returning to England in the spring," Monica replied.

"And then you'll be looking for another job, eh?" Jim suggested.

Monica shrugged.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," she agreed. "Running a place like this is a great responsibility, you know. I didn't realise it at first, but I do now. Besides, it ties one down so, and I'm unable to take a holiday—even a week-end."

"Yes, I can well understand that," Jim said sympathetically, "and I shall be glad when Aunt Linda returns and relieves you of the heavy responsibility, Monnie."

Jim busied himself for an hour or so helping his sister and the housekeeper with the Christmas decorations. They put up strings of coloured paper chains, arranged festoons of holly and evergreens and placed bunches of mistletoe at what Jim laughingly called "strategic points."

When they had finished their task, he kissed Monica good night and returned to the hotel.

"Well, and how did you get on, old chap?" Frank asked eagerly.

Jim grinned.

"I've been helping Monica and the housekeeper with the Christmas decorations," he said. "Apparently, the old ladies living there are expecting a visit from Santa Claus and all the rest of it!"

"Oh well, I suppose they're in their second childhood," Frank suggested laughingly. "And has Monica roped you in for Santa Claus?"

"No, she's got the postman to do the job," Jim said. "By the way, Frank," he added, "I've promised Monnie that I'll have dinner at 'Seaview' on Christmas Day, so you'll be on your own. I hope you don't mind."

"Don't worry about me, old chap, I shall be quite all right," Frank said.

"I haven't thought of any plan yet for fixing up a meeting between you and Monica," Jim went on. "Anyway, I'm afraid it will have to wait till after Christmas."

"Just as well, perhaps, as it will give me time to make some plans of my own," Frank remarked thoughtfully. "Tell me, Jim," he added, "what's the programme at 'Seaview' on Christmas Day?"

"Oh, the customary procedure," Jim replied, grinning. "Dinner, of course, to be followed by Santa Claus with his sack of gifts, and the rest of the usual kid's stuff. "And," he went on, with mock chagrin, "no pretty girls to kiss under the mistletoe, for I doubt if there's a single boarder there much under the ripe old age of eighty."

"Poor old chap!" laughed Frank. "It doesn't sound as if you were going to have a very gay time, does it? And all on my account."

"It's as much on my sister's account as yours, dear boy," Jim said. "I've got to stop her, at all costs, from marrying that gigo! I've tried arguing with her and failed. Monnie has got the bit between her teeth, and you know what I mean with her, don't you, old chap?"

Frank nodded his understanding.

"And I'll have to put on my glad rags for the great occasion," Jim added, a wry smile on his face.

"Is it as formal as all that?" murmured Frank.

"I'll say it is!" Jim said. "Apparently the old dowagers appear in all their finery and dripping jewellery like Oriental queens," he added laughingly. "I suppose they get a kick out of it or they wouldn't do it."

"Yes, obviously," Frank agreed. "Maybe Santa Claus will arrive with a number of surprises for them," he added mysteriously.

Jim gave him a puzzled look.

"What do you mean by that, Frank?" he asked.

Frank laughed.

"I've not been lounging about here just twiddling my thumbs, you know," he said. "I'm more than ever convinced that Jules Legarde is the man I saw on the laboratory screen that night, and, as I have already hinted, I rather think there are some surprises in store for several people."

"Including me?"

"Yes, including you, my dear boy."

Jim frowned.

"I wish I knew what was going on in that deep pit you call your mind," he mused. "Surely you can take me into your confidence old chap."

"It's not that I don't trust you, Jim, but I would rather not discuss plans which at present are—well, only half-baked, if you understand what I mean," Frank said. "Have you finished the Christmas decorations at 'Seaview'?" he added, anxious to change the subject.

"All but," answered Jim. "I've promised Monica that I'll call there in the morning and help her put the final touch to everything."

IMEDIATELY after breakfast on Christmas Day, Jim went round to "Seaview", and Monica set him to work to clean the silver in the pantry.

"Don't forget, Jim, that dinner is at seven this evening, so you had better be here not later than half-past six," Monica said. "And as Miss Camwold is the senior guest, you must take her into dinner."

"But, my dear Monnie, I shan't know what to say to the old girl," Jim protested laughingly.

"Oh, but Miss Camwold will do all the

talking, Jim, and you'll only have to listen," she said.

When Jim returned to the Hawbush Hotel for lunch, Frank was not there. Nor did he return all that day, much to Jim's surprise, and he was greatly puzzled to know what had happened to his friend.

JIM arrived back at "Seaview" punctually at half-past six and found that the guests were already assembling in the drawing-room for aperitifs. He made himself useful by handing round glasses of sherry, during which he exchanged polite little jokes with the ladies and discussed the weather with the two old gentlemen boarders.

