

FAMILY JOURNAL

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FAMILY JOURNAL

GINA'S AWAKENING

By Malcolm Trevor

HER FIRST CHRISTMAS IN ENGLAND

IN spite of her warm coat, and the rug over her knees, Gina shivered as she watched the snow forming thicker than ever on the windows of her compartment. Soon, she told herself, she would not be able to see even the names of the stations as the train passed through—not that it passed through many, for it was a branch line serving a scattered countryside, and stopped almost everywhere save at the smallest of wayside halts.

Presently the woman sitting opposite her leant over and smiled. She was a heavily-built countrywoman, with a round, red, laughing face. On her knees she was balancing an enormous basket filled to overflowing with packets and parcels, and on the top a sprig of mistletoe.

"Could you tell me the time, my dear?" she asked.

Gina looked at her watch.

"Yes," she answered; "it's just twenty minutes past three."

The other nodded.

"Ah," she said, "I thought it must be getting on that way. It means we're late again, and before I got in I told Sam Watson I'd crimp his hair for him if he didn't get me home by four o'clock. Sam's the driver," she explained. "He lives in the next cottage to me with his widowed mother. A good lad is Sam. He don't mind waiting for everybody—not but what it's a good thing when you happen to be late yourself," she went on laughingly. "That's different, of course. But it isn't so good when you're in time and want to get home quickly."

Gina smiled, and agreed that it was not. "Are we very late, then?" she asked.

"A good quarter of an hour, anyway," the woman replied, glancing through the window at the snow-covered landscape. "Still, I suppose we ought to expect it at Christmas time," she added philosophically. "And with all this snow about, too, it doesn't make travelling any the easier, does it?"

Gina nodded her agreement, and after a moment's silence, her companion asked—

"How far are you going, my dear?"

"To Stoke Abbots," Gina replied.

"Well, fancy that now!" beamed the woman. "That's only one station past where I get off." She glanced at Gina's cases on the rack and added—"I suppose you'll be going for Christmas?"

Gina nodded again.

"And come a long way, too, by the look of those labels on your bags up there?" the other went on in her cheerful fashion. "Italia," she read out. "That's Italy, isn't it?"

"Yes," Gina answered, amused by the woman's curiosity.

"And you've come all the way from Italy to Stoke Abbots?" she exclaimed, her eyes round with astonishment.

"Yes, all the way from Italy," Gina
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said smilingly.

"Well, I never!" For a moment it seemed that the woman was too utterly taken aback to speak. Then—"All the way from Italy!" she repeated. "And now you're sitting here in this carriage with me, and you're going to Stoke Abbots! It doesn't seem possible. Why, you must have been travelling for weeks, my dear."

Gina smiled.

"Oh, no, I flew over from Rome yesterday," she said.

"Flew?" her companion exclaimed. "And here you are sitting there looking fresh as a daisy. All the way from Rome. Why, it's like coming out of the Bible story, isn't it? St. Peter went to Rome on one occasion for Christmas, didn't he?"

Gina laughed, displaying a set of perfect teeth against the light olive of her complexion.

"I'm afraid I don't know," she confessed. "He may have done, of course."

"Well, I'm not quite sure myself, but I think he did," the woman said, in her jovial fashion. "And so you come from Rome, do you? Do you live there, may I ask?"

"For the past three years I have," Gina answered.

"But—but surely you're English, aren't you, my dear?"

"My father was. But my mother was Italian," Gina explained.

"Well, now, who's have thought that?" the woman murmured. "And you speaking English as good as me. I'd noticed you were sunburnt, but I thought that was from the hot summer we had. I suppose it's always hot in Italy?"

"Not always," Gina assured her. "It's often very cold. And we have snow, too, in winter."

"Do you really, now! Well, I never knew that. I thought it was always summer in Italy—it just shows you, doesn't it, miss?"

Gina wondered what exactly it did show, but before she could ask, her companion began hastily to button up her coat in readiness to get out of the train.

"This is me!" she said, getting up and placing her basket on the seat. "You'll find Market Baintry's the next stop—then Stoke Abbots, my dear. You're nearly there now."

"So soon?" Gina asked in surprise.

"Another ten minutes," the woman said. "Why, my dear? Aren't you glad, after all the way you've come?"

"Yes, of course," Gina stammered. "But, you see—well, I have never been here before."

"But somebody's meeting you, surely?"

"Oh, yes, somebody will be at the station to meet me," Gina said.

"Ah!" laughed the other, quick to read the meaning of the sudden flush that suffused the girl's cheeks as she spoke.

So romance was in the air, was it? A first visit to the young man's home, maybe. The woman's eyes softened as she gathered up her basket; it was at Christmas time

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that she had met her own man.

"Well, I wish you a very happy Christmas, my dear," she said, as the train began to slow down. "And the brightest of bright New Years when it comes. Yes, and all the happiness in the world," she added, with a meaning smile.

Gina flushed again.

"And a happy Christmas to you, too—and all your family," she said. "You—you did say another ten minutes, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's right, my dear," the woman muttered, as she squeezed through the door and stepped out on to the platform. "And thank you very much for your good wishes. And you needn't worry about losing yourself in Stoke Abbots!" she called back. "It's only a small village, you know!"

Gina nodded and smiled as a porter closed the door. She knew that. Bob had told her so much about Stoke Abbots that even before she saw the place its picture was clear in her mind. It was not the village itself she was thinking of, or nervous about. It was Bob himself. After all, six months was a long time, and perhaps she would not look the same to him in his own home as she had in Rome.

She thought of those long, sunny days when they had gone about together, sometimes just the two of them alone, but often with the family.

There were five of the Graysons—mother and father, two sons and a daughter, and they were on a first visit to Rome—in fact, to Italy itself. They were staying in an hotel, and one morning, happening upon them in the Piazza di Spagna, obviously lost and in difficulty with the language, Gina had asked if she could be of assistance to them.

Their relief and gratitude had been almost comic. Mrs. Grayson, a tall, pleasant-faced woman, explained that they had set out with the intention of finding the Ponte St. Angelo, had lost their way, and having very little knowledge of Italian, were unable to make themselves understood.

Gina, who happened to be going in that direction, had at once offered herself as guide, and that was the beginning of a most happy friendship.

Having reached the Ponte St. Angelo, Mrs. Grayson admitted that their real intention had been to visit the famous castello. And Gina, who had nothing particular to do, that morning offered to show them the place. Again her offer was most eagerly accepted, and since, by the time they came out of the castle, it was lunch time, Mr. Grayson had insisted that Gina should have luncheon with them.

Rather shyly she had accepted the invitation, and over lunch they had introduced themselves. Gina learned that Mr. Grayson was the squire of Stoke Abbots, a small village in Sussex; that they lived at Abbots Hall, that the two sons, Robert and his younger brother Richard, had just come down from Cambridge, and that Mary, the daughter, was going in for Art.

"Which is really why we have come to

Rome," Mrs. Grayson explained. "Mary wanted to study in the art galleries, you see, so we thought we might as well all come."

"Though not to study Art!" put in Robert with a grin, his eyes admiring Gina's black hair and soft, warm olive complexion.

He was altogether a different type from his brother. Richard was on the quiet side, with widely-spaced eyes and cleaner-cut features than Robert, who was jovial and witty and amusing, and did most of the talking at that first lunch.

But it was the daughter who made the pace, and it was in answer to a question of hers that Gina told them about herself. She explained that her father had been a civil engineer who had come to Rome some twenty-five years before, to take charge of a large drainage project. While in Rome, he had met her mother, fallen in love with her and they had married and lived there.

Then, three years ago, her father's work had taken him to Argentina, where he had died of fever, and Gina and her mother had returned to Rome.

"Then you're living here?" Mary remarked eagerly. "So you know all about Rome?"

"Well, I wouldn't say 'all,'" Gina answered smilingly. "Rome is a very big city, you know, but I have a fairly good knowledge of many of its famous art treasures. As a matter of fact," she added, "I had leanings towards Art myself at one time—but I just wasn't good enough."

"You mean you know the Galleries well?" Mary asked excitedly. "You—you have studied there, apparently?"

"Yes, for two years," Gina said.

"Oh, Gina, do take me round and explain everything to me," Mary burst out in her enthusiasm.

"Mary, please curb yourself, my dear," her father put in reprovingly. "Where are your manners? Miss Darke has other things to do, no doubt, and has no wish to become a—well, a sort of bear-leader to you!"

Mary laughed.

"But, daddy, artists don't bother about manners, you know," she said. "Have you really got other things to do, Gina? I mean—do you work at anything?"

"Only housekeeping for my mother, who has not been very well of late," Gina replied. "Though I'll have to find some work to occupy my time later on, as I don't like being idle."

Mary smiled delightedly, and taking Gina's arm, pulled her a little away from the rest of the family.

"Don't take any notice of what any of them say, Gina," she whispered. "I know it's an awful cheek on my part, seeing how much of your time you've given us this morning, but if you could manage to show me round, so that I do not miss anything—"

Recalling that first meeting with the family, Gina smiled to herself as the train drew nearer to Stoke Abbots. Of course she had taken Mary round, being unable to resist the girl's pleadings. They had started out that very afternoon, and then, day after day, had visited each of the famous art galleries in turn; also the churches and the frescoes and the murals—they had even paid a flying visit to Florence. Mr. Grayson had insisted upon paying the expenses of the outing.

It had been a wonderful time for Gina. She had lunched and dined with the family at their hotel, and they had visited her home. Often Mrs. Grayson would drop in for tea with Gina and her mother, and sometimes the whole family would come. Mrs. Darke had taken a great liking to them—Richard in particular, since he was

training for an engineer and appeared to be very fond of the things that her late husband had liked so much.

Gina took the young man out to show him the engineering work her father had carried through when he first came to Rome, and stood by while Richard made a thorough inspection of the job. But she never felt quite as much at home with Richard as with his brother. He was not so easy a talker—in fact, the younger son seemed to have no small talk at all.

"Oh, Richard's too intense," she remembered Bob dismissing his brother airily one day, "and he always has been. If he hasn't got his nose buried in a text-book, he's out measuring up bits of stone, bridges, tunnels and so forth. He's so busy working for the future that he's forgotten how to enjoy the present. Yes, that's Richard's trouble."

Bob, of course, had no such inhibitions. He was intending to step into his father's shoes—Mr. Grayson was a stockbroker, and nothing on earth worried Bob. He took a delight in trailing round the art galleries with Gina and Mary, and whenever his sister stopped to make a copy of something that especially attracted her, he would seize Gina's arm and pilot her to a convenient seat.

"Come and talk to me, Gina," he would grin in that engaging way of his. "These things they call art bore me stiff."

"But you don't have to come, do you?" Gina laughingly told him on one occasion.

"Oh, yes I do," he replied. "If I didn't, I wouldn't see you at all, Gina—and I want to see you."

She would have liked to ask why, but abstained from doing so. Already Gina had come to consider that her day was wasted unless she and Bob Grayson had been together. She could not fail to know that he was interested in her, and to herself she had to admit an ever-growing interest in him.

He was so easy to get on with, always so gay and amusing and bright, and when the others were tired after their day of sightseeing, Bob would whisk her off to the theatre, or dance with her at the hotel where they were staying, often until after midnight.

"Don't you dance, Richard?" she asked the younger brother one night, after he had sat for an hour or more watching her dance with Bob.

"Oh, yes, Richard dances like an elephant!" Bob put in laughingly. "If you don't want your toes trodden on, I advise you not to dance with my brother, darlin'."

He often called Gina "darlin'." At first, the term had caused her heart to flutter a little, but she soon realised that he called everybody "darlin'"—including his mother and sister.

Meanwhile, a strong friendship had developed between Mary and Gina. They had many tastes in common—particularly art and literature—and they spent a great deal of time in each other's company. They were almost the same age, with Mary having a slight seniority by a matter of a month or so, she being the baby of the Grayson family.

She was shorter than Gina, and with none of Gina's grace, and poise—a fact of which Mary was fully aware and frequently bemoaned.

"Angels were certainly round your bed when you were born, Gina dear," she remarked one day, when the two girls were looking at a picture of the Nativity by one of the old masters. "And I rather suspect there must have been a regiment of imps round mine! The angels gave you all that a girl needs, but to me they gave nothing—save unsightly hair, ungainly hands and

feet, and a pug face like Bob's!"

"Plus a kind heart, and eyes with the gift of an artist's vision," Gina said. "Are those nothing, Mary?"

"Yes, but nobody sees them," Mary laughed ruefully. "If I had a lovely face like yours, Gina, I'd have my picture in the papers as the up-and-coming young artist and be dubbed 'the beautiful Miss Mary Grayson'! Which means I'd be halfway to success before I even exhibited a picture."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear!" Gina protested, though she flushed under the girl's compliment. "Handsome is as handsome does—and I've done nothing in the world, and am not likely to, so far as I can see, whereas you have already the stamp of success on your brow, Mary."

It was Mary who suggested to her parents that they should invite Gina over to Stoke Abbots for Christmas—an invitation which they were only too delighted to offer.

But before doing so, Mr. and Mrs. Grayson paid a secret visit to Gina's mother to sound her about it, for by now they had guessed that Mrs. Darke was not too well off. The problem was how to introduce the subject regarding finance without touching the Italian woman's pride. And how to work it so that Gina would not know they had undertaken to pay all the expenses for her visit to England.

It was a highly delicate task, but in the end Mrs. Grayson managed to arrange everything satisfactorily, and Mrs. Darke agreed to her suggestion. So on the last day of their stay in Rome, the invitation was extended to Gina.

"Why not come to England and spend the Christmas holidays, my dear?" Mrs. Grayson said. "We should all love to have you at Stoke Abbots, of course."

Gina thanked her and said she would love to accept the invitation, but she feared it would be quite impossible for her to do so.

"Well, please talk it over with your mother, my dear," Mrs. Grayson suggested. "And remember that we shall not easily be put off," she added smilingly.

When she arrived home that afternoon, Gina mentioned the matter to her mother.

"It was very sweet of Mrs. Grayson to invite me, wasn't it, mother?" she said. "But I told her it was quite impossible for me to accept the invitation."

"Would you have liked to go, darling?" her mother asked.

"Yes, rather!" Gina answered. "Who wouldn't, mother?"

"Well, then you can go, if you particularly wish to, my dear," her mother said.

Then it all came out.

"Your father had always thought that one day you would want to go to England," Mrs. Darke explained. "As you know, Gina, it was his constant dream to take you there himself, but, unfortunately, he never had an opportunity to do so, and in making his will he remembered it, and left you the money to defray your expenses for a visit to his homeland when you felt like undertaking the journey."

Gina gave a gasp of surprise.

"Oh, mother," she murmured, "are you—are you sure you're not making this up? I mean that you're not squeezing the money out of your own small income just because you think I would like to go?"

Her mother smiled.

"No, darling," she said, "the money was left you, for precisely such an occasion as this. So if you would like to go, Gina, the way is wide open, and you need not worry about me because I can go to Aunt Maria in Venice. I've been promising to pay her a visit, as you know, and this will

be an ideal opportunity while you're in England."

Gina beamed with delight.

"Well, now I know what Cinderella felt like when the fairy godmother waved her wand and the pumpkin turned into a splendid carriage!" she declared laughingly.

"Very well, darling, then you can tell Mrs. Grayson that you will be pleased to accept her kind invitation when you have dinner with the family to-night," her mother said.

And it was that night when Bob kissed her. Mary was highly delighted, and even Richard's face lighted up with pleasure when she told them the news.

"It will be nice having you at Stoke Abbots for Christmas, Gina," he said, in his rather tongue-tied fashion.

But Bob, on the palm-shaded veranda of the ballroom, after one swift glance round to make sure they were alone, suddenly took her into his arms and kissed her.

"Oh, Gina, I'm so awfully glad," he whispered ecstatically. "You know that I'm in love with you, don't you? And now you're coming to England to stay with us. Oh, darling, I can hardly wait until Christmas."

That night Gina literally went home on air. She was feeling bewildered and a little frightened, but was so happy that she wanted to sing. Bob loved her—and he had kissed her!

Gina had slept little that night, but early the next morning she was at the airport to see them off. There she renewed her promise to be with them at Christmas, and they all kissed her goodbye—even Richard, awkwardly, on her cheek.

But Bob put his arms round her, and there before them all, kissed her as a lover kisses.

"You—you will remember, won't you, darlin'?" he whispered, as he released her. Gina nodded.

"Yes, I—I shall remember, Bob," she whispered back.

He then followed the others into the air liner, and Gina watched it fly away until it was but a speck in the sky.

After that, there were letters—love-letters—for several months. Letters from Mary, too, and from Mrs. Grayson. Then came a cable from Mr. Grayson himself promising to meet her at London airport. This he had done, and after taking her to lunch, had seen her off on the train for Stoke Abbots.

And, at last, she was here! Bob would be waiting for her on the station—he had told her so in his last letter.

Gina took a final look at herself in the mirror as the train slowed down for Stoke Abbots. It seemed to be snowing harder than ever now, but what did that matter? Bob would be there waiting to kiss her. Would he recognise her, she wondered, in her winter coat and furs?

Her heart was beating wildly as the train stopped. She opened the carriage door and got out. She saw a solitary figure standing on the platform, looking this way and that along the train.

"Bob!" she called, with suppressed excitement, and next moment her little world seemed to come to a dead stop, for the man who came hurrying towards her was not Bob at all.

It was Richard!

"So there you are, Gina!" he exclaimed, smiling at her. "I was beginning to wonder if you had missed the train or had got out somewhere at the wrong station," Richard added, as he shook hands with her. "Tell me, where is your luggage? Is it in the guard's van?"

"No," Gina answered. "It is still in the carriage, Richard."

"Right-o!" he said, and entered the compartment. "Six pieces, Tom!" he called to the porter, who was standing waiting outside. "Put them in the car," he added, as he stepped on to the platform again. "You'll know where to find me, Tom."

"Okay, Mr. Richard!" grinned the porter, with a quick, approving glance at the visitor.

Richard linked his arm in Gina's and said—

"Now come along, Gina. The porter will see to everything. I expect you must be half frozen."

"Yes, it is very cold," Gina murmured, doing her best to stifle her bitter disappointment that Bob had not come to meet her.

She bent her head against the driving snow as Richard escorted her along the open platform, glad of the excuse not to have to speak until she had recovered herself. Why had not Bob met her, as he had promised he would? she asked herself.

Why had he sent his brother, instead of coming himself? Was he ill? she wondered.

Before she could ask the question, Richard pushed open a door in the station buildings and ushered her into a small, cabin-like room where a bright fire was blazing.

"Thought you'd like a warm up first, Gina, before we start for home," he told her smilingly.

"Oh, this fire is lovely!" Gina said, holding out her hands to the blaze.

"Yes, and a nice cup of hot coffee would be lovely, too, wouldn't it, Gina?" he suggested, grinning at her and pointing to a large earthenware jug, covered by a saucer, that was standing inside the fender.

Gina nodded.

"What is this place?" she asked curiously, glancing round about her.

Richard laughed.

"Well," he said, "actually it's the porter's room, but on these small wayside stations of ours the porter is the station-master, signalman, and everything else. And since it's the only room with a fire in it, it's also the waiting-room in winter for the village people."

"And the coffee?" she asked, watching him take two cups and saucers from a shelf and start pouring out.

Richard grinned again.

"Well, you see, Tom lives in the nearby station house, and I persuaded his wife to see what she could do about it." He handed her a cup of coffee and added—"I can't guarantee its quality, Gina, but I can guarantee that it's hot. Have a sip and tell me what you think of it."

"Absolute ambrosia, Richard," she pronounced, when she had tasted the coffee. "And thank you for thinking of it. How very kind and thoughtful of you!"

The shrill whistle of the engine and the roar of the exhaust steam as the train pulled out of the station on the next stage of its journey prevented Richard from making any reply to that—beyond a sudden, sombre gleam in his eyes. Then, when they could make themselves heard again—

"As a matter of fact, Gina," he said, "I've come to meet you as Bob's deputy. Bob would have come himself, but telephoned to the Hall an hour or so ago to say that he was stuck in a drift the other side of Prestfield and couldn't possibly make it. So would I come instead? Prestfield is a little village some fifteen miles away," he explained.

So that was it? Bob *had* remembered, and he would have come, but for having been held up in a snowdrift. Suddenly, a load seemed to lift from Gina's spirits.

"Poor Bob!" she murmured. "That

must be dreadful, mustn't it? I suppose he'll have to wait there until the drift is cleared?"

"I imagine so," Richard said.

"Will that take long?"

Richard shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "But I expect Bob will manage to get through somehow."

Gina stood gazing thoughtfully into the fire. In her mind's eye, she could see Bob making Herculean efforts to reach her through the snowdrift, and she smiled dreamily as she pictured the scene. Nothing would stop him. And when he did get back, he would find her anxiously waiting for him.

"Have you remembered, darlin'?" he would whisper as he held her close.

And she would whisper back—

"Yes, Bob dear, I have remembered."

She gave a little start when Richard spoke again.

"Did you have a good journey over, Gina?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Oh, yes, thank you," she replied, tearing herself out of her dreams. And then, suddenly remembering her manners—"Your mother and father, Richard—and Mary—how are they?"

"All well," he answered briefly. "And here's Tom coming," he added, "so I think we had better be going now, if you're quite ready. We haven't far to go—a couple of miles or so, then you'll be home."

A few minutes later, they were sitting in the car and passing through the village.

"Is—is Bob there alone?" Gina asked.

"So far as I know," Richard replied, his eyes on the road ahead—at any rate, upon the strip between the hedges, which was all of the road that was visible. "But there's no need for you to worry about him, Gina," he added, "as we are used to drifts in this part of Sussex."

"Oh, no, Richard, I'm not unduly worried," she said, with a forced little laugh, not wishing him to guess her secret. "And I think it awfully kind of you to have met me in Bob's stead."

Richard made no reply to that. Nor did he speak again until, turning off the road between two high stone gateposts, he pointed to a large house which was just visible through the swirling snow. Then—

"Journey's end!" he said, and a minute or two later, he drew up beneath a wide portico.

But before he had time to open the car door for Gina, the front door of the house was thrown open and Mary came rushing out.

"Gina, darling!" she cried, wrenching open the door of the car and literally smothering Gina in a bear-like hug. "At last you're really here, and I never thought you would be. All along I've had a dreadful feeling that at the very last moment you'd send a cable saying that you were unable to make the journey—especially when the weather reports from over Europe were so foul. But come along in, darling, for you must be frozen, and here I stand chattering away as though it were mid-summer! Really, my dear, you'll be thinking I'm crazy or something—"

"No—not something," Richard broke in drily. "Just plain crazy, my girl. That's what you are. Now off you go into a warm room, both of you, and I'll bring in the baggage."

At that moment, Mrs. Grayson appeared at the open door.

"Welcome to Abbots Hall, my dear!" she said, giving Gina an affectionate hug. "I'm delighted to see you again—and still more delighted to know that you were able to come, in spite of Mary's dire premonitions. Now please come in and sit

by the fire and get warm, then Mary will take you upstairs to your room."

In the drawing-room, questions came thick and fast. And it was not until half an hour had passed—during which it seemed to Gina that she had told the full story of all she had been doing in the past six months—that, at last, Mary took her upstairs to her room.

"I've arranged to have you next to my room, dear," Mary explained. "It's Richard's room, really, but I managed to turf him out of it."

"Oh, no!" Gina protested.

Mary laughed.

"Oh, yes, I did," she said, "and, my dear, he went like a lamb. He even helped me move his things to a room on the top floor, though he loathes moving his junk. As you know, Bob's stuck in a drift somewhere."

"Yes, it's very unfortunate for him, isn't it?" Gina murmured.

"He's dodging the work, if you ask me," Mary went on. "We decorate the house to-night, as we always do the night before Christmas Eve, and Bob usually sidesteps it if he can. Richard and I were out before eight o'clock this morning, gathering holly and mistletoe. We've got a lovely lot this year. Do you like the job of decorating, dear?"

"Yes, rather!" Gina replied. "Though I've never decorated with holly and mistletoe."

"Well, we'll show you, then," Mary said. "And to-morrow night, we dress the Christmas tree. Oh, darling, we're going to have such fun now you're here," Mary added, with girlish glee.

Gina smiled.

"And I'm sure I'm going to love every minute of it," she said.

"And stay here for ever, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, my dear," Gina returned laughingly.

"For a long, long time, anyway?" Mary insisted. "After all, darling, you can't come all the way from Rome for a mere month or so, you know. That wouldn't be economic, as Richard was saying only this morning."

"Richard!" Gina murmured in surprise.

"Well, you see, Richard is strong on economics," Mary went on. "He's taking it with his engineering, I'm not quite clear why. But for heaven's sake don't ask him, my dear, unless you're prepared to spend most of the day listening to him explaining it all! This is my room," she added, changing the subject and touching a door on the left of the long cream and blue corridor. "And this is yours."

She opened the door and stood aside for Gina to enter. Then—

"I hope you like it, dear."

"Like it?" Gina echoed, as she gazed around in wide-eyed amazement. "Why, Mary, it's fit for a princess. I—I think it's one of the loveliest bedrooms I've ever seen. Richard must be furious with me for—"

"Turning him out?" Mary put in laughingly. "Oh, but it isn't quite like this when Richard uses it," she went on to explain. "Mother and I have been very busy here since we gave Richard his marching orders. You see, we wanted you to have a room that you would really like, so as to tempt you to stay longer with us. There, now you know, my dear!"

Gina gave her a grateful look.

"Really, Mary," she said, "you are all too good to me. I have done nothing to deserve so much kindness and consideration."

"That's something for us to judge, isn't it, dear?" Mary said. "Oh, look at that sprig of holly stuck in the clock!" she cried, darting across the room. "Well, now, that

must be a bit of Richard's work, for I certainly did not put it there!"

Before Gina could speak, there was a rat-tat on the door.

"The porter is here with the luggage!" Richard announced.

"Very well, bring it in, dear boy," Mary called.

Richard pushed open the door, and lumbered in with the bags and suitcases.

"Put them down by the wardrobe, my man," Mary ordered, grinning at him, "and then tell me who put this sprig of holly in the clock?"

Richard gave a sheepish laugh.

"Oh, that!" he muttered. "It was the twig of holly you stuck in my buttonhole this morning, Mary, and I thought it would give the room a seasonable touch. But if you don't think it does—"

"Well, I certainly do!" Gina broke in smilingly. "It was a very kind thought on your part, Richard."

"Though a sprig of mistletoe would have been more to the point, I should have thought," Mary put in jestingly. "Are there any more cases down there?"

"Yes, three," Richard replied.

"Very well, then bring them up, young man, and then make yourself scarce," Mary ordered. "We have work to do here for the next half hour or so."

She switched on the electric fire, and seized one of the suitcases.

"Come on, Gina, and let me help you unpack," Mary said briskly. "We shall have no time after tea when we start decorating."

Their task was constantly interrupted by Mary pausing to admire some dainty garment and bemoaning the fact that she could not wear such a thing herself.

"Gosh! If only I had your slenderness and figure, Gina, instead of being like a suet dumpling badly tied up!" she mourned. "I tremble to think what is going to happen to the young man in the district when I take you out for a walk! But one thing I can promise you, my dear—I'm going to have a stab at painting you while you're here. And if only I can get you on canvas exactly as I see you, then a niche for me in the Royal Academy is a sure thing!"

They had just finished unpacking when the tea gong sounded, and although Gina descended the stairs hoping to find that Bob had returned, she was destined to yet another disappointment.

"Oh, Bob's just dodging the decorating, darling," Mary said laughingly, when her mother remarked upon the time it was taking to clear the snowdrift. "Anyway, what was he doing at Prestfield to get caught in the snow? I thought he'd gone in to the office."

"Yes, of course," her mother remarked, and glanced at Richard as though seeking information of some kind from him. "What would Bob be doing at Prestfield, Richard?" she asked.

Richard hunched his shoulders.

"Not knowing, I can't say, mother," he muttered. "But I expect there were drifts on the main road, and Bob had the bright idea of trying the Prestfield route in the hope that he wouldn't find it so bad that way," he added lamely.

"Pat, but scarcely convincing," commented Mary. "Personally, I don't trust Bob when there's Christmas decorating to be done."

"But, Mary, when he knows that Gina is here?" her mother murmured.

Mary sniffed, but offered no further comment. Listening to the conversation, Gina's heart contracted still further. Surely when he must know how she was longing to see him again, Bob would not willingly linger on the road? And if, as was suggested, he had gone to his office that

morning, why had he not met her at the airport?

Another thing that puzzled her was why none of the family appeared to have the remotest idea of how things stood between herself and Bob. Bob might not have told them, of course, but surely someone would have sensed the situation from the kiss he had given her at the airport in Rome—and certainly from the many letters that had passed between them during the intervening months!

Looking up suddenly, she encountered Richard's eyes fixed upon her in an odd questioning way. But even as their glances met, his fell away hurriedly and he pretended to be engrossed in the mince pies that were immediately in front of him on the tea trolley. Did Richard know or suspect anything, Gina wondered uneasily.

The arrival of Mr. Grayson from the City formed a welcome distraction. He came in laden with parcels and wreathed in smiles. He was a shortish man, broad in the shoulders, with a round, rubicund face, and a hearty manner.

"Hullo, Gina dear, so you arrived safely?" he exclaimed, dumping his parcels on a side table and coming straight over and kissing her. He held her away from him for a moment, his hands on her shoulders while he looked at her. Then—"Splendid!" he said. "You're looking fine, my dear, and it gives me infinite pleasure to see you here at Stoke Abbots. But I'm afraid, I shall have to telephone for a few miles of barbed wire," he added jestingly. "Barbed wire, father?" Richard repeated, a puzzled look on his face.

"Yes, my boy, to keep the suitors out!" laughed his father. Mr. Grayson kissed his wife, and then Mary. "Well, now, are we all ready to start the great work?" he asked. "Did you find plenty of holly and stuff, Mary?"

"Yes, daddy, it is in the kitchen," she replied.

"Then the sooner we get busy the better," he said. "I've got a new idea for this room—spotted it in a magazine at the office. A bit difficult, maybe, but very effective." "Oh, daddy, not another of your grandiose schemes—please!" Mary teased.

Mr. Grayson laughed.

"There now, Gina!" he said. "You can see what a stick-in-the-mud my family is. Always afraid of new ideas. But you and I will do this room, eh? We'll show 'em! He rubbed his hands gleefully, then added—"Where's Bob?"

"Stuck in a snowdrift," Mary answered, and then gave her father chapter and verse of what had happened.

"Prestfield, eh?" he said, frowning. "What on earth was he doing at Prestfield? Anyway, surely he can't have been stuck in a snowdrift for four hours!" he protested, glancing at the clock.

"Bob would remain stuck for four days if he thought it would get him out of helping with the Christmas decorations," Mary said. "You know what Bob is, daddy. He always does find some excuse to be missing when he's wanted."

"But not when Gina's here, surely?"

Gina felt herself flushing, and turned away under pretence of warming her hands at the fire.

"Oh, well," Richard put in, "he'll turn up presently, no doubt, or he'll telephone to us. So come on, dad! On with the dance!"

Mr. Grayson then led the way into the kitchen, and a few moments later they all trooped back with their arms full of holly and mistletoe. Mrs. Grayson brought in cardboard boxes filled with paper chains and paper bells and all manner of things that, as Mary explained to Gina, went up every year and were already hallowed by

time and tradition.

Balloons were produced and blown up, and dozens of glittering balls and dangles were dusted and made ready for yet one more appearance on the Abbot's Hall Christmas tree.

To Gina, it was all extraordinarily exciting, so that for a time she forgot her disappointment and heartache in the fun and laughter of decorating the house. They went from room to room, and it was more than two hours before Mr. Grayson was satisfied that all had been done that could be done.

It was at that moment when the door opened and Bob walked in.

"There, now, didn't I tell you?" Mary exclaimed, as they all stood staring at him. "I don't know how he manages it, but he always does."

But Bob was looking at Gina, and Gina was staring at him. He had left his hat in the hall, but was still wearing his overcoat, and somehow he looked shorter and plumper than she remembered him. His face, too, looked rounder and plainer and less attractive.

Oh, yes, Bob was different—very different, her heart cried in quick dismay. He was not the same man whose image she had been carrying in her mind for all these months.

Then he smiled, a little ruefully, and striding across the room shook hands with her.

"Hello, Gina!" he said. "I'm awfully sorry about this, but there was simply nothing I could do about it. Well, and how are you, my dear?"

He leaned forward to kiss her, and acting under a compulsion she could not resist, Gina gave him her cheek.

"And how are you, Bob?" she heard herself saying. "It's nice to see you again after all this time. You are certainly looking very well."

"But not feeling it," he said, with a wan smile, and turning to take in the whole family. "Four solid hours I've been stuck over there in the snow—they say it's the worst drift in ten years. The only bright spot was the fact that Richard was on hand to meet Gina at the station. However, I've managed to reach here at last—and am faint with hunger and dying for a drink."

"H'm!" Mary muttered sarcastically. "Well, it's a better story than the one you thought up last year, Bob—I'll say that much for you. The only thing we don't understand is what you were doing at Prestfield."

"Oh, that's easy," Bob said, with a jaunty air. "I went there to see if the lake was all right for skating."

"Oh, gosh!" Mary exclaimed. "I'd clean forgotten that. And is it, Bob?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, it is, my dear girl," Bob said, "and Walter Crane told me people were skating on it this morning. So, if the weather holds, it will be safe as houses on Christmas Day. We'll be able to roast an ox on it!"

"Oh, goody!" enthused Mary, in her volatile fashion, but next moment her face fell. "But you don't skate, Gina, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I do," Gina returned smilingly. "I learnt on the ice-rink in Rome."

"Darling, how perfectly splendid!" Mary cried excitedly. "Then we'll have a skating party on Christmas evening. How many cars can we bank on, for light?"

Mr. Grayson gave a loud groan.

"Bang go all the batteries again," he mourned. "The one on my car was never any good after that last do."

"Now daddy, please don't grumble," Mary reprimanded him laughingly. "You

know you were first on the ice and last off when we had the last merry party. How many cars can we bank on, I wonder?"

"A baker's dozen, at least," Bob put in. "It doesn't seem to occur to any of you that this is precisely what I've been arranging. You see, I thought it would be the one thing that might be new and novel to Gina. That's why I went to Prestfield. I've roped in no less than thirty people and at least a dozen cars."

"But I thought you'd been stuck in a snowdrift?" Mary said.

"So I have—at least, the car has," Bob retorted. "But I walked back to Walter Crane's place and got busy on the telephone. As I've just told you, I had this in mind when I went round that way, and a snowdrift wasn't going to stop me."

"I—I see," said Mary, on an oddly deflated note.

She glanced at Richard, who had been watching his brother in silence. He had now turned away and was making towards the cocktail cabinet on the far side of the room.

He did not look at Gina, but as he passed her, she wondered why his mouth should be so taut and grim.

THE DREAM FADES

IT was the maid bringing tea that awoke Gina the following morning.

"Good heavens! What time is it?" she gasped, sitting up in bed.

"Eight o'clock, miss," the maid answered smilingly. "I'm afraid you were asleep when I knocked on the door."

"Yes, I certainly was," Gina admitted, smiling back at her. "Would you please hand me my comb?"

The maid fetched a comb from the dressing-table, and Gina ran it automatically through her black hair. She had slept like a log, though she had not expected to sleep at all.

Inevitably her thoughts flew to Bob, and to the events that had happened since her arrival in England on the previous day. For six long months she had looked forward to meeting Bob again; for six long months never a day had passed without her longing to be with him; wondering what he was doing and if he were thinking of her as she was thinking of him.

His image had been constantly in her heart and mind, and in the 'plane she had counted off every passing minute as bringing her nearer to him.

Yet, when he had so suddenly and unexpectedly walked into the room, there had been no quickening of her heart at sight of him. No thrill of delight such as she had always known in Rome whenever they met. No sense of breathlessness when he had leaned forward to kiss her.

Instead of being swept to the heights, she had remained calmly and coolly on the ground—serene, unmoved. He had not even looked like the Bob of her dreams. It was as though, having braced herself against the deafening crash of an explosion, nothing had happened but the shush of a damp squib!

It all seemed utterly incredible to her. Disturbing, too, because she was at a loss what to do. It was mainly to be with Bob that she had come to England. She was fond of the others, of course, but it was the man to whom she had lost her heart that was the magnet.

"You are deeply in love with him," Gina told herself, "and he with you. Bob is going to ask you to marry him, and you have come to say 'Yes'. It was all arranged before he left Rome, and this is the all-important moment you have been looking forward to so eagerly and im-

patiently all these months."

But the words did not seem to mean anything now. They conveyed no sense of reality to her mind. It seemed to have all happened in a flash—even before he spoke a word to her.

Was she bereft of her senses? Gina asked herself. A girl who did not know her own mind from one moment to the next? A girl who did not even know when she was in love and when she was not? What would Bob think of her?

Perhaps she had been a little overwrought last night! Gina sought to comfort herself. Perhaps Bob had been keyed-up, too? Perhaps to-day she would see with different eyes, and when they met, she would know the old thrill, the old exaltation, the old all-pervading sense of happiness.

Gina finally persuaded herself that she would, and buoyed up with that conviction, she sprang out of bed and looked out of the window. It was still snowing—though not so heavily as on the previous day. All round the world was wearing its spotless winter coat.

"A real fairyland!" she murmured to herself, and then remembered that to-day was Christmas Eve.

She was still standing at the window gazing at the fairyland scene when Mary came in, wrapped in a long blue dressing-gown.

"Morning, darling!" she cried, in her cheery fashion. "And half a Happy Christmas to you, seeing that it's Christmas Eve, and to-morrow will be The Day. Well, and how did you sleep, my dear?"

"Like a log!" Gina answered smilingly.

"Ah! That's the famous Stoke Abbots air," Mary laughingly assured her. "Everybody sleeps like a log here—including me." Then, after giving Gina a careful, half-humorous appraisal, she added—"Yes, it beats me, my dear, it really does."

"What beats you?" Gina asked.

"Well, how on earth you always manage to look so devastatingly attractive first thing in the morning," Mary said. "I mean, just look at me! Did you ever see anything more absolutely ungainly in your life?"

"Oh, come, don't be so foolish, my dear," Gina protested.

"Even Richard says he's sorry for the man I marry," Mary rattled on, in her breezy fashion. "But there it is, and what can't be cured, must be patiently endured, as the old song says. Now if you're ready, I'll turn your bath on, Gina. We breakfast at nine—anyway, more or less!" she added gaily, as she left the room.

It was gone nine when the two girls entered the breakfast room, but they were still not last. Mr. and Mrs. Grayson were there, but Bob had not yet appeared.

"And where's Richard?" inquired Mary, as she helped Gina and herself to bacon and eggs from the chafing dish.

"I don't know, my dear," her father replied. "According to the maid, he breakfasted early and went off in his car. Richard never seems to rest a minute, these days. I don't know what in the world has come over him."

"Come over who?" asked Bob, entering the room at that moment. Then—"Morning, Gina! Morning, everybody."

Gina looked up as she wished him good morning, then quickly lowered her eyes.

"I was referring to your brother," Mr. Grayson said, in answer to Bob's question. "He's gone off on his own somewhere—the unsociable fellow!"

"To the lake, I expect," Bob grinned.

"What—to skate?" Mary asked.

"No—to make sure the ice is safe for to-morrow," Bob said. "Richard mentioned something about it last night—and you know what he is. I'll bet he'll be

drilling a few test holes by now, measuring them, and working out by trigonometry whether or not the ice will play ball or let us through."

"Oh, Bob, don't be so ridiculous!" Mary protested. "I think it's very noble of Richard to take such care. None of us wants a wetting, you know."

"Is the lake very deep?" Gina asked.

"Pretty deep in parts—shallow in others," Bob explained.

"But if Richard says it's safe, then it will be safe!" Mary asserted. "You can always rely on him, Gina, I'll say that for Richard."

"And you can't rely on me?" grinned Bob. "Is that what you mean, my girl?"

"No comment!" Mary replied.

"Now you two!" Mrs. Grayson put in mildly. "Peace on earth, remember!"

"And goodwill to all men—and women," laughed Bob. "Well, and what are we going to do this morning, may I ask?"

"I propose to take Gina and Mary for a walk into the village," Mr. Grayson said.

"Then I'll come with you," Bob volunteered. "But what about footgear? Gina will need snow-boots, won't she?"

"I've brought a pair," Gina said. "Mother thought that I would probably need them when we read in the papers that it was snowing heavily in England."

"Then we're all set, so let's get a move on," said Bob.

"But what about Richard?" Mrs. Grayson asked. "Haven't you better wait for him?"

Bob gave an impatient shrug.

"Oh, I expect he'll be away all day, mother," he said, "so we can't wait for him. You know what Richard is, don't you?"

Gina glanced up quickly. Why was it, she wondered, that Bob never seemed to have a good word to say for his brother? She recalled how, in Rome, he had always sought to belittle Richard.

Presently, well-shod and warmly clad, the four of them set off through the snow towards the village, Bob and Gina walking a few yards behind Mary and her father.

"It's about time, darlin', that you and I had a word or two together, isn't it?" Bob whispered, slipping his arm through hers. "I had such a lot to tell you when we met yesterday. It—it was dreadful luck that I happened to get stuck in that snowdrift and had to ask my brother to come to the station in my place to meet you. Did you mind very much, darlin'?"

Gina wanted to tell him that it had seemed like the end of the world to her when she had called out "Bob!" and it was Richard who came hurrying forward to greet her.

"Did it, Gina?" he prompted, when she hesitated.

"I—I don't know," she stammered at last, feeling that something had gone out of her, that the man by her side was not the man her memory and imagination had made of him, and that it was useless trying to persuade herself that he was.

Bob sighed.

"I'm rather afraid it did, Gina, and that you've not forgiven me," he went on. "I'd been so looking forward to meeting you when you stepped from the train."

"Well, I suppose it couldn't be helped," she murmured.

"Then why be angry with me, darlin'? Why so cold?"

"I'm not angry, Bob."

"Very well, then, I'm going to kiss you, darlin'. You don't call that peck you offered me last night a kiss, surely?" he added, smiling at her.

Gina measured the distance between the two in front and themselves with a thoughtful eye. Had Bob said that in Rome, a

short six months ago, she would eagerly have held up her lips for his kiss. But now she did not want it.

Now, however, she was not even particularly interested in having him with her. It seemed that from the heights of ecstasy she had fallen to the depths of complete indifference, and, somehow, she did not know why it should be so.

"Take it easy, darlin'," he said, when she would have increased her pace.

"Don't be silly, Bob!" she retorted, with an impatient gesture.

The words had escaped her lips before she could check them, and Bob stopped dead and stared at her, a puzzled look on his face.

"My word, you are angry with me, darlin'," he said. "Somehow, I had a feeling that something was wrong, but I had no idea that it was as bad as this. Though I must say you're more beautiful than ever when you're angry, darlin', and it makes me all the more determined to kiss you."

"My advice to you is not to try," she flashed back at him.

Bob frowned.

"Very well!" he muttered. "Though I don't pretend to understand your changed attitude towards me, Gina. I had thought that you loved me. You did in Rome, you know. And there has been nothing in your letters to me to indicate that you had changed in any way."

At mention of her letters, Gina flushed. That was true enough, she knew, for in her letters to him she had not hesitated to pour out her heart. She had given way to the Italian side of her—the warm, glowing, vital, idealistic love of the Mediterranean peoples. The love that delights in giving rather than receiving; the love that has no thought for itself, but only for the beloved.

"What's happened to change you so, Gina?" he asked plaintively.

She gestured with her hands—a purely Italian gesture that conveyed nothing to his understanding. Actually, Gina was indicating that the boot was on the other foot and that it was he who had changed.

"Anyway, you have changed, haven't you, Gina?" he persisted, plainly nettled by her continued silence.

At last she spoke.

"That question you should ask yourself, Bob," she told him steadily. "Have you changed?"

"I changed?" he returned indignantly. "Of course I haven't. Why should I? You little know how eagerly I have been looking forward to this Christmas, so as to be with you again."

"But why?" she challenged.

"Because we were going to be together again, of course," he answered.

"But not because you loved me, Bob?"

He stared at her for a moment, then drew a deep breath.

"I—I don't know what you are trying to get at, Gina!" he stammered. "Of course I love you, my dear girl. I told you so in Rome, didn't I? So there's no need to keep harping on the subject, you know. We know where we stand, don't we?"

"Well, exactly where do we stand?" she asked.

Bob was nonplussed for a moment. Then—

"I think I know why you are being so—well, so obtuse, darlin'. You've got it into your head that if I'd wanted to, I could have met you yesterday, haven't you? But I just couldn't manage it, my dear Gina. All the same, I'm sorry now that I went out of my way to go to Prestfield."

"I still can't understand why you did," Gina said, an accusing note in her voice.

"You say you went there to find out about the skating, but we could have done that to-day, of course, as, apparently, your brother has done."

"But I couldn't have arranged the party though!" Bob muttered defensively.

"Was that so very important?" Gina retorted. "More important than making sure that you met me at the railway station?"

"Oh, come, my dear Gina, you're being impossible, you know," he said. "How was I to know I should be trapped in a snowdrift? Had I known then what I know now, I wouldn't have gone to Prestfield."

"No, I don't suppose you would," Gina murmured sarcastically.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Bob demanded, eyeing her warily.

Gina caught his glance, and knew that she was right.

"You really want to know?" she asked.

"Of course I want to know."

"Then I'll tell you, Bob. Yesterday you had forgotten me. But now, having seen me again, you have remembered. That's all."

"Nonsense!" he muttered angrily. "You don't know what you're talking about, Gina. When we were in Rome—"

"When you were in Rome," she broke in, "I was a pleasant interlude in your life; but yesterday I was something of a nuisance—something out of the past that you had almost forgotten and were not quite sure what to do about it. But now that we have met again, you would like to continue the Rome interlude, wouldn't you?"

"Well, why not?" he demanded.

"Because I have no wish to, Bob, that's why," she answered bluntly. "Now let us hurry on and catch up with Mary and your father, shall we?"

"Right!" he said, a grim note in his voice. "But let me tell you this, Gina—you're completely wrong in thinking the way you do, and it will be my business to make you realise it."

Gina gave a disdainful shrug. It was too late now. At last she had seen through him and taken his measure. All he had told her in Rome had been nothing but flattery. He had never really loved her as she had loved him. His had been all pretence; he had merely been amusing himself with her, of course, Gina told herself.

THERE were only three shops in the village of Stoke Abbots, but to Gina each of them was a minor enchantment.

She loved their old-fashioned bow-fronted and bulls-eye windows, and the way you went down two steps when you entered them. And inside, everything was piled in apparently higgledy-piggledy confusion on counters, chairs and shelves, but whatever Mary asked for seemed to be drawn immediately from the debris.

Gina bought a number of things for the Christmas tree at Abbots Hall—including a box of glittering trifles which had been unearthed while searching for some coloured ribbons for tying up the presents. Mr. Grayson found some giant balloons, and Mary some pretty paper joy-bells.

For half an hour or so they rummaged round for anything that attracted them, while Bob lounged in the background looking bored and sullen.

"If I'd thought you were going to buy all this junk, I'd have brought the car!" he grumbled, when Mary thrust yet a fourth parcel into his hands.

"Well, you invited yourself, my dear boy," Mary laughingly reminded him. "And since you can scarcely regard yourself as an ornament, Bob, you might just as well be useful. Now where's daddy gone."

"I wonder?" she added, when she turned around found that her father had suddenly disappeared.

"I think, Miss Mary," smiled the buxom shopkeeper, "he's gone into the store-room."

"Oh, Mrs. Green, you shouldn't let him do that!" Mary exclaimed, in mock alarm. You know what my daddy is when he's loose in your shop. Daddy-y-y!" she called shrilly.

"Coming, darling!"—and his voice sounded as if coming from somewhere in the back regions of the shop.

Suddenly Mr. Grayson appeared carrying a cardboard box and looking very pleased with himself.

"See what I've found!" he cried triumphantly, and lifting the lid he showed them an assortment of cardboard masks.

"But, daddy, they're for Guy Fawkes' night—not Christmas!" Mary exclaimed laughingly. "You must be losing your grip, daddy dear!"

Mr. Grayson grinned.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," he said. "We can have a bit of fun with them whatever day it is. Now come along, my dear Gina," he added. "I'm going to walk back to the Hall with you."

He linked his arm in Gina's, and they set off together through the village, leaving Mary to return with her brother.

On arriving home, they found that Richard had returned.

"Well, and what's the expert's opinion?" Bob asked, in the facetious tone he seemed to reserve for his brother.

"Oh, I think everything will be quite all right," Richard replied. "I examined the ice very carefully, and the lake will be as safe as the Bank of England by to-morrow night if it keeps on freezing."

"What a very wise and obliging young man you are, Richard!" commented Bob in that sardonic way of his.

Gina sighed, and found herself wondering again how she could ever have fallen in love with him. In Rome, she had thought him smart and witty and amusing; but in his own home, and among his own people, Bob seemed to be little more than a gadfly—always stabbing and stinging. His affectation of superiority over his brother filled her with disgust.

Yet Richard never seemed to resent it. Indeed, he appeared to be totally unconscious of it, whether through usage or indifference, Gina could not tell. But of one thing she was sure—Richard Grayson was the most even-tempered young man she had ever known.

Lunch was a gay meal, enlivened as it was by Mary's colourful account of their morning's shopping in the village, and the "trouble" they had had with daddy.

"Well, we're only young once, darling!" Mr. Grayson said complacently, grinning at Mary. "The trouble with us, my dear," he added, smiling at his wife, "is that all our children were born 'greybeards'!"

"But not foolish!" Bob muttered suddenly.

Mary laughed.

"A more modest man would have waited for an outside opinion on that point, Bob," she shot back at him. "What do you say, Gina?"

"I'm afraid I'm in no position to judge," Gina murmured smilingly.

"By the way, Richard," Mary went on, changing the subject, "you had better use your well-known skill and engineering ability this afternoon by fixing Gina with a pair of skates. Do you think you can rummage out a pair that will fit her?"

Bob gave a cynical little laugh.

"Judging by the look in brother Richard's eye, I deduce that he has already found you a pair," he said. "Come now, own

up, my dear chap!"

"Well, yes, Bob, as it happens, I have got a pair," Richard said quietly. "I borrowed them this morning, when I was over at Prestfield."

"Oh, but you don't know my size, do you?" Gina exclaimed.

Richard looked very embarrassed, and again Bob laughed.

"Don't you believe it, my dear girl," he said. "Richard has been at your feet for longer than you know—both literally and figuratively," he added satirically, "and this afternoon he will give you proof thereof. Tell me, Richard, let's know what size skates have you borrowed?"

"Threes!" Richard muttered defiantly.

"And threes is correct," smiled Gina.

"Full marks for you, Richard, and thank you very much."

"And after lunch, Richard, we'll give you a medal for being so observant," Mary promised laughingly.

Mrs. Grayson had already risen from the luncheon table and the others rose and pushed back their chairs.

"Would I get a medal for knowing the size of your waist?" Bob asked *sotto voce*, grinning at Gina, and before she could speak, Richard snapped angrily—

"No, but you deserve one for being a first-class lout, Bob!"

Bob swung round, and seemed about to speak, but thought better of it when he encountered the icy stare of his brother's eyes. For a long moment they seemed to be measuring each other, then Bob turned away.

"A Galahad to the rescue—huh?" he jibed, as he walked from the room.

Gina had flushed angrily at the unpleasantness, but now she paled. Bob was certainly showing his true colours now.

"Good for you, Richard!" Mary applauded, linking her arm in Gina's. "It looks to me that our all-important brother is getting too big for his boots these days. He needs taking down a peg or two, or there'll be no living with him. Thank heaven daddy didn't hear that crack of his, or there would have been ructions! Anyway, I'll have a word with Bob, as we're not going to have him spoiling our Christmas festivities."

That afternoon, having found a pair of boots suitable for skating, Mary handed them to Richard, and then she and Gina went for a walk in the grounds surrounding the Grayson home.

"The real trouble with Bob, you know, my dear, is that he's jealous," Mary remarked thoughtfully.

"Jealous?" Gina echoed uneasily, for she had never dreamt that any other member of the family was aware of how things had developed in Rome between Bob and herself.

"Yes, jealous of Richard, I mean," Mary said.

"Richard! You—you mean——"

"I don't know why, Gina, so it's no use asking me," Mary broke in. "All I know is that it is so. You see, Richard's got something that Bob has not, and Bob knows it and resents the fact. I think he has always known it, and that's what has made him so waspish with Richard."

"Oh, but Bob is the most popular of the two, isn't he?" Gina murmured.

"But only with girls," Mary said. "Bob never has had any men friends. Men don't seem to take to him for some reason, and I suppose that is why he always goes for the girls. But Richard is the other way round—he's got lashings of men friends—he never has been the slightest bit interested in girls. In fact, he quite shook me at lunch when he admitted knowing what size shoes you took, Gina. I'll bet he's no more idea

than the dead what size I take!"

Gina laughed, and changed the subject. "So Bob's a flirt, is he?" she remarked, with forced laughter.

"Oh, yes, a shocking flirt!" Mary said. "His latest girl is Olive Crane. He's been chasing her for the past couple of months or more, but I don't think with much success. Walter Crane—I mean the man he was speaking of last night—is her brother. They live near the lake at Prestfield where we're going skating to-morrow, and I expect we shall meet them."

"You mean where the snowdrift is?" Gina asked.

"Yes; and if you ask me," Mary went on, supremely unconscious of the significance of what she was saying, "that's where Bob was putting in his time instead of coming home to help us with the Christmas decorations."

So that was it! Gina thought to herself. How right she had been in her reading of him that morning. Out of his sight, she had been out of his mind. What Mary had so unwarily told her also explained the brevity of his recent letters to her. It was not pressure of business that had cut them short—evidently, he had been dancing attendance upon Olive Crane!

The fading light of the short winter afternoon soon forced them to retrace their steps homeward, but as Mary chattered on in her inconsequential fashion of this and that, Gina could not help but reflect by how narrow a margin she had missed the bitterest heartbreak of her life.

Had she not awakened to Bob Grayson in time, had she not looked upon him with fresh eyes and seen him as he really was, instead of through the rose-tinted glasses of a girlish romance, what Mary had just disclosed to her would have broken her heart.

As it was, however, Gina was aware of nothing but the most complete indifference. It was, she reflected, extraordinary how quickly and with what utter finality the bubble had burst, leaving no trace of its passing. It could never have been real love that she had felt for Bob Grayson, she realised that now. At best, it had been no more than attraction, a summer idyll, a first romance. She had been in love with love—not with Bob Grayson himself, although she had thought so at the time.

But it made her position very awkward in the Grayson home, Gina reminded herself, and she would not want to stay for long after the Christmas holiday was over. Probably the best thing for her to do would be to write her mother, ask her to reply by return, and under the excuse of not feeling so well, advise her to return home immediately.

"Yes, I'll write by air-mail, the moment the holidays are over," Gina decided. "Then, by the end of the week, I shall be able to leave."

They reached the house through the yard and outbuildings, and surprised Richard leaving the garage carrying Gina's boots and skates.

"Hullo, Richard! Finished them?" Mary asked.

"Yes, they're ready," he answered, holding the boots out for their inspection.

"Oh, Richard, how absolutely professional!" Gina exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Well, Richard is a professional—or will be, when he's through his training and exams," Mary said. "He's going to be a first-class engineer, aren't you, Richard? And he'll probably end up with a knighthood or something!"

"More likely 'something'," grinned Richard, his eyes on Gina. "Shall I take them indoors for you?"

"Yes, please," Gina answered smilingly, and when the three of them walked in together, they found that tea was on the point of being served in the drawing-room.

"And now for the Christmas tree!" proclaimed Mr. Grayson with gusto when they had finished the meal. "We needn't wait for Bob—he's gone over to see his friend Walter to fix up just where to park the cars round the lake to-morrow night."

Decorating the tree turned out to be the most amusing task in which Gina had ever assisted. To start with, Mr. Grayson announced grandiloquently that this year he had a new idea—but since everybody else appeared to have a new idea nothing much came of it.

"And now for the fairy!" announced Mr. Grayson when, at last, it seemed that not another thing could be hung on the tree in safety.

From a box on the table, Mrs. Grayson produced a beautifully dressed doll, wearing a spangled ballet dress and armed with a star-tipped wand of silver.

"Please wait a moment, dad!" Richard said laughingly. "Where are those two enormous witch balls we had last year?"

"Broken, thank heaven!" Mary put in. "Richard, must I again remind you that this is a Christmas tree, and not the parish pump?" Mr. Grayson asked. "Now where are the lights?"

"Oh, crikey! I left them in the garage," cried Richard. "I knew there was something I'd forgotten," he added, rushing off to fetch the lights.

Mrs. Grayson shook her head despairingly.

"Gina dear," she said, "I really must apologise for my husband and family. Every year I have to endure this sort of thing from them."

"It's all daddy's fault!" Mary put in laughingly. "He's the real culprit!"

At that moment Richard returned with a string of coloured fairy-lamps and started up the step-ladder just as his father decided to come down. That started another argument until, at last, Gina, weak from sheer laughter, sank into a chair. Never, she told herself, had she met such a happy, riotous, scatter-brained family.

"I bet you they don't light up, my boy!" said Mr. Grayson, when Richard had finished what he called the "electric fittings".

"No, of course they won't!" chimed in Mary. "They never do."

"Ha! But watch the little bird!" advised Richard, stooping to the switch, and next moment the lights shone out bravely, amid cheers.

"Well, now, I consider that a work of art," Mr. Grayson said triumphantly, after stepping back for an inspection of the tree. "At least, the bits that I did are," he added challengingly.

Richard laughed.

"I was thinking that they were the bits that spoiled it, dad!" he said jestingly. "What it really wants are those two witch balls I bought last year. They would have given it all just that touch of elegance and class which——"

"Oh, no," Mary broke in, "last year they completely spoiled everything. Your taste is deplorable, Richard."

"Well, when you have quite finished," Mrs. Grayson said, "may I ask where you intend to tie on the presents?"

They all laughed. In the fever of tying on the decorations, they had completely forgotten the presents. They looked at the tree blankly, then at each other, accusingly.

"Well, my dears," Mr. Grayson remarked resignedly, "I may as well tell you now as to-morrow. It's been a very bad year,

and—well, I'm afraid there won't be any presents." He gave a mock sigh and added—"Anyway, you can all put your presents to me on my plate at the breakfast table to-morrow."

"You're a bit of an optimist, aren't you, dad?" grinned Richard. "If you are broke we are all broke, so we may as well drown our sorrows in strong drink. So what about the punch, mother?"

Mrs. Grayson rang the bell, and a maid brought in a steaming bowl of punch.

"This, Gina dear, is where we start wassailing," Mary explained, as her father began ladling out the punch. "Two of these, and daddy thinks himself a second Caruso!"

"A gross libel, Gina," protested Mr. Grayson. "Though I do happen to be the possessor of a very fine voice, and of which my family, not having a squeak between them, are extremely jealous."

Mary laughed.

"You'll hear him, presently, in 'While shepherds watched', Gina," she said. "That's daddy's favourite, and we have to endure it every Christmas Eve."

"And if I'm in form, 'Hark, the herald angels' as well," pronounced Mr. Grayson complacently. "I'm all for tradition, my dear Gina."

"Do you know the carols?" Richard asked curiously, smiling at Gina.

"Yes, of course I do, Richard," she answered. "I used to play them on the piano every Christmas Eve for my daddy."

"Then off we go!" Richard said. "Come on, dad, we've got a pianist!" and taking Gina's arm Richard led her to the piano. "Do you want a hymn book?" he asked.

Gina shook her head.

"Oh, no, I know them by heart," she said, running up and down the keys to get the feel of the instrument. Then she broke into the oldest and best-beloved of all the Christmas carols.

"Now come on, dad!" Richard urged. "Do your stuff!"

Mr. Grayson protested that he wasn't ready yet, but they wouldn't listen to his excuses. Then, after two false starts, he got away on the right note and sang the carol from the first word to the last.

"Now don't you think that was a fine performance on my part, Gina?" he asked, a little breathlessly. "I'm in good form to-night, aren't I?"

"Yes, you certainly are in something, daddy dear," Mary said, throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him. "But whether it's your voice or——"

"But Gina knows I am, don't you, my dear?" Mr. Grayson broke in. "Coming from Rome, she knows a fine voice when she hears one."

"That's what we're afraid of, dad," mourned Richard. "But come on, have another go. Your family can take it, if Gina can."

So off they went again, this time with "Hark, the herald angels sing", and when that was finished, Mrs. Grayson asked for "Good King Wenceslas", which they all sang together. After that, they sang every carol they could think of, and at Richard's request, Gina sang one in Italian.

She had a clear, sweet, soprano voice, which came as something of a revelation to them all. It was Mrs. Grayson who asked Gina to sing something else, and after a moment's thought, she sang "Ave Maria", again in Italian, and the silence which followed the last long note was mute evidence of her audience's appreciation.

Then they danced to the music of the gramophone, and having persuaded the reluctant Richard to dance with her, Gina made the discovery that he danced quite well.

It was then that Bob came in. Gina did not notice him at first. The first intimation she had of anything unusual happening was when Richard's arms tightened suddenly about her, and looking up into his face, she followed his gaze and caught sight of Bob standing just inside the curtained doorway, a sardonic smile on his face.

"Mind your toes, Gina!" he jibed, as they swung past him.

"I don't have to, thank you," she said, with a gay laugh. "Richard is an excellent dancer."

Richard's grip of her slackened.

"That was very kind of you," he murmured.

"But it was the truth, Richard," she smilingly assured him.

Bob would have caught her for the next dance, but Gina managed to evade him and danced with his father.

Then supper was announced, and he had no further chance. It was not only that she no longer loved Bob, but she was beginning actively to dislike him. The trouble was that while she remained a guest in the house, she could not very well avoid him.

As they sat at the supper table, Gina was aware of his mocking eyes, and she made up her mind not to remain at Abbots Hall a day longer than she had to. It would be a miserable end to what could have been such a happy visit, and would entail some awkward explanations when she arrived back home, of course.

It was at supper that Gina learned for the first time precisely how the presents were fastened on the Christmas tree. The long-standing custom of the Graysons was for each person to steal downstairs after they had all retired for the night, and tie his or her presents to the tree unseen by anyone else.

It was rather a mad idea, as Mrs. Grayson had remarked, but they had always done it at the Hall, and she supposed they always would.

"And it was Mr. Grayson who started it, when the children were young and he used to dress up as Santa Claus," she explained, smiling at her husband.

Mr. Grayson shook his head in mock despair.

"The more I hear it all, Gina," he said mournfully, "the more I realise what I shall have to answer for. I ought to have known better, of course."

"Never mind, dad," Bob put in laughingly. "I expect you'll grow up, one day."

"I hope not," Mrs. Grayson said fervently. "I like your father just as he is, bless him!"—and she reached out and gave her husband's hand an affectionate squeeze.

It was a completely spontaneous gesture, and for a moment a dead silence fell. Then Mr. Grayson rose and lifted his glass.

"Thank you, my dear Susan," he said softly. "That's the finest Christmas present I could wish for. Children," he added, "I give you a toast—your dear mother!"

"To mother!" they all responded, leaping to their feet. "And God bless her!" Richard said warmly. "And you, too, dad, for between you you've given us all everything worth having."

"Hear, hear!" seconded Mary.

"Sure!" mumbled Bob.

It was an affecting moment, and it was still with Gina when she retired to her room that night. It was like it had been between her own parents—and would still have been now if only her dear father had lived.

"The love that lasts!" she murmured to herself, as she stood gazing at the glowing

bars of the electric fire, and wondering if such a love would ever come to her.

For a long time she stood there, deep in thought. Then, suddenly remembering the presents, she unlocked one of her suitcases and brought out the gifts she had bought for them all before leaving Rome—silk scarves for Mary and her mother, a box of cigars for Mr. Grayson, a cedar-wood box of cigarettes for Bob and a cigarette case of Florentine workmanship for Richard.

The cigarette case was the only gift she was really sure of, for walking round an antique shop in Rome one morning, Richard had stopped to admire it. And when she had known that she would be coming for Christmas, Gina had remembered the occasion, had gone back to the shop and found that it was still there.

She thought about Richard now as she wrapped up her parcels and tied them with the gay string they had bought in the village that morning. In Rome she had thought him tongue-tied and shy and not very sociable; but in his own home he was not a bit like that. As she had seen that evening, he could be as genial and gay as the rest of them when the occasion called for it.

It was nearly half-past twelve before Gina thought it safe to descend the stairs to the drawing-room, her only great fear being that Bob might be lurking about waiting for her. Stealthily she crept along the corridor, then down the wide staircase and into the drawing-room.

The fairy-lamps illumined the Christmas tree and threw a soft light over the room itself. She saw that several parcels were already tied on, so that some members of the family had evidently already made the trip downstairs and gone back to their rooms. Swiftly Gina found places for her parcels and made them fast to the branches of the tree.

Then, just as she was about to leave, she heard footsteps, and on the instant hid behind the curtains.

Was it Bob? she wondered. But when a second or two later she peeped between the velvet hangings, her fears were allayed for the man she saw tiptoeing towards the tree was Richard.

Gina smiled to herself as she watched him. He had only one small packet in his hand, so apparently he must have forgotten something and had returned to tie it on the tree. He stood considering for a moment, as though looking for a special position on which to place his gift, and Gina could see that there was a beaming smile on his face.

Then, glancing at the parcel he held in his hand, he pressed it to his lips, hastily tied it on the tree, and then hurriedly left the room.

Gina waited until such time as she considered he would have reached his room, then, prompted by an uncontrollable curiosity, she stepped across to the tree to have a look at Richard's intriguing present.

"For Gina—from Richard," she read, in bold letters.

THE GREATER LOVE

GINA awoke next morning to a sudden burst of music. The house was filled with the triumphant singing of "O come, all ye faithful", by what sounded like a huge choir. Then, thinking that Mary must have a wireless set in her room next door, she got out of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown, and stepped out into the corridor.

"Good morning, Gina! And a very happy Christmas to you!" came Richard's voice. He had carried up the gramophone downstairs, set it on a table on the

main landing, and was playing a record. "I'm a wait!" he added, a beaming smile on his face.

Gina gave a gay little laugh.

"And a very happy Christmas to you, too, Richard!" she said, smiling back at him. "And to you, Mary," she added, as the door of the adjoining room opened and Mary's tousled head appeared.

"Do we have to have this infernal noise so early in the morning?" came Bob's angry voice from somewhere above.

"Yes, you do, my dear chap!" Richard called back. "And there's lots more to come. 'Morning, dad, and a jolly happy Christmas!" he said briskly, as his father appeared in a dressing-gown at the end of the landing.

Mr. Grayson laughed.

"That puts you one up on me, Richard," he said, as he came down the corridor. "Now have you got 'Good King Wenceslas' for your mother? She's enjoying it all immensely."

"Yes, here it is, dad," Richard said, as he put on another record. "Then one for each of you—I've got one for each of you."

"Splendid!" his father exclaimed delightedly, and wished Richard the good old wish. "And a happy Christmas to you, my dear," he went on, giving Gina a kiss on each cheek. "And to you, darling," he added, as he kissed Mary. "The inventive genius of the Graysons coming out, eh?" he laughed, nodding towards Richard.

"I'm afraid it's you who is slipping, daddy," Mary told him laughingly.

"Yes, I know, my dear," he mourned. And as the music of "While shepherds watched" came joyfully from the gramophone, Mr. Grayson expanded his chest and sang lustily.

"Well done, dad!" Richard said at the end of it all. Then, turning to his sister—"Happy Christmas, Mary dear," he said, and gave her an affectionate kiss. "We've already said our piece, haven't we, Gina?" he added smilingly.

"And have you kissed Gina?" asked Mary.

"No," said Gina, quick to notice the flush rise to the young cheeks. "Happy Christmas, Richard—and thank you for the lovely concert," she added, and shyly raised her face to him.

Richard stooped awkwardly, and would have kissed her on the cheek, but Gina gave him her lips. It was only a quick kiss, and Richard hurried back to the gramophone, muttering something about another record.

Mary smiled thoughtfully. She had had her suspicions of Richard ever since their visit to Rome, but now she felt quite sure. Yes, Richard was in love—and the girl was Gina, she told herself.

After breakfast that morning, came the ceremony of the presents. They all gathered round the Christmas tree, and one by one Mr. Grayson detached the presents and called out the name of the lucky recipient amid cries of delight, and kisses were exchanged.

At last, there was only one present left on the tree—the one Gina had peeped at the previous night and had been watching surreptitiously all the time.

"For Gina!" Mr. Grayson read out slowly, gazing curiously at the handwriting. "I rather suspect it must be from Richard."

Richard flushed and lowered his head.

Gina eagerly untied the string and opened the package. Inside was a leather case. For a moment she fumbled with the spring catch, and when the lid flew back, she caught her breath.

"Oh, Richard, how—how lovely!" she murmured involuntarily.

Inside lay an antique Florentine brooch of exquisite design and workmanship. She recognised it in a moment. It had been exhibited in the same gallery in Rome where she had bought Richard's cigarette case, and as he had paused to admire the case, so had she paused, gazing in admiration of this valuable brooch, which she had told herself must be centuries old.

"Oh, Richard," she began again, "you—you shouldn't have—"

"But you—you like it, don't you, Gina?" he broke in smilingly. "You gave me to understand that you did, when I was with you in Rome."

"Yes, I know, Richard, and it's very lovely. But—"

"But if you like it, Gina," he interrupted again, "that is all that matters, isn't it?" And in an obvious effort to cover up his embarrassment, Richard added—"Now—what are we all going to do this morning?"

"Look to our overdrafts, I suggest—some of us, anyway," Bob put in sardonically.

Mary laughed.

"Well, there's one thing about it, Bob, you won't need to spend much time studying yours!" she said sarcastically, eyeing the small box of chocolates he had given her. "Come on, Gina," she added, "let's put our coats on and go for a walk, shall we? Would you like to come with us, Richard? And what about you, daddy?"

"Sorry, my dear, I'm a kitchen hand this morning," grinned her father. "I'm baster-in-chief to the turkey; so you'd better take Bob."

"Oh, but Bob's going over to Prestfield to see his friend Walter Crane. They are going to test the ice!" Mary said, with a triumphant smile at her elder brother, and before Bob had time to answer, she was gone.

The two girls and Richard went for a brisk walk, and when they returned, they stopped to look at a thermometer fastened to the wall of one of the outhouses.

"Oh, dear!" Mary exclaimed mournfully. "It's gone up, look!"

"Yes, I thought as much," Richard said. "It is freezing still, but only just. Anyway, let's hope for the best. I rather think the ice will be all right for skating," he added optimistically.

CHRISTMAS dinner, like so much else at Abbots Hall, was traditional, and great fun.

The table talk was fast and furious, and interlaced with much gay laughter. Even Bob thawed out a bit and became a little less biting in his attempts at witticism.

At the end of the meal, all the servants came into the dining-room, and each drank a glass of port with the family and received their Christmas presents.

When, at last, they adjourned to the drawing-room, Richard suggested that Gina should play and sing to them, and he found an old English song book for her.

"Do you mind, Richard, if I play something from memory?" she asked, when he handed her the book.

"No, of course not, Gina," he answered smilingly.

"Then I'll sing an old Italian love song," she said softly. "It's my mother's favourite song."

They all listened intently as she sang, and when she had finished, Richard, oblivious of the sullen frown on his brother's face, walked over to the piano and asked—

"What do the words mean in English, Gina?"

She smiled.

"Well, I don't know that they would make much sense, translated into English, Richard," she said. "The song starts off, with the words, 'My heart comes to you

like a white bird, flying high over the lagoon."

Then, to cover up her confusion, Gina started to play from the old book of songs he had handed to her, and the song she hit upon happened to be "John Peel". That, of course, was right up her host's street, and Mr. Grayson came and stood behind her chair and sang for all he was worth.

Then came "Annie Laurie" and "Robin Adair", in which they all joined in singing.

Dusk was already falling by the time they went upstairs to change in readiness for the skating party. Mary went ahead with her mother, and as Gina was hurrying up the stairs, she was overtaken by Bob.

"Look here, Gina," he began brusquely, "what game's this you're playing? Are you trying to make me jealous or something?"

"I—I don't know what you mean, Bob," she stammered.

"Well, I mean all this fooling about with my brother!" he flung at her. "You never took any notice of Richard in Rome, did you? Besides, you came here specially to see me—you told me as much in your letters. As you know, we're in love with each other, so what is this game you're playing now?"

Gina shrugged.

"No game at all, Bob," she said, "and please let me remind you that I am a guest here. That being so, you have no right—"

"I have every right to do and say anything I like!" he cut her short. "And you gave me that right, six months ago, when we were in Rome."

"And have since withdrawn it, Bob," she retorted.

"But I love you, Gina, and you love me," he persisted.

"Oh, no, you're wrong, Bob. I do not love you, and I realise now that I never have really loved you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" he muttered angrily, and seized her by the arm.

"Do you want me to scream?" Gina asked, trying to free herself from his grasp.

"I don't care a hang what you do, I'm going to kiss you!" he snarled.

Fortunately, at that moment Mary called from the landing, and he quickly released her.

"Don't think you have escaped me, my dear girl," he muttered, scowling at her. "You can't play fast and loose with me, Gina Darke!"

Gina hurried on up the stairs and entered her room, Burning with indignation, she crossed to the hearth and switched on the electric fire. One thing was plain—she would write to her mother that very night, and ask her to cable her at once to come home.

Buoyed up by the thought, she took writing materials from her case and wrote the letter then and there. She did not bother to explain matters, or even to give her reasons. All she said was that she was very unhappy, and upon receipt of this, would her mother cable her requesting her to return home at once?

That done, Gina put the letter into an envelope, addressed it to her mother at Aunt Maria's address in Venice, and then went into Mary's room to beg a stamp.

"Good heavens, darling! Haven't you dressed yet?" Mary exclaimed in surprise.

"I—I've been writing to my mother," Gina explained. "As you know, Mary, she is not well," she added mendaciously, "and I'm very worried about her. Could I borrow a stamp, Mary?"

"Of course," Mary answered, and crossed to her writing-desk. "I'm sorry about your mother, dear. I thought she had completely recovered."

Gina sighed.

"Yes Mary, but you know how it is," she said vaguely, as she took the postage stamp and returned to her own room.

THE scene at the lake, when eventually the Grayson party arrived, was very like fairyland. Already dozens of young people were skimming about on the ice which was illuminated by the headlamps of a number of cars drawn up at strategic positions round the banks. It was a comparatively small lake, and was surrounded by snow-covered trees which rendered the scene one of elfin beauty.

"Like it?" Richard asked, as he came to meet his father's car in which Mary and Gina had travelled—he and Bob had driven their own cars for the sake of having all the headlamps they could muster.

"Oh, yes, it's lovely!" Gina exclaimed smilingly. "How's the ice, Richard?"

"Fine, they say," he answered, "but haven't been on it yet."

Richard waited while his father manoeuvred the car into the prescribed position, then opened the rear door and helped the two girls to descend.

"Where's Bob?" Mary asked.

"He was with the Cranes the last time I saw him," Richard said. Having collected their boots and skates from the car, he added gaily, "Now come on, Gina. Guests first."

He helped the two girls to put on their skating boots, and when they were ready to start off, Mr. Grayson took Gina's hand and said laughingly—

"Richard is the expert at this game, my dear, but I'm not so bad myself. I can give you a warm-up, at any rate," and a moment later they were away, followed by Mary and Richard.

Presently, the four of them linked arms and skated round together to the accompaniment of the usual Grayson family wit and quips and peals of laughter. Then, running into another group of skaters, they split up, the result being that Richard caught Gina's hand and off they went again across the ice.

"Hope you don't mind, Gina?" he said apologetically. "I feel a bit of a pirate, and I'm rather afraid you must be getting tired of having me around all the time. Incidentally," Richard added, "I caught sight of Bob when I pirated you away a moment ago. So I suppose I'll be in hot water again."

"Do you mind?" Gina asked.

"Not if you don't," he answered.

"Well, I certainly don't," Gina said. "Besides, Richard, I think you're the best skater on the pond," she added, smiling up at him.

"And I'm skating with the best partner!" Richard said. "You remind me of that 'white bird flying high over the lagoon', in that Italian song of yours, Gina."

"Do I, Richard?" she murmured. "You seem to have a good memory, don't you?"

"Well, yes, for some things, Gina," he answered. "So have you, too." Richard paused, then added—"As witness the lovely cigarette case you gave me this morning. You remembered that I took a great liking to it that day we went to the shop together in Rome, didn't you?"

"And you remembered that lovely brooch I fell in love with, didn't you, Richard?" she countered.

"Anyway, I wanted you to have it, Gina, and when I got to know that you were coming to us for Christmas—"

"You sent for it, I suppose?" she suggested smilingly, when he hesitated.