Presently, a gong sounded in the hall, and they all rose and entered the dining-room, Jim escorting Miss Camwold, who positively glistening with jewellery, while the other ladies, not to be outdone, wore "full regalia", as Jim put it to himself.

Colonel Fistaff said grace, and dinner was then served. Monica had been right when she told her brother that he wouldn't have to talk to Miss Camwold, but only listen and murmur some polite monosyllable when she paused for breath. The guest on Jim's left was a quiet little woman who said nothing at all, so that he had quite an easy time of it.

At a signal from Monica when dinner was finished, Jim stole away to switch on the tiny coloured electric lights on the Christmas tree in the drawing-room.

"You must distribute the gifts, Jim," she had whispered to him, "and then Santa Claus will enter with his sack."

So, in due course, Jim snipped off the little parcels from the tree and called out the name written on the wrapper. There was much laughter and merriment as the recipients opened the packages—as, for instance, when Col. Fistaff displayed a tiny flat-iron and Miss Camwold unrapped a small celluloid baby.

At last, all the presents having been distributed, Monica went to the door and clapped her hands.

Next moment Santa Claus in fur-trimmed scarlet cloak and hood and a long white beard, entered with a sack over his shoulder and was greeted with loud applause.

Suddenly he dropped his sack and the astonished guests found themselves looking at the business end of a revolver.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you are covered!" the hooded figure announced. "This is not a joke. You will oblige me by stepping forward one at a time and dropping your valuables into this sack."

Consternation and incredulity showed on all faces. Then, as they still hesitated—

"Come, you, sir," he ordered sternly, pointing to Colonel Fistaff, "off with those diamond studs and cuff-links of yours, and I warn you that if any of you scream or make for the door, you'll get what's coming to you!"

One by one the terrified guests stepped forward, divested themselves of their jewellery and dropped it into the sack, the man covering them with the revolver. Then—

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," he said, picking up the sack with one hand, the other still holding the revolver.

Then, backing towards the door, he slipped out, slammed the door shut and turned the key in the lock.

They all gazed at one another in utter bewilderment for a moment or two. Then it happened. The door was thrust open again, and a police superintendent entered, followed by two constables and Frank Bartrum.

Frank grinned at Jim, then smiled at Monica.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "here is the sack containing your belongings. Please help yourselves," he added, handing the sack to Colonel Fistaff.

There was a gasp of astonishment and relief.

"Oh, Frank!" Monica cried, staring at him in amazement, as the guests crowded round the sack to claim their jewellery. "What is the meaning of all this?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Please don't be angry with me, my dear Monica," he said smilingly. "We have another and, I expect, a bigger surprise in store for you, haven't we, Superintendent Wheatley?"

The police superintendent nodded, and invited Monica to accompany him into an adjoining room. Wonderingly, she followed him and Frank and was startled to see Jules Legarde standing there handcuffed and in charge of a constable.

"The police have taken this man in charge, Monica," Frank explained. "What the scoundrel did was to bribe your postman friend to let him play the part of Santa Claus to-night, so that he could hold up and rob your guests. But when he left the drawing-room with his booty, we were waiting for him, and, as you see, he is now under arrest."

BUT, Frank dear, how on earth did you manage to find out about the man and his villainous plan?" Monica asked when, an hour later, they were alone in her private sitting-room.

"With the help of Scotland Yard, darling," he answered. "You see, they had a suspicion that Legarde, whom I had recognised as the man who tried to force the safe at the laboratories, might have been after something more important than the pay packets. So they had him shadowed, and it now transpires that he is just a common thief who camouflages his nefarious calling by running a small orchestra."

Impulsively Frank put his arms about Monica and drew her to him.

"Darling," he whispered, a penitent smile on his face, "I realise now that I have been a fool. But I have learnt my lesson, so will you come back to me, my love?" he pleaded.

"Yes, of course I will, Frank dear," she whispered back, smiling into his eyes. "In my heart, I have never ceased to love you."

Christmas Day was nearing its end, and as their lips met in a long, tender kiss of reconciliation and love, they knew a peace and joy that was to remain with them for the rest of their lives.

THE END.

VAT'S THE 'URRY!

"Abe," said the bank manager on the phone, "our books indicate that you owe us £100—you've overdrawn." "Is dat so," replied Abe. "Vell, I want a favour dis time; look again in your books and see how ve stood in January." A little later the manager phoned. "Abe, in January the bank owed you £2,000." "Vell," came Abe's triumphant reply, "Did I ring you up in January?"

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Counsel: "Are you sure that occurrence was on the seventeenth of the month?" Witness: "Yes, it was the seventeenth." Counsel: "Now, remember, you are on your oath! How do you know it was on the seventeenth?" Witness: "Cause the day before that—" Counsel: "Be careful what you say now! Go on!" Witness: "Was the sixteenth, and the day after it was the eighteenth!"

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