"Well, not exactly, Gina. You see, I—er—well, I already had it. I—I went back to the shop and bought it for you that

same day," he added confusedly.

"Oh, Richard, what a dear you are!" Gina burst out involuntarily. "And all the time I—"

"Yes?" he prompted, when she hesitated. Gina sighed.

"Now let's try a waltz, shall we, Richard?" she asked, to hide her embarrassment.

And there in the centre of the pond, in the full glare of the car headlamps, the young couple swirled and whirled in the movements of a waltz on skates. Gina's hand was on Richard's shoulder, his arm around her waist, and in her heart was the dawn of something she had never known before and scarcely recognised even now.

They were just finishing when Mr. Grayson came limping up, dismay on his face and one skate dangling in his hand.

"Richard, I'm undone!" he said mournfully. "This beastly skate's broken away again."

Richard laughed.

"It's dad's big feet, Gina," he said. "It isn't really skate-blades he needs—it's steel girders! Very well, dad," he added, "come over to the bank and I'll see what I can do about it."

Gina would have gone with them, but Richard advised her to skate on and keep moving, in case she became cold.

Noticing that most of the party appeared to be bunched together at one end of the pond, Gina struck off towards the other end. She was aware of a curious feeling of elation such as she had never known before.

Having reached the end of the lake, she started on her way back when she met a young couple coming towards her. She at once recognised the man for Bob Grayson, and pretending not to have noticed him, Gina sheered off towards the centre of the pond.

What happened then happened so fast that she was never able to remember the sequence. She had a momentary impression of gliding downhill, and then came a loud crack behind her and she found herself in the water.

The next thing she knew was that she was clutching desperately at the ice, panting for breath, and paralysed by the icy cold. Then she caught sight of Bob and his companion a short distance away.

"Help!" she cried. "Help!" But they seemed not to have heard.

Then, suddenly, she caught the sound of Richard's voice.

"Hold on, Gina!" his voice reached her fading senses. "Hold on! I'm coming!"—and a moment or two later, she felt his hands were under her armpits and she was being lifted out of the icy water.

"Oh, Richard!" she gasped. "Oh, Richard, dear, thank heaven you have come!"

"You are quite safe now, darling," she heard him say, as he gathered her in his arms and carried her to the bank.

IT was late on the following morning when Gina awoke to full consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she saw Mary smiling down at her.

"Well, and how are you feeling now, darling?" Mary asked, an anxious note in her voice.

Gina tried to smile, but her face seemed strangely stiff. And when she tried to put out her hand, she was unable to do so.

"Oh, dear, is—is my arm paralysed?" she murmured faintly, a troubled look in her dark eyes.

Mary gave her a reassuring smile.

"No, of course not, darling," she said, gently stroking Gina's forehead. "But I'm afraid you will have to spend two or three days in bed, my dear," she added. "Doctor's orders, you know!"

Gina sighed, and was silent for a moment or two. Then—

"How—how is Richard?" she got out shyly.

"A little mental, I should say, judging by the way he's been patrolling the corridor this morning," Mary replied laughingly. "He's making himself a perfect nuisance, one way and another. Now would you like a cup of tea, my dear?"

Gina nodded, and Mary pressed the bell.

"Yes? What is it, Mary?" came Richard's voice from outside.

Mary threw up her hands in mock despair. "Gina would like a cup of tea," she called.

"Right you are," said Richard. "I'll bring it in a moment or two."

But it was Mrs. Grayson who brought the tea.

"Oh, my dear, we would have given anything not to have had this happen," she said, giving Gina an affectionate kiss. "We are all so afraid that your mother will think we have not taken proper care of you. My husband and Richard are worried sick about it."

"But they mustn't be," Gina murmured. "It was my own fault, anyway, Mrs. Grayson, and at worst it was only an accident. I'm dreadfully sorry that I should have been such a nuisance and spoil everybody's evening. I should imagine you are all wishing that I had never come here for Christmas."

Mrs. Grayson shook her head emphatically and smiled.

"Well, I can't say that I've noticed any signs of that, darling," she said. "So please dismiss such an idea from your mind at once. What you have to do is to lie relaxed and quiet until the doctor calls this afternoon."

As she lay in bed, Gina lived over and

over again through the events of the previous night, but always she returned to that moment when she had looked up and saw Richard bending over her.

"You are quite safe now, darling," he had said.

Yes, "darling," he had called her!

All through the day she thought of Richard. Her memory ranged back to that day in Rome when they had visited the antique shop together, and she knew now that he had gone straight back and bought the brooch for her, because she had taken a great liking for it.

She wondered how long it would be before she could see him again. Perhaps Mary read her thoughts, for that evening, apropos of nothing, she suddenly remarked—

"I don't know if you'd like to see that brother of mine for a few moments, darling."

"You—you mean Bob?" Gina asked.

Mary shook her head.

"No, darling, Bob has gone to London," she answered. "You see, he has a flat in Town and is very busy, so I expect he won't be returning for some little time. I mean Richard, of course."

"Oh, yes, please ask him to come in," Gina said smilingly.

A few moments later, Richard entered the room on tiptoe.

"This isn't a hospital ward, you loony!" Mary exclaimed laughingly.

Richard flushed.

"Hullo, Gina!" he muttered awkwardly. "I—I hope you are feeling better."

"Yes, very much better, thank you, Richard," she answered smilingly. "And but for you, I wouldn't have been here at all."

"Oh, no," he protested. "It—it was nothing, dar— Gina," he corrected himself hastily. "I mean to say—"

"Yes, Richard, and I'll give you two minutes in which to say it!" Mary cut in laughingly, and then left the room.

Richard remained standing gazing down at Gina for a long moment, apparently tongue-tied. Then—

"Gina, I—I love you!" he stammered helplessly. "I—I lost my heart to you in Rome, but I—but I thought you were in love with my brother."

Gina smiled.

"I thought so at the time, too, Richard," she told him softly. "But now I realise that I was mistaken, and that it is *you* I love."

Richard's heart gave a sudden bound, and next moment he was pressing his lips to hers. . . .

It was three days later, and Gina was still convalescent in her room, when Mary brought her a cable.

"Oh, dear, I do hope it's not bad news, darling," Mary murmured anxiously.

Gina quickly tore the envelope open and read—

"Am not so well. Could you possibly return home, darling.—Mother."

"Is it—all right, darling?" Mary asked.

Gina smiled.

"Yes, quite all right, Mary dear," she said. "It's from mother. She is evidently enjoying her stay in Venice with Aunt Marie, and hopes that I'm happy."

"And—and are you, my dear?" Mary asked smilingly.

"Oh, yes, exquisitely happy," Gina answered, her eyes aglow with joy. "It has been the most wonderful Christmas I've ever spent, Mary dear!"

THE END

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HER HAPPIEST NEW YEAR

By Frances Nicholls

THE TIES OF MEMORY.

CAROL WYNARD stood at the window of her workroom idly watching the falling snow. It had been coming down like this for the past two days, and the weather report said that it was likely to continue for two more days, with the added inconvenience of gales and high wind in the south and south-east.

It was scarcely a pleasant outlook for the last day of the old year, but Carol was not particularly interested in that. She had been away to an hotel on the south coast for the Christmas holidays, and when one lives a quiet, routine life for three hundred and sixty days of the year, to spend the remaining five in high-living and junketing is apt to leave one feeling tired and stale, which was how she was feeling now.

Moreover, it always seemed to Carol that there was a certain sadness in the passing of another year. It was a reminder that time itself was passing, and that one stood just about where one had stood at the end of the preceding year with little accomplished and still less done.

It reminded one of old ambitions that had never been fulfilled, she reflected sadly, and what was infinitely worse, whispered of the folly of even trying to start any others.

When one was young, every year was a

renewal of hope and of faith. Every year, one told oneself, must surely be one's lucky year. But generally the years went on in the same weary way, until suddenly one woke up to the fact that one was old—and after that, nothing seemed to matter.

Carol sighed and turned from the depressing view outside.

"Much more of this," she muttered to herself with a wry smile, "and I shall be looking for the rat poison!"

Almost she wished that she had not turned down the invitation to the Studios' New Year's Ball—but not really. For although she worked among the film people, she had never really cared much about them and had little in common with them.

"I should only have been bored stiff," she muttered on. "And anyway, I don't want to be up until two or three in the morning. I'm getting too old for that kind of thing."

Actually, Carol was twenty-three—not a great age even in these days when the accent is all on the teen-ager—a tall, slim, elegant girl, with small hands and feet and a sweetly serious face. Her mother she had never known, and her father, a solicitor, had died in unfortunate circumstances, leaving her, at eighteen, to make her own way in the world as best she could, starting from scratch and without any training in anything at all.

It had not been an easy task. She had tried many things, and at last found her

niche in the hairdressing trade. Carol had gone as an apprentice to Henri's of Bond Street, found that she liked the work, and within a year had proved an apt pupil. At that time, Henri had done a considerable business in dressing the hair of society women for the big fancy dress balls and so on. He was a master of "period" hair styles, and in assisting him, Carol had learned them, too.

Three years later, hearing of an opening with the Stannard Film Corporation for a woman stylist with a good knowledge of period hair styles, Carol had applied for the position, been given an interview, and to her secret surprise, had been successful in obtaining the post. The immediate effect of that had been to double her salary and present her with a far more interesting job.

Now, after two years of hard work and intensive study, she was already considered to be something of an authority upon hair styles—both English and Continental—between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. And upon the credit titles of almost every historical film, she was accustomed to seeing her own name as being responsible for the hairdressing of both actresses and actors.

She had her own workroom, her own staff of assistants, her own library of sketches and photographs of old paintings depicting various hair styles through the centuries, and finally some eighty or more representative wigs that she had designed,

created, and made up with her own hands.

Carol had paused to touch up one of those wigs when she turned to call "Come in!" in answer to a tap on her door.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Ralph," she smiled when she saw who was her visitor. "Hullo, Carol!"

Ralph Brassington was Stannard's production executive—a short, plump little man of forty or so, with a round, clean-shaven face, nondescript features, and heavy-lidded, sleepy-looking eyes. But those eyes of his, as everybody from top-ranking stars to the lowest paid workers in the studios knew, were nothing but a snare and a delusion, for no shrewder, more calculating man ever produced pictures for the silver screen—nor a man of more imaginative and dynamic personality.

He came up to where Carol was standing, idly touching the wax faces beneath the wigs as he passed them.

"Nice, quiet companions!" he grinned, indicating the wax heads. "I'd rather have them round me than the mobs I have to endure all day! Bet they've got more brains, too, than most—anyway, they could scarcely have less than some of them. Busy, Carol?"

"Not particularly this morning, Mr. Ralph," she answered. "I gather the outside shooting has been cancelled again?"

He nodded grimly.

"Yes," he said. "This cursed snow is playing the very devil with our schedule, one way or another." Brassington thrust his hands in his pockets and looked gloomily through the window, and Carol wondered what he had really come to see her about.

"Goin' to the hop to-morrow night?" he asked offhandedly.

Carol shook her head.

"No," she answered, "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I'm tired, I think, and a bit jaded. It's all right for Scots people to go gay—they don't seem to do much at Christmas, do they? It always seems to me that December twenty-fifth and January first are too close together to give us people a chance. We've barely got over the one jollification when the other's on top of us."

"You've said it!" Brassington agreed fervently. "And what are you going to do, stay at home?"

"Yes," she said.

"Ah!" Her answer seemed to have pleased him, for he brightened up at once. "Tell me," he added, "what would you say to an evening's work, Carol?"

"You mean—you're shooting?"

"Well, no, not exactly," he replied. "But I could find you a job if you'd care for it, Carol. Twenty guineas and all found. So what about it?"

"Doing—what?" she asked, staring at him in surprise.

"Oh, fixing up the hair of a few Anne Boleyns and Queen Elizabeths and Catherine of Russias and so forth," he grinned. "A lot of fat dowagers with more money than sense—you know the type. You could take your girls from here to help you—pay 'em a fiver and they'd leap at the chance. Transport and everything free, and twenty for yourself, Carol. What d'you think?"

Carol hesitated a moment. Then—

"You mean a fancy dress ball or something, Mr. Ralph?" she asked.

"That's the idea," he said. "It's like this, Carol. A chap I know in the country—huge house and plenty of money, you understand—makes a practice of giving a big ball on New Year's Eve. Sort of tradition in the family, I gather, and to it come all the notabilities for miles around, and so on and so forth. It's fancy dress,

and for the last couple of years they've made a habit of having Henri down to do the hair of the house party.

"But this year," Brassington continued, "Henri's down with bronchitis and can't make the journey—he telephoned last night to say as much. So this morning my friend rang through to ask if I knew of anyone else who was capable and willing to oblige, and I said yes, I did, provided she was free and fancied the job. I told him that right here we had Henri's star assistant—now probably his master—and I promised my friend that I'd see what you had to say about it."

"You—you mean you want me to go, Mr. Ralph?"

"Yes, I'd like you to, Carol," he said. "First, because I like the chap and would be pleased to oblige him; secondly, because he's on the verge of putting money into our next production, and thirdly, because I'm going there myself and would like the party—for his sake—to go with a bang."

"I see," Carol murmured thoughtfully, knowing full well that the second reason was Ralph Brassington's real and only one with which he was vitally concerned.

It was said of him in the studios that he ate, drank, slept and dreamt pictures, and that she knew for truth. Also, she knew that he was the financial genius behind many of the Film Corporation's most successful productions, and it did not take her many seconds to realise that, if finance lay behind his own attendance at this particular ball, then it would be only sound commonsense on her part to fall in with his wishes.

"Well, as I've told you, I'm not doing anything to-morrow night, Mr. Ralph," she said, after a pause. "So I suppose I could go, if it would be of help to you in any way."

"It certainly would help, my dear Carol," he said—"more, possibly, than you could imagine. It's a pretty important function from all I can gather, and a helping hand from our studios could easily turn the scale in the—er—well, turn the scale, if you see what I mean?"

Carol did see—at any rate, she saw enough to know that she had been right about the financial angle.

"And you're miles ahead of your old master now, you know, Carol," he added.

Carol smiled at the compliment. It was obvious to her that he was very anxious for her to accept.

"Where is the place?" she asked.

"In Kent," he replied. "I shall be going down there in the afternoon, and I can take you and your girls with me and bring you all back when it's all over. The place is a few miles beyond Cranbrook."

"Cranbrook?" Carol exclaimed.

He gave her a quick glance.

"You know that part?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I've been there."

"Then you'll probably know this place I'm talking about," Brassington hurried on. "You go through Cranbrook on the Tenterden road as far as Benenden—if you know that?"

Carol nodded in an oddly mechanical sort of way, and he continued—

"Well, a mile or so past Benenden you turn left down a side road, and about half a mile farther on, you come to the gates of this big estate. The house is called 'The Towers'—though it hasn't any towers now, but maybe it did in days gone by."

Carol had half turned. She stood motionless, staring through the window so that he could only see her profile, and from that he could read nothing.

"It's the head of the house party you'd be mostly concerned with," he went on, after a moment of silence. "Apparently,

he chucks a big house party at Christmas and it carries on over the New Year, especially to take in this big annual ball. As I've told you, Carol, they've been relying on Henri, but now they are stuck. And since this is Godstone's first year as host and owner of the place, he's naturally in a bit of a flap about it all."

"Godstone?" Carol heard herself repeating.

"Yes, Guy of that ilk," Brassington said. "He succeeded his father some fifteen months ago, I understand—came back from Kenya or somewhere to take over when the old man died. So, naturally, this being his first attempt to carry on the family tradition, you can bet that he'd want everything to run smoothly. And since he's got the money to be able to do it—"

Brassington paused, and shrugged, watching her intently. If only he could persuade the girl to oblige Guy Godstone, he was certain that it would be a card in his favour when the two of them got down to talking finance later on.

"Well, what do you think, Carol?" he asked, when she remained silent. "I'd take it as a personal favour if you would come down with me to-morrow. It could mean quite a lot to me—and to the Stannard Corporation, too," he added significantly.

Carol looked at him for a moment, fully aware of what he intended her to understand. Then she spoke.

"Very well, Mr. Ralph, I'll have a talk with the girls," she said, playing for time. "Will it do if I ring you in, say, about half an hour's time?"

"Excellently, my dear girl!" he enthused. "And I know you'll do your utmost for us, for this affair is really more important than you know—from several angles."

"Well, I'll do my best, Mr. Ralph," she promised.

"Good girl!" he said smilingly, and then shook hands with her and took his departure.

When the door had closed behind him, Carol muttered grimly—

"Guy Godstone—The Towers!"

It seemed utterly incredible. She knew that life was full of coincidences, but this was almost unbelievable. She had attended the New Year's Ball at The Towers every year from the age of ten right up to her father's death. Indeed, even without Ralph Brassington's intervention, it was highly probable, in view of her reputation as Henri's assistant, that, sooner or later, she herself would have been approached direct with a request to take over the hair-dressing work for the occasion.

What seemed most incredible of all to her was that Ralph Brassington should know Guy Godstone and be invited to the ball. But she supposed even that did not seem so miraculous when she came to think of it, seeing that Guy was a wealthy man, had always been interested in the Arts, and had what most film producing companies are eternally seeking, capital to play with.

But the all-important question she had to decide—and decide quickly—was what she was going to do about it.

Carol crossed to her desk, and sat down. Her mind was in a whirl, her thoughts chaotic. Vignettes of memory crowded in upon her; half-forgotten voices were clamouring again in her ears; half-forgotten vows rang again down the dusty corridors of her mind.

Five years! Five long years since she had set eyes on the man to whom she had given her heart from childhood, through girlhood, to the very threshold of her womanhood. Five years since they had walked together in the woods and vales

which surrounded The Towers, sometimes in the early morning and sometimes in the warm dusk of evening—but always hand in hand and always, both of them, supremely certain of the future.

Carol's father had been solicitor to the estate, and Carol herself had been born in the charming house her parents had occupied a short distance from The Towers.

There had been woods on three sides and a little stream on the fourth—Carol could seem to hear the water now as it trickled musically over the stones while she and Guy, bare-legged, dug and sieved for the "pirate gold" old Samuel, the gardener, assured them had been buried there.

The explorations they had undertaken! The untold number of Indians they had driven out of the woods! The times she had been rescued from the cruel claws of "fire-breathing dragons" by a gallant knight charging into battle on old Nelly, the Shetland pony, with a dustbin lid for a shield and a trusty lance which, in more peaceful moments, served to hold up the clothes line!

Carol brushed a hand across her eyes as memories, grave and gay—and unleashed for the first time since she had left the dower house—swept over her in an unending flood. In five minutes, she was remembering, as though it were only yesterday, all that it had taken her five agonizing years to forget.

She could see Guy now as plainly as she had seen him on that never-to-be-forgotten birthday night—her eighteenth—when, after dining with them all at The Towers, he had walked back with her across the park to her home. He had stopped outside the house, in the shadow of the rhododendron bushes which had hidden them as children in their games, and taking her hands, he had said, smiling into her eyes—

"I love you, Carol. I have always loved you, darling, and always shall, of course. I can't remember a time when we were not together, just as I can't envisage a future when we shall not be together. I shall be of age next year, and on that day—and very early in the morning!—I shall come over here to ask if you will marry me. What will your answer be, Carol, my love?"

Yes, she could still see him as he had stood there that night, his face a pale oval in the thin light of the October moon, and his tall, lithe figure silhouetted sharply against the night sky behind him.

And she had known there was no need for her to answer. There never had been much need for words between him and her. Even as children they had seemed to have one mind, one way of thought and one heart. So she had merely tightened her fingers about his and quite simply and naturally lifted her face to his.

Hundreds of times he had kissed her, but it was the first kiss of love between a man and a maid as against that between children and young people. It was a long, tender kiss, and when at last he released her, she whispered ecstatically—

"Oh, Guy, dear!" and buried her face in his shoulder.

He held her close, murmuring endearments. He had known it for a long time, he told her, and had been dying to speak.

"But always I was a little frightened, darling," he said. "I thought that having known me as a grubby kid, you would never see me as anything else, or would laugh at me for being silly!"

"But you have known me as a 'grubby kid,' too!" she laughingly reminded him.

"Yes, I know, my precious, but men are different, you know," he said. "Not that you ever were a grubby kid, but even in those days I knew that it was my job to look after you, even though I didn't know

why. But as I grew up, I did know why—and the answer was because I loved you and wanted you for my own. You, and none other, for ever and ever, my Carol."

"And I—and I wanted you, Guy," she had told him shyly.

It had been an ineffably sweet and tender love-making. As lovers they ranged the woods and fields where they had roamed and played as children. They would stop at a gate that, in former days, had been a favourite upon which to swing, and they would laugh and kiss and try it again.

But, alas, it was an idyll that could not last! Sometimes it seems as though the gods themselves envy such happiness among mortals, and in their jealousy strike them apart. Within a month Carol's father was found shot in his study, and when the investigations were completed, it was found that a large sum of Colonel Godstone's money could not be accounted for.

That was when Carol had fled. She could not face the disgrace—nor the agony of seeing Guy turn from her because she was her father's daughter! Her father had robbed his father of money, and with that spectre between them—even if the stiff-backed old colonel sanctioned the marriage, which Carol knew he never would—nothing could ever be the same again.

So Carol had packed her bags secretly and fled. She left no address, nor even said good-bye to the man she loved—that was an ordeal quite beyond her strength—and from that moment she had set herself firmly to forget.

Five years! Five whole years in which she had heard no word of Guy nor any news whatever from The Towers. Now, it seemed, the old colonel was dead—he had been dead for some fifteen months according to what Ralph Brassington had said—and now Guy had come home from Kenya to reign in his father's stead at the old home.

Carol wondered if he were married; she supposed he was. In any event, he would have completely forgotten her by now—or, at least, have wiped her from his life and memory as effectively as she had striven to wipe him from hers. Perhaps Guy would not even recognise her again if he saw her, for she had changed a lot in the past five years.

She smiled sadly at the thought, and a dull pain stabbed through her heart as she pictured the might-have-been. Carol saw again the old dower house in its bower of roses, and away across the fields the roofs and gabled windows and majestic chimneys of The Towers, as she had so often seen them glowing rose-red in the setting sun. And as the picture strengthened in her mind, she was assailed by a yearning hunger to look upon it all again.

For a while longer she sat thinking, dreaming, but never once admitting to herself that the hunger at her heart was not for her old home or even for The Towers—but for the man she had loved and who once had loved her. Instead, she sought to justify what was already her decision by telling herself that it would be foolish not to fall in with Ralph Brassington's wishes. After all, it was he who had given her her job, and he to whom she looked for its continuation.

Therefore, it would be stupid of her to refuse to do what he so obviously wished her to do, particularly since his avowed object in attending the ball at all was to increase his chances of obtaining financial backing for the Film Corporation's next production.

So Carol argued, and with such sophistry she satisfied her mind and excused her weakness. Suddenly she rose to her feet and walked briskly into the room where

her three assistants were working.

Three minutes later, Carol was back in her own office, and although her voice was firm when she spoke, her hand holding the telephone receiver was trembling visibly.

"Yes, Mr. Ralph," she said, "I've had a talk with the girls and they are willing to go."

"Fine!" replied Brassington, and Carol could sense his relief. "And you, of course, Carol?"

"Oh, yes, naturally I shall be delighted to be of help to you, Mr. Ralph," she answered, with forced cheerfulness.

JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

THE next day dawned cold but clear, and in spite of the ominous weather forecast, it had stopped snowing. So much Carol saw from the window of her small flat when she jumped out of bed and pulled back the curtains.

"Thank heaven for that!" she said fervently, as she looked out across the snow-covered roofs and down into the street below.

Knowing Kent so well, Carol had gone to bed haunted by the thought that if the snow continued until morning as it had been falling for the last two days, the chances were that they would never be able to reach Cranbrook, much less Benenden and The Towers.

There was a big dip in the country road between Benenden village and The Towers, where, in winter, Guy and she used to take their toboggan, and a morning such as this would have sent them wild with delight, Carol reflected, with a wistful little smile. All the same, it would not be any too good for travelling by car.

Carol went into the kitchen and put on a kettle for tea. While she waited for it to boil, she fell to wondering what she would wear—not that it mattered, of course. It was simply that she did have a position to keep up as Stannard Film Corporation's expert on period hair-styles, and naturally Ralph Brassington would expect her to show that she was aware of the responsibility.

Fortified by that piece of sophistry, she made herself a cup of tea, then went back into the bedroom to inspect her wardrobe. That took a considerable time, and involved the removal of four suits, five dresses, two winter coats and various accessories, all of which were laid out on the bed and considered at length, and from all angles.

After all, as she kept reminding herself, Ralph Barrington was not taking her to a roadhouse or a Palais de Dance—but to The Towers for the famous New Year's Ball—and he would expect her to look her best for such an important occasion. She would need her prettiest smock, too, for her work.

Eventually she decided upon a greenish suit of some tweed material, and her newest, heavy winter coat. She had a very pretty scarf which went with that, and a close fitting hat to match, together with bag and shoes.

By the time she had had breakfast and was ready to go, Carol decided that Ralph Brassington would be quite satisfied with her appearance—at any rate, she had done her best. And even if the eyes looking back at her from the mirror did accuse her of wilful self-delusion, she shrugged and refused to pay any heed to them!

After all, she told herself, she was only going there because Ralph Brassington wanted her to go! And just a little, perhaps, she conceded reluctantly, from a sudden desire to see again the scene of her child-

hood's days—and surely there was nothing strange in that, for most people felt a little sentimental about that kind of thing!

The morning at the studios passed on leaden feet, but at long last it was over and they were piling into Ralph Brassington's big car. The three girls Carol was taking with her occupied the rear seat, together with their gear, and Carol sat in front with Brassington.

"I must say you're looking wonderfully attractive to-day, Carol," he remarked, grinning at her as he started the car—"suspiciously like a million dollars, in fact!"

"Thank you, sir," she said, with a mocking little laugh. "We always try to please, don't we?" she added, instinctively seeking to suggest that there was really nothing more in the outing than just another job of work.

They went by Bromley, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells, and on the way Brassington told her of the arrangements that had been made for their reception.

"They've fixed you up with chairs and mirrors in what they call the 'Garden Room,'" he said. "I don't know what kind of a place it is, but, apparently, it's where Henri always worked, and——"

"Yes, I think I know," Carol broke in, without thinking.

"Eh?" he muttered, turning to her in surprise.

"Henri told me about it once, Mr. Ralph," she answered coolly, but her heart was thudding violently.

"I see," he said. "I'd forgotten that Henri and you were buddies"—and he then went on with what he had been telling her. "And now we're coming to somewhere you know," he added presently, as they reached the outskirts of Cranbrook. "Do you recognise it all again in its winter suit?"

Carol nodded, but said nothing. Since that nearly fatal slip, she had put a guard on her tongue, but even so, she could not prevent herself from leaning forward a little as they ran into the straggling Stone Street—every house and shop of which was engraved upon her memory.

Past the old windmill and the church, and then out again into the country along the Beneden Road. With every mile the car covered, her throat was becoming drier and her agitation increasing.

For now, amid the familiar scenes, Carol was face to face with the reality of what she was doing. Back in London, it had all seemed so possible, so ordinary, she had deliberately refused to consider the effect it would have upon her when she arrived on the spot.

Five years had seemed such a long time, but now it might have been but five minutes. Travelling along that well-remembered road, every turn and twist of which she knew by heart, and knowing exactly what she would see round the next corner—yes, it might have been only yesterday that she had been there, for every house they passed looked exactly as it had always looked. Nothing was changed.

By the time they reached Benenden, just as the short winter afternoon was changing to dusk, Carol was on the verge of panic. She could not go on with it, she told herself frantically. She knew a wild desire to reach out for Brassington's hands as they lay on the wheel and beg him to stop for her to get out.

"I—I don't want to go any farther!" she gasped desperately. "I realise now that I should never have come."

"What's that, my dear girl?" Brassington asked, staring at her in surprise.

Carol swallowed—hard.

"I—I mean is this Benenden, Mr. Ralph?" she stammered.

"Yes, we're nearly there," he said.

Carol felt awful. What on earth would Guy think of her, forcing her way back into his home like this? she asked herself, panic-stricken.

She tried to tell herself that he wouldn't know her; that he had forgotten her long ago; that he was now happily married. But it carried no conviction to her mind or any ease to her fears. Anyway, probably he would not even see her—after all, why should he? She was just a hired worker—and hired not for his service but for the service of his house-party.

When, at last, the car swung in through the well-remembered stone gate-posts, Carol clenched her hands in despair.

"Oo, I say!" one of the girls behind her broke out involuntarily, when the house itself, with every window a blaze of light, suddenly came into view through the murk and trees. "It—it looks like a fairy palace, doesn't it?"

"Yes, with a real Prince Charming waiting to kiss you all a Happy New Year!" laughed Brassington. "So keep your heads, my dears! Keep your heads!"

The girls behind giggled, but Carol, white-faced and with staring eyes, watched the old Tudor house drawing nearer. Oh, if only she had never given way to this crazy impulse! What had she hoped to gain by reopening a wound that was already healed?

Brassington swung the car round the front of the house and pulled up at the main entrance. Frantically, Carol wanted to cry out to him to go round to the back, but already he had alighted and was running up the four steps to the porticoed entrance.

He rang the bell, spoke for a moment to the maid who opened the door to him, then turned round and called—

"Come on, girls—out you get! Everything's ready for you."

Clenching her teeth, Carol slowly got out of the car and turned to help the girls with their gear, then followed them up the steps into the house.

Nothing was changed. Everything in the great hall was exactly as she had last seen it. A quick glance round had shown her that it was empty, and with a sigh of relief, Carol followed the others across the polished oak floor, the maid leading them towards the Garden Room.

"Oh, it's really like the palace of the Sleeping Beauty!" one of the girls whispered in an awestruck voice.

"This is the room, sir," the maid said, smiling at Brassington. "And Mr. Godstone told me to say that anything else you wanted you were to ask for."

"Thanks," Brassington said. "Is Mr. Godstone at home?"

"No, sir. They all went out skating this afternoon."

"I see," Brassington murmured. He looked round at the chairs and mirrors and tables that had been set up in readiness, then turned to Carol. "Think you can manage here?" he asked.

Carol nodded glumly.

"I—I think so," she answered.

"Miss Wynyard will be in charge here," Brassington told the maid, pointing to Carol.

"Yes, sir," the girl said, smiling at Carol. "Would you like tea served now, miss?" she asked. "There are hooks for your clothes behind that screen over there."

Carol glanced at the girls, and they nodded eagerly.

"Yes, thank you, we would like tea," she said, with formal politeness.

She realised that not even her name had rung a bell in the maid's memory, which suggested that she was not a local girl. In which case, all might yet be well.

"Very well, I'll leave you to it," Brassington said, turning to go. "If there should be anything you want later on, Carol, just let me know and I'll have it fixed. Okay?"

Carol nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Ralph," she forced herself to say.

The maid followed him out, and at once the three girls broke into animated chatter. It was the first really big house any of them had ever been in, and their comments were phrased accordingly.

"What is he—the fellow who owns this place?" one of them asked. "A duke or something?"

"Mr. Ralph called him 'Mister Godstone,'" another said.

"But plain 'misters' don't live in palaces like this, do they?"

"Yes, of course they do if they have the money!" laughed the other. "If you've got money you can buy anything."

They took off their outdoor things and hung them behind the screen, still chattering like magpies. They had collected round the blazing log fire when the maid came in with a large tray of tea.

"Gosh! That looks good," one of them laughed gaily. And with her eye on the toasted cakes and crumpets—"How long have we got before we start work, Miss Wynyard?"

"Long enough for you to eat what you want to eat, Doris," replied Carol. "I don't suppose anyone will be ready for us much before six o'clock."

"That's right, miss," the maid put in. "The dressing bell goes at six to-night."

When she had gone, the girls pulled their chairs to the fire and started to tuck in voraciously, but Carol shook her head to everything save a cup of tea. She was not hungry, she said. Actually, she was feeling too sick and frightened to eat. Oh, if only the earth would open up and swallow her! she was thinking.

Presently, the crunching of wheels on the gravel outside, and the sound of many voices, warned them of the return of the skaters. In no time at all, as it seemed, the house became filled with the banging of doors and loud laughter.

"I think we had better unpack and get ready," Carol said.

The girls had already donned their white coats, and now set about unpacking the tools of their trade—the lotions and creams and unguents, the combs and brushes and scissors and pins and clasps—and setting them out ready for use.

Suddenly, Carol became conscious of footsteps approaching along the passage outside—firm, long-striding steps that, for a moment, seemed to be treading on her heart. With the blood draining from her cheeks, she said hurriedly—

"I'm going to change into my smock. If—if anyone comes, please say we do not want anything"—and then quickly disappeared behind the screen.

The girls stared after her, then looked at each other blankly.

"Miss Wynyard is acting strange, isn't she?" Doris whispered, and before either of the others could answer, the door opened and a young man stepped inside.

He was wearing an old tweed shooting jacket and shapeless flannel bags, but there was something in his manner and bearing that proclaimed him instantly to be a "somebody."

"Good evening, ladies," he said smilingly, glancing from one to the other. "I hope I'm not intruding. I just looked in to make sure that you were quite comfortable, and have everything you wanted. You have already had tea, I see," he added, as he noticed the tray on the table.

Standing behind the screen, Carol caught her breath. She had made no mistake.

Always she had told herself that she would know Guy's footstep and his voice among a million—and neither had changed one iota in the years since he had held her in his arms and whispered words of love to her.

And he was out there now, almost within arm's reach of her. After five long, weary years they were together again, in the same room, separated only by a thin canvas screen that was yet as effective as a wall of steel. She stood there trembling in every limb, and with her heart pounding wildly.

"Yes, we—we've had tea, thank you, sir," she heard Doris stammer.

"And there's nothing more you need—for your work, I mean?"

"No, we've everything we want, sir," Doris answered.

"Then that's all right!" Guy said.

The sound of the door closing warned her that he was gone, and Carol drew a long, quivering breath. Another moment and he would have caught her, and what would have happened then she trembled to think—supposing, of course, that he would have known her again.

But now that he had looked into the room once, and assured himself that they were on hand and that everything was ready for his guests, he might not bother to come again, Carol told herself hopefully.

Pulling herself together, she slipped the smock over her suit, drew a deep breath, and walked back into the room.

"Who was that?" she asked casually, pretending to be busy with straightening her smock.

"I don't know, Miss Wynyard," Doris answered. "But I'd say at a guess he was that Prince Charming Mr. Ralph told us about," she added laughingly. "Leastways, he was charming enough even if he wasn't wearing the clothes!"

Carol's heart contracted painfully at the words. Yes, Guy would still be charming, of course. All the Godstones had that gift—his father, and his Uncle Francis, had been men of great charm.

"Now have you settled your chairs?" she asked briskly.

The girls had, and were ready to start.

"I wish we were going home when we'd finished," the girl called Gladys said. "I can't say I much like the idea of driving back to London at three or four o'clock in the morning. It was cold enough coming down here, and I expect it'll be perishing going back."

"Anyway, Glad, we're getting well paid for it," Doris put in philosophically.

They had not long to wait before a member of the house-party arrived. She was a young woman of considerable physique, big-boned, and with a round, rather vacant-looking face. Even as Carol spoke to her, she knew the character the guest had chosen.

"I'm going as Anne Boleyn," she tittered. "I always pride myself that I'm rather like the pictures of her—don't you?"

Carol certainly did not, but was too tactful to say as much. Instead, she took in the shape of the woman's head, considered for a moment, then called Doris and gave her whispered instructions.

That was the beginning, and thereafter, for two hours or so, the girls were kept busy arranging the elaborate head-dress of their clients for almost every possible and impossible character known in history.

Still Guy Godstone had not looked into the room again, nor had Carol, much to her relief, recognised a single one of the members of the house-party.

Then, what they thought was their final patron—a good-looking, dark-complexioned woman who was going as Isabella of Spain—had taken her departure, and

the girls were sitting smoking cigarettes, the door opened and a woman swept into the room covered from head to foot in a white sheet. They all stared at her in amazement.

"Thank heaven the last of that mob's gone!" she exclaimed contemptuously. "Now perhaps I can get some attention myself."

Then, when she removed the sheet, they saw that she was already dressed in the gorgeous raiment of Elizabeth the First of England. She was young and strikingly beautiful, with natural bronze hair, and was, in fact, the very embodiment of the character she was portraying.

She turned slowly on her stilt heels, arms held from her sides and hands moving in graceful twists and turns. Carol realised at once that she must be a trained actress—or a model.

"Well, if there's a prize for the most magnificent costume, madam," Doris remarked smilingly, "it's already yours!"

"So I intend it to be," she said. "I am not accustomed to taking second place in anything or to anybody. And now set about doing my hair. I want it done exactly like that," she added, handing Carol a reproduction of a famous painting of Elizabeth the First.

"You—you have the head-dress, madam?" Carol enquired.

"Yes," the girl answered, and produced the familiar net affair of pearls and jewels of all descriptions.

Carol glanced at it, then handed it to Doris.

"Now if you will please take this chair madam?" Carol said.

The girl sat down, and graciously indicated that they might begin. But no sooner had Doris carefully covered the Elizabethan costume with the wrap and picked up a comb to start work than the girl asked—

"Are you the Number One?"

Doris hesitated a moment. Then—

"If you mean am I in charge, madam, the answer is no. Miss Wynyard is in charge."

"Then that's who I want," the girl said. "Haven't I already told you that I want none but the best?" she added, a curt note in her voice.

"My assistant is quite capable of arranging the style you require, madam," Carol remarked smilingly. "It was she, you may be interested to know, who did Nanita Storr's hair for the part in the recent film called—"

"My dear girl, I don't care whose hair your assistant did, or in what film!" the girl cut in angrily. "This is my hair and my show, and it's going to be done as I want it and by the best person available. You have been brought here for that purpose, let me remind you, and I insist on having my hair attended to by the head of the firm."

Carol managed to suppress the hot rejoinder on the tip of her tongue, and said complacently—

"Very well, madam, if that is how you prefer it!"

"I do prefer it!" the girl snapped.

"Very well, madam," Carol said again, and taking the comb from Doris, started on her task.

"I don't suppose you people know who I am, do you?" the girl muttered, a few moments later.

"No, madam, we haven't that pleasure," Carol replied.

"Then where were you dragged up?" the girl exclaimed, with a mocking laugh. "Haven't any of you got eyes? Don't you

ever read the newspapers? You mean to tell me that you don't know Sophie Langdale when you see her in the flesh?"

So it was out at last! Carol gave a furtive glance at her assistants, to whom the name seemed to convey nothing. But Carol knew of her all right. The girl had had a small part in an Italian film, and had been spotted because of her glamorous looks and figure. She had then appeared in musical comedy in New York, gone from there to Paris, and was now playing a small part in a London theatre.

How on earth had such a girl managed to worm her way into The Towers? Carol asked herself, as she went on steadily with her work—at least, as steadily as the girl would allow with her continual complaints and instructions.

Close on an hour later, the job was finished and Carol drew back with a sigh of relief. For several minutes Sophie Langdale stood staring at herself in the mirror. Then she cut loose.

"My Heavens!" she burst out furiously. "What have you done to me, you fool? Have you deliberately tried to make me look a freak? Do you want me to look as though I've got a string of sausages hanging round my head?"

And when Carol remained stonily silent—

"Look!" she cried indignantly. "I've paid thirty guineas for the hire of this costume because I wanted to look my very best to-night, for this is going to be the biggest night of my life, I would have you to understand. And on the last stroke of the Old Year, Guy Godstone is going to announce our engagement!"

"What?" Carol gasped involuntarily, her heart leaping into her throat.

"Rather startles you, eh?" laughed Sophie Langdale. "Well, I guess it's going to startle quite a number of people here to-night. And now I suppose you know why I want to look my best at this New Year celebration affair? I don't care a damn how Queen Bess wore her hair, but I'm not going to wear mine like this! Now get busy and pin back those ridiculous infantile ringlets so that people can admire me. Get the beastly things out of my eyes and off my brow, I tell you!" she ordered imperiously, and then flung herself back into the chair.

Carol gazed at her in dumb astonishment. Guy engaged—and to this woman? Oh, it was utterly impossible that she could have been using all her artistry to beautify another woman for the eyes of the man she herself had once loved and who had sworn that he loved her!

Carol reached blindly for the back of the chair, missed it, and instead, caught hold of the high-standing collar of Sophie Langdale's costume. In a flash the woman was on her feet, shrieking out curses in her fury. Not content with ruining her hair, the fool of a girl was now determined to ruin her costume!

"Are you blind, you—you idiot?" she shrieked. "By heavens! I'll see that you pay for this, you clumsy ass! I——"

She broke off abruptly as the door opened and Guy himself looked in—Guy, handsome and elegant in the white velvet costume of an Elizabethan nobleman.

"Oh, Guy darling, thank heaven you've come!" Sophie wailed. "I'm having a perfectly dreadful time with this stupid girl. She has completely ruined my hair, and is now doing her best to tear my costume. Just have a look at what she's just done to my collar, darling."

But Guy Godstone was staring dazedly into the ashen face and frightened eyes of the supposed culprit. Then—

"Carol!" he gasped breathlessly, "Carol, s it—can it really be you?"

Completely at a loss what to say or do, Carol shook her head.

"I—I'm afraid you are mistaking me for someone else, sir," she managed to murmur, then turned and walked across the room to where her assistants were staring at Guy Godstone in blank bewilderment.

Sophie Langdale gave a cynical laugh.

"More of your sticky past bothering you, Guy darling?" she said, thrusting her arm through his. "What a naughty boy you are!" she went on. "You never told me you had a weakness for lady-hairdressers, did you? I think I'd better take you away from this room before you betray any more of your secret past!"

Carol did not see him go; nor did she know that his eyes had remained fixed on her uncertainly until he submitted to be led out of the room by the other girl. Only when she heard the door close behind them did she know that he had gone.

Then it seemed that the last of her strength deserted her. Forgetting that she was not alone, completely unconscious of her staring assistants, Carol slumped down heavily in the nearest chair, buried her face in her hands, and gave way to bitter tears.

THE FRAGRANCE STILL LINGERS

IT was Doris who eventually aroused her. Understanding nothing of what was going on, and puzzled and distressed by Carol's sudden collapse, she stole out of the room and went on a tour of exploration along the passage outside to try to see something of the guests whose cars they could hear constantly arriving over the gravel drive.

A few minutes later she came hurrying back again.

"Mr. Ralph's coming, Miss Wynyard!" she told Carol urgently. "He'll be here in a moment!"

Carol sprang dazedly to her feet, dabbing at her eyes and looking wildly round. She had forgotten Brassington, forgotten where she was—only Guy seemed real to her now.

"Here's a damp towel!" whispered Doris, snatching up one from the table. "Please wipe your face, Miss Wynyard—you'll be all right. We've finished everything now."

Carol obeyed mechanically, giving the girl a pathetic little smile of thanks. Then Ralph Brassington stepped into the room, and in spite of his medieval jester's costume, his expression was plainly one of annoyance.

"What the devil's going on here, Carol?" he demanded roughly. "What's all this I hear about that Langdale woman?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Carol. "She's extremely difficult. Nothing we did for her was right. She wouldn't let Doris touch her, and insisted upon having me to attend to her. And when I'd finished, she flew into a passion and declared that I had deliberately made her look a freak!"

Brassington clicked an impatient tongue.

"Anyway, that's not her version of what happened," he said. "She's been tearing strips off me about it." Then, becoming aware of the three girls staring at them and listening eagerly, he ordered them out of the room. "I want to talk to Miss Wynyard alone," he told them curtly.

They went out at once, scenting trouble and only too glad to be out of it. When they had gone, Brassington turned again to Carol and went on—

"Now listen, Carol, I don't care two hoots for the Langdale woman and her tantrums. She's of no interest to me

whatever—at any rate, she wasn't until to-night. But now she's suddenly become very important to me. The fact is, she's going to be the future Mrs. Guy Godstone, and for that reason we've got to placate the wretched woman at all costs.

"You see," he continued, "I want her on my side in the negotiations I'm going to have with Godstone on the question of finance for our next production. We'll probably have to give her a part in the thing—I expect she'll demand that as the price of her 'playing ball'. Anyway, that's something we can't help. So the all-important thing at the moment is to keep her 'sweet'."

"But, Mr. Ralph, I did everything I could for her," Carol protested helplessly. "I couldn't have done more for—"

"You don't have to tell me that, my dear girl!" Brassington cut in. "And you don't have to tell me what she is—I know. I've just had a session with her, and I've seen her in action. She thinks she's the world's most beautiful woman! That she's a wonderful actress, and that every theatre manager is breaking his neck to engage her for super-star productions!"

"Well, let her go on thinking it, that doesn't worry us. We can hold a candle to the devil with the best of 'em when we have to. The immediate point is this—the fool has now cooled down and she wants you to go up to her room and put her right again. So just give her what she wants, Carol, and to the devil with whether it's historically accurate or not," Brassington added, with a sarcastic grin.

"But I would rather not do that," Carol muttered defiantly.

"I know you wouldn't," Brassington said. "I wouldn't touch the woman with a barge-pole if I could help it—in fact, young Godstone must be crazy not to have seen through her in five seconds! But there you are; that's how it goes. It's the way of life, my dear Carol, and we've just got to accept it and play ball as long as it suits us. Remember that I've had to crawl to the stupid creature, Carol, so you won't be alone in that act."

Carol gestured her disgust.

"I wish to heaven I'd never come at all, Mr. Ralph!" she muttered.

"Yes, I can quite understand that, my dear girl," he said. "But I couldn't foresee this situation arising, could I? I hadn't the remotest idea that Godstone even knew the woman, much less that he was intending to marry her. So far, I've never even heard him mention her name."

"Does—does Mr. Godstone know anything about me?" Carol blurted before she could stop herself. "I—I mean, have you mentioned my name to him, Mr. Ralph?"

Brassington shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "Why?"

Carol gave a sigh of relief.

"Well, because if you haven't, please don't, Mr. Ralph," she said. "If he should happen to ask, please say that I'm—oh, anything you like. Jane Smith, for instance!"

Watching her intently, Brassington was suddenly aware that there was yet another angle on this baffling affair—an angle he had never suspected. In a flash his mind ranged back over the whole episode, right back to the moment when he had first mooted the proposition to Carol in her workroom, and the little things in her attitude which he had scarcely noticed at the time now took on a new significance. She knew Cranbrook, too, he remembered, and might even have known Guy Godstone in former days!

He looked at her with a new interest, instantly alive to the dramatics of the intriguing situation. If that were so, and

Sophie Langdale was aware of the fact, therein might lie the reason for the woman's tantrums!

Ralph Brassington would have liked to ask questions, but caution prevailed. One thing at a time was his motto, and his immediate business at The Towers was finance. At the same time, if Carol had known Guy Godstone in the past, and still had any pull with him, it was an important point to remember, he told himself.

Carefully dissembling his thoughts, he laughed and went on—

"Okay, Jane Smith! But if it's your reputation you're worrying about, forget it, Carol! It'll need more than the blatherings of a half-wit such as Sophie Langdale to bring that down. You're at the top of your profession, my dear girl, and neither she nor anyone else can deny that fact."

Carol threw him a quick glance, and breathed more freely. Thank heaven he had not guessed her secret. Instead, he had jumped to the conclusion that it was her professional reputation she was concerned for. To confirm him in that belief, she said—

"All the same, Mr. Ralph, it isn't nice to be shouted and stormed at—and in front of my own girls, too."

"Yes, I know," he soothed, beginning to wonder if it was he who had jumped to the wrong conclusion. "But the woman is no more to us than a silly sheep bleating in a field. So please forget it, Carol. Do her wretched hair as she wants it done, and I'll be eternally in your debt."

"Very well, Mr. Ralph," she murmured reluctantly. "Which room have they given her?"

"They call it the 'Blue Room', so she said," he replied.

Carol nodded and picked up the few things she would need. But, she told herself, she was not going through the house, and risk another meeting with Guy.

"Would you mind telling the girls where I've gone, Mr. Ralph, and that I won't be away long?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, Carol," he answered smilingly. "And I'm very, very much obliged to you indeed," he added fervently.

Carol crossed the room and went out by a door on the far side. Then, as Brassington was about to leave by the other door, something clicked in his mind and he paused.

That was rather odd, he told himself. Why had Carol gone out by that side door? Had she made a mistake? Come to think of it, she had not even asked where to find the Blue Room!

Having delivered Carol's message to her assistants, who were waiting in the corridor, Brassington chanced to meet the maid who had admitted them to the house when they arrived.

"By the way," he asked smilingly. "where does that door at the far end of the Garden Room lead to?"

"It is a back way to the East Wing, sir," the maid replied. "The staff use it."

"And is the room you call the 'Blue Room' in the East Wing, may I ask?"

"That's right, sir," the girl replied. "Miss Langdale is in there now."

Brassington thanked her and walked away. A back way to the East Wing, was it? And the Blue Room was in the East Wing.

"Deuced funny!" he muttered to himself, "and Carol seemed to know all about it!"

Carol, meanwhile, had hurried through the familiar corridors and reached the Blue Room. From the ballroom below she could hear the strains of the band tuning up, and she had to pause for a moment as memories swept over her in a heart-breaking flood.

How often Guy and she, as small child-

ren, had waited and thrilled at sound of that first herald of the New Year's festivities! How often they had crept down to the gallery to watch the magnificent figures swirling round and round upon the polished floor below! "There's daddy!" she could hear herself squeaking in excitement as she picked out her father. "And there's my daddy—look!" Guy would cry.

Later, they had been allowed to join the revels—how well Carol could remember that first occasion. She had been twelve at the time, Guy fourteen, and together with two other children they had given a little exhibition—a minuet they had been taught for the occasion. She had been dressed as a Dresden shepherdess, and Guy as her sweetheart.

Swallowing the sob that rose to her throat, and forcing herself to remember what she was there for, Carol raised her hand and knocked on the door.

"Come in!" called Sophie Langdale; and when Carol entered—"It's taken you an awful long time to come here, hasn't it?"

"I'm sorry, madam," Carol apologised, determined, for Ralph Brassington's sake, not to allow herself to be put out again. "I've only just learned that you wanted me."

"Then you learned wrong—I didn't," the actress jibed. "But since apparently there is nobody else available, I've got to have you. What's your name?" she asked curtly.

Carol hesitated a moment, remembering that her assistant had referred to her as "Miss Wynyard". But the fear of having Guy come looking for the woman again drove her on.

"My name is Jane Smith, madam," she answered, as calmly as she could, and hoping that the woman had forgotten.

Apparently she had, for she said nothing. She sat down in a chair before the mirror and ordered Carol to take out "those stupid curls and dress my hair properly."

"I'll tell you how I like it as you go along," she muttered, watching the reflection of Carol's face in the glass.

The actress sat there in silence for a time, watching Carol's face in the glass, and then suddenly reverted to the question she had asked.

"What did you say your name was?" she demanded again.

"Jane Smith, madam," Carol murmured. "Then why did the gentleman address you as 'Carol' just now?"

Carol looked up from her task and the eyes of the two met in the mirror.

"I—I suppose, madam, he was mistaking me for someone else," she stammered.

Sophie Langdale said nothing to that, but she smiled secretly at her own reflection in the glass. Did the little fool think she was as easily deceived as that?

"All right, that will do!" she muttered at last, with an irritable gesture. "Now where's the cap?" she added, rising from the chair.

Carol found the cap and fixed it upon her head. The actress then crossed to the long mirror, where she stood for some little time posturing and posing and admiring herself.

Suddenly they heard footsteps in the corridor, and they both instinctively concluded that it was Guy. White-faced and terrified, Carol looked round for somewhere to hide.

"Oh, no, stay where you are!" snapped Sophie. She quickly switched off the lights, then opened the door and stepped outside. "Hullo, Guy darling!" she said, in honeyed accents. "I was just coming down to find you."

Carol gasped, and clutched the back of a chair to steady herself.

"Is—is that girl with you, Sophie?" she heard Guy ask.

"Girl?" she exclaimed. "What girl, darling?"

"The girl Brassington brought here from his studios," Guy answered impatiently. "The one who did your hair. I was told that she was here with you."

"Oh, you mean Jane Smith, I suppose," Sophie said. "Yes, she was here, but she's just gone."

"Which way did she go?" he asked urgently. "I didn't see her."

Sophie laughed.

"Aren't you being rather absurd, Guy dear?" she said. "How on earth should I know which way the girl went?"

"Anyway, I've got to see her, Sophie! I'm completely at a loss to understand all this. Who told you her name was 'Jane Smith'?"

"The girl did," Sophie answered, a slight edge to her voice. "Really, Guy, you're not being exactly complimentary to me to-night, are you? Why pester me with such silly questions about a mere hair-dresser?" she added petulantly.

"I'm sorry, Sophie, but you don't understand," Guy said. "I don't understand myself, for that matter. But I've got to see that girl again, for it is of vital importance to me."

"Of greater importance to you than—me, Guy darling?" she asked.

Carol did not hear what Guy answered to that. Suddenly she became aware that the voices had ceased. Obviously, she she told herself, Guy was not satisfied with the denial she had given him in the Garden Room in that first moment of recognition. He was certain that she was Carol; he had known her as surely as she had known him, and now that he had had time to think it over, he was more than ever convinced of it and was determined to seek her out again.

But desperately as her heart was yearning to talk with him, even if only for a few moments, her head warned her of the folly of such weakness. Nothing could come of it save further heartbreak, now that he was in love with another woman and had chosen to-night to announce their engagement.

Carol thought she could understand his wanting to see her again, to make absolutely sure that she was indeed the girl he knew her to be. That she could well understand, because they had been such intimate friends in days gone by. They were friends long before they were lovers, and, she reminded herself, friendship—real friendship—is often stronger and more enduring than love.

For several minutes, Carol stood listening intently, and having satisfied herself that they were no longer there, she tiptoed to the door, opened it and peeped out.

The corridor was empty. Evidently Sophie Langdale's protests had prevailed, and Guy had accompanied her back to his guests. Actually he would have had little option in the matter, seeing that he was the host. Nevertheless, Carol knew a quick stab of jealousy.

She quickly thrust it aside, however, despising herself for such stupidity. For the moment, she had forgotten why she had originally fled the place and disappeared; forgotten the years between, their silence and their shame. But Guy would remember her, naturally—just as she remembered him.

And, in all probability, thinking that he recognised her, he would want to ask how she was getting on and what she had

been doing with herself all the years since they last met. Her appearance in the old house that night would inevitably have been quite a shock to him. It would be rather like seeing a ghost from the past—particularly in that room and on New Year's Eve!

Carol gave a quivering sigh. The thing to do now was to get right away from it all before Guy found her and she made a fool of herself!

She fell to wondering if it would be any use her appealing to Ralph Brassington to leave early, but in view of his purpose in coming to the house at all, she doubted it. Moreover, she did not see how she could do that without having to explain a good deal more than she wanted to explain—including the story of her father's tragic end and the cause of it.

On the other hand, she could scarcely play hide and seek there until three or four o'clock in the morning!

The faint jingle of bells caught her ears, and instinctively she stepped back into the darkness of the Blue Room—but not before Mr. Ralph Brassington had seen the swish of her gaily coloured smock and recognised it.

Before she could close the door, he had hurried forward and jammed his foot against it.

"I say, Carol, what the devil are you prowling about up here for?" he demanded angrily, as he stepped inside, the bells still jingling on his jester's cap.

"I—I have been dressing Miss Langdale's hair," she said, doing her best to keep her voice steady, "and she has just gone downstairs to the ballroom."

"You mean she went down half an hour ago!" Brassington said sarcastically. "Don't talk such rot, Carol. I've just come from there. What's the matter with you to-night, anyway? Why are you looking so ghastly white and frightened?"

"I didn't know that I was," she murmured.

"Well, you certainly are!" he said. "And the girls tell me you were crying in that other room downstairs. If this place means trouble for you, why didn't you tell me before we came, my dear girl? You know how important it was for me to keep on the right side of young Godstone, don't you?"

Carol nodded.

"Well, now, listen," he went on. "Please don't think I'm a fool, Carol. You happen to know this house pretty well, don't you? Now tell me—why are you so desperately afraid of Guy Godstone knowing your real name? I don't care two hoots what you were here in days gone by—cook, kitchen-maid, or anything else—nor why you left. It has nothing to do with me. Nor do I care whether you had an affair with the son of the house or whether you didn't. What I do object to is having to put myself in wrong with young Godstone, and I'm certainly not going to allow you to involve me in your loves and hates."

"I—I don't know what you mean!" Carol stammered at the end of his tirade.

Obviously he thought she had been a maid of some kind at The Towers, and had left in disgrace or something—hence her attempt to hide her real name. Well, if Ralph Brassington wanted to think that, let him do so, Carol told herself. At least it would explain things that otherwise she could not—and would not—even attempt to make clear.

"You know what I mean!" he flung back at her. "All I'm trying to tell you is that if Godstone gets at me again about you, I shall tell him straight out that you are Carol Wynyard. I'm not going to get on the wrong side of him just because

you happened to make a fool of yourself in some way in the dim and distant past, and you've no right to expect it of me. He has already as good as called me a liar!"

Carol gestured with her hands.

"All right, Mr. Ralph Brassington," she said. "Naturally, you will do as seems best to you. All I can say is that you are utterly wrong in your estimate of me. But that doesn't matter now. How soon can we leave for home?"

"Not until the time I told you before we started out," he replied. "Hang it all, my dear girl, I can't go around mending broken hearts! I feel enough of a fool in this outfit, without having to appear as Cupid with a bow and arrow. Now come along out of this and wait with the other girls in that Garden Room, or whatever you call it.

"What's passed is past, Carol," he added, on a more appeasing note, "and you can't call it back. So let the young fellow marry that Langdale woman if he wants to—he'll soon be wishing he hadn't, without your telling him!"

He put his arm through hers, and as they made their way along the corridor, Carol seemed to be pursued by the haunting strains of the violins calling her to the dance—calling her back to life and love, instead of which she was walking into the outer darkness of oblivion.

She did not know why, when Brassington left her at the foot of the staircase and watched her disappear down the passage that led to the Garden Room, she diverted her steps. It could have been the music, or it could have been a longing to look once more upon the brilliant scene in the ballroom with which she had once been so familiar but now would never have the opportunity of seeing again.

Or it could have been simply that Guy was there and she wanted to see him again—to watch him without herself being seen. She did not know, nor did she pause to ask herself. Sufficient that the urge was there and that she had the knowledge to fulfil and satisfy that urge.

With a glance behind her to make sure that no one was watching her, Carol opened a door on the left of the corridor, passed through it, and swiftly climbed the flight of stairs to which it gave access. That took her on to the first floor of the West Wing of the house.

From there, by devious back-stair passages and doors, she made her way into the East Wing, and from there downstairs again and along the familiar route by which, as children, Guy and she had often made their way to the little gallery overlooking the ballroom.

The door was not locked, and opening it, Carol peeped in. There was no one there. Then, slipping inside, she quietly closed the door and tiptoed to the front, from where she could look down upon the ballroom floor. In the olden days, it had been a minstrels' gallery, but it was much too small for a modern dance band.

They were playing a waltz—the hackneyed but still lovely "Blue Danube"—and the guests were just taking their partners as Carol sat down out of sight behind the protecting balustrade. For a moment or two, the shimmering light of the great chandeliers dazzled her eyes, but once she had become accustomed to their glare, she began to search among the brilliantly-dressed crowd for the one man in all the world who mattered to her.

She did not find him, but she saw Ralph Brassington in his multi-coloured jester's costume dancing with an Eastern houri, and it was Ralph who gave her the clue. Every time he found himself facing that way, his eyes fastened themselves on the

curtained entrance to the ballroom. And even when the movement of the dance brought his back towards it, he did not hesitate to turn his head so that he could still keep the doorway within his view.

He seemed to be looking very worried, too. In a flash Carol knew why when, a moment or two later, she caught sight of Sophie Langdale standing alone and watching that same doorway.

Carol drew a quick breath. Guy was evidently still searching for her, she told herself. He had gone off again and neglected his guests—even Sophie Langdale herself! Carol could see the fury beneath the set smile that twisted her mouth; see the slight movement of her hooped skirt as the woman tapped her foot impatiently while she waited.

In sudden alarm, Carol gave a quick glance at the door behind her. Guy had evidently not remembered how, as children, they used to come there, and she hoped frantically that he would not remember.

Suddenly, the curtains over the doorway at the entrance of the ballroom were thrust back, and there stood Guy himself, breathless it seemed to Carol, his eyes raking the crowd of dancers on the floor.

On the instant, Sophie Langdale rushed towards him, but Carol had no eyes for her. She concentrated her gaze on the slim, lithe figure, wearing the white velvet costume of an Elizabethan courtier—the man she had loved for as long as she could remember, and whose kisses seemed still to be on her lips.

The gay crowd, the shimmering lights, the streamers and balloons faded from her awareness as she watched him. Only one person was in that vast room, so far as Carol was concerned, and he the man who, on her eighteenth birthday, had told her that he loved her, and that he always would love her.

She saw him coming nearer to the little gallery, and when he came immediately below her, she could not resist the temptation to lean over the balustrade so as not to lose sight of him even for a single instant. She watched him walk round the ballroom and disappear again through a side door.

Then, by an evil chance or some strange alchemy of thought, Sophie Langdale looked directly up at the gallery and saw her!

For a moment or two, Carol sat frozen, expecting a fury of denunciation. The eyes of the two girls held, clashed like rapiers. Then with a quick catch of her breath, Carol drew back and prepared for flight.

But she was halted by a sharp exclamation from the dance floor. The band had stopped, and in the momentary silence that followed, Sophie Langdale's voice rang out excitedly—

"Oh, good heavens! My diamond brooch! It's gone!" she cried, on a rising note of hysteria.

Carol peeped over the top of the balustrade. The actress was standing with one hand pressed to her throat in the attitude of a tragedy queen. Guy, who had now arrived, was standing staring at her, and people were crowding round them.

Suddenly someone called—

"Be careful, everybody! There's a diamond brooch on the floor somewhere!"

Immediately the guests started to gaze about the floor, but no one appeared to find anything. Meanwhile, Sophie Langdale was going over every inch of her highly decorated costume, but all to no purpose, and in the end, she looked up at Guy with despairing eyes.

"Oh, darling, it's gone!" she mourned.

"When did you last notice it?" Guy asked. "Are you quite sure you were

wearing it when you entered the ballroom?"

"Yes, darling, of course I am——" she began, then stopped, and placed a hand to her mouth in well-simulated confusion. "No, Guy," she went on, "now I come to think of it, I don't believe I was wearing the brooch at all. I remember taking it off while I had my hair attended to. I remember putting it on the dressing-table. Oh, dear!" she added, with a shaky little laugh. "I'm so sorry, everybody."

"Well, better go and make certain, my dear," one of the women guests suggested.

"Yes, and I'll go with you," Guy volunteered.

The crowd then began to loosen up, and Carol noticed Ralph Brassington slip through the curtained doorway. Vaguely she wondered if he was going to the Garden Room in search of her.

Carol's heart seemed to miss a beat. Supposing the brooch were not where the Langdale woman said she had left it? Supposing she had not left it there at all, and that it was never found? Already Ralph Brassington seemed to think that she had been a maid or something of the kind at The Towers, and that she left there under a cloud.

Supposing he thought that she had stolen the brooch? Was that why he thought she was looking so white and frightened when he entered the Blue Room earlier on that night?

She gave a terrified look at the scene below, and then darted to the gallery door. Guy and the Langdale woman would be now on the way to the Blue Room. At first, Carol decided to follow them there and give them the lie direct, for instinctively she knew that if the brooch were not found on the dressing-table, Sophie Langdale would immediately accuse her of stealing it.

Carol hesitated a moment. Already she was beginning to feel the cords tightening about her. But terror forced her on along the corridor in which the Blue Room was situated.

Suddenly she remembered that halfway down the corridor there was a cubby hole where in olden days the maids had kept their buckets and mops and so forth. It had not been used for years, and when she and Guy had discovered it one day, they had called it their "secret lair". If only she could get that far, she would at least be safe for the moment.

Voices coming up the stairs left her no option. Scarcely aware of what she was doing, Carol found the cubby, thrust open the door and crawled inside. She was just in time to close the door behind her when she heard the voices of Guy and Sophie Langdale as they approached from the direction of the staircase.

Carol heard them enter the Blue Room, and a moment or two later, heard Ralph Brassington's voice asking if he might come in.

The door was opened, and Carol heard Sophie Langdale exclaim—

"Yes, it's gone, Guy. I am quite certain I left the brooch here when I went down to the ballroom. So someone must have stolen it!"

"Oh, no, my dear girl, no one in this house would steal it, of that you may rest assured," Guy protested.

"All the same, I know it must have been that hairdresser girl who took it!" the woman cried angrily. "I left her to clean up when I went downstairs with you."

"But, Sophie, you told me she had already left when I asked you!" Guy retorted.

"Yes, I—I know, darling, but I said that out of pique!" she stammered. "You—you seemed so dead set on seeing the girl, didn't you, Guy? I mean——"

Her voice trailed off, and a short silence followed. Then—

"Where is the girl, Brassington?" Guy asked.

Crouched in her cubby hole, Carol strained her ears for Brassington's answer.

"I—I don't know," came the reply. "And what's more, I don't know anything of what's going on here," Brassington added. "The last I saw of her she was going to join the other girls in that place you call the Garden Room."

"Very well, then let's go there at once," Guy said.

"But I've just come from there," Brassington went on, "and according to the other girls, she never arrived. Nor have they seen her since she came up here to do Miss Langdale's hair. They've no idea what has happened to her."

"There, you see!" Sophie cried triumphantly. "The girl has taken the brooch and bolted, Guy! Yes, she's cleared off, and left the house all right!"

"Oh, no," Guy protested, "she has done nothing of the kind, Sophie. If that girl is—" He broke off, and added—"She's one of your girls, Brassington. You brought her here, and you know more about her than any of us, of course. Now tell me—who is she?"

Carol held her breath as Brassington hesitated.

"I—I really don't know, Guy," he stammered at last. "I wish to heaven I did. But I can tell you this much—she appears to know this house backwards! So I'm pretty sure that at some time or other she's worked here—a maid or something, I imagine. Anyway, she knows all the back stairs and passages, I can tell you that much."

"So there you are, darling!" Sophie exclaimed exultantly. "There's the answer, surely? Like enough, Guy, she had a confederate waiting outside and—"

"Oh, no!" Brassington interrupted. "I know nothing of what's happened here, but I do know Carol Wynyard well enough to know that—"

"What?" Guy broke in excitedly. "What did you say the girl's name is?"

Carol held her breath. So it was out at last!

"Oh, well, I suppose it had to come out some time," Brassington said, "though I did promise her I wouldn't tell you, Guy. Anyway, that's her real name—Carol Wynyard. At least, it's the name we at the studios have known her by for the last two or three years."

"Carol Wynyard!" Guy repeated. Then he laughed. "I felt pretty certain that I had not been mistaken," he went on. "I recognised her the moment I saw her, as if I could ever forget the dear girl! Now come, Brassington, I've got to find her at once!"

"But, Guy," shrilled Sophie Langdale, "what about my brooch?"

"Damn the brooch!" came the reckless answer. "I've got to find Carol!"—and she heard the two men hurry off along the corridor.

Then there was silence, save for the distant strains of music from the ballroom, and the muffled sound of Sophie Langdale's sobs coming from the Blue Room.

Carol's heart was beating almost to suffocation point. She had loved the exultant note in Guy's voice when he said "I've got to find Carol!" That had been the enthusiastic Guy she knew—the Guy Godstone she had loved and who had loved her.

Almost she could have persuaded herself that he loved her still, but that, she reflected sadly, would be folly, after all that had happened—the unfortunate affair of

her father and the rest of it!

Carol shivered as the seeming insurmountable difficulties rose like a great wall before her, and involuntarily she thrust her hands into the pockets of her smock for warmth.

Then, to her horror, there, in the right hand pocket, was Sophie Langdale's diamond brooch!

LOVE FINDS THE KEY

CAROL did not know how long it was after that appalling discovery that the door of her hiding place was thrust open and she was blinded by the glare of a torch.

Not even Guy's voice seemed to mean anything when she heard him exclaim excitedly—

"So I have managed to find you at last, Carol dear! I've only just remembered our 'secret lair'. Now please come out of there at once, my girl, and tell me all about this—this extraordinary escapade of yours."

She did not move, she could not. She sat there stunned, wide-eyed and staring blankly. Although her lips moved mechanically, no words came.

"Here, take the torch, Brassington!" Guy snapped. "There's evidently something seriously wrong with her."

Guy crawled into the cubby hole, quite regardless of his elegant white velvet costume, lifted her gently out, and with Brassington's assistance, carried her into the Blue Room.

Sophie Langdale had heard the commotion going on outside, and when she caught sight of Carol's bedraggled condition, she gave a mocking laugh.

"So she's been in hiding, has she? And no wonder!" she shrilled triumphantly.

Neither of the men answered her. They placed Carol on a settee and Guy started chafing her hands.

"The dear girl is frozen stiff," he murmured anxiously. "Go and fetch some brandy, Brassington."

A sip of the brandy helped to revive her, and when at last Carol forced herself back to full consciousness of her surroundings, her eyes took in the anxious face of the man who for years had lived only in her memories and her dreams.

Standing beside him was Ralph Brassington, looking completely bewildered; and Sophie Langdale, on whose face was a twisted smile.

"When you've quite finished patting that girl's hands, Guy," she muttered contemptuously, "you might ask her what she has done with my diamond brooch."

Guy frowned.

"Listen, Sophie," he said brusquely, "this is Carol Wynyard, whom I've known all my life. Whatever has happened to that brooch of yours, you can rest assured that she hasn't stolen it!"

"Oh, can I?" she retorted. "Your confidence in the girl is quite touching, Guy. Do you suppose she was hiding in that cubby hole for fun?" she added sneeringly.

Guy gave an impatient shrug.

"You don't understand, Sophie," he said. "But I'm beginning to," she flung back at him.

"What did you say the girl had been here, Mr. Brassington? A maid or something of the kind, wasn't it?"

Ralph Brassington pursed his lips, and glanced helplessly at his host.

"Don't ask me, Miss Langdale," he said. "I know no more than you do. But I'm as sure as Guy is that Miss Wynyard wouldn't stoop to steal anything. I know her well enough for that."

Sophie laughed.

"You may think so, Mr. Brassington," she said acidly. "Thank heaven I'm not

quite so susceptible to maidens in distress as you men appear to be." She broke off, and glared at Carol. "What have you done with that brooch of mine?" she demanded fiercely.

Carol winced. What could she say? What could she do? she wondered frantically. Who would believe her now if all she could say was that she had found the brooch in the pocket of her smock?

"Well?" Sophie taunted. "Haven't you a tongue in your head? Or are you ashamed to confess that you are a thief?"

Carol stiffened to the lash of the woman's contempt. She was aware that both Guy and Ralph Brassington were waiting anxiously for her reply.

"I—I have not stolen your brooch!" she jerked out at last. "I would not know the brooch if I—I saw it!"

"There, now, Sophie, you have your answer," Guy said quickly. "So that's settled that!"

"My dear Guy, don't be utterly ridiculous!" Sophie exclaimed scornfully. "It may be good enough for you, but it isn't for me. Of course she would say that she'd never seen the brooch. What else did you expect her to say? The girl's lying like a trooper, and you can read as much in her face. She's scared stiff that we're going to search her."

"Well, nobody is going to search her!" snapped Guy. "Nor is anyone going to put her to such an indignity while I'm master of this house. Miss Wynyard has told us that she hasn't seen the brooch—and that's good enough for me."

"And me, too!" put in Ralph Brassington.

"But not me!" stormed Sophie. "Heavens above! Are you both crazy? Look at her!" she cried. "Look at her lying face. Why, she's got the brooch on her at this very minute—I can see it in her eyes. Just look at her ashen face! Do you call that a picture of innocence?"

"Shut up, Sophie!" Guy muttered furiously. "And for heaven's sake do try to act less like a fishwife."

"Fishwife!" she raved at him, beside herself with baffled hate. "You call me a fishwife because I happen to want what belongs to me from a slut you're determined to let go scot free! Do you think none of us here have eyes in our heads or enough wit to put two and two together, and notice the way you've been rushing round like a cat on bricks from the moment you clapped eyes on this dreadful creature?"

"Be careful, Sophie Langdale!" he got out savagely through his teeth.

"Careful, my foot!" she shrilled. "What do you think I am, Guy Godstone? I tell you the girl has got my brooch on her right now! She's got it in her pocket!" she added. And she sprang forward with the obvious intention of thrusting a hand into the very pocket where Carol knew the brooch to be lying.

But Guy intercepted her. Even as Carol stepped back and instinctively made to clasp her hand on that incriminating pocket, Guy's hand reached it first.

Carol waited breathlessly for him to produce the brooch, but after a moment of fumbling round he withdrew his hand—empty.

"You're wrong, Sophie," he said coolly. "There's nothing at all in the pocket."

"Liar!" she spat back at him. "You're determined the thief shan't be found out, but I'm equally determined that she shall. My brooch is in that pocket, I tell you. She stole it, and it's in there right enough."

Guy gave her a piercing look.

"You seem very sure of it, don't you, Sophie?" he said slowly.

"I am sure!" she retorted. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

Guy shrugged.

"What I'm wondering at the moment, Sophie, is why you are so sure?"

"Why?" she repeated, without stopping to think. "Why, because I—"

She stopped abruptly, and caught her breath. And as she stood there, rigid, staring blankly at Guy, her cheeks turned slowly from pale to a dull flush and back again to a frightened palor.

Then Guy spoke again.

"Those who hide can generally find, Sophie Langdale," he said grimly, and slipping his hand into the pocket of Carol's smock again, he brought out the brooch. "Well, here it is," he went on, handing her the brooch, "and the next time you try to fix an innocent person, remember not to lose your temper."

"You—you planted the brooch in that pocket yourself, for what purpose I can only guess," Guy added accusingly, "and I think that's all that need be said—save that a car will be at your disposal immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning to take you back to London."

He then slipped his arm through Carol's and turned to the door, leaving the astounded Sophie Langdale standing there as though she had been turned to stone.

There was a baffled expression on Ralph Brassington's face as he followed the young couple along the corridor. It was all extremely perplexing, he was thinking, and would make an excellent story for a film. Later on, he told himself, he must find out what was actually behind it all.

And New Year's Eve was a time-honoured occasion for reunions, his thoughts ran on, so that much was right! And with Carol on his side, and young Godstone looking like a man who had found a crock of gold at the foot of the rainbow, Brassington had the feeling that he would get the finance he needed for Stannard Film Corporation's next production.

"As for Sophie Langdale—well, she had never amounted to a row of beans, anyhow," Brassington muttered to himself. "And I doubt now if the story of her about-to-be-announced engagement to Guy Godstone has ever existed save in Sophie's imagination."

MEANWHILE, Guy had taken Carol to the small room he used as a study, and closing the door, drew up a chair for her before the blazing log fire.

"Now first of all, let me have a good look at you, my dear Carol," he said smilingly, placing his hands on her shoulders and holding her at arm's length. "Somehow or other, I feel I have to convince myself that it is really you, and not some crazy dream born of a New Year's Night!"

He touched her hair, her cheek, and gazed into her eyes.

"Oh, Guy, I must look an awful fright!" she murmured shyly, turning her face away when she could no longer sustain the ardour of his inspection. "And I—and I'm feeling dreadfully tired."

"Yes, of course, my dear Carol," he said. "Now sit down and let me get you a glass of wine and some biscuits"—and without waiting for her answer, Guy walked to the door. "I'm going to lock you in while I go," he added, turning and grinning at her, "for I don't intend to lose you again so easily!"

She heard the click of the lock as he turned the key. Guy had always been a man of his word, she reflected, smiling to herself. Carol gazed into the heart of the fire and tried to convince herself that she was not dreaming, that it was not all too utterly unreal and remote to be true!

For five long years she had dreamed of the possibility of such a thing happening, and now she found it impossible to separate the dream from the reality.

Even when she tried to connect up the happenings of the night she found it beyond her. That brooch, for example! Even now she could not understand what had really taken place.

Suddenly the click of the key in the lock warned her of Guy's return. He came in carrying a tray upon which were two glasses, a bottle of wine and a plate of biscuits.

"Reminds me of our beanfeasts in the Pirate's Cave!" he told her laughingly as he set down the tray. "But in those days we drank ginger-pop, didn't we, Carol? Remember?"

Carol nodded. Of course she remembered. Was there anything of those days that she did not remember?

He gave her a glass of wine and took one himself.

"Well, my dear Carol," he said, smiling at her, "here's to the happiest New Year and the most wonderful night of my life!"

"Here's to mine, too, Guy," she whispered, scarcely knowing what she was saying, and dreading the awakening that must inevitably follow very soon.

Nothing could wipe out the past, Carol told herself; the past would be always between them, and what was happening now was no more than an interlude—a make-believe oasis in her desert of despair.

The wine warmed her, and Guy sat on a hassock at her feet, an adoring look in his eyes.

"Feeling better now, Carol?" he asked, a tender note in his voice.

She nodded, longing to reach out and touch his hair.

"Then let's have a talk," he said. "In spite of those lost five years, it won't be difficult, will it, Carol? The only thing I have never been able to understand is why you decided to run away from here. Why did you, Carol dear?"

Carol struggled for words.

"Well, you—you know what happened, don't you, Guy?" she murmured.

"But surely that need not have made any difference between you and me, darling?" he said.

"But, Guy, the investigation proved that—"

"You—you mean about your father?" he broke in. "Surely you must have heard all about that, Carol!"

"What do you mean, Guy?" she breathed. "Heard—what?"

"That your father was completely innocent, of course," he said. "The clerk in the estate office had been falsifying the books for years—he confessed as much some twelve months later as he lay dying in hospital following upon a motoring accident. It was he who had stolen the money and left your father to shoulder the blame. Naturally, the disclosure came as a terrible shock to my father—as it did to everybody—and I've been trying to trace you ever since, Carol. You see, we thought that when you learned the truth, you would decide to come back to us."

"But I—but I never did hear about it, Guy," she murmured helplessly. "Oh, my poor daddy! But surely he would have known that the clerk—"

Guy shook his head.

"Your father was not an accountant, Carol," he broke in again. "Besides, if you remember, he was not in the best of health at the time, was he? The whole thing was a shocking tragedy, of course, and worse still is the fact that you never got to know the truth about it all. My father and I did everything we possibly could to trace you, but all to no purpose."

Carol covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"In—in those early days I took care to hide myself," she explained brokenly.

"You see, Guy, I—I didn't know anything of all this, and I had to find myself a job, so I answered an advertisement of Henri's for an apprentice. After that, I never looked back. When I left Henri's, I started a business of my own, and that's what brought me here to-night."

"Thank heaven for that, darling!" Guy said fervently. "Oh, if only I had known! Think of the wasted years, Carol. Think what might have been if only my father and I could have discovered your whereabouts at the time! And even now, if it hadn't been for the chance of my getting into touch with Ralph Brassington, and you working for him—"

"On how little does our fate sometimes depend!" Guy went on. "And yet it has worked out all right for us, hasn't it, my dear Carol? Here you are, back again, in what might be called your second home—remember how we used always to call this place your 'second home', darling? And here we are together again—you and I, Carol. For that I shall never cease to be profoundly thankful."

Carol smiled through her tears.

"Mr. Brassington told me you were in Kenya when your father died, Guy," she murmured, remembering what Sophie Langdale had told her about her engagement to him.

"Yes," he said, "I went out there a couple of years ago, after being forced to the conclusion that I should never find you again, Carol. You see, darling, I thought that you—well, that you had completely forgotten me, and if I live to be a thousand I shall never forget that moment when I walked into the Garden Room and caught sight of you again. And when you told me I had made a mistake, I felt I had to believe you—because anything else would have seemed nothing short of a miracle to me."

"Yet it did happen, didn't it, Guy?"

He nodded, and went on—

"I said to myself that if it wasn't you, then it could only be your twin sister, and I knew you hadn't a twin sister, so it must be you! So I rounded up Ralph Brassington and asked him your name, and he told me 'Jane Smith'. And when I went in search of you again, and was told that you'd gone to the Blue Room, I went there and asked Sophie Langdale the same question, and she, too, told me that your name was 'Jane Smith'."

"Yes, I know," Carol said. "I was in the room when you called, and Miss Langdale told you I had gone, didn't she?"

Guy's face darkened.

"What a strange creature the woman is!" he muttered dourly. "Her behaviour to-night has been a revelation to me. Even now I can't think why she had the brazen effrontery to put that brooch in your pocket, Carol—and she must have done it, of course! No doubt she managed to put it there while you were doing her hair. In fact, that's why she sent for you to come to her room, I can see that now." Guy laughed, and added—"As if anyone would ever believe that you had stolen the brooch, my dear Carol!"

"Yet it was in my pocket, Guy," she reminded him.

He grinned.

"Yes, I admit that came as a bit of a shock to me," he said. "But I knew that you were Carol Wynyard, you see, and that there must be something radically wrong. And it didn't take me long to force it out of her. Sophie gave herself away beautifully, didn't she?"

Carol looked at him for a moment as he sat in front of her, his chin resting on her knee, his eyes watching every fleeting expression of her face. Often in days gone by he had sat like that while she had read

to him out of Hans Anderson or Grimm.

She hesitated to ask the question, but the words formed on her lips and were out before she could stop them.

"Are you—are you in love with her, Guy?"

He stared at her in surprise.

"In love with who?" he asked.

"With Sophie Langdale, of course."

He literally gaped at her.

"What on earth are you talking about, my dear Carol? Where in the world did you get that—that idea?" he stammered.

"Miss Langdale told me, Guy."

"What?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"And she—and she told me that you were announcing your engagement to her after the ball to-night, Guy."

He continued staring at her for a long moment, then gave a derisive laugh.

"Well, if Sophie Langdale told you that, darling, it's the first I've heard of it!" he said. "Good heavens, what an imagination! Why, I've scarcely spoken a dozen words to the woman until she came to The Towers to join my Christmas party. As a matter of fact, I only invited her here because she very kindly entertained the old people in the neighbourhood when they held their annual beanfeast last August."

"And was that when you gave her the diamond brooch?" Carol ventured to ask, now beginning at last to see daylight.

"Yes, that's right," Guy said. "She wouldn't take a fee so I told her to go to a jeweller's shop and select a piece of jewellery for herself, and she chose that brooch," he added, with a rueful smile.

Carol sat back silent for a while, thinking. Now she was beginning to understand something of the reason—the fear—that had driven Sophie Langdale to the dangerous lengths she had attempted that night. She remembered the words the woman had used in the Garden Room when telling her of the announcement that Guy was to make in the ballroom on the last stroke of the Old Year.

"Startles you, eh?" she had laughed, when Carol stared at her in consternation. "Well, it'll startle lots of other people here to-night, but that's how it's going to be—you can take my word for that!"

"Her word"—that was the operative phrase. Sophie Langdale had accepted Guy's invitation to the Christmas party under the impression that he was interested in her personally. And from that to imagining he was already in love with her would be but a small step to one of her conceit. Then, with a little judicious handling, Guy would ask her to marry him, and soon she would be mistress of The Towers!

That had been what Sophie Langdale intended. And she had seen no difficulty in the situation because of her invincible belief that she had only to look at him twice to have any man she chose grovelling at her feet. It must therefore have come as a severe shock to her when Guy had walked into the Garden Room and acted so strangely with the girl who had been dressing her hair. It must have been plain to her that here was someone out of his past, and she had at once scented a rival.

From that moment onwards, being the woman she was, Sophie Langdale had set herself to the task of getting rid of that rival. What she wanted she must have, at all costs, and had concocted a plan for discrediting her rival and getting rid of her for all time. Hence her planting the

diamond brooch in the pocket of Carol's smock!

"Well, Carol, have you now managed to work it all out?" Guy asked, smiling at her.

Carol nodded thoughtfully. Already it seemed to her that the years between had suddenly been rolled back—it was almost as though they had never been, that Guy and she had never been parted.

"Yes, I—I think so, Guy," she answered.

"Then supposing we talk about ourselves, my dear Carol?"

"But I thought we had been talking about ourselves?" she hedged, aware of the quickening beat of her heart.

"Yes, Carol, but not what I want to talk about," he said.

Guy rose to his feet, and taking her hands, he gently drew her up. For a long moment he stood looking at her, and suddenly shy because of what she saw in his eyes, Carol remarked jestingly—

"I believe you have grown since we last met, Guy! In fact, I'm sure you have."

"Nonsense!" he told her laughingly. "The top of your head was always level with my nose, and I'll bet it is now."

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her to him.

"Oh, Carol dear," he whispered, resting his cheek against her hair, "I hope this is not just a Midsummer Night's Dream—or rather a New Year's Eve dream! I've pictured your being here so often; I've tried over and over again to live on memories, but it wasn't much use. When I planned this ball, I thought how marvellous it would be if, on the night, a crystal coach drew up and out of it stepped a Dresden shepherdess who suddenly turned out to be *you*. Do you remember that lovely dress of yours, darling?"

"Yes, Guy, I was thinking of it earlier on to-night," Carol murmured.

"I was your sweetheart when I took you into the ballroom that night. Do you remember, Carol dear?"

"Yes, of course I remember, Guy."

"You were about twelve then, weren't you?"

"And you fourteen," she said.

"A long time ago, isn't it, darling?"

"Yes, it certainly is, Guy."

"On a New Year's Eve, too."

"Yes, Guy."

He was silent for a moment. Then—

"Tell me, Carol dear, is there—have you lost your heart to—to anyone else?"

"No, Guy," she murmured, a little breathlessly. "There—there's never been anyone else."

"Nor for me, darling."

Guy gently lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. For a long time they stood so, without speaking. Indeed, there was no need for words between them.

At last, Guy broke the silence.

"Always I have been in love with you, my darling," he whispered softly. "Always you have been in my mind and in my heart. For five years I have been doing my best to live without you because I thought you were lost to me—thought you might have forgotten. I certainly can't let you go again, sweetheart, unless—"

"Unless what?" Carol prompted, when he hesitated.

Unless "you—want to go, my love," he

got out jerkily. "Do you, Carol?"

She shook her head.

"No, I—I do not *want* to go, Guy," she answered.

"You mean you'll marry me, darling?" he asked eagerly.

"If you—if you want me, Guy,"

"Want you!" he said exultantly. "Oh, Carol, my precious, you'll never know just how much I do want you. I've never wanted anyone else but you in all my life, darling."

"And I—you, Guy!"

Next moment Carol found herself tightly clasped in his arms, and they were kissing each other with the ardour of five long years' separation.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of what seemed like guns being fired, and they broke apart.

"Good heavens! What's that?" Carol asked dazedly.

Guy laughed.

"Crackers, my darling," he said, quickly forcing his mind back to the present. "It's New Year's morning, Carol, and those are the crackers to announce its joyous arrival! Come, my love, we can just make it!" he added, linking his arm in hers.

"What—like this?" Carol gasped, looking down at her soiled smock.

"Yes, darling, like anything!" Guy cried recklessly. "So come along, as I have a very important announcement to make. I'm supposed to have been going to make one and now I can do so!"

He literally whirled her to the door, and then hesitated for a moment.

"Carol darling," he said, smiling into her eyes, "you—you are quite sure, aren't you?"

For answer she threw her arms round his neck.

"For ever and ever, my own precious Guy!" she whispered ecstatically, and sealed her troth by a lingering kiss.

A few moments later, they entered the ballroom hand in hand. Everybody turned and stared at them in amazement. When Ralph Brassington saw the glowing look on the young couple's faces, he breathed a sigh of relief.

For more than an hour he had been on tenterhooks, fearing the outcome of it all. But now he knew that, happy as this New Year was going to be for Guy and Carol, it was going to be equally happy for him and the Stannard Film Corporation.

They might have lost their crack hair-stylist, but the Corporation had gained a very important financial backer. he told himself gleefully.

Nor, in the event, was Brassington disappointed.

THE END.

A HEARTY COMPLAINT.

"What is the matter with me?" he asked anxiously. "Anything wrong with my heart?" "You show signs of angina pectoris," said the doctor. "Oh, you haven't got the girl's name right, doctor."

* * * RIDICULOUS.

The conductor handed back the two-shilling piece to the passenger. "That's a dud coin, madam," he explained. "Ridiculous!" exclaimed the woman, examining the coin. "Why, conductor, it's dated 1901. Someone would surely have noticed it before of it were bad!"

THE WAY OF A HEART

By Joan Telscombe

FIRST MEETING

THE day Peter Strange met Judy Laleham he fell in love with her.

Peter had come to Roxton as the assistant borough surveyor, an appointment he had obtained from among a score of other applicants. Recently he had completed four years in West Africa, where he had been engaged on a large irrigation and land reclamation project, so that to his other qualifications had been added some practical experience.

He was twenty-seven, nearly six feet tall, quite good-looking and the possessor of a quiet self-confidence that impressed those with whom he came in contact.

To the many who wondered why he had returned to the comparatively humdrum existence of a county surveyor, he had replied that four years of sand, sun and flies was enough for any man and that he wanted nothing better than to feast his eyes on green fields for a change.

He had not thought it necessary to add that, while he was glad of the experience he had acquired, he had no intention of spending the best part of his life in the tropics.

"It's like this," he had said to his sister, Kitty. "A chap comes to a stage in his life when he feels the urge to settle down, to make new friends and have something to look forward to, instead of knocking about the world."

They had been seated under a spreading chestnut tree in the garden of the Sussex house where Kitty Wainwright lived with her husband. Three years older than her brother, she looked younger, with fair hair and eyes of cornflower blue.

"You are quite right, of course, Peter," she had laughed. "But all the same, I can't quite see you settling down to an office routine in a rural town! You'll become bored to tears within a year unless something spectacular or exciting comes along."

"Perhaps something like that will," he had said, smilingly. "I may even find the girl of my dreams and surprise you all by becoming a tame husband, like your Donald."

"Donald isn't a tame husband by any means, so don't run away with that idea," his sister had said. "Does that mean you have a dream girl, Peter?" she had added probingly.

He had nodded.

"Most men have even if they don't realise it," he had said. "Strange as it may seem, I want a wife and a home of my own, always provided I can find the right girl. There are worse ambitions, I suppose."

"There certainly are," Kitty had said, rising to her feet and looking down at his sprawled length on the grass. "But don't make the mistake of falling in love with somebody just because she happens to fit in with your pipe-dreams. You're not an easy person to understand, Peter, so you'd best make sure before you fall in love."

TWO months after coming to Roxton he met Judy!

Like a great many other rural towns of its size, Roxton was expanding, and a huge new housing estate on the outskirts was beginning to take shape.

It was part of Peter's duties to supervise

the layout of roads and drains, working from the plans that had been passed by the council.

This brought him into contact with the various builders and contractors engaged on the work, and his blue car was often seen parked on the site.

The day he met Judy he was talking to John Laleham, head of the firm of contractors engaged on the scheme. Peter was convinced that if every contractor carried out his part of the project as efficiently as Laleham did, his own work would be halved, and much of the ratepayer's money saved.

"Well, that's that, Mr. Laleham," he said, rolling up the plans he had been studying.

Then he glanced around, watching the concrete mixers at work, the lorries discharging their loads of bricks and window framing.

"I'll let you have that engineer's certificate to-day," he went on. "Then you can make a start on the South Avenue excavations." He nodded towards the scarred hillside, where the new roads were beginning to take shape. "It's funny to think that in a year's time all this will be streets, with buses running along them, and every house a new home!"

"Aye!" Mr. Laleham nodded, offering Peter a cigarette. "Nowadays we tackle a job of this kind like a military operation, what with mechanical grabs an' bull-dozers an' all. Those machines can do the work of twenty men."

Peter was about to go when he saw a small car stop on the new roadway a short distance off.

Seated at the wheel was an attractive-looking girl, dressed in a high-necked green cardigan. Even from that distance he saw that her hair was a reddish-brown.

"By the way, can I give you a lift back to town, Mr. Laleham?" Peter offered, wondering who the girl was, and why he hadn't seen her before in Roxton.

"It's quite all right, thank you, Mr. Strange," said Mr. Laleham, turning towards the car. "My daughter's come to pick me up. You haven't met, have you?"

"No," Peter replied, eagerly, "I haven't had the pleasure."

"Come along now, then," said the other.

As they approached, the girl turned her head to greet her father, her glance going to Peter's face for an instant in polite curiosity.

Mr. Laleham casually waved his hand. "Judy, my dear, this is Mr. Strange, the assistant borough surveyor," he said. "He's new here and doesn't know many people, so you'd better take him under your wing!"

"How do you do, Mr. Strange?" the girl smiled her acknowledgement of the introduction, her voice a warm husky contralto. "I've heard of you, of course. Daddy is always singing your praises."

"That's very kind of him, though quite unjustified, Miss Laleham," Peter reddened slightly. "In my opinion the boot should be on the other foot. I often say that he makes my job an easy one."

"I see, so it's a mutual admiration society," Judy smiled. "I always thought council surveyors were unpleasant people bent on undoing everything my poor father did! No wonder he thinks so highly of you."

"This," said Peter, grinning, "is getting

most embarrassing! Don't you think we should talk of something else, Miss Laleham?"

"I've an appointment with my hair-dresser in half an hour, so there isn't time to talk about anything else," Judy said demurely, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "But I suggest you come to dinner instead, Mr. Strange! Then we'll have the entire evening to talk about anything you wish! Don't you think it would be a good idea, daddy?" and she turned to her father.

"As you like, my dear," he said, preparing to get into the car. "Why not fix an evening now?"

She turned to Peter.

"How would Thursday evening suit, Mr. Strange?" she asked.

"Admirably, thank you, Miss Laleham," he replied, feeling suddenly shy under her gaze. There was something elusive about her, something he could not quite define, so that he did not know whether she was mocking him or not. "What time?" he added.

"Is seven o'clock too early?" she suggested.

"Not at all. I shall look forward to it very much," Peter said.

Judy smiled and pressed the self-starter.

"That's settled, then," she said, with another enigmatic smile. "We shall see you on Thursday evening at seven! Good-bye for now, Mr. Strange."

She drove off, leaving Peter staring after the back of the car, thinking to himself that he had never seen a more beautiful girl.

"HOW is it I haven't seen you before?" Peter asked.

Judy Laleham raised her eyebrows.

"Didn't father tell you? I've been away," she said. "I only got back from a cruise last week. It was quite an event in my young life," she went on laughingly. "I've never been abroad before, you see, so when an aunt of mine suggested going to the Mediterranean with her I simply couldn't refuse."

"Was there any reason why you should refuse?" Peter wanted to know, unable to take his eyes off her face.

Judy pursed her lips and looked out over the quiet garden to where the lights of Roxton gleamed in the valley.

It was after dinner and they were standing on the terrace built out at the back of the house.

A little earlier Mr. Laleham had gone off to his study, where he was engaged with his works manager.

"It's only that I hated leaving daddy for such a long time," she said. "I don't mean to infer that I am indispensable—the housekeeper sees to all that—but he gets rather lonely since mother died two years ago. He wouldn't hear of my not going, though. But then he's like that!"

"I admire your father very much, Miss Laleham," Peter said quietly.

Again he felt clumsy and out of his depth, and wondered what she would think if he told her that she was his dream girl come to life; that he had fallen hopelessly in love with her the moment they had been introduced.

Fortunately he got hold of himself in time and listened politely to what she was saying, content with the sound of her voice even though the words themselves were unimportant.

"My father is someone you *can* admire," she said, speaking with feeling. "I don't know if he has told you, but he started in quite a small way when he was a young man and has built up the firm from next to nothing. Now he employs well over five hundred people! Some of them, like Mr. Weekes, the works manager, have been with Daddy for over twenty-five years."

"We didn't always live in a big house like this one," she went on, when Peter nodded. "When I was a little girl we had a three-roomed cottage at the back of the town. Daddy built this house as a present for mother. She had always wanted to live on Roxton Heights and have a big garden. As I say, she died soon after we came here."

"I'm sorry," he said, and at the sudden ring of sincerity in his voice Judy glanced at him quickly. Then—

"Let's go in—it's getting chilly out here," she said. "I daresay Daddy won't be long. In the meantime, would you like some music?"

An hour later Peter rose to go. For the greater part of that time he had had Judy to himself and had made the most of his opportunities.

Their conversation had ranged over a variety of subjects, in the course of which they had discovered they possessed a great deal in common; an appreciation of good music and a liking for animals.

They had discussed painting and art, and wrangled amiably over the rival merits of the Grieg Piano Concerto in A and the Beethoven third, Peter maintaining that Grieg was essentially a miniaturist and not to be classed along with such giants of the musical world as Wagner and Beethoven.

"Oh, I can't argue with you," Judy had surrendered, laughing. "You apparently know far more about it than I do. But I know what I like, even if I don't know why I like it."

It was then that Peter had noticed the silver-framed portrait on top of the glass-cabinet. It was that of a dark-haired young man with a somewhat serious, almost an intense expression, wearing the uniform of the R.A.F.

On his left breast were the "wings" of a pilot and some medal ribbons, though as the picture was not coloured, Peter could not tell what they were.

"A friend of yours?" he had asked, picking up the portrait and looking intently at the face.

Quite without realising it he had reached the stage when the mere fact that the silver frame occupied so prominent a place in the room invested the unknown young airman with all the dangerous attributes of a rival.

Judy had hesitated a bare second, a look of discomfort coming into her eyes.

Then—
"That's Squadron-Leader Derek Carr," she had said, taking the picture and replacing it on the cabinet. "At the moment he's serving in Malaya. We are to be married when he comes home!"

PETER put the car away in the garage, and let himself into his flat above a block of offices in the High Street.

He did not attempt to evade the issue which stared him so obviously in the face. He was in love with a girl who was engaged to another man, one who had an even greater claim to her consideration than he could ever hope to possess.

Though not that that mattered, he told himself rather cynically, switching on the light in the little bedroom.

The absence of the engagement ring that would have prepared him for the shock of learning that he was too late on the scene, was easily explained. Derek Carr had been ordered abroad soon after Judy's mother had been laid to rest and she was still in

mourning.

They had decided, therefore, not to announce their engagement, so only a few of their closest friends knew. Derek had given Judy a signet ring, but, she had explained, she did not wear it for the reason she had told him.

"It doesn't make any difference, you see," she had ended a little lamely.

She had said this almost as if she were feeling guilty about something.

Now he stood looking out of the window.

On the mantelpiece a clock ticked away, its tiny sound becoming merged with others—the whine of a lorry going down the hill, the sharp whistle of a goods train negotiating the maze of tracks at Roxton Junction.

In some queer way they seemed unreal to Peter, standing there, as if he did not really belong to this quiet country place, their unreality made all the more poignant by the white roof-tops.

Yet he seemed to know, with a queer kind of fatalism, that despite the obstacles in their path, he and Judy Laleham had been destined to meet.

IN the weeks that followed, the well-known adage "All's fair in love and war" did not consciously come into Peter's mind, but he acted as if it had.

During his university days he had avoided the kind of emotional entanglement in which so many of his friends became so hopelessly involved, with the result that, when he finally did fall in love, he did so in the whole-hearted fashion of a man who has kept his ideals bright and free from stain.

It was, in fact, like the bursting of a dam, the pent-up forces that he had kept so rigidly in check spilling over like floodwaters released from long confinement.

From there it was but a short step to arguing that he was under no obligation to deny himself the pleasure of Judy's company so long as she was willing to share it with him. Thus, they drifted into friendship, completely unmindful of the dangers and pitfalls that lay ahead.

But in a small town like Roxton it was impossible to keep their association secret, even had they wished to do so.

Judy came in for a good deal of friendly chaff, and it became an understood thing that both at the tennis club, and amongst their own "set" they should be paired off. It was always "Oh, Peter and Judy will do that" and "Judy will come with Peter, of course".

They went for long walks on Sundays and covered miles of the Sussex Downs, Peter telling her all about the places he had seen in his travels.

And during all this time never once was Derek Carr mentioned.

Without being aware of it, Judy's fiancé had become relegated to the background, the tender blossoming of their love becoming like the half remembered figment of a dream.

Judy wrote dutifully to him each week, telling all she did, but deep in her heart she knew that the old, carefree note was missing, that her words were mere echoes of something that had passed and gone.

Then, one afternoon when they had climbed the seven hundred foot hump which, like a stranded whale, brooded over the famous dyke running south towards the River Arun, Peter asked her abruptly why she had become engaged.

They were seated on a grassy mound, a blue sky speckled with fleecy clouds high above them.

She turned her head, giving him a half resentful, half startled glance.

"What a curious thing to ask, Peter,"

she said a little edgily. "There is generally only one reason why one gets engaged to somebody, surely?"

"You mean you imagined you were in love, I suppose, Judy?"

There was a moment of uneasy silence, and for a brief moment of time Judy forgot Peter and everything that went to make up the present.

She went back with Derek to the bank of the river that ran below the town, feeling again the aching sense of misery that had been hers as he had held her hands tightly between his own.

It was good-bye, he had told her. He must fly to Malaya in four days' time with other replacement pilots. There was no time for anything—orders had come suddenly and he had been given forty-eight hours leave, no more.

Up to then she and Derek had taken each other very much for granted. But with the moment of parting hanging over them, crowding them brutally to their hour, she had stepped over the dividing line between girlhood and womanhood, knowing and understanding his need.

She had stammered something incoherent—something that even at this distance of time did not make sense. She only knew that she had torn down the last artifice her courage a bright flame between them.

Then it had been terribly important—the only thing that had mattered—but looking back on it all now she owned that they had been carried away by emotions that had their roots in mere liking rather than in anything more enduring.

For a long time afterwards she had worried in secret, and her worry had taken toll of her nerves, making her thin and pale.

To her father it had seemed that she was grieving for Derek, so that when her aunt had suggested a Mediterranean cruise, he had urged the girl to go. Now that she had returned life seemed to have slid back into its proper place again, with all that had happened then no more real than the hazy memory of a film seen long ago.

She looked down at her hands, saw they were trembling and knew that Peter had seen also.

"I *am* in love with Derek," she said abruptly, in a queer, hurt-tone. "One doesn't imagine things like that. But I would rather not talk about it if you don't mind, Peter."

He shrugged.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to be impertinent. Perhaps, if you were in my shoes, you would wonder, too. But let's forget it. It's time we started back."

It was easy enough to say forget it, Judy thought wearily, as she prepared for bed that night. Whether Peter's question had been prompted by forces he could not control, so that he had been trapped into a voluntary admission, or whether it had been deliberately planned to bring things into the open, she could not quite decide.

The truth was, she admitted heavily, she had not treated him fairly. She should have seen, right from the beginning, that Peter was falling in love with her and taken steps to prevent the affair from reaching its present stage.

Instead, she had been grateful for his friendship, finding in his quiet understanding an outlet for her loneliness.

She kicked off a shoe and sat on the edge of her bed, staring moodily down at it. What was to be the outcome of it all? she wondered. Where would it end?

During the past weeks Peter had become life size in proportion to the way Derek's image had shrunk in her consciousness. Often she wondered if the attraction was

just liking or whether it went deeper?

An acid bitterness swept over her. If Derek had not been ordered abroad, as he had been, they might have been happily married by now, and she might never have heard of Peter.

But as it was, her emotions were made all the more intense and poignant by a loneliness that was born of a need she as yet scarcely understood.

A QUESTION OF GUILT

FOR the rest of the week they did not meet. Peter was busy, she knew, and they had made no arrangements to go anywhere.

Then, after lunch on Saturday, he drove up to the house and came into the garden, where she was picking some roses for the sitting-room.

She greeted him casually, hoping that he would not notice the shadows she had seen under her eyes in the mirror that morning.

Yet beneath her manner there was a rising excitement that brought a flush to her cheeks. She knew that a crisis was at hand and that no attempt at evasion on her part would ward it off.

"It's such a glorious afternoon that I thought we might drive as far as Tryford Down and have tea at that place we went to once before," Peter said. "I don't know about you but I'm not in the mood for tennis."

Judy thought of the tennis club, with its courts set below the hill on which Roxford Castle was built, with the ruins of the ancient Priory on the other side. There would be the usual crowd there, squabbling amiably over the games, the girls in white shorts, the men in flannels. And she knew, quite suddenly, what they were all thinking and, possibly, saying as well, and that she could not face them at the moment.

"All right, Peter," she nodded, a trifle breathlessly. "If you don't mind waiting a few minutes I'll go and change."

She reappeared in less than five minutes wearing a pleated skirt and jumper and carrying a green head-scarf.

"You look good enough to eat, you know," he smiled, as he opened the door of the car for her.

Judy laughed happily. She was playing with fire, but a sudden recklessness swept over her and carried her along. In some queer way she could not understand, the sense of guilt which had dwelt with her all the week was transformed magically into an enchanted feeling of being more alive than she had ever been before, so that everything seemed to possess more colour, the fields a richer green, the sky a deeper blue.

They left the car on the edge of the Downs and walked a little way along the slope. The gorse lay in patches everywhere, and the short, springy turf was like a deep pile carpet.

In front the valley stretched out before them, patterned by a checkerboard of fields and hedges. Nearby was a path which led to a sheltered spot where they had sat once before.

When they reached it Judy paused and gazed around.

"I think this is the loveliest view in Sussex, don't you?" she said musingly.

When he did not answer she turned and saw that he was watching, not the view, but her.

For a moment neither spoke, their eyes locked in a gaze which said all that they might not put into words. In his eyes was a light she had never seen before.

"Judy!" he murmured tenderly. Just that.

She looked at him speechlessly her lips trembling.

Above a seagull flew high in the sky, but neither saw it. They were alone in a golden world of their own creating, with nothing to keep them apart save the misty recollection of an episode that was ended.

Then, with a sob, she found herself in his arms, felt the tautness of his muscles as he drew her close, felt the touch of his lips on hers.

IT was very quiet in the big sitting-room, with its deep chairs and the shaded lights intensifying the shadows in the corners. The nights were growing chilly and a low fire burned in the hearth, the flames reflecting the polished mahogany of the glass cabinet against which Peter was standing.

He stared at Judy, his mouth a thin line.

"I don't get it," he sighed bewilderedly. "I love you. I've never said that to anyone else in my life and it oughtn't to be necessary to say it to you. I think you've known that right from the start, for I've never tried to hide the fact."

"Oh, I know, Peter," Judy murmured sorrowfully. "But—"

"Look!" he interrupted firmly. "I've never felt like this before and neither, I expect, have you—in spite of Derek Carr and all his works! I want to marry you, Judy darling."

She stood a little away, conscious of a dull ache inside her, yet she had a quiet dignity that armoured her against anything he might say. Her eyes met his with a courage that came near to shaming his impetuosity; only her mouth was poignant and unhappy.

She had known from the beginning, he had said. Well, not quite from the beginning, perhaps, but for a long time. By then it was too late, caught up as she had been in that mystical web of enchantment. But it was not too late to draw back now. Even in the midst of the shimmering wonder of Peter's love she had remembered Derek—Derek, who was thousands of miles away and who believed and trusted her!

Now the hardest part of it all was to make Peter understand, for to his way of thinking there was no problem at all.

They loved each other and so nothing else mattered. He wanted her to write to Derek and tell him the truth—all of it, if she liked, though he argued that it would be sufficient to say that she had fallen in love with someone else and wanted her freedom. Then, after a suitable interval, they could announce their own engagement and start thinking of wedding plans.

"It—it's no good, Peter," she said finally, brushing a hand wearily across her eyes. "I can't let Derek down like that. He's out there in Malaya, facing danger and discomfort, and all the time—"

"Oh, rot!" Peter said angrily, his face pale. "That sort of sentiment went out long ago. You're not going to tell me that after what we have been to each other you're going through with this farce of an engagement to him. Besides, how is that going to square up with your conscience? You don't propose to tell him, do you?"

With a deep sigh Judy turned away, making a little hopeless gesture.

It was nearly a fortnight since that magic afternoon on Tryford Down, when she had plumbed the depths and scaled the topmost pinnacles of feeling at one and the same time.

In the interval she had seen Peter about three times, each meeting becoming a

misery of conflict which separated them by an ever growing gulf of misunderstanding and bitterness.

"I—I'm sorry," she said, speaking with a curious hesitancy that betrayed her more than any words could have done. "I—I'm not going to pretend that—that it is easy to send you away, but—I must. I—I can't let Derek down. All this time he has been planning for the day that he and I can be married."

"Then, then—" he began.

"Oh, we were mad, Peter," she cried stormily, trying to control her trembling lips. "But—but that doesn't mean we have to go on being mad. Please—please—don't make things harder for me than they are."

"You're the one who's making things harder," he accused. "Good heavens girl, the situation isn't an unusual one—it's happened before! If Derek Carr is half the man you say he is he won't expect you to marry him when he learns that you are not in love with him any more. Another thing! How long do you imagine it will be before he finds out for himself what the position is? There are plenty of people who'll tell him if you don't!"

She bowed her head in her hands. It would be so easy to surrender to the longing which beset her, but she knew that if she did so she could never look herself in the face again. For it would mean cold-bloodedly betraying the man who trusted her, and a love that had its roots in treachery must inevitably wither and die.

"It's no use, Peter," she repeated again, speaking with the weak obstinacy of a child. "I—"

"Judy darling, listen to me." He took a stride towards her and gripped her wrists, turning her so that she had to face him. "You've got to get wise to yourself, my dearest. Don't you realise, knowing what we mean to each other, that you could never hope to get away with the sham a marriage to Derek Carr would be?"

Judy felt the hot colour creep up into her cheeks. It wasn't necessary for him to draw a diagram. She knew exactly what he meant.

Yet, pulling at her heart-strings was memory. The memory of Derek's eyes when he had kissed her good-bye at Waterloo, his promise to come safely back to her, the feel of his hands when he had cupped her face between his palms and, kissing her had said: "Good-bye, Judy darling! You are everything to me—and that means life itself!"

Only she could understand the remorse that must be hers if she were to attempt to climb to happiness on the ruins of his hopes!

Sick at heart, she whispered:

"Oh, Peter, why did all this have to happen? It seems so cruel, so utterly unfair! I would give anything to be able to answer you as you want, but—but I can't! Please try to understand."

He gazed searchingly at her for a moment, gripped by a sense of futility that was new to him.

Logic meant nothing to a girl situated as she was situated, he reflected bitterly. At whatever cost to herself, she was prepared to honour her bond, and in doing so, sacrifice both of them on the altar of another's need. That in the end she might—almost certainly would—defeat her own object was something she could not see. But when she did see, it would be too late.

He hesitated a moment then sighed.

"I'm not going to quarrel with you, Judy," he said, "but it strikes me that the whole thing is a bit one-sided. It's

Derek Carr all the time—you mustn't let him down—you must marry him whether you love him or not just because you said you would. Well, that's all right as far as it goes but where do I come in? Don't you owe something to me and yourself as well as to Carr? It's tough on him, I daresay, but that's the luck of the game." "You forget—I gave Derek my word," she said dully. "He has a right to expect me to keep it."

"He has no right to expect anything of the kind," Peter retorted crossly. "It isn't your fault if you find out you've made a mistake. Or have you?"

Judy flinched.

"Wh-what do you mean?" she stammered, going white.

"What I say!"

The lamp cast his shadow on the wall so that it seemed to hand over her, poised and watchful.

A spasm of fear wrenched at her heart, as he went on accusingly.

"You're like all the rest—you think you can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds—anything so long as you have a good time. That's it, isn't it?"

"It's not. Oh, it's not, Peter. You know that isn't true." Tears of humiliation stung her eyelids, and she wrung her hands. "If—if that's what you think of me then you'd better go."

"I think I had." He went to the door and jerked it open. Then he looked at her for a long moment, his eyes sombre. "One day you'll wake up and realise just what you've done. Anyhow, I won't bother you again. Good-bye."

He was gone almost before she realised it. She heard the slam of the front door, followed by the sound of his footsteps on the path. Then, discovering that she was shaking, sat down suddenly on the nearest chair, her hands clasped in her lap.

The house was unnaturally quiet. Her father had gone to a council meeting and would not be back until late and the housekeeper was out, too. She sat staring into space, remembering Peter's last words to her, his curt "Good-bye".

Getting up at last she went slowly over to the fireplace, stooping to put another log on the flames.

There was a box of cigarettes on the mantelpiece and, although she seldom smoked, she took one and lit a spill at the fire. Her fingers were trembling so much that she had difficulty in keeping the flame steady long enough to light the cigarette.

Then she sat down again, and stared into the fire, tears of humiliation and bitter anguish stealing down her cheeks.

THE airmail letter lying on her plate was the first thing Judy saw when she came downstairs the following morning, after an almost sleepless night.

Her father glanced up from his paper and greeted her with a smile.

"That's from Derek by the looks of it," he said. "Let me see, it's some time since he last wrote, isn't it?"

"No, I heard a week ago," she answered, seating herself at the table and reaching for the coffee pot. "He said that he was on special duty dropping surrender leaflets on to the terrorists, if you remember."

"So he did." Mr. Laleham nodded. "Time goes by so quickly these days that one loses track. The next thing you know Derek will be home again and you'll be thinking of getting married! I suppose," he added, "the best wedding present I can give you would be to build you a house!"

"That would be lovely, father," she murmured trying to sound interested.

There was a little silence while she

scanned the closely written sheets, pausing as she did so to take an occasional sip of coffee.

Presently she looked up, her cheeks flushed.

"It's strange you should have said what you did about Derek coming home," she said. "That's just what he is doing. He hopes to be here in about two weeks time!"

"That's good news, my dear," her father returned, laying aside his paper. "He's quite well, I hope?"

"He doesn't say very much," Judy answered, a puzzled note creeping into her voice. "Apparently there isn't any need to keep so many squadrons out there now so he and some of the others are coming back."

"Well, that's all to the good," nodded Mr. Laleham, getting to his feet. He paused to fold his table napkin. "I suppose he hasn't said anything about his plans?"

"Plans?" Judy questioned.

"What he proposes to do," her father replied. "Is he staying in the service or coming out? As I have said more than once, there will always be a place for him in the firm if he wants it."

Judy looked at him with tears of gratitude in her eyes.

"Thank you, father," she said throatily. "I think it's wonderful of you to say that. Derek does, too, but he may want to stay on in the R.A.F. He's very keen on flying—or was."

"Well, if his mind's set on it, it's not much use trying to make him do something else," said Mr. Laleham philosophically. "Still, I'd like to have him with me so that he can learn the business. There'll be no one to carry on when I'm due to retire. Still, maybe I'll have a grandson," he added, with a chuckle.

Judy lowered her eyes.

"You're looking much too far ahead, father," she flushed. "We aren't married yet."

"Well, you soon will be, if I know anything of young men," said her father.

He patted her shoulder and went out, humming the Wedding March under his breath.

THE day passed with exasperating slowness. Judy went shopping during the morning, and afterwards gathered some late autumn flowers for the house.

Then, while she waited for her father to come in for lunch, she put a record on the radiogram, and listened to the third movement of a Beethoven concerto.

She felt utterly wretched and restless, eating scarcely anything for lunch, so that her father remarked on her loss of appetite.

"This won't do, you know," he said half-sternly. "Derek will have something to say when he returns if you go to meet him looking like a bean-stick! Why don't you let Dr. Holland have a look at you? Maybe you want a tonic?"

Judy murmured something non-committal and changed the subject.

Strange and disturbing emotions chased each other through her troubled mind, so that nothing seemed real any more. Even her father's personality was withheld from her, so that it seemed they were no longer in tune with each other's thoughts and feelings, as they had always been.

Once, in answer to a remark, she looked up with a start, guiltily aware of having forgotten his presence, too involved in her own thoughts to take in what he was saying.

She went for a long walk after lunch, taking the path which led in the opposite direction from Tryford Down. There was a small hill which she climbed and sat on a wooden bench at the top, her hands clasped

round her knees.

In the distance she could see part of the housing estate and a blue car speeding along the new roadway. Peter's car was blue and she wondered if he were thinking of her.

Her eyes filled, but she blinked the tears back angrily. Crying for the moon did not help. What had happened was no more than had happened to many other girls, all through the ages.

She laughed drearily. She had been so sure of herself, so sure of Derek's love for her. At the time it had seemed the only thing in life. Well, pride went before a fall, they said, and she had proved the truth of the old saying.

If only she could make Peter understand how she felt about it all.

From his point of view her conduct must seem inexplicable. To go to the lengths she had gone, to allow herself to be swept off her feet by a gust of emotion that broke through her pitiful defences as if they were not there, could only be explained in terms of a love that brooked no denial.

Yet she had sent him empty away, adding the humiliation of failure to the frustration and anger her dogged obstinacy had aroused.

With a sigh she got up after sitting there for some time. The blue car had disappeared; it might not have been Peter's in any case.

She started off back to the house, her problem no nearer a solution than when she had set out.

From Peter's way of looking at things, no doubt, either what had happened was all important; in which case she had no alternative but to tell Derek the truth.

On the other hand, if it were not, then there was no justification for it so that Peter would have every right to despise her, which by now, he probably did.

There was another council meeting that night, at which her father had to be present, so that it was unnecessary to think an excuse to go out. She waited till nine o'clock, then she changed into a skirt and jumper and put on a three-quarter length swagger coat. It was the coat she had been wearing the day she and Peter had met, she remembered, with a little pang.

WHEN she called on him, Peter was alone, wearing an old sports jacket with leather elbow patches.

As soon as he opened the door of his flat, and saw her standing there, his face changed. Judy had caught a glimpse of his expression before it had become a polite mask of enquiry, however: it looked tired, strained and unhappy.

"Judy! Whatever brings you here at this time of night?"

"I—I had to see you, Peter," she answered a little tensely. "May I come in?"

"Of course," he said, stepping aside. "The place is in a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. Usually I go out for supper but to-night I made myself some tea and sandwiches. I'm working on the report for the council about the new layout in Shannon Road."

She nodded, looking around with a kind of bleak interest, knowing that it was wrong of her to come. The flat was simply furnished, with an electric fire, one bar of which was red. There were some comfortable chairs, a bookcase and a radio set, and in the window a large table covered with blue prints, architect's drawings and sheets of scribbled figures. An empty cup and saucer were pushed to one side and the ash-tray was half-filled with cigarette butts.

"Won't you sit down?" he invited, with a trace of embarrassment. "I can get you some tea if you like. That's the kitchenette through there."

She shook her head, her shaking hands thrust deep into her coat pockets. There

was something withdrawn, unfathomable about her that caused him to look at her in a puzzled manner.

"Would you like a cigarette?" he enquired, obviously ill at ease and feeling his way.

He proffered his case, but again Judy shook her head. He took and lit a cigarette for himself, his actions a cover for his thoughts. Then—

"I don't flatter myself you've come at this hour in order to tell me you've changed your mind about things, my dear Judy," he remarked with polite sarcasm. "Obviously, there's something else! What is it?"

"Derek is on his way home," she said quietly.

"Really? How nice!" he said. There was no mistaking the sarcasm this time. "What do you want me to do? Arrange with the council to string a banner across the High Street with 'Welcome to Roxton' along it? I believe, at a pinch, we might even manage the town band."

She flushed warmly and her eyes sparkled with anger.

"That's not fair," she said scornfully. "You know perfectly well why I came to tell you."

He stared at her for a moment, then laughed.

"Quite right, I do," he said brutally. "You're in love with this fellow Carr, aren't you? It isn't just a passing infatuation, after all. And so you're scared stiff in case he finds out about us."

She stood looking at him, very still and withdrawn, armoured by something he could not understand against anything he might say. Only her mouth betrayed her: it was taut and very unhappy.

"I'm not in the least bit scared, Peter," she said. "I intend to tell Derek everything, you see, so I thought it was only fair to warn you."

"That doesn't answer my question," he said.

"I should have thought that it did," she replied, with a faint shrug. "Anyway, what does it matter? I've been a fool and for that I blame no one but myself. I don't know what attitude Derek will take up but the whole thing is going to be very awkward, isn't it?"

Faint amusement crossed his features for a moment. What he had expected when he saw her standing on the threshold when he answered her ring, Judy could not have said: it was obvious, however, that he had not expected anything like this.

He said rather scornfully—

"Your solicitude for my welfare is quite touching, my dear girl, but it isn't necessary. As far as I am concerned your precious fiancé can do what he likes!"

"I see," she said, in a tight little voice, her shoulders drooping. "I'm sorry. Evidently I have been making—another mistake."

He took a stride forward and seized her by the shoulder.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded curtly, flinging away his half smoked cigarette. "If I remember correctly, you told me very plainly where I got off the last time we discussed this matter, so why should you think I am interested?"

She looked steadily at him, a flicker of something that might have been compassion or contempt, coming into her eyes.

"You said you loved me, Peter. Because of that I was—sorry. I would have given anything for it not to have happened, but as it did—" She broke off, her lip trembling.

He laughed bitterly.

"I don't know what you hoped to gain by coming here," he said. "But you can take this for your comfort! I despise myself for being a cad and a fool! I deliberately

blinded myself to what was happening when all you cared about was having another scalp to add to your collection! That's all it was, wasn't it?"

"That's not fair, Peter!" she denied weakly. "It isn't true, either."

"It is true and you know it," he said derisively. "I daresay if you were honest enough to admit it, your sole reason for coming here to-night was to ensure that I didn't spill the beans, as far as Derek Carr is concerned. No doubt you imagined that by saying you intended to tell him what happened you would forestall anything I might have intended to do."

She could feel his triumph over her discomfiture. Feel it and resent it. She looked up. Her hands were shaking and there were tiny spots of perspiration on his temples.

"If it gives you any satisfaction to think those things I can't stop you, Peter," she said quietly. "But they aren't true, in spite of what you say. I came because I didn't think it would be fair to tell Derek what I must tell him without you knowing first. I'm not such a rotter as all that!" She sighed deeply. "I—I'm terribly sorry about it all, Peter. I can't tell you *how* sorry."

"Oh, keep your beastly pity," he retorted, in a voice shaking with suppressed anger. "Keep it with all the rest of the shams and hypocrisies you surround yourself with! Go on cheating yourself, my dear girl, and one of these days you'll find that it's you who has been cheated!"

"Really!" she exclaimed, shocked by his changed manner. "Perhaps when you have had time to think it all over you will apologise. Until then—"

"Why should I apologise?" he demanded hotly. "Is it something to be ashamed of Or does the fact that I'm fool enough to want you still offend your delicate susceptibilities? Do you think I *want* it that way? Heavens, no! But I can't help it any more than I can help wanting food and drink!" He stared at her from eyes that were suddenly haunted.

"Oh, Peter!" she said softly, her heart wrung with sudden pity. "I—"

It was as if her words and gesture touched off a hidden spring. Before she could take a backward step she was in his arms, trapped even though his sudden violence aroused no answering fire in her. She went cold and twisted her head away, but she was unable to avoid his kiss.

But at the touch of his lips she shivered. "Peter! Let me go! If—if you don't I shall hate you!"

For a moment she thought he would pay no heed, then he released her, and they stood facing each other like enemies.

But only for a moment. He looked defeated, the anger gone from his eyes, and there was a despair about him that reached out and made itself felt.

All Judy felt that afternoon on Tryford Down welled up again in a sudden wave of tenderness and pity. She longed to comfort him but she knew that he was beyond reach of any comfort she could give.

He raised his head at last.

"You may hate me if you like," he said dully. "You probably will in time because, being a woman, you'll think I've torn down something you valued. Perhaps I have. But one day you'll understand. That will be the day when you learn what it is to *really* love someone."

TEN minutes later Judy walked rapidly through the deserted, silent streets, her head held high, thinking how bright the stars seemed to-night.

Long ago Derek had said something which came back to her now. They had been standing at the bottom of the garden, wrapped in an intimacy that was born of

the night and of their awareness to each other.

"You only really *see* the stars when the night is quite dark."

It was true. She looked up at them now, serene and remote in their inaccessibility. *Per ardua ad astra*—the motto of the R.A.F. It symbolised all that men like Derek did and felt, riding alone above the sleeping jungle on their dangerous missions.

Men like Derek carried their faith with them, so that they were fortified against danger and terror. Because of that she had to wait, though every moment that she waited was an added terror.

To write to him was out of the question. He might not get the letter, but if he did—she shuddered.

She could imagine the eagerness with which he would open it, imagine the stare of incredulity that would gradually change to horror and despair as he tried to take in the sense of what she had written—her confession. Anything but that, she told herself despairingly.

There was a light on in the study when she reached the house and she knew that her father had returned.

She went in and entered the long sitting-room, switching on the lamp over the mantelpiece as she did so.

She picked up the photograph that had first attracted Peter's attention and, holding it in her hand, studied it critically. Derek's eyes seemed to smile at her from out of the frame and there was that funny little whimsical curl of his lips that told her he would understand.

"Dearest," she whispered, "please try to forgive me! I was mad, I think—completely and utterly mad—but I know now that I never loved Peter as I love you! At least I won't deceive you. Better nothing at all than a fool's paradise, but if you will give me another chance I will make up to you for all my weakness and folly."

Her father was in his study, a pleasant, book-lined room at the side of the house. He looked up from a letter he was writing and smiled as she came in.

"Hullo, my dear," he said. "Been out for a walk?"

"Yes," she said, hating the need to be evasive. "It was such a lovely night I felt a blow would do me good. Have you been in long?"

She saw his eyes go to the clock and with a queer sense of shock she saw that it was now after eleven.

"I've been in quite a time," Mr. Laleham said quietly. "To tell you the truth, I was beginning to get a bit anxious." He leaned back in his chair, holding a pencil between the fingers of his two hands, turning it round and round so that the light from the reading lamp on the desk caused little reflections to dance along the polished surface. Then he said abruptly; "What were you doing in Peter Strange's flat, Judy?"

She went crimson and then white as she stared at him without speaking.

When at last she found her voice all she could say was: "How—how did you know, father?"

"Samuel Teddy told me," he answered a trifle heavily. "His office is just opposite, as you know, and he called back there to get some papers he had forgotten to take to the council meeting. He saw you go in and told me. You know what he's like?"

"Naturally, he would think the worst," said Judy bitterly.

The man her father had mentioned was in business as an estate agent and had been elected to the council the previous year. He had two daughters, both plain and unmarried, and when Peter first came to Roxton he had been showered with invitations

to tea and dinner at Mr. Teddy's home. But Peter had failed to rise to the bait so temptingly displayed, with the result that there was no love lost between him and the older man.

Mr. Laleham looked severe.

"I'm not concerned with what Samuel Teddy thinks," he remarked, with a near approach to curtness. "But there are certain rules of conduct one has to obey—especially in a small town like Roxton—or become a target for ill-natured gossip. I'm not a betting man, but if I were I would wager that the news that you went to Peter's flat this evening and, apparently stayed there for some considerable time, will be all over the place to-morrow. Other considerations apart, my dear, what is Derek going to think?"

Judy could have laughed at the irony of it all had she not been so close to tears. She walked to the window and pulling the curtain aside, stood looking out, her back to the room. If only she had not allowed her loneliness to make her an easy prey for her own emotions; if she had never been so foolishly attracted to Peter; never been guilty of losing her head, she would have been looking forward to Derek's return with joy instead of dread. If—if—if—

She dropped the curtain into place and turned to face her father.

"I shall tell Derek myself. About Peter, I mean," she said. "That's why I went to his flat to-night. I had to tell him what I intended, you see."

Slowly her father rose to his feet.

"Does that mean there is something to tell him?" he asked heavily.

"Yes," she said. She flung out a hand in a little gesture of appeal. "I—I'm sorry, father. I don't expect you to understand—why should you? Sometimes,"—she sighed—"I don't think I understand myself!"

It was obvious that her father had had a shock and Judy felt a little rush of pity sweep through her. If she could have spared him she would have done so, but it had been taken out of her hands.

"Are you in love with Peter Strange?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"No, father," she said, in a hollow voice. "I thought—for a time—that I was, I suppose. I don't honestly know. It—it's all so difficult."

"Difficult?" he repeated. "There should be no difficulty in choosing between right and wrong, my dear. Surely you realised where it would lead you? I could understand it if you were in love with the young man, but as it is—"

He broke off abruptly, unable to find words to express his bitterness.

"I don't know what to say," he presently continued, taking a pace up and down. "As far as Peter Strange is concerned, I can't express my condemnation of his conduct too strongly. He—"

"Peter isn't to blame," she interrupted, standing very still and straight. "He's in love with me—he wants to marry me. Derek isn't here and so I—" Her voice trailed off.

Without warning her control snapped, and she sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands, sobs racking her young body.

Her father stood irresolute for a moment. He had seen her weep before, but never like this. There was something hopelessly abandoned about her grief that left him feeling more helpless than he had ever done in his life before.

He crossed to her side and going down on one knee, put an arm round her shoulder.

"My dear child, please don't cry like that," he murmured. "You made a mistake, that's all, but as long as you know it was a mistake, everything will be all right. Derek can be trusted to understand, I'm sure of

that. He will forgive you—freely—as I do! Now dry your eyes and we'll say no more about it. As for Peter Strange, I'll have a few words with him to-morrow. Quite obviously he can't stay in Roxton!"

Judy lifted her head and stared at her father in something like horror.

"Oh, you can't do that, father!" she gasped. "It—it isn't Peter's fault—I've told you so. You can't expect him to throw up his job and go away just because I've been a fool. Please! You must promise me not to say anything to him!"

"Very well," he said, after a little pause. "If that is how you feel about it I have nothing more to say. Perhaps it won't be necessary. But I know that if I stood in Peter Strange's shoes I would take the obvious course and leave the district."

THE ONE WHO CAME BACK

THE morning Derek Carr was due to arrive Judy awoke with a splitting headache. She had scarcely slept all night, drifting into a waking doze as the sky turned pale in the east, and as she got out of bed she felt a deathly lethargy steal through her, as if she had been ill for weeks.

Her father was in the breakfast-room when she arrived downstairs and greeted her with a slightly anxious glance, as if trying to read into her expression something of his own doubts and fears. Derek had wired the previous day saying what time his train would arrive and Judy had made arrangements to meet him at Roxton Junction.

He was to stay with them for a few days, a room having been got ready for him.

"You'll take the car, of course," Mr. Laleham said, when they were seated. "I won't be needing it this afternoon in any case, but if I did I could use the office car. You don't know how long Derek has got in the way of leave, I suppose?"

She shook her head, a little frown of concentration puckering her brows.

"He didn't say, father," she murmured, pouring out the coffee and passing him a cup. "He wrote very hurriedly from the airport when he landed and said that he hoped to be free to come down before the week-end. He wouldn't know then what his movements were."

"Quite so."

Her father said nothing further and Judy was glad. Her nerves were stretched to breaking point and she felt that it would take very little to make her panic.

Lying in bed, watching the twinkling stars against the black canopy of the sky, she had fought and resisted temptation. Her secret was safe as far as her father was concerned, however much he might disapprove of her conduct, not, for that matter, would he ever know whether she told Derek or not. He wouldn't ask her, that was certain.

But she could not marry Derek without being honest with him. If he refused to forgive her—well—that would be the end of everything.

She had seen nothing of Peter in the past fortnight and had scarcely expected to do so. But to be on the safe side she had avoided the places where she might run into him. For she had now reached the stage where she felt that nothing mattered any more except to put herself right with Derek.

It was a relief when at last it was time to go to meet the train. Dressing carefully, she wore a pleated skirt and sweater, with a finger-tip length coat and a close fitting velvet hat.

Her eyes softened by fatigue, looked unnaturally large in the pale features which she

saw in the mirror and she hesitated wondering whether to add a dash of colour or not. But finally she decided against it, and gathering up her bag and gloves, went downstairs to the car.

She arrived at the Junction ten minutes early and parked the car in the station approach.

The town's War Memorial had been erected almost opposite, a tall, granite column set in a little square of green.

Judy walked across to it, impelled by some queer impulse to look at the disconsolate wreaths of red poppies lying at its foot, wondering what agonies of grief they represented, what emptiness and desolation.

Life, surely, was not meant to be like that. It was meant to be rich and full, not ugly and purposeless.

One of the cards on the wreaths still bore a name, smudged by successive rains. Or was it tears? Tears for the hope, the promise, the beauty that had gone unfulfilled? What had she been like, the girl who had written on that card? Had she been preparing herself for his return—waiting, praying, trying to hold back the tears, clinging to his brave prophecy that he would come safely through? Then had come a telegram—now a wreath of poppies.

A signal fell with a crash and Judy turned, walking quickly into the station. Far down the line an engine whistled and then she saw the express curving round the bend in the rails, looming larger and larger as it approached the platform. When it stopped half a dozen passengers alighted.

The last of them was Derek!

He saw her at the same time and smiled. Judy felt her heart pounding and the colour rose to her cheeks.

The next moment she was in his arms half laughing, half crying, feeling the roughness of his R.A.F. jacket against her cheek.

Presently she held him off from her a little, eyeing him critically, noting the tautness of him, the pallor beneath his tan.

"My dear," she murmured unsteadily, "what have they done to you? You're as thin as a rake!"

"It's nothing that good English air and food won't cure in a very short time, my darling," he said, with a whimsical smile. "Between you and me I crashed my plane in the jungle during a leaflet dropping operation and had rather a thin time until I was picked up again. The result was a medical board and orders to come home."

"But you never told me, Derek," she said reproachfully. "Still, never mind you'll soon get fit again now that you are back. How long have you got?"

"The usual twenty-eight days," he replied. "After that I'm due for another medical board. What happens then is anyone's guess. I may get posted to a home service squadron or I might get flung out on my ear. It all depends on the board's findings."

"Well, come along, then," she said happily. "I've got the car outside."

He picked up the grip and suitcase he had lifted down from the train and followed her to the barrier. His luggage stowed in the back of the car, he got in beside her and leaned back with a sigh.

"This is something like," he said appreciatively, as they drove out of the station yard. He looked around with evident interest. "Everything looks the same. Is it?" he added.

"Oh, yes," Judy replied, turning into the High Street. "I don't think there are any great changes. Except the new housing estate, of course, but that's right outside the town."

"Oh, yes, you told me about that," he said. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home, of course—where else?" she said.

"You didn't think we would let you stay at the *Three Crowns*, did you?"

Derek laughed.

"I didn't think about it at all," he confessed. "In the jungle you learn never to think too far ahead. I guessed you would have something fixed up, but it's kind of you to go to all that trouble."

Judy smiled but said nothing. He seemed nervous, she thought, and took comfort from the fact.

Roxton was his home town, where he had been born and educated, but both his parents were dead and the house sold. They had died soon after he had joined the R.A.F., with the result that he had nowhere to come back to and on his various leaves he had generally put up at the *Three Crowns*, the only decent hotel in the place.

"Look, there's old Johnny Stiles," he said suddenly, leaning forward to look at someone on the pavement. "He doesn't look a day older, yet he must be over seventy." He leaned back again. "Where did you say the new housing estate was, Judy?"

"On the north side of the town, where the ground levels off," she said. "They took in part of Mr. Wicks' farm when it was planned."

"What's happened to old Wicks?"

"He was compensated for the land he had to give up and moved to somewhere near London, I believe," she said.

Derek nodded, thinking of the last time they had walked where the new estate must be. It had been sunset and a bank of cloud, saffron-coloured and dirty-looking, had lain across the horizon.

There he had told her that he had been posted abroad, and all their hopes and dreams had been crowded into one shining hour of almost unbelievable happiness. It had been all they had to sustain them through the years of separation, for a few days later he had been on his way to the Far East.

"Here we are," said Judy.

She pulled up in front of the house and switched off the engine, sitting without movement for a moment, slim hands on the wheel.

Derek turned his head and smiled at her and she smiled back.

Then—

"I can't believe that you are really here—that I won't wake up to find it is all a dream," she said.

With a sudden catch of her breath she choked back the sob which rose to her throat and, fumbling blindly with the catch, opened the car door and stepped out on to the drive.

LATER that night Judy stood at the open window of her room, her dressing-gown belted around her, staring out through the misty darkness towards the lights of Roxton.

She wondered if Derek were asleep, or was he, too, standing at his window along the corridor, staring into the night, wondering what was to become of them both?

It was too late to tell herself that it had been a mistake to confess what had happened. Yet that was what it had been. She had known that almost as soon as she began, in little stumbling sentences, to tell him about Peter.

Derek had heard her out, seated on the edge of the settee, lighting a cigarette with careful deliberation when she came to the end. He had not shown either anger or bitterness, which somehow made it all seem worse.

When at last silence had fallen, he had not spoken for some time, but had looked

steadily into the glowing heart of the fire, as if seeing things that were hidden from her.

When she could bear the silence no longer she had looked at him timidly, putting out a hand as if to touch him.

"Derek," she had said miserably. "Please won't you say something?"

He had turned his head and looked at her for a moment before speaking, then he had said wryly—

"There's not much one *can* say, is there, Judy? I mean—it happened, didn't it?" He had made a gesture of resignation. "What do you *want* me to say?"

She had fallen to weeping quietly, as if the violence of her grief had spent itself and only the reason for her tears remained. She had been sitting at his feet when she told him, and he had drawn her head against his knee, resting a hand on her shoulder.

Later he had said—

"I'm not going to pretend you haven't given me a jolt, my dear. It—it's the kind of thing I've heard of happening to other fellows and it's going to take quite a bit of getting used to. I've got to have time to think about it."

"If—if it's too big for you, Derek, I—I would understand," she had whispered brokenly. "I couldn't bear it if you were just being—chivalrous."

He had smiled for the first time.

"Nothing's too big if you love a person," he had said gently. He had got up and drawn her to her feet. "It's getting late and we can talk about it to-morrow if you want to. You ought to try to get some sleep."

His good-night kiss had been cool and impersonal and somehow pitying. She would have given her life to have been able to wipe away the knowledge she saw in his eyes, the shame and self-loathing that dwelt in her heart.

But knowledge, once gained, was not something that could be banished like a bad dream. What had happened either meant so much it could not be ignored, or there was not a vestige of excuse for it.

That was the way Derek would reason and, she admitted drearily, it was the only way.

With a tired sigh she turned away from the window at last and climbed into bed, to lie wide-awake in the darkness clinging to the thing Derek had said when he had helped her to her feet in the sitting-room—the thing which pointed to the way of redemption, however long and difficult the road might prove.

"*Nothing's too big if you love a person—*"

DEREK stopped the car on the crest of the Downs where the road wound down to the sea. In front, the English Channel lay before them like a sheet of fretted silver, and to the right they could see the spires of Chichester above the haze.

"This has always been my favourite view," he said. "When I was a boy I used to come here and sit for hours thinking of the ships that sailed from here to help Drake fight the Spanish Armada. The sea has encroached a long way since then, of course. Over there, beyond Selsey Bill, there's an area they still call The Park. In Queen Elizabeth's day it was a park, with deer grazing under the trees and now it's an anchorage for fishing boats."

Judy nodded without speaking. Derek was thinking aloud more than making conversation, she knew drinking in all the delights and sensations that come from revisiting old haunts.

It was a glorious day, with a touch of winter frost earlier on, and barely five weeks to Christmas. But for the knowledge

that lay like a shadow over their lives, it would have been a day filled with the excitement and ecstasy of just being together. Instead, by her folly she had created a gulf that yawned between them, separating them emotionally and spiritually as nothing else could have done.

So far the subject had not been mentioned again. After breakfast Derek had gone out, saying that he wanted to look up some old friends and call at the bank. He had returned just before lunch driving a car he had hired for the duration of his leave.

"If you feel like it I thought we might take a run into Chichester this afternoon, Judy," he said casually. "We could go by Tryford Down and drop down to the coast road and come back through Ichenor."

Every fibre of her being had shrieked a protest. The last time she had gone that way had been with Peter! But she could do nothing, say nothing, only murmur agreement.

She stole a glance at him, taking in the familiar line of his dark head down to the angle of his firm jaw, the clean-cut, sensitive mouth. He was seated with his hands resting lightly on the rim of the steering wheel, eyes half closed as he gazed into the distance. Desperately she wondered what he was thinking, but she could learn nothing from his expression.

"Your father asked me when we thought of getting married, Judy," he said abruptly, breaking the little silence. "I told him that it depended entirely upon you as, of course, it does." He hesitated a moment, then went on: "I've no desire to rush you into a decision, naturally, but it's one you will have to make sooner or later, so it may be as well to clear the air."

Judy felt herself beginning to tremble. "Do—do you still want to marry me, Derek?" she asked humbly.

He turned his head to look at her, his eyes inscrutable.

"Of course," he said simply. She detected an undercurrent of bitterness in his tone. "I haven't changed."

She checked the protest that rose to her lips, despairing of making him understand. Instead she said—

"That means you haven't really forgiven me, doesn't it, Derek?"

"It isn't a question of forgiving or not forgiving, Judy," he answered quietly. "Heaven forbid that I should presume to sit in judgment over you. It isn't even a question of relative moral values. I know what loneliness means, you see. There were times, out there, when anyone would have done anything—just to fill the gap."

Judy winced but said nothing.

"The fact remains," he went on slowly, "that whatever happened—happened. It means that, for the time being at least, *there was someone else*. Because of that I don't love you less than I did. Not only that, but I believe you when you say that you never really stopped loving me. If you had done, you couldn't have told me what you did last night. It's up to us, therefore, to make what we can out of what's left."

She covered her face in her hands. Out of his love for her he was prepared to understand and forgive her betrayal of his trust, but the bloom had been taken off their love, its shimmering wonder dimmed, perhaps for all time! And she—she alone was to blame.

"How you must despise me, Derek," she whispered brokenly.

He drew her hands down and smiled tenderly at her.

"I don't despise you, Judy, my dear," he said. "What happened is for you to forget if and when you can. All I am concerned with is the future. I've got to be sure, you

see, that if you do become my wife, it is because you want to and not because you are trying to make amends."

She looked away.

"You think I might want to marry Peter?" "Would that be so very strange?" he countered. "After all, you must have cared for the fellow to—"

"No, Derek," she interrupted, her colour rising. "I'm not in love with Peter. I never have been. You said just now that—that you believed me when I said I had never really stopped loving you. You've got to believe that. Please!"

"What about Peter Strange? He's in love with you, isn't he?"

"No," she said again, with a sharp intake of her breath. "I—I thought he was until a short time ago. He—he probably believed he was—he may do so still for all I know but—oh, it's so hard to explain. We—we were both a little mad, I think and—"

"Don't go on, my dearest," he said quietly, when her voice faltered and broke. "I didn't want to rake it all up again, I assure you. What we have to do," he continued firmly, "is to put it out of our minds. This is where we begin again and to mark the occasion I'm going to drive you into Chichester to buy a proper engagement ring. After that—we'll see."

NEW YEAR—NEW LIFE

A WEEK before Christmas they were married. Derek had been granted an extra month's leave and, as he had pointed out, the opportunity was too good to miss. Judy's aunt, from London, came down a few days before the ceremony, which took place in the little country church where Judy had been christened.

Only a few intimate friends had been invited, and a young squadron-leader, who had served with Derek in Malaya, acted as best man. It snowed as they came out after the ceremony.

Mr. Laleham's wedding present was the car in which they drove away on the first stages of a honeymoon that was to include a tour of Devon and Cornwall.

"It ought to have been mid-summer, but it can't be helped," said Derek cheerfully, as they planned where they would stay. "I'm told that Cornwall can be rather nice if we get a bit of winter sunshine."

They were fortunate. The weather was more than kind and but for the abiding sense of guilt which never left her Judy would have been very happy.

Derek was thoughtful, tender and considerate, and throughout, his eagerness was never allowed to become possessive.

He surprised her, too, by the extent of his knowledge. Often, when driving through some quaint old village he would stop the car to point out something of interest—an old church or ancient ruin, perhaps—and tell her things about it that displayed a vital interest.

Yet, deep down, she knew there was something missing. She withheld nothing, striving to be to her husband all that he had a right to expect, but she was inhibited by an over-anxiety that prevented her from breaking the fetters which shackled her to the past.

Sometimes, as when they were seated one evening in the tiny sitting-room of an inn, she would look up to find him watching her. He often did so, she knew. It was as if he were waiting for something, but what it was she did not know.

Seated there over a fire, she was gripped by a queer sense of unreality. It seemed impossible to believe that only a short three months ago she had lain in Peter's arms that afternoon on the Downs—and yet

be here in this remote country place with Derek!

That was the core of her trouble, had she but realised it. The transition had been too abrupt. Against her will she found herself making comparisons, and thus created an image which she was unable to wipe out. She tried to face the position squarely, to discover wherein she had failed, but her usual reasoning powers seemed to have deserted her.

"What shall we do to-morrow, darling?" Derek inquired, breaking a long silence.

Lazily he put out a hand and took one of hers in his grasp, holding it contentedly.

She turned and gave him a fleeting smile. There was a time when the touch of his hand like that would have sent a little thrill through her. Now she felt nothing.

"What do you suggest?" she asked.

"What about going on to Torquay?" Derek said. "We can pick up our letters at the hotel there and then decide what we are going to do afterwards. We can be there by lunch time easily if we make an early start."

"I think that's an excellent suggestion," she said, getting up. "Why not ask them to pack us a picnic lunch to eat on the way there? Then we needn't hurry."

"Now, that's what I call good staff work," Derek said, getting up in turn. He tapped a cigarette down on the back of his case, regarding her with a faintly enigmatic expression. "I'll go and talk to mine host about it while you get a coat. It's a lovely night and there's time for a stroll before we turn in."

THE next day was a perfect one for the time of the year, and by the time they stopped for lunch it was quite warm.

Derek took the seat out of the back of the car and placed it for Judy to sit on, and after they had eaten, lay down on a blanket with his hands behind his head.

Judy looked about her. Derek's eyes were closed, but she knew he wasn't asleep.

After a time she spoke.

"Derek!"

"Yes, my dearest?"

"I'm going for a stroll down to the beach. I won't be long."

"All right. Don't get lost." He put an arm over his face and wriggled into a more comfortable position.

Judy smiled to herself and got up.

A path led down to the seashore. It was steep and rather rough in places, but she was wearing stout walking shoes, so she did not mind.

She had succumbed to a sudden urge to get away by herself for a few minutes, to allow her thoughts free rein.

The talk she had had with her father shortly before her marriage to Derek had told her nothing new. Peter Strange had applied for special leave to attend an engineering conference at Harrogate, and would not be back in Roxton until after the wedding.

In the course of his duties Peter had encountered Mr. Laleham twice, and from what her father had told her, Judy gathered that the young man had been left under no misapprehensions as to his status in the older man's sight.

"You shouldn't have been like that to him, father," she had said. "For one thing, Peter will guess that you know and for another, it isn't fair to blame him for what happened. I was as much to blame as anyone."

"That makes no difference as far as I am concerned," Mr. Laleham had replied. "However, we won't wrangle about it, my dear. You've got to think of Derek from

now on and forget that such a person as Peter Strange ever existed! If you don't—" He had left her to finish the sentence for herself, his tone and manner implying all that he left unsaid.

Now she sighed at the recollection. With her marriage and all that it implied, she had nourished a strange conviction that she would undergo some mysterious and subtle change that would be both spiritual and physical. A kind of re-birth in which she would emerge a totally different person.

But despite everything her mental equilibrium remained unimpaired, so that the past, with all its bitterness and regrets remained alive, taunting her with her failure to lay her ghosts, intruding even in moments of ecstasy which should have been perfect but were only—pretence.

She shivered. It was queer how things linked up. Somewhere she had read an article on what the writer called "the determination of chance". If she had not gone to the housing estate that day to pick up her father she might not have met Peter when she had. In that case he would not have been asked to dinner and all that followed might not have happened.

She pulled herself together. To argue like that was simply absurd. Whether she met Peter then or later it would have been the same. In some queer way she could not understand their paths had been destined to meet. Only the purpose was obscure.

She remembered with bitter anguish how Derek had comforted her when he had been ordered abroad, telling her that when he came back everything would be gay and sweet and terribly exciting.

With the thought there welled up within her such a surge of bitterness that it left her breathless and trembling, one part of her mind engulfed in a morass of wild rebellion against a destiny which had so cruelly betrayed her. While with the other she sought desperately for something to which to cling, something tangible that would thrust aside the feeling she had of soiled.

The whine of an approaching aircraft recalled her to the passing of time. With a glance at her watch she turned, slowly at first and then with a quickening of her pace beginning to retrace her steps.

How long, she wondered, would it be before Derek awoke to the fact that he was being cheated—that she was paying her dues in false coin? Was that why she found him watching her when he thought she wasn't looking? Was that why his patient tenderness had about it a curious quality of waiting?

When she reached the car Derek was not there. He had replaced the back seat cushion and packed the things they had used, putting the basket on the floor of the car.

She looked around for him, her mood swinging between nervousness and irritation. And then, just as panic seized her for no accountable reason she saw him walking up the road.

She stumbled towards him, uttering a little gasp of relief. He put out a hand to steady her.

"Judy! What's the matter? Is anything wrong?"

She caught back a little hysterical laugh, her lips trembling.

"No, of course not. I didn't know where you were, that's all. I mean—I thought—but it doesn't matter. I was just being silly."

"Were you?" He looked at her curiously. "It isn't like you to panic without good reason. Are you sure nothing happened to upset you?"

She had control of herself now. It was a shock to realise that she could give way to an attack of nerves in that fashion! She

shook her head.

"Nothing happened. At least," she hastened to correct herself, "nothing real. It was finding myself alone, I suppose. I didn't know where you had gone."

"I went for a stroll as far as the bend in the road," he said. "I thought there might be a good view of the coastline from there. I'm sorry—I wouldn't have gone if I had known."

Judy turned her head away, feeling the tears come into her eyes. She could never explain, she thought dispiritedly.

He could not be expected to understand that she had expected to find him still lying on the grass and that when he was not there, she had been seized by a kind of waking nightmare in which he had left her, victim of her own morbid introspection, his last illusions shattered finally and forever.

Nothing further was said and they got into the car and drove on.

They had gone about a mile when Derek drew into the side, and stopped the car, leaving the engine running. Above it, Judy could hear the whine of the aircraft she had heard earlier, and looking up, saw the white vapour trail making a huge figure eight against the winter sky.

Derek reached over to the back seat and picked up a pair of binoculars. Taking them out of their case he levelled them at the tiny speck, that like an arrow head, left a thin ribbon of white behind it as it climbed higher and higher.

"That's one of the new Centuars," he observed. "There's a rumour that we're going to have them in the squadron soon. They're a lovely job, and what's more, they look it. Hullo, something's wrong!"

As he spoke Judy saw the vapour trail make a sudden downward curve, as if a giant hand were drawing patterns in the sky with an invisible pencil. The curve lengthened and became a zig-zag, and then the white trail was cut off suddenly and only the tiny speck remained, diving earthwards at an incredible speed and becoming larger every second.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Derek. "He's out of control or I don't know the first thing about flying. Why doesn't he bale out? He'll crash!"

So swiftly did the tragedy mar the brightness of the winter afternoon that less than ten seconds had elapsed since they had seen the aircraft stall at the top of its climb.

And now the air was filled with a hideous, screaming resonance as the doomed machine appeared to level off above the trees half a mile to their left and made a tight turn that would bring it out over the sea.

"Don't look!" said Derek, in a tense voice as the aircraft skimmed over the water, defying the pilot's attempt to get it down at the speed it was travelling. The next moment it struck a belt of trees fringing the shore.

To Judy's horrified ears the sound of rending fabric seemed to go on and on and high above the shaking foliage she saw a wing-tip rear itself against the sky before disintegrating into slivers of polished metal. There was a dull thud like an explosion, followed at a second's interval by another. Then silence.

Derek was out of the car in a flash.

"There's a call-box half a mile down the road," he said. "Get on to the local police—tell them where the crash is. They'll know what to do."

He vanished into the trees at a run, leaving Judy to give the alarm. Numb with shock she slid automatically into the driving seat and put her hand on the gear lever.

As she did so she heard the high-pitched whine of a powerful car coming up the road behind her.

Next moment a police car equipped with radio screamed to a stop beside her.

She switched off her own engine.

"It's down there," she cried, pointing to the path down which Derek had run.

The police sergeant, who had jumped out of the car, nodded and started off at a run, leaving his driver to send out a call for assistance.

As she got down on to the road, her limbs feeling curiously weak, Judy could hear him giving urgent instructions into the microphone he was holding in one hand.

The path seemed endless and wound about in a particularly frustrating manner. But at last, panting and breathless, stockings torn by the brambles which grew thickly along its borders, she emerged on the seashore and saw the tail and part of the fuselage of the wrecked aircraft sticking up into the air.

One wing was crumpled up beneath it and its nose seemed to be wedged between two massive oaks. A dense pall of smoke rose above the trees and adding to the horror of the scene, she heard the roar of flames.

For a moment she could not take it all in and thought that Derek was not there.

Then, as another explosion sent a billowing mass of smoke eddying upwards she saw him, heedless of the danger, struggling furiously to free the trapped pilot.

"Derek!"

She had not known that she screamed. Someone came running past her. It was the other policeman who had been in the car.

"Derek!" she screamed again and started to run. A gush of smoke blotted everything out for a moment; when it cleared she saw Derek and the police sergeant carrying the limp body of the pilot to a place of safety.

Someone came running past her and there was a confusion of voices and moving figures against the lurid background of flame. Judy ran forward and dropped on her knees beside Derek, who was unfastening the cumbersome flying helmet, revealing the fair hair and boyish features of a young man, a deep gash on his left temple accentuating the wax-like pallor of his skin.

"He's alive!" Derek said, with a sigh of relief.

His own features were blackened and his hair singed. Blood ran down from a cut on the back of one hand.

"The ambulance will be here in a minute or so, sir," the police sergeant said. "It was a lucky thing but we were not far off when the plane crashed and so we were able to send out a radio call for assistance right away. You look as if you need a doctor yourself," he added, eyeing the livid weal of a burn above Derek's right ear.

"Who—me? I'm all right," Derek muttered, his careful fingers feeling for the faint heartbeats that told that life had not yet fled. He laid a coat someone had brought over the still form. "Where's the water I asked for—oh, good!" Someone handed him a beaker. "Has anyone a large clean handkerchief?"

"Let me!" Judy took the handkerchief someone handed her and bathed the ugly, contused wound on the young pilot's temple, thinking as she did so: "This might be Derek lying here. It could be—there might not be anyone near who was brave enough to pull him out of the flames. And then—he would never know—never understand—how much I love him!"

"Here's the ambulance," a voice called.

Someone touched her on the arm. It was Derek. Very gently he took the handkerchief away from her and dropped it on the grass. Then he drew her to her feet while the police sergeant pulled the coat up over the pilot's face.

"You can't do any more for him," Derek said, leading her away. "He's dead, poor fellow."

JUDY awoke from a heavy exhausted slumber to see the bright moonlight streaming into the room. For a moment she had to think, to try to remember where she was and instinctively put a hand out towards the bed beside her own. There was no one there.

She sat up, pushing the hair back from her temples and saw Derek, hands in the pockets of his dressing gown, standing at the long casement window looking out over the lake. He was smoking a cigarette and she could see the red glow of it reflected in the glass.

She said softly—

"Derek! What's the matter. Can't you sleep?"

He turned and came towards her, seating himself on the edge of her bed.

"Did I disturb you?" he asked. "I'm sorry. I tried to be as quiet as possible."

"I'm glad I woke up," she said, sighing. "I've had such horrid dreams! I dreamt I was in the middle of a huge forest and that you had crashed somewhere in it but though I kept on searching and searching I couldn't find you." She shuddered.

He inhaled deeply, so that the red glow of his cigarette illumined his features dimly for a moment, revealing the newly treated scar which ran up past his temple into his hair.

"That's only to be expected after what happened to-day," he said gently. "Would you like me to get you something? I've got some aspirins in my grip if you think they would help."

"No, thank you, Derek." She sighed again. After a moment she asked: "Is your hand hurting very much?"

He leaned forward to crush his cigarette out in the ashtray on the bedside table and she caught the flash of a white bandage in the moonlight.

"It throbs a bit," he said. "But it's nothing to write home about. I'm afraid it means you will have to take over the job of chauffeur, though. The doctor has advised me to use it as little as possible for a few days."

She nodded, reliving those moments of terror when she had seen Derek struggling to free the jammed cockpit cover in order to release the doomed pilot. In a perverse way she was glad that the injury to Derek's hand meant she would have to drive the car; it was something she could do for him.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked, after another little silence.

He smiled faintly in the darkness.

"Oh, lots of things. The night is a good time to think. There aren't any distractions."

"I know, but *what*?" she persisted.

"Well, for one thing, I was wondering why that Centuar crashed," he said. "And also why the pilot's ejector seat gear failed. I don't suppose we'll ever know, though. The aircraft is still on the secret list, so the RAF will put a security ban on the whole thing. I'm afraid it's going to make a mess of our plans, though. They will want me to give evidence at the enquiry—in fact, I've already been warned to hold myself in readiness to do so."

"It doesn't matter." Judy clasped her hands round her knees. "In a way I'm glad. It may help to prevent another one crashing, Derek."

He shrugged.

"Maybe. I couldn't say. There's not much I can tell them, really, and the aircraft itself is pretty well burned out. I can only imagine that he tried to pancake the thing on to the sea to avoid crashing it on some houses."

"He must have been very brave," she murmured.

"Yes," said Derek thoughtfully. "When

you think how strong the instinct of self-preservation is in most of us, you realise that *that* kind of thing takes a bit of doing."

"Like going into the flames to get a trapped pilot out of his cockpit!" she said softly.

He shrugged.

"That's entirely different. Remember, I knew what to do! I took a calculated risk, that was all."

"I still think it was terribly brave of you. The police sergeant said you ought to have the George Cross!"

"The police sergeant is letting his imagination run away with him, then," said Derek, with a faint laugh. He sighed. "I only wish it had been worth while."

"I know." Judy stared thoughtfully into the darkness. Then she said: "I wish I was brave, like you. I'm such a frightful coward."

"What nonsense," he said. "Don't you know that there are many degrees of what you call bravery, my sweet? If you had been a coward you couldn't—" He broke off.

"You mean—I couldn't have told you about Peter?" she said, bringing it out into the open.

"Something like that," he admitted. "It can't have been easy."

"No," she said gravely. "It wasn't easy, Derek. I tried to think how I could avoid telling you. Not because I was afraid but because I didn't want to hurt you. But I was too much of a coward to face what it would mean."

He turned his head. She could see it silhouetted against the light patch that was the window.

"What would it have meant, Judy?"

"Living a lie." She gestured with a hand and then clasped her knees again. "I couldn't do that, even though it meant telling you I had let you down." She bowed her head, her forehead resting on her knees. "I—I've been an awful fool, Derek."

"Have you?" He smiled down at her. "In what particular way?"

"Oh, heaps of ways." She sighed and lifted her head. "I—there was a letter from Peter amongst those we found waiting for us here."

"Oh?" His tone was studiously non-committal.

"I kept it to show you. There's—there's nothing in it you can't see. He wrote to say that he was sorry and to tell me that he is leaving Roxton. He—he will be gone by the time we get back. He's got an appointment somewhere abroad and the council have agreed to release him at once."

"That's very noble of him." He was unable to keep the sarcastic note out of his voice.

Judy stirred restlessly.

"Don't, Derek! It—it wasn't really Peter's fault. He honestly thought I wasn't in love with you. I—I'm to blame for that. I suppose, if we are going to be strictly truthful I was flattered by having someone like Peter so obviously crazy about me."

Derek laughed softly.

"I tried to make you see that right from the beginning," he said. "But you had turned your mind into a cemetery and were so busy, laying flowers on the grave of something you thought you had lost that you hadn't eyes for anything else."

She turned her head in the darkness, her eyes wide.

"What about self-respect, Derek?"

"You regained yours the night you told me about Strange," he said. "Maybe you didn't realise it, but you weren't weeping over the headstone of yours, my dearest. Only your vanity!"

The hot colour flooded Judy's cheeks and she was suddenly grateful for the

concealing darkness.

"Oh, Derek!" she murmured protestingly.

He took her hand.

"Let's get this straight," he said quietly. "Are you trying to tell me that what happened between you and Strange isn't important any more, Judy?"

"It never was, Derek. Only, I didn't know."

"And now?"

She kept her face averted from him.

"I—I wanted you to know, that's all."

"I see. No other reason?"

She bent her head, her cheeks still crimson.

"I—I've learned my lesson, Derek. I learnt it this afternoon. Do you remember—just before the crash—how I panicked when you walked down to the bend in the road? I came back to the car and found that you weren't there. I don't know what happened, but I had a sudden frightful feeling that you were in danger! Then, afterwards, when you really were—" She broke off, shuddering.

"I know," he said smiling. "You're not very good at hiding your feelings, my dear Judy. I looked up and saw your eyes when you ran towards me when we laid that poor fellow on the grass. I knew, then, that what I had been waiting for had really happened."

"What you had been waiting for?" she echoed faintly. "I—oh, Derek, what do you mean?"

"I've been waiting for you to fall in love with me all over again, my sweet," he said tenderly. "At any rate, I took a chance on your doing so. You see, I knew the girl I had loved, and who loved me when I went abroad was still there. The other Judy—the one who took her place for a time—didn't really exist. So all I had to do was to wait until she found herself."

She lifted her face.

"Oh, Derek, I love you—terribly," she whispered. She drew a deep, sighing breath. "I know now that happiness is too precious to be gambled with—that the only thing that matters is faith! So—if you still want me—"

"Want you?" he breathed, drawing her into his arms. "Want you? My dearest, of course I want you."

A MONTH later Judy paused on the crest of the Downs and looked down at the new housing estate, a gentleness in her eyes that caused Derek to catch his breath.

They had returned from their interrupted honeymoon a fortnight previously and a few days later Derek had reported in London for a final medical board.

She had gone with him, and waited until he came to meet her late the same afternoon. One glance at his face had told her his news, even before he broke it to her.

"They were pretty decent about it all," he had said, seated opposite her at a corner table in a popular cafe. "But there are some things you can't get round however much you try. This is one of them." He had held up his bandaged hand.

"What did they say, Derek?"

He had smiled.

"Apparently I damaged some nerve with a long sounding Latin name," he explained. "Cut short, it amounts to this—it won't bother me as far as ordinary things go, such as driving a car and doing a normal job of work, but as far as flying is concerned—I've had it. They offered to ground me permanently and give me a posting to one of the administrative branches, but I said I would prefer to resign my commission." He had smiled

across at her. "Now tell me you're sorry!"

"I *am* sorry, darling," she had said softly. "Terribly sorry."

His eyes had twinkled.

"I'll believe you, though thousands wouldn't," he had said teasingly. "At any rate, you will be able to sleep peacefully at nights, without dreaming that I'm going to crash!" And then, as she had blushed crimson, he had laid a hand on hers and added gently: "It's all right, my sweet. As long as I have you, I don't care about *this*."

They had returned the next day and discussed the question of Derek's future with her father. Mr. Laleham had been perfectly frank about it all.

"I wouldn't stand in your way if you wanted to make the RAF your career, Derek," he said. "But now that the decision has been taken out of your hands I'm not going to say I am sorry things have turned out this way. I need someone like you in the firm—someone I can trust and who will give me the benefit of youth and experience, both of which you have. If you like to come into the business, to learn the job right from the bottom—well, we shall be keeping it in the family, don't you see?" His eyes had twinkled.

And so it had been arranged. For the time being they were to go on living at the big house, but as soon as they could get the plans passed, they were going to build a bungalow on a vacant site a little further up the hill.

Now Judy turned to Derek and he put his arm around her shoulder, smiling down into her upturned face.

"Happy darling?" he asked slyly.

She laughed and blushed.

"So happy I can hardly bear it," she murmured.

He bent and kissed her and she put up her hands, linking them behind his neck.

"Oh, Derek, it will always be like this, won't it?" she said unsteadily.

And, with his answer, she knew that she had come to the end of the long dark tunnel and that together they had come out into the sunshine.

Derek kissed her again.

"Always, my darling," he said solemnly, investing the words with the sanctity of an oath. "To-day—to-morrow—and for the rest of our lives, God willing."

God willing! Judy leaned against him, thinking how strangely everything linked up.

That day when the aircraft had crashed she had been given a glimpse of what life would mean for her without Derek. Yet, because her love for him she had fought down her dread, shutting resolutely away the visions that came to haunt her—visions of Derek's aircraft ploughing its way through the trees, of a wing-tip reared drunkenly against the sky.

But because he had not hesitated: because he had put another's danger above all else, he could no longer fly! It was like a jigsaw puzzle, she thought, and now all the pieces were in place.

"Come," she said, linking her hand in his. "It's getting late and daddy will be home and wanting his supper! You'll see quite enough of the new estate before you've done with it, my lad!"

He laughed and kissed her again ere they moved off down the hill, hand in hand. There are hopes and joys beyond the power of human will to control, and the urgent need for fulfilment was one of them.

If, Judy thought, with a little secret smile, there was any efficacy in prayer, the day would soon come when Derek would hold his son in his arms—his son—and hers!

THE END.

THIS DAY OF JOY

By Gail London

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS!

GAZING out of the carriage window at the countryside, dull and leaden under a grey November sky, Brenda Marsh was conscious of a little thrill of anticipation such as she imagined she had outgrown in the two years she had spent working as a journalist in London—she was going home for Christmas!

Ahead of her were six glorious weeks of freedom; six weeks in which to forget London, and the publishing house where she was on the editorial staff of a weekly journal devoted to stories and homely articles.

She glanced at her watch—it was four o'clock.

By now the letter telling those at home that she would be arriving this afternoon would have been received.

She could easily imagine the excitement it would have caused, the warm glow that would have come into her mother's cheeks; for it seemed ages since she had seen her eldest daughter. Three months, to be exact.

Brenda smiled to herself. She had purposely not let them know that she had had an attack of flu and that the doctor had ordered her to get away from London for a time.

Of course, everybody at her office had been most kind. Miss Wilkins, her immediate chief, had said she could write her weekly articles at home and send them in by post. Another member of the staff had promised to answer her readers' letters and so on.

"And if you don't feel up to coming back at the end of six weeks, don't," Miss Wilkins had concluded.

Brenda knew that, had she written home to tell her family that she was ill they would have worried themselves sick without being able to do anything to help.

As it was, she had been looked after by the girl with whom she shared a flat in Kensington, and also by one of their neighbours, the wife of a young naval officer serving in the Far East.

When she had been out of danger, and some colour had come back into her cheeks, her doctor had said—

"You can put any idea of going straight back to your office clean out of your mind. Influenza such as you have had, isn't something you can shrug off easily young lady. London, at this time of the year, is the very last place you should be in. Can't you go and stay with friends or relatives for a few weeks—somewhere in the country?"

"I suppose I *could* go home, doctor," Brenda had said doubtfully. "But—"

"Well, that's just the thing," he had broken in, waving her halting protest aside. "Where do you live?"

"In Dormanston—Hampshire."

"Couldn't be better," he had said. "The farther you are away from London fog, the sooner will you recover. Remain here and I won't be answerable for the consequences!"

Now the train was beginning to run through familiar country, and Brenda thought of her family with mounting excitement.

Her father kept a little book-shop in Dormanston, but business was very quiet and he made little profit.

However, despite their struggles, despite having little money, he and his wife had

been very happy. After thirty years of married life they were still as much in love with one another as they had been the day they had married, so that their love had spilled over and embraced their children.

AT Winchester some of the people in the compartment got out and others got in.

As the train drew out again on what, to Brenda, was the last lap of her journey, she was remembering the last time she had been in the famous cathedral town.

Geoffrey Weldon and she had spent the day there, exploring its quaint old streets and standing, silent and awed, before the lovely statue of Joan of Arc in the cathedral.

Geoffrey had told her that King Arthur's Round Table hung in the County Hall and he had taken her to see it. She had expressed surprise at the time, for like a great many other people, she had never really thought that it still existed.

But Geoffrey was like that, full of surprises. One could always trust him to plan something out of the ordinary, so that going out with him was a perpetual excitement.

Now he was in North Africa, where his regiment had been transferred after leaving the Suez Canal Zone, while his younger brother, Richard—if all she had heard was true—had married and taken over the management of their father's thriving boat business.

Sighing, she allowed her mind to drift back over the years.

There had never been a time when she had not been in love with Geoffrey, she told herself wistfully.

Even when he had been a schoolboy at Dormanston Grammar School, and she and her sister Sally had been pig-tailed schoolgirls, Geoffrey had been her hero.

He had not been like the other boys. And, in particular, he had not been like his brother Richard, who was two years his junior.

Where Richard Weldon had teased her unmercifully—and often unkindly—Geoffrey had been quiet and understanding, and had seemed, by contrast, to be gentleness itself.

Yet Geoffrey's gentleness was deceptive, for when roused he could be very angry, though he never lost his temper as others did.

Instead, he would become pale and cold; only the queer light which came into his eyes betraying the storm of emotion which racked him.

He had been angry like that the day many years ago—when Richard had pushed her off a punt into the water, rocking with laughter at her predicament.

She would never forget the ringing contempt with which Geoffrey had condemned his brother's hooliganism, as he called it, nor his kindness as he had hurried Brenda home to change her clothing.

Leaning back against the cushions, a little half smile hovered about her lips. Much water had gone under the bridges since those carefree days, when she and Sally had played with the Weldon boys or gone hiking over the Downs with a party from the Youth Centre.

In those days they had generally paired off, and although Sally had been only fourteen when Richard had left the Grammar School to go to college, Brenda had

been sure that he and Sally would marry one day. But such had not been the case.

As for herself and Geoffrey, except for the echoes contained in his infrequent letters, the old magic seemed to have faded and gone. Geoffrey had gone into the Army, intending to make it his career, and Richard had gone into their father's business, a prosperous boat-building concern on Southampton Water.

Then, just over a year ago, Richard's engagement to the only daughter of one of Dormanston's wealthiest citizens, had been announced.

Geoffrey had got special leave and had flown home for the wedding, which had taken place in June, and at the reception he had singled Brenda out as he had always done whenever they were two of a crowd.

"Well, young Richard has done pretty well for himself," he had remarked, with a familiar grin. "You know the old saying, of course?"

"Which one?" Brenda had asked. "I know quite a number, Geoffrey."

"Never marry for money, but where money is," he had smiled. "One thing you've got to admit, though. Daphne may not have much in her head, but she's very decorative."

"You have become cynical since you joined the Army," she had said, laughing, at the same time conscious of a queer little pang that she could not explain.

It was as if something had happened to their old freedom of thought, so that they had become guarded with each other.

For though he seemed to be the same Geoffrey as ever, Brenda knew, with an intrinsic certainty that brooked no doubt, that their words were merely sounds on the surface, and meant no more to each of them than the idle chatter going on all around.

Geoffrey had gone back to his duties the following day without seeing her again and Brenda had returned to London, wondering if she were being foolish to weave dreams that might never be anything but mere dreams.

The train began to slow down and Brenda got up, taking her suitcase down from the luggage rack. Glancing into the mirror she patted a stray wisp of golden hair into place under the brim of her hat. A pair of grey-blue eyes, softened by her recent illness, looked back at her, and though she decided that she was very pale it was too late to do anything about it now.

Utterly without conceit, it never occurred to her that she looked very lovely.

Then she momentarily forgot everything else in the sheer joy of the reunion which took place a few minutes later.

Her entire family had come to meet her—father and mother, Sally and her younger brother, George.

They were grouped near the ticket barrier, anxiously scanning the alighting passengers and it was a moment before George caught sight of her.

As she got down and turned towards them Brenda's heart gave a funny little leap and she felt the warm prick of tears behind her eyelids.

Next moment she was in her mother's arms.

"My darling—it's lovely to have you again."

"Oh, mummy."

Half laughing, half crying, Brenda kissed her mother fondly and then turned

to her father.

With a queer sense of shock she noted that he looked much older, his hair completely grey, and his shoulders bent.

Then everybody seemed to be talking at once. George, a schoolboy still, grinned at her trying not to look self-conscious at being kissed by his big sister in public, while Sally, whose vivid good looks were set off to perfection by an aureole of dark, wavy hair, clung to her arm and imparted news and asked questions all at the same time.

They crowded into the hired car outside the station, firing questions at her until she scarcely knew which one she was answering. How long had she got? Was she really going to stay right over Christmas? Why hadn't she written before to tell them she had been ill? How was she feeling now?

"Wonderful!" Brenda said happily. "I can't begin to tell you how glad I am to be here, everybody. I didn't need much urging on the doctor's part to take a long holiday, I can tell you."

"You must take care, dear," fussed her mother. "You ought to wrap yourself up more, you know. I'm sure that coat isn't half warm enough for you."

"Oh, I'm beautifully warm, mummy dear," said Brenda, taking her arm. "I'm quite recovered now, I really am, and if you insist on making a fuss I won't be able to do half the things I've planned to do."

"As long as you take care," said her mother. "That's all I want, my dear."

"I suppose this all seems very cramped and old-fashioned after your glamorous flat in Kensington," remarked Sally, as she followed Brenda into the bedroom they were to share. "I'm sorry we weren't able to get the spare room ready in time but you didn't give us much notice. Mother thought it would be all right if we put your bed in here."

"If you don't mind, I certainly don't, Sally," Brenda replied, taking off her coat and laying it over a chair.

She walked to the window and stood looking out. The house was built on a rise so that she could see the lights of Dormanston coming on below her, like little pin-pricks of fire in the deepening dusk.

She gave a little sigh of satisfaction. "You can't guess how thrilled I am to be home!"

Sally looked at her curiously. "You sound as if you really *are* thrilled," she said.

Brenda smiled. "Of course I am. You don't know what it's like living in a flat in London, with nothing to do half the time but wash your hair or read."

"I'd like the chance," said Sally, half enviously. "Dormanston's all right in small doses, but it's pretty much behind the times. Nothing ever happens here."

"You'd soon get fed up with London, my dear."

Brenda turned and sat on the edge of the bed, looking round with pleased interest. The old bow-fronted mahogany chest opposite had once held her clothes. In the fireplace there still stood the copper kettle that had always been there, a bright surface to catch the gleam of the fire.

In the mirror of the wardrobe she seemed to see again the lanky schoolgirl with thin wrists protruding from the ends of a school blazer.

She laughed at the recollection and turned to Sally.

"What's all the news? You must have heaps to tell me."

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Sally shook her lovely young head.

"There's nothing, really," she said. "You know, of course, that old Mr. Weldon had a stroke and that Richard is running the business now. From what I've heard he's making the money fly, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Brenda.

"You know. House-parties—entertaining on a grand scale—all that kind of thing. But that's Daphne—Richard wasn't like that."

"I know," Brenda nodded. "It's funny, when you come to think of it. Richard being married, I mean."

"What's funny about it?" Sally enquired somewhat shortly. "Presumably they liked each other."

There was the faintest of pauses before the word "liked" and Brenda knew why. Sally shied at the word *love* and never used it—in that sense—if she could avoid doing so.

If she hadn't known better Brenda might have imagined that her sister was one of those who thought that for a girl to admit that she was desperately in love with a man—even to herself—was to be immodest.

But she knew her sister too well for that. If Sally ever loved anyone she would not be a hypocrite. She might conceal the fact—probably would—but that would arise from a secret contempt that, Brenda suspected, she felt for anything that she might put down as "sloppy".

Glancing at her now Brenda thought that the younger girl looked pale and in some queer way, remote. She pushed back the thought which followed, and jumped briskly to her feet, resolved to let nothing cloud the happiness of being home once more.

"I don't know about you, but I'm dying for tea and some of mummy's home-made cakes," she said, going to the mirror and running a comb through her hair. "We'll have plenty of time to talk later on. I suppose,"—as they turned to go downstairs—"you haven't seen Richard. To speak to, I mean?"

Sally shook her head, a thoughtful look coming into her eyes.

"No," she replied, with a little shrug. "He never comes to see us nowadays and I don't go to the places he goes to. I don't think he's been near the tennis club since he married." Her lip curled faintly. "Daphne sees to that, of course."

"Then you don't know if Geoffrey is coming home for Christmas?" asked Brenda, trying to sound off-hand.

"I don't know any more than you do," said Sally. "Doesn't he write to you still?"

"I haven't had a letter for about two months," said Brenda. "He didn't mention anything about Christmas leave then."

Downstairs they found their mother laying the cloth for tea.

On the way from the station Mr. Marsh had dropped off at his shop to do another hour's work, and as young George had gone to a scout meeting there would be just the three of them to sit down.

"I thought we would have tea out here," Mrs. Marsh said apologetically, when the two girls entered the kitchen. "It is much warmer, for one thing and saves trouble. I've only just lit the fire in the sitting room and it hasn't had time to warm up yet."

"It's much more comfortable here," said Brenda helpfully.

She helped her mother to arrange the plates and cups and cut the bread, a little sensation of uneasiness rising within her. For the second time the feeling of something being wrong came back to nag at her like an aching tooth: it seemed to hover above them all, threatening them in a way that Brenda could not understand.

Over tea the conversation ranged about

a variety of subjects, never seeming to reach the things that Brenda most wanted to hear—the family. How they were managing. How the business was going. What had been happening that they had not mentioned in their letters.

It was not until she asked a teasing question about a young man who had been paying marked attention to Sally—when Brenda had last been home—that she received a clue to the trouble.

"Who, Peter Armstrong?" Sally looked rather scornful. "Good gracious, you didn't expect me to take him seriously, did you?"

"Why not?" asked Brenda. "He struck me as being a very nice boy."

"Oh, Peter's all right as far as that goes," Sally said, with a yawn, "but he's the type who will always be content to work for someone else. When I marry it's going to be to someone who'll get on and make money—lots of it."

"I see," said Brenda drily. "Love, I presume, doesn't enter into it?"

"Oh, love's a back number these days," Sally retorted, with a gleam in her young eyes. "In any case, it doesn't get you anywhere. To my mind the only thing that matters is getting what you want and having enough money to pay for it."

Brenda frowned noticing with dismay that her sister sounded really bitter.

"What on earth's made you think that way, dear?" she said. "Once upon a time—"

"That's just how all fairy stories begin," interrupted Sally, with a trace of cynicism in her voice. "Since you've been living in London and earning a jolly good salary you've forgotten what it's like to pinch and scrape as we do here. Personally, I'm sick of living from hand to mouth and I'll take jolly good care that I don't get the raw deal mummy has had!"

"I've tried to tell Sally that she—that her ideas are quite wrong," said Mrs. Marsh, her voice a mixture of stubbornness and anxiety. "She seems to think that the only things that count are material things—"

"And so they are," Sally broke in, warmly. "I want to live—not merely exist! What do you get out of life, I'd like to know, mother? You aren't go to the pictures without weighing up whether you can afford to or not. Besides, look at this place!"

She waved a hand round in an angry gesture.

"I want a home where I'm not ashamed to invite my friends," she went on. "Oh, I know you think I'm being disloyal, talking like this—you don't seem to notice how shabby everything is—but I know Brenda does. That's why she took the chance to get out of it when she did."

"That's not true, Sally," said Brenda quietly. "To take one thing at a time—this is my home and I love it. So do you, deep down, even if you won't admit it. As for the rest, you know perfectly well that I accepted the offer of a job in London because it meant a very great deal to me to get a chance I would not have got staying here. It had nothing to do with the house or anyone in it."

"Oh, it's easy enough to talk like that now," said Sally, in a tone of weary disgust. "But what's the use? None of you understands."

Brenda glanced from Sally to her mother, a rush of warm tenderness and deep love sweeping over her. Then she laid a hand on her mother's worn one and smiled gently.

"Darling, don't look so upset," she murmured. "Sally doesn't mean to hurt. It's just that she's young and—"

"Just because you've got a job in London

and live in a flat you needn't be so beastly patronising," interrupted Sally hotly.

Brenda turned her head and looked at the younger girl steadily.

"I'm sorry—I don't mean to be patronising," she said quietly. "But if you want it straight from the shoulder, Sally, I think it is jolly mean of you to upset mother like this. Even if all you say about the place is justified—and I don't for a moment agree that it is—you might have a little consideration for her feelings."

"All right—I'm sorry," said Sally. "I didn't mean to go off the deep end like that." She drank the rest of her tea at a gulp, looking ashamed.

Brenda gave her an understanding smile and turned to her mother.

"I thought daddy looked very tired, mummy," she said, hoping to divert her mother's mind from what had just been said. "Is he working too hard, do you think?"

"That's just what he is doing, Brenda dear," Mrs. Marsh answered, with a deep sigh. "Business isn't very good these days—the takings have fallen off very considerably. In fact, he is beginning to wonder if he will be able to carry on much longer." She blinked back the tears which suddenly filled her eyes. "There now, and I didn't mean to worry you with it all as soon as you got home. Whatever must you think of me!"

"One day I'll tell you." Rising, Brenda stooped impulsively and dropped a kiss on her mother's brow. "Now you sit still and rest while Sally and I clear away. Then, when the sitting room is a bit warmer, we'll go in there and have a nice, cosy chat."

NEARLY twenty four hours later Brenda paused in front of the lighted window of a shop in the High Street and gazed reflectively at the Christmas goods displayed there.

She had been doing some shopping for her mother, and now she was killing time until Sally, who was employed in the local council offices, would be free to meet her.

The scene was a familiar one, but for once Brenda saw nothing of it. Neither the rush and roar of the buses which stopped briefly at the Clock Tower and hurried on, the thronged pavements, the gleam of the car headlamps reflected by the wet roadway, had power to break in on her thoughts.

And she felt a sharp pang as she thought of the scene at the tea-table yesterday, and of all her mother had said afterwards.

She wished now that she had been able to persuade them to let her help. She had wanted to do so but they had refused to let her. And whenever she asked they always said that they were managing quite well, thank you.

When she thought of the flat she shared with Gillian Drew, and compared it with the shabby sitting room at home, she had to admit that, as far as Sally was concerned, she had had the best of the deal.

True, she worked hard, but she earned good money as well, as her balance in the post office savings bank proved, and she lived well and did not have to stint herself of good clothes.

She had made them all presents from time to time, it was true, and had tried, by careful planning and enquiry, to make her presents fill some much needed want. But it was not enough. The deep-seated unhappiness responsible for Sally's outburst arose from something more fundamental than the shabbiness or otherwise of the home.

To a girl like Brenda, who was blessed with an unusually broad understanding of

human nature, an understanding enlarged by her journalistic work, it spelt one thing and one thing only—frustration.

With a sigh she turned to resume her way. And as she did so a hand fell on her arm and a well-remembered voice uttered her name.

With a gasp she turned to look up into the face of a tall, good-looking young man who stood smiling down at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners with pleasure and amusement as they had always done.

"Why, Geoffrey!" she exclaimed, nearly dropping her carrier-bag in excitement. "When did you get back?"

"This morning," he grinned. "I thought I wasn't going to make it in time for Christmas, but the little gremlins who look after us poor soldiers relented and here I am! Need I say how glad I am to see you, Brenda?" His voice seemed to become warmer with every word.

Brenda blushed slightly.

"And I'm glad to see you, Geoffrey," she murmured. "I know someone else who is, too."

"My dad?" He nodded. "You're quite right, Brenda. He nearly fell on my neck. I can't say the same for brother Richard though."

"Oh Richard lives in a different social whirl these days," she said. "Sally was only saying yesterday that he hasn't been near the tennis club since he married Daphne."

"I gather he's finding his social obligations rather a full time job," he returned drily. "But look, what are you doing now, Brenda? If you aren't waiting for someone, what about letting me give you tea in the old place? I passed it just now and it doesn't seem to have changed a scrap. If I didn't know that Mrs. Briggs was the soul of honesty I could swear she still had the same cakes in the window that were there the last time we went in!"

Brenda laughed.

"I told Sally I would wait and go home with her," she said. "But she doesn't leave until five-thirty, so that gives us time if you don't mind me hurrying."

"Good," he remarked firmly, taking her arm. "I left my car parked on the other side of the square, so after tea we can collect it and I'll run you both home. How are your mother and father by the way?"

"Quite well, thank you, Geoffrey," she replied.

"And you, my dear Brenda? Set the Thames on fire yet?"

"Oh, far from it," she shrugged ruefully. "In me you behold a broken reed, Geoffrey. I've been sent home in disgrace."

"Really?" He sounded more amused than concerned. "What have you been doing—helping yourself to the petty cash?"

"Nothing so dramatic. I was ill and the doctor packed me off home for six weeks. Not that I minded very much, which just goes to show you!"

"And what does it show me, my dear girl?" he enquired, with some concern at her tone.

He piloted her into an old world cafe with the name *The Singing Kettle* over the door. Finding a corner table he drew out a chair for her and seated himself opposite.

"It shows that I am what I said—a broken reed," she explained with a quirk of laughter. "I found that I was very glad indeed to shake the dust of London off my feet and decided that Dormanston was a very much nicer place."

"You're in the minority, then," he said. "Most people I know are only too anxious to get away from the place. Personally, I'm small town minded myself and can think of nothing I'd like better than to settle in a place like Dormanston. You're staying

over Christmas, then?"

"Oh, yes," said Brenda. "I'm not exactly sure when I'm going back. Sometimes," she added with a little sigh, "I wish I wasn't."

He gave her a whimsical glance, then turned to order their tea from the waitress.

When they were alone again he turned to Brenda.

"You don't have to go back, you know," he said. "No one can compel you to do anything you don't want to do! You've made good—proved that you can make the grade—so that all you have to do now is to sit back and write that novel you once spoke about. Then,"—with a twinkle in his eye—"if you are really good, some fat local alderman will one day unveil a plaque saying 'Miss Brenda Marsh, the famous writer, lived here!' Such is fame."

"I don't want fame, thank you, Geoffrey. But I have to earn my living, you know."

"True. Tedious but necessary," he said. "Still, that ought not to present any great problem. Apart from other things, you are not going to live out your years in single blessedness, I trust."

Brenda gave him an exasperated glance, her colour deepening.

"Don't you ever take anything I say seriously, Geoffrey?" she asked.

"Of course, my dear girl. Ah, here comes tea. You know, I believe those *are* the same cakes that have been in the window for years—I'll really have to speak to Mrs. Briggs about it."

"Stop fooling and tell me all about yourself—where you have been and what you've been doing," Brenda admonished him, when the waitress had gone.

Geoffrey shrugged.

"My dear girl, there really isn't anything to tell," he said. "I mean that. I've been here, there and everywhere—at Government expense, of course—and that's about all. Nothing has happened and, it began to seem, nothing ever would, so I was quite glad to get old Jonas Smythe's letter suggesting that it was time I came home to look round at things."

"You mean Mr. Smythe wrote to you?" Brenda was frankly startled.

She knew that the elderly gentleman Geoffrey referred to had been the Weldon family solicitor until his retirement a few years ago and it must have been something serious to have caused him to write to Geoffrey in such terms.

She asked quickly.

"That doesn't mean that your father is—?"

"No," Geoffrey said, when she broke off. "Considering everything, father is not too bad. He was asking after you by the way—said he hadn't seen you for years."

He grinned, but Brenda knew from experience that his thoughts were only half on what he was saying and that something was worrying him.

"There's something wrong, isn't there, Geoffrey?" she said breaking a short silence.

She passed him the tea she had poured out.

He smiled as he took it.

"You always know, don't you, Brenda?" he said, thinking how lovely she looked. "I've never yet succeeded in hiding the fact from you that I was worried about anything. How do you do it?"

"Quite easy," she said, with a shadowy smile. "You—you're very transparent at times, Geoffrey. Besides I am quite sure Mr. Smythe wouldn't have written to you unless the matter was urgent."

"True," he agreed, sipping his tea. "At least I don't have to put on an act for your benefit, my dear girl. To tell you the

truth," he continued, "old Smythe is far from satisfied about what has been going on where the family business is concerned and, from what little I have gleaned in half an hour's talk with him, neither am I. It seems to me that Richard has planted himself very firmly in the saddle, with the result that a great many things have been happening that would not have been permitted in the old days. Get what I mean?"

"I think so," she murmured, remembering what Sally had told her. "Now that Richard is married things are a little different."

"They most certainly are," he returned a trifle grimly. "The chief difference I noticed was that Daphne is quite definitely mistress of the house and expects to be treated as such. Naturally, being her brother-in-law, she could scarcely have shown me the door, but I was made to feel I wasn't wanted before I had been in the place five minutes. As for my father—well—he's completely under her thumb."

"Oh, Geoffrey!" Brenda exclaimed, pained.

"As you know, father took a great deal of pride in running the firm on progressive lines—bonuses to the staff, interest in their welfare, all that kind of thing," he said. "Now, from what Mr. Smythe tells me, a great many of these privileges have been taken away and there is a grave danger that we shall lose some of our best workers."

"That's awful, Geoffrey," she frowned. "Can't you do anything about it? You're a partner in the business, aren't you?"

"In a way," he agreed, his expression grave. "The trouble is, though, I have no real powers to intervene. If I took an active part in the management of the business it would be a different matter, but that would mean sacrificing my career in the army."

"But surely your father is still a director?" she said.

"Yes, but he's practically an invalid now, as you know, and he leaves everything to Richard. And Richard has a wife!" he added meaningfully.

"You mean to say that Daphne—?"

"Calls the tune and Richard dances to it," he nodded. "I haven't been back long but that is one fact which sticks out a mile. Daphne is a social climber, if ever there was one, and if you wish to be 'in the swim' these days, you need money. Lots of it. Wait till you see the kind of party she is planning to give at Christmas! Oh boy!"

"I don't suppose I'll see it," shrugged Brenda.

"Oh, but you will," he said. "Both you and Sally will receive invitations in due course. Father will ask where you are if you don't put in an appearance—if he didn't I should! And though Daphne has the reins tightly clasped in her dainty hands, she is far too wise in her generation to apply the curb too suddenly."

"It all seems horribly unfair," Brenda murmured. "Not much of a homecoming for you, is it, Geoffrey?"

"Oh, I don't know." He smiled wanly. "You're going to be here for Christmas, so what more could I ask? And again, it's grand to be home whatever the circumstances. But there! I didn't trick you into having tea with me in order to discuss my personal troubles. Tell me about yourself, Brenda, and how you have been getting on."

"There's not really much to tell, Geoffrey," she answered. "Sometimes I wonder if I did right in accepting a job on a woman's paper. I mean, it might have been better if I'd been content to struggle along writing the kind of stories I wanted to write."

"As you pointed out just now, you have

your living to earn," he said. "You couldn't have done justice to yourself if you had been pounding a typewriter in somebody's office in a country town! You can look at it that you have been serving an apprenticeship to your art. After all, you must have learned a very great deal?"

"There is that, of course," she conceded. "But I think I'm like you, Geoffrey—small town minded. Sally, on the other hand, would give anything to work in London. She thinks I have a whale of a good time."

"I suppose she wouldn't be human if she didn't make comparisons between her life here and what she imagines yours to be," he smiled. Then serious: "It's funny, but I used to think that Richard and Sally would marry one day, but evidently I was mistaken. Just as well, perhaps. Sally is an individualist if ever there was one and Richard—" He shrugged. "On the other hand, she might have been the making of him. One can never tell."

"It isn't much use speculating now, is it, Geoffrey?" she said. "Richard is married now and Sally—"

"Is threatening to kick over the traces, if I have read between the lines correctly," he put in sagely. "The two things may not be unconnected, you know."

"Perhaps. It's still rather pointless. I mean, one can't do anything about it even if Sally was in love with Richard," Brenda said flatly.

Privately she realised that he had put his finger on the core of Sally's problem.

Though she would not say so to anyone, it had been noticeable that Sally's restlessness dated from the time Richard Weldon's engagement had been announced. Her outburst the previous evening had been directed mainly against her home life, but that might have been merely a peg on which to hang her smouldering resentment.

"When are you calling to see us, Geoffrey?" Brenda asked as they left the cafe together a little later. "Mother was only asking yesterday if I knew when you would be coming home. She'll be very pleased when she knows that you are actually here."

"I was thinking of coming round this evening, as it happens," he answered. "If it is convenient I'll still do so."

"Do," she said eagerly. Then a thought struck her. "But it is your first evening at home, isn't it? I mean, your father—"

"Don't let that worry you, my dear girl," he said, with the suspicion of a sigh. "Father retires at nine—has done, I understand, ever since his illness—and I'm quite certain that both Richard and Daphne would prefer my room to my company. The chances are they'll be having someone in or going out themselves, so you can expect me round about eight-fifteen. Now we'll go and collect sister Sally."

Arriving at the county hall, one of the policemen on duty came over to his car on recognising him.

"Good evening, Mr. Geoffrey," he said, a broad smile on his good humoured face. "It's nice to see you back again. Staying over for Christmas?"

"Yes, I hope so, Wilkins. How are you and Mrs. Wilkins these days?" Geoffrey smiled. "And the children, of course."

"Fine, thank you, sir. We were very sorry to hear about your father's recent illness. Pretty sudden-like, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say," Geoffrey replied. He glanced up and down the street. "Am I all right parking here, for a while?"

"Yes, you're all right here, sir—except when the magistrate's court is sitting," the constable replied. He stayed to chat a moment longer, and then moved off.

Geoffrey watched him go, a smile on his lips as he turned to Brenda.

"There goes a contented man," he said musingly. "My respected brother could take a leaf out of P.C. Wilkins's book and be a great deal happier for it than he is. Wilkins was a regimental-sergeant-major in a crack infantry regiment and has a distinguished war record. He married an A.T.S. girl he met just before D-day, and after the war ended, he enrolled in the police force here. They have a small house, a nice little garden and two lovely kiddies. I'm willing to wager quite a lot that, if you gave Wilkins the chance of stepping into Richard's shoes, he would refuse."

"Do you know everybody in the town?" Brenda said laughingly.

"Pretty well." He grinned. "I—ah, here comes Sally, straight out of her alley. Good evening, Sallykins! How are you?"

"Well, look what the wind's blown in!" cried Sally, coming to a sudden halt, a pleased expression in her eyes. "Why, we were only talking about you last night, Geoffrey. When did you arrive and how are you?"

"This morning—and fine," he said, getting out of the car and opening the door. "Squeeze in—there's room for three on the front seat."

"How long are you staying, Geoffrey?" Sally enquired, as the car moved off. "Over Christmas, I hope?"

"If I have to answer that question another once I'll bite the questioner," he grinned. He slowed down for the traffic lights and then added—"But I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me around the place until the New Year. So don't groan!"

"Oh, goody!" Sally said, smiling gaily at him. "It'll be quite like old times having you and Brenda at home. I needn't ask if Richard fell on your neck and wept tears of joy, I suppose?"

"Well, I think his emotions were a trifle mixed," Geoffrey shrugged. "As I sent him a wire to say when I was arriving he had had time to prepare himself for the great event, but I've had more cordial welcomes in my time! In fact, I was made to feel very much like the prodigal son returning."

"Well, I'm pretty sure he'll take jolly good care to see that there are no fatted calves prepared for you," said Sally, almost maliciously. "He's got too pompous and conceited for words since he married that—woman! If he doesn't watch out he'll get grossly fat!"

Geoffrey roared with laughter.

"Good old Sally," he said. "You never did pull your punches, my girl. Never mind! You'll have a chance to put one over on Daphne. You and Brenda are going to be invited to a party to end all parties, I believe it's a week before Christmas."

"How marvellous—I don't think!" cried Sally scornfully. "I suppose this is Daphne's idea to get her slumping over before her real festivities begin! Well, she can send me an invitation if she wants to, but wild horses wouldn't drag me there. I have a rooted objection to being patronised, as my sister knows."

"Oh, wild horses are out of date, my dear Sally," he chuckled. "We'll use this old bus instead! You mustn't let the side down, you know."

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked suspiciously.

"What I say. I shall be there, and so will a friend of mine—Major Hugh Latimer. Hugh is a good scout, quiet and unassuming—like me!—and he's promised to come down for Christmas. I'm still allowed to invite a friend to stay at my own home, you see," he added, with a lop-sided grin.

"Ho—Ha!" remarked Sally interestedly. "Anyhow, I'm not going to promise to

come. As for being quiet and unassuming, that's the first I've ever heard of it. If your friend is anything like you I shall have to watch my step. A girl can't be too careful these days with all you army men around."

He laughed and stopped the car outside their gate, leaning over to open the door on the opposite side.

"But you'll like Hugh," he said. "He's right out of the top drawer, with a very nice line in sports cars. As a substitute for Richard you couldn't do better."

"Thank you—for nothing," said Sally, stepping out. "Anyhow, I'll think it over, Geoffrey dear. After all, it *might* be rather—amusing!"

Brenda joined her on the pavement, turning a smiling face to the young man at the wheel.

"I'll see she comes, Geoffrey," she promised him jokingly. "Thank you for bringing us home."

"It was a pleasure," he replied courteously.

Something in the way her sister met his smiling glance caused Sally to look at her sharply. A curious expression came into the younger girl's eyes and she turned her head away, as if afraid of betraying a thought that she must at all costs keep to herself.

TIDAL WATERS

THE Weldon home was a big Georgian mansion standing in its own grounds on the outskirts of the town.

On the night of Daphne Weldon's pre-Christmas party it was brilliantly lighted; two massive floodlights bathed the front in a fairy-like brilliance that brought a little gasp from Sally.

"Gracious!" she murmured, as Geoffrey's car swept into the drive. "Daphne must have shares in the electric light company."

Major Hugh Latimer chuckled. He and Sally shared the back seat, with Brenda next to Geoffrey in the front. He was a tall, fair, good looking young man in his late twenties, and, as Sally had already discovered, possessed an almost irrepressible sense of humour.

Although she had known him less than a week, they were fast becoming very good friends, and though she would not have admitted it for worlds, she had found herself looking forward to the evening ahead of them.

"It certainly adds glamour to the scene," he remarked, as they got out of the car and waited while Geoffrey switched off the lights. He glanced around at the other cars parked beneath the trees. "Quite a party!" he added, half under his breath.

"Come along, folks!" Geoffrey called, and taking Brenda's arm, led the way forward.

It was the first time Brenda had seen Richard Weldon and his wife since she had attended their wedding in June.

Tall and willowy, with fair hair beautifully waved, Daphne Weldon received her guests with a little condescending smile that amused Brenda and secretly infuriated Sally.

Richard Weldon was a trifle more cordial, but as Sally remarked later, when she and Brenda were powdering their noses, he looked as if the occasion was proving too much for him. A plumper, less attractive younger edition of Geoffrey, it was nevertheless easy to see that they were brothers.

Where Geoffrey took life as he found it, a smile on his lips, anyone could see that Richard Weldon took life as his wife found it, and Brenda was shocked to see the change that had taken place in him during recent months. He looked worried out of his life.

They passed on, making room for later arrivals, and entered the high-ceilinged drawing-room, which ran the length of the house. There were two large fireplaces, in both of which burned a log fire, but as Brenda knew, the house was also centrally heated.

Brenda glanced across to where Sally was talking to Hugh Latimer, thinking how lovely her sister was to-night. Just then, she was looking up at Hugh, something oddly provocative in her expression.

It had about it the same blend of innocence and sophistication that Brenda had noticed almost as soon as she had arrived home. As if, suddenly, Sally had grown up without quite leaving her childhood behind.

Dancing began soon afterwards, and as she took the floor with Geoffrey, Brenda was conscious of a little thrill, though at the same time she was puzzled and uneasy.

During the past three weeks she had seen Geoffrey a number of times: they had gone about together with Sally and Hugh also.

Yet, though Geoffrey was as charming as ever, there was a withholding aloofness about him that she could not fathom, so that she was left to wait . . . and wonder . . . and wondering, to know the first creeping chill of doubt.

"Sally and Hugh seem to be hitting it off well, don't you think, Brenda?" Geoffrey asked, his glance going over to where the two in question were dancing. "Do you think it's a case?"

"I couldn't really say." She smiled up at him. "Sally is quite unpredictable at times, so I wouldn't commit myself. But Hugh seems smitten, doesn't he?"

Geoffrey nodded.

"He talks about no one but Sally from morning to night!" he said smilingly. "I could tell he was a goner within five minutes of their meeting each other. They always say that it's these confirmed bachelors who fall hardest in the long run, don't they?"

"Is Major Latimer a confirmed bachelor, then?" she asked.

"Well, he was," said Geoffrey, with a quirk of his lips. "He used to hold forth in the mess about young officers who entangled themselves in marriage and put a millstone round their necks for the rest of their lives. According to him, you couldn't be a hundred per cent good soldier and be married at the same time. His view was that having someone you were responsible for—a wife and family—made a man cautious and that a cautious man was never a good soldier."

"Oh! And do you agree with that point of view, Geoffrey?"

For the life of her she could not refrain from asking the question.

Geoffrey appeared to hesitate for a moment. Then—

"Frankly, I don't," he said. "I believe on the other hand, that a man needs some incentive for living other than his ambitions. But marriage is a responsibility, of course, and so it behoves one to be quite sure that one is doing the right thing. After all—"

He broke off as the music ended and they found themselves in the middle of a group of young people, the majority of whom knew them both. A girl with red hair and freckles cut across something Geoffrey was saying.

"Who's the glamorous young lady talking to Richard, Geoffrey?" she said.

He glanced in the direction indicated. His brother was standing near the entrance to the room talking to a slender girl with Titian-coloured hair.

There was something about her which made Brenda think of a hothouse flower and for no reason at all she knew a faint

sensation of uneasiness, completely unaware that it arose from an instinctive recognition of a possible rival.

"That's Moira Hewitt, Daphne's cousin," he informed her. "She lives in London, I believe, but she's spending Christmas here. She's rather glamorous, isn't she?"

The music, supplied by a radiogram, started again, and Brenda found herself claimed by Hugh Latimer. He smiled down at her in the oddly whimsical way he had and made some complimentary reference to her appearance.

But what he said was lost on Brenda, for she had seen Geoffrey go over to where Moira Hewitt was standing.

Sally was dancing with George Brewster, the son of a local solicitor. Evidently he had claimed her before Geoffrey could, but the purposeful manner with which Geoffrey had crossed the floor to Daphne's cousin brought on a feeling of uneasiness within Brenda.

Sally glided by in George Brewster's arms and gave them a little wave. She was looking particularly radiant, with her dark head thrown back, her curls gathered in a provocative little bunch at the nape of her neck, her cheeks faintly flushed with excitement.

Hugh glanced after her and smiled. "What a charming girl your sister is," he said. "Present company always excepted, of course, but she is quite the prettiest girl in the room."

Brenda laughed outright.

"You needn't bother to be polite to me, Hugh," she said teasingly. "I'm not in the least envious or vain—at least, I hope I'm not. Sally is very lovely—and very young," she added, half below her breath.

He guided her skilfully past a couple who were indulging in some fancy steps of their own before he spoke again.

"You are very generous," he said, smiling whimsically. "So much so that I am encouraged to ask you a question! You may not be able to answer it, I know, but on the other hand, it's just possible that you may."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows. "What is it, Hugh?"

"Do I stand a chance with Sally?" he asked.

"Well, that is rather a difficult question," she said, partly to get over her surprise.

"You see," he went on, "I fell in love with her the first time we met. As you know, I have to report back to my unit soon after Christmas and I'd like to know where I stand before I go. At the same time I'm afraid of rushing my fences, as it were. You do understand, don't you?" he ended anxiously.

Brenda nodded.

"Of course, Hugh," she said gently. She hesitated a moment, a deeply thoughtful expression coming into her eyes. Then she said frankly—

"I can't answer your question, Hugh, much as I would like to be able to do so. Sally is—how shall I put it?—rather unsettled at the moment and I'm not sure what she really wants. I don't know if she's sure herself. If I were to give you any advice at all, it would be to be very patient. I don't mean you shouldn't take the opportunity of telling Sally that you love her—if one occurs, that is. But don't try to make one!"

"Thank you, Brenda," he said gratefully, as the dance came to an end. They had stopped alone at the far end of the room and Hugh was able to continue what he was saying. "You know her better than I do, so your advice is just what I needed. It goes without saying that I shall follow it." He grinned suddenly. "It's rather cheek on my part asking you, I suppose."

After all you might not want me for a prospective brother-in-law."

Brenda smiled up at him just as Geoffrey came towards them.

"There is no one I would like better," she said softly.

BRENDA danced twice more with Geoffrey, and once with Hugh, before Richard Weldon came to ask her for a dance.

He seemed very ill at ease and Brenda found it in her heart to pity him. An ambitious and scheming wife had transformed Richard into a mere semblance of his former self and she could tell that he was not enjoying himself one single bit.

"You must be glad to have Geoffrey home, Richard," she said, more for the sake of making conversation than for anything else.

"Well, yes, I am, Brenda," he muttered, throwing a glance over his shoulder, as if, she thought, he was afraid he might be overheard by his wife. "It's rather a pity in some ways though. Father is very ill and ought not to be worried about matters that can be handled better by one of us. He wanted to look in at the party to-night, but Dr. Simms has forbidden him any form of excitement."

"I'm sorry to hear that Richard," she replied gently. "I can't think that having Geoffrey home for Christmas would be bad for your father, though. He thinks the world of him as, of course, he does of you."

"Oh, I daresay," Richard returned indifferently. "But the cobbler should stick to his last, I think. Geoffrey chose the Army as a career and left me to run the business, so I hardly think it's fair to start interfering at this stage!"

"Is Geoffrey interfering?" she asked, surprised at the resentment in his voice.

"Well, not exactly," he returned, as if realising that he had been on the point of saying more than he had intended. "But he insists on airing his views about how the business should be run and it's so bad for father. I really think Geoffrey should show a little more consideration."

"It's most unlike Geoffrey to be inconsiderate," said Brenda warmly, her colour deepening. "Are you sure you aren't reading something into his visit that isn't there, Richard?"

"That's just it," he exclaimed eagerly, ignoring the latter part of her remark. "Geoffrey is usually the most considerate of fellows, so he probably doesn't realise what harm he is doing by talking as he is! I thought, perhaps, as you and he are such good friends, you might drop a hint. What do you say?" He smiled ingratiatingly. Brenda bit back the retort which rose to her lips and said instead:

"I imagine you are quite capable of speaking to Geoffrey on that subject yourself, Richard. Or, failing that, why not ask Daphne? I'm sure that Geoffrey would be more inclined to listen to her than he would be to me."

Richard flushed a dull red and looked very uneasy.

"I'm sorry," he said huffily. "It just struck me that you used to have quite a bit of influence where my brother is concerned. After all, he used to be pretty keen on you at one time, didn't he?"

It was said with scorn, and Brenda's indignation almost overflowed.

But fortunately the dance ended at that moment and she rejoined the group of which Hugh and Sally were the centre, her eyes bright with anger.

Richard had muttered something as he had left her, but whether it was an apology or not she could not have said.

Then Geoffrey came over and took her

arm.

"Here!" he said mysteriously. "I want you, young lady."

He led her masterfully to a door halfway along the room. It led into a square hall, with a second staircase going up to the right. A door on the left led to the kitchen quarters, from behind which came sounds of bustle and preparations, where the servants were busy getting supper.

Brenda looked at him in surprise. "What's all this about, Geoffrey?" she enquired.

"Father wants to see you," he said seriously.

He led the way along a passage to another room, on the south side of the house, and opening the door, ushered her in. It had been old Mr. Weldon's study in former days, but now it was furnished as a bedroom.

Geoffrey's father was seated in an invalid chair drawn up before a crackling fire, a rug over his knees, one thin, blue-veined hand resting on the chair arm.

He looked round as they came in and Brenda experienced a shock of surprise.

The old man looked ill—terribly ill. His cheeks were sunken, giving him a curiously ravaged appearance. But his eyes were as bright and intelligent as ever and it was obvious that he was in full possession of all his mental faculties.

"Ah, Brenda dear," he said, putting out a hand in greeting. "Geoffrey told me that you were here!"

Smiling, she stooped and gave him a swift kiss.

Poignant memories of her childhood, when she and Sally had been given free run of the house, and Mr. Weldon had never been too busy to spare them a kindly word, came back to her and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"I'm sorry you are not well, Mr. Weldon," she murmured throatily, hardly knowing what to say.

He smiled up at her.

"Tis God's will, my child," he said quietly. "I have had a good life, so I mustn't complain. Besides,"—with a sudden twinkle—"I can still enjoy talking to a pretty girl, you know. Tell me," he added, "how do you think Geoffrey is looking?"

"Very well indeed," said Brenda, with a smiling glance in Geoffrey's direction. "And don't you think so, too, Mr. Weldon?"

"Indeed, yes. He's broadened in mind as well as body, I should imagine." Again his old eyes twinkled. "Needless to say I'm glad to have him home. He's needed here, my dear. Things aren't what they were, by a long chalk."

Brenda patted his hands comfortingly.

"Now, you mustn't worry, Mr. Weldon. Geoffrey can be trusted to take care of everything. All you have to do is to think about getting better."

"I'm afraid I shall never get better, my child," he said, a note of quiet resignation in his voice. "I have never been one to run away from facts and that is I have faced for some time now. But I can go to my Maker with a clear conscience, for there is no man living who can point a finger at me and say he hasn't had a square deal from me. Now there is only one thing I want,"—he paused and smiled at the girl in a manner to cause her heart to skip a beat—"and that is to know that you and Geoffrey are going to be married. When that happens I can die content."

A wave of colour swept Brenda's cheeks, and she dare not look at Geoffrey, who was standing on the other side of his father's chair.

For a moment there was an embarrassed

silence, and Brenda could not have spoken to have saved her life.

Then Geoffrey cleared his throat and smiled briefly at her before turning to the older man.

"Who's talking of dying, father?" he asked lightly. "You're good for many years yet. As for the rest, you don't have to worry about that, either! Brenda and I are engaged, but we haven't told anyone about it yet. You are the first to know. That is so, isn't it, Brenda, my love?"

He looked across at her as he spoke and in his eyes was an appeal for her pity and understanding. Even if she had not loved him, it was an appeal that she would have found impossible to resist, and she gave an almost imperceptible nod, her lips trembling.

Mr. Weldon looked from one to the other and then leaned back in his chair with a deep sigh. Putting out his hand he took Brenda's and held it tightly, giving the other to his son.

"That's the best news I've heard for many a long day," he said in a trembling voice. He turned his head and looked at Brenda and she could have sworn there were tears in his eyes. "God bless you, my dear. You—you've made more than Geoffrey happy to-night. You've made an old man's dreams come true as well!"

Too deeply moved to speak she bent and kissed him. And what else might have been said will never be known, for at that moment the door opened and Daphne Weldon came in.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, giving them all a sweeping glance. "I didn't know you had visitors, father. Do you think it wise? It's getting rather late, you know."

"Nonsense, nonsense," her father-in-law replied, a shade of annoyance in his tone. "I wished to see Brenda and asked Geoffrey to bring her to me. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that they have just become engaged," he added, beaming.

"Really?" Daphne Weldon smiled mirthlessly, a look of scarcely veiled hostility coming into her eyes. "Congratulations, both of you! Is it a family secret, or do you intend announcing the good news to the world?"

"Oh, we'll keep it in the family for the moment, if you don't mind, Daphne," said Geoffrey. "Naturally Brenda wants to tell her own people before the news gets round. You do understand, don't you?"

"Oh, of course," she said, with a tinkling little laugh. She turned to Brenda. "You must be feeling positively thrilled, my dear! As a soldier's wife you'll travel to all kinds of romantic places. Not like the rest of us, who have nothing but Dormanston to look forward to for the rest of our days."

"Oh, but there's nothing wrong with Dormanston, my dear Daphne," said Geoffrey, with deliberate calm. "In fact, that's what Brenda and I will be doing—living in Dormanston. You see,"—he paused maddeningly, a slight smile wreathing his lips—"I am resigning my commission."

"Resigning—"

Had he said he was going to jump off the roof to amuse her guests, Daphne could not have been more taken aback.

In the silence that followed Brenda felt she could almost hear the beating of her own heart.

Old Mr. Weldon gave a sudden chuckle.

"That surprised you, didn't it, Daphne?" he said, with obvious enjoyment. "Geoffrey and I have been having a long discussion about various matters and I'm happy to say that he thinks the same way as I do."

"Well, really!" Daphne found her voice at last, and turned accusingly to Geoffrey.

"So that's what you've been planning, is it? Well, if you think Richard—"

"What about me, my dear?"

Richard Weldon came into the room to hear the latter part of his wife's speech. He glanced around, sensing something afoot.

Daphne turned, her hands clenched at her sides.

"Geoffrey has just said that he's giving up the Army and intends living here," she said, her voice shaking. "I told you what would happen if you allowed him to come here! Now you see, I suppose!"

"Really, my dear, you forget that Geoffrey is a partner in the business and has a perfect right to decide what he wants to do," protested Richard, reddening. "In any case, I don't see—" He broke off, glancing uncertainly at Brenda.

"Oh, it's quite all right, old chap. Brenda is practically one of the family now that we're engaged to be married," said Geoffrey blandly. "Apart from all that, though, I think it might be a good idea to discuss the matter some other time. You have guests out there and, as Daphne said a few minutes ago, it's getting somewhat late."

"I quite agree," replied Richard shortly. He hesitated a moment, then turned to Brenda, holding out a hand. "May I wish you happiness, Brenda? I can't tell you how pleased I am by the news."

"Thank you, Richard," she murmured flushing.

He sounded sincere enough and she felt a little rush of pity for him. Caught between the upper and nether millstone of family loyalty and tradition on the one hand, and his wife's social ambitions on the other, Richard was anything but a happy man.

Geoffrey moved forward and took her arm.

"Come, my sweet, or Sally and Hugh will think we're lost," he said. He dropped a hand on his father's shoulder in passing. "Good night, dad! I'll tell Bateman you're ready for your hot milk, shall I?"

"Yes, please, my boy. I am feeling rather tired, if the truth is known." He looked up and smiled at Brenda. "Good night, my dear—and God bless you."

"Good night, Mr. Weldon," she whispered, stooping to bestow another kiss on his cheek. "Sleep well."

OUTSIDE in the corridor Brenda stopped, fighting back the panic which gripped her, looking reproachfully at Geoffrey.

"Oh, Geoffrey," she exclaimed, in a low voice, "what are we going to do now?"

He smiled, an expression in his eyes she could not understand.

"Well, the usual practice, when couples become engaged—shout it from the house-tops—"

"Oh, stop it!" she said, making a cross little gesture. "It's all very well for you to stand there laughing, but look at the mess you've landed us in!"

"Mess?" he echoed. "Well, I like that! Being engaged isn't usually described as a mess. Hang it all, my dear girl, I've just paid you the greatest compliment a man can pay a woman and, instead of being flattered, you call it a mess."

"Listen, Geoffrey, this is serious," Brenda insisted, half laughing despite herself. "I ask you, what are we going to do?"

"Carry on the good work," he grinned. "At any rate, we'll have to go through the motions for the time being. I'm afraid. Quite honestly, I hadn't the foggiest idea of what was likely to happen when father asked me to bring you to him. It was doubly unfortunate, Daphne coming in

like that, but there you are."

"You mean you want me to go on pretending to be engaged to you?" she cried, staring at him.

"Nothing of the kind. I want you to be really engaged to me," he corrected.

"We've got to do the thing properly or not at all. Father is as sharp as a needle, despite his illness, and—well—you don't want to upset him, do you?"

"I see," she said slowly. "I'm just a pawn in the game, is that it? It hasn't occurred to you that I might be fond of someone else, I suppose?"

"If that's true, then there's an end of it," he said hastily. He shot out a hand and caught her wrist, drawing her to him. "Is it true, Brenda?" he asked.

For a moment she struggled with her conscience, pride fighting a losing battle in the process. Then she sighed and lowered her eyes.

"No," she admitted finally. "There—there's no one else, Geoffrey. If—if you want me to—I don't mind pretending to be engaged for the time being. After all,"—the sudden colour flaming in her cheeks—"we can always break it off later, can't we?"

He laughed and tucked her hand under his arm, starting to walk towards the drawing room, from whence came sounds of laughter and merriment.

"I took a chance, but it wasn't really taking a chance," he said, a note of sudden gaiety in his voice. "I felt pretty sure you would play, even though you were taken unawares, as I was. Now all we have to do is to put a bold face on it and pretend that we are really in love!"

A QUESTION OF PRIDE.

A FEW days before Christmas Eve Sally came home in a raging temper. She had gone to *The Singing Kettle* to buy some cakes and had seen Geoffrey seated at a table with Moira Hewitt.

Then she had just got back to her office when Hugh Latimer had telephoned to ask if she would make up one of a party to go to the ice rink at Blenheim the following afternoon, a Saturday. Moira, it appeared, was an expert skater and the suggestion had come from her.

"If Hugh thinks I'm going to make up a party with that glamorous redhead he's making a mistake," she said, telling Brenda what had happened. "Just because she wants to show off at our expense is no reason why I should help her. If he's so anxious to go skating with her—he can."

Brenda burst out laughing.

"You sound all mixed up, my dear," she said humorously. "I see no great harm in going. As it happens, Geoffrey asked me to go and I said I would. There are two or three others joining in so it ought to be rather fun."

"Fun?" echoed Sally, stung into indiscretion. "You've a strange idea of fun, my dear Brenda. Personally, I'd have more pride than to tag along as one of a crowd in order to watch my fiancée dance attendance upon a girl like Moira Hewitt. She's a scalp hunter and it's men like Hugh and Geoffrey who provide her with her spoils."

"Aren't you being a little extravagant with your remarks?" enquired Brenda coldly. "I don't see why you should accuse Geoffrey of dancing attendance upon Moira. She's a guest in his father's house, remember, so you can hardly expect him to turn his back on her."

Sally's eyes flashed.

"Being a guest in his father's house doesn't mean he's got to live in her pocket," she retorted. "He doesn't have to take her shopping in the car or give her tea at *The Singing Kettle*. Does he? Hugh is just as

bad. They're both acting like a pair of moths dancing round a flame. Oh, how I hate men!"

Brenda said nothing. There was not anything very much she could say. Only she knew that her engagement to Geoffrey was a piece of make-believe. Bitter-sweet, tantalising in its mockery though it was, she still had frequently to remind herself that it was only make-believe.

No doubt there was a good deal in what Sally had said, she reflected wistfully. Moira Hewitt was not only beautiful and self-possessed, she was also a good companion with a sparkling fund of conversation and, what was much more important where men were concerned, could be a good listener.

"I don't think you are being fair to either Hugh or to Geoffrey," Brenda said. "In any case, there's nothing we can do about it. Moira has only to say she wants to go somewhere to make it very difficult for one or the other of them to refuse to take her. She is Daphne's cousin and she is here on a visit, so whatever you may think of the present situation, she can't be left out."

"Oh, she's Daphne's cousin all right," exclaimed Sally, with feeling. "Birds of a feather, if you ask me—out for all they can get!"

"Don't please, Sally dear," said Brenda protestingly. "That kind of talk doesn't get you anywhere. In any case, I'm not really interested. Geoffrey is a free agent and he can take Moira to tea just as often as he likes as far as I'm concerned."

Sally gave her a glance of mingled curiosity and concern. She opened her lips to speak but evidently thought better of what she had been about to say.

Instead she picked up her coat and walked to the door.

"Very well, Brenda, if that's the way you feel about it," she shrugged. "But don't say I didn't warn you, that's all."

Left to herself, Brenda put on a coat and slipped away from the house into the garden, the mild evening settling round her like a pall.

Hitherto she and Sally had steered clear of the kind of emotional entanglements in which they were now caught up, and a situation had developed with which she had no way of dealing.

Her supposed engagement to Geoffrey had complicated matters to an unbelievable extent; her parents had been delighted and congratulations had poured in from all sides.

Caught up in a web of doubt and indecision, she seemed to have lost her normal powers of reasoning, so that she could envisage no future, no way out of the position that would leave her with even the rags of her pride intact.

But one thing stood out clear. Geoffrey was not in love with her—never had been. If he were he could not treat the affair as the joke he made of it when they were alone.

It was all rather horrible, really. She hated deception in any shape or form and, however great the justification, no amount of specious argument would gloss over the fact that they were acting a lie.

Had it not been for the fact that old Mr. Weldon had had a relapse the day after the party she would have told Geoffrey that she could not go on with the farce: As it was, her hands were tied, for the last reports she had received said that the old man was very ill!

Hateful though the position was, for the moment at any rate, she had no alternative but to go on pretending, even though it hurt to do so.

She walked slowly to the bottom of the

garden, her hands clenched in the pockets of her coat.

She had watched the progress of Sally's love affair with a kind of acid bitterness at the injustice of the fate that had overtaken her, feeling herself as one who was set apart by circumstances not of her making.

If only she did not love Geoffrey so selflessly, so wholeheartedly as she did! Then it wouldn't matter what he did, but now his power to hurt her was the measure of her love.

Her mind went back to what Sally had been saying in the kitchen a few moments ago. Remembering what Hugh had said on the night of the party Brenda could not bring herself to believe that he was so susceptible that he could become interested in another girl almost overnight, however attractive.

Yet, how was she to know? She would have staked her life on Geoffrey's honesty, his consideration, yet he had not hesitated to make use of her in what most people would condemn as a particularly callous fashion, in order to serve his own ends.

Yet that was not quite fair, she admitted, after a little mental struggle. To think along those lines was to allow her resentment to warp her judgment.

Geoffrey had been taken as unawares as she had been and, given no time to think, they had found themselves hopelessly involved before either of them had had time to consider all the implications. If Daphne Weldon had not come in when she had—

The kitchen door opened, letting out a stream of light and her mother's voice reached her, faintly anxious.

"Brenda! Where are you, dear? It's getting awfully cold."

"Coming, mother!" she answered, turning towards the house.

That was life, she thought, as she hurried toward the light. Just when things became unbearable; just when breaking point had been reached, the equivalent of a kitchen door would open and all the little homely things would come clamouring for attention, refusing to be denied. It was just as well, perhaps.

"You oughtn't to be out in the garden at this time of night, my dear," scolded her mother. "You don't want to be ill again, do you? Why, you haven't even got a scarf!"

MEANTIME Geoffrey was standing with his back to the log fire in the drawing-room of his father's house. Moira Hewitt was seated at one end of the big settee, her hands clasped round one knee, gazing into the fire.

In the background, the music from some Continental station came softly over the radio, a mere murmur of sound in the stillness of the big room.

"It's so lovely and peaceful here," said Moira. "So different from London, with all its rush and bustle. I'll hate going back."

"Will you?" Geoffrey raised his eyebrows. "I thought you liked that kind of thing? You told me not so long ago that you considered the only thing that mattered in life was having a good time while you were young enough to enjoy it."

She gave him a darting glance from beneath long lashes, her eyes provocative.

"You *would* throw that up in my face," she said reproachfully. "I daresay it sounds silly to you, but since I came on this visit to Daphne I've realised that there are other things in life than that."

"Such as, for instance?" he prompted, lighting a cigarette.

She made a little gesture.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand, being a man," she said. "But I feel as if I belong

here. I've never felt like that about any other place."

"Well, you might go farther and fare worse," he said smilingly. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, a slight frown crossing his face. "I wonder what's happened to Hugh?" he continued, returning his lighter to his pocket. "He said that he expected to be back by seven and it's nearly half past already."

Moira made a little impatient movement that betrayed her vexation.

Despite all her efforts, Geoffrey appeared to be singularly blind to the opportunities she threw in his path. In fact, he betrayed no more interest in her than he might have done in any other guests, so that she felt his indifference to be a challenge.

The fact that Geoffrey and Brenda were engaged was no kind of an obstacle to a girl of Moira's stamp. She had weighed everything up very carefully and, being no fool, had quickly assessed the situation where Richard and Geoffrey were concerned.

Consequently, with complete faith in her own charms, she deliberately set to work to woo the latter from his allegiance, seeing herself in her imagination already installed as mistress of Weldon Manor; for Geoffrey being the elder, if he married and settled down, Richard and his wife would have to move into the Lodge.

She put on her sweetest smile, therefore, and pretended an interest she was far from feeling.

"Where has Hugh gone, Geoffrey?" she enquired. "He's been away all day, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He went to London on some business or other, I believe," he said indifferently. "He expected to be back by now, but he's probably been held up on the road. It looked as if it might be foggy when we came in."

"I daresay that's what has happened," she murmured, stifling a yawn. Then she looked up engagingly. "Is it true that you are going to leave the Army, Geoffrey?"

"And who told you?" he asked in turn.

"Oh, Daphne just mentioned it this morning. I asked her how long leave you had got, I believe."

"Officially, my leave ends on the twenty-eighth," he said. "I have applied for an extension, however, as my father is so ill, and at the same time requested permission to resign my commission."

There was a curious deliberation about the way he gave her the information that puzzled Moira and she wondered if she had annoyed him by seeming curious.

"I hope you didn't mind my asking?" she said quickly.

"Not at all," he replied politely. "It will be common knowledge in a few days."

"Will you be sorry to give up the Army, Geoffrey?" she asked.

"For some reasons, yes," he said, flicking his ash into the fire. "But on the whole I shan't regret the step I am taking. There are—compensations." He smiled.

"Yes, indeed," she sighed. "I can believe that. Geoffrey! You've no idea how envious I am."

"Envious?" He looked questioningly at her.

"Of course." She laughed. "Fancy being able to live in a place like this! I don't just mean the house—but everything."

Geoffrey looked a trifle incredulous.

"I can't imagine you being content with the humdrum existence of a country town, my dear Moira," he said. "After all you have said I should think it would begin to pall in time. It can be deadly dull unless you have a real interest in the country, you know."

"Oh, but I have!" she protested. "I'm not the fly-by-night you seem to think I am.

I mean, dancing and parties are all very well, but they don't amount to much in the long run, do they?"

"I suppose not," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. The sound of a car coming up the drive reached them and he brightened visibly, much to Moira's annoyance. "That will be, Hugh," he went on, in a tone of such obvious relief that she could have stamped her foot. "He's not so late, after all."

"How nice!" she said sarcastically. She got up and crossed to the fire, warming her hands at the blaze. "It's such a pity he has fallen for the wrong girl, don't you think?"

Geoffrey stared at her.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" he asked.

She laughed provocatively, before turning away and going over to the radio.

"My dear Geoffrey, you don't really expect me to tell *you* that, do you? Besides, you've got eyes, haven't you? You've seen what's been happening. I know I have."

With a savage little jerk of her wrist she switched off the radio, and in the tense silence that followed they heard the sound of footsteps crossing the hall. The next moment the door opened and Hugh entered.

RETURN TO HAPPINESS.

SOON after lunch the following afternoon Sally left the garden by the side gate and took the road which led to the open country.

A good walker, she liked nothing better than a long country ramble, but to-day her thoughts were on other things, her parting words to Brenda epitomising the bitterness which engulfed her.

"I don't care what Hugh says, thinks or does," she had flashed out, when Brenda had reminded her that Hugh would probably be calling to take her out. "If he wants to go skating with Moira Hewitt he can. I said I wasn't going and I mean it."

She walked on, leaving the houses behind and took the path which led over a stile to the rising ground where a ring of ancient larks brooded over the countryside.

It was one of those bright, cold days which set the blood tingling in one's veins, and Sally would have been less than human had she not experienced a sense of uplift.

By the time she reached the trees and paused to take breath, much of her temper had evaporated.

The truth was, she admitted to herself, Hugh Latimer had come into her life at a time when there was a breach to be healed, so that her emotions had been in a state of flux. Hugh was the complete opposite to Richard Weldon, yet there had been a time when Geoffrey's brother had been her hero.

That she had probably been in love with love, rather than with Richard, was something she was not prepared to admit, but even so passing an affair had power to wound.

Now she was facing a crisis of deeper and more lasting significance, so that once again she was thrown into a turmoil of doubt and indecision that found an outlet in a childlike desire to bury her face in her hands and burst into tears.

It was at that moment that Hugh Latimer appeared on the scene.

"Hullo, Sally," he greeted, smilingly, coming silently up a path on the right. "It seems that my luck is in, after all. I was more than half afraid I'd miss you."

"Really?" she said, with well assumed indifference. "Does that mean you have been following me about?"

"You can call it that if you like," he chuckled. "I went to the house hoping that I could persuade you to come out for a drive with me, but Brenda said you had gone for a walk. She told me which way you had gone, so I drove along the road as far as the bridge and then cut up the path here."

"I forgot you were in the Intelligence Corps," she said flippantly. "Of course, it would be quite easy for you to work it all out, wouldn't it?"

"Not at all," he rejoined, quite unruffled. "I wanted to see you and it seemed a pity to waste a lovely afternoon. Having the car made it easy enough to overtake you."

Hugh could see that she was feeling anything but happy and determined to find out the reason. Utterly without conceit, it never occurred to him that he might be the innocent cause.

"I thought you were so keen on taking Moira skating?" she enquired, deceptively sweet. "You seemed to be when you telephoned yesterday afternoon. Aren't you going now?"

"As you said you wouldn't come I backed out," he replied quietly. "Then just before lunch Geoffrey phoned from the works to say that he wouldn't be home until much later, so the whole idea fizzled out. Incidentally, I telephoned you from London. I had to go up to see the powers-that-be about a new posting. I've been offered a staff appointment that will keep me in England, but if I turn it down, the alternative is a long spell of duty in Hong-Kong."

Sally turned to him in surprise.

"Oh, I didn't know," she said, a little taken aback. "The girl at the switchboard never said it was a long distance call—she just put you through."

"It doesn't matter," he said, with a smile. "I hadn't time to phone you before I left—I only had the letter offering me the job yesterday morning, you see. The trouble is, I've got to make up my mind almost at once. They're stretching a point, really, in giving me a choice."

Sally felt herself beginning to tremble. She stared before her, her lower lip caught up between white, even teeth.

Then—

"Have you decided, Hugh?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said quietly. "You see, it—well—depends on you, Sally."

"On me?" She stared at him wide-eyed. "How can it possibly depend on me? We—we hardly know one another and—and—" She made a helpless little gesture.

"We haven't known one another very long," Hugh said gravely. "But I don't think time has much to do with it, really. You see,"—he paused and smiled at her—"I knew I was in love with you when I had only known you for a few minutes, Sally darling. It sounds crazy, I admit, but it happens to be true. During the last ten days I have dared to hope that you felt the same, but I expect that's too much to ask."

She looked coldly at him, only her quivering lips betraying the storm of emotion which swept through her.

"I—it's rather pointless to discuss the matter, don't you think, Hugh?" she said frostily. "Why don't you try your blandishments on Moira Hewitt? I'm sure she'd be thrilled to death."

"Moira?" he frowned. "What on earth has she got to do with it? It's you I love, Sally. Only you!"

Sally burst out laughing. If there was a note of something like hysteria in her laughter he did not notice it.

"What's funny about it?" he demanded a little tersely. "Really, you are the most

infuriating person I know! For two pins I could shake you."

She stopped laughing and gazed at him in wonder.

"Then why don't you?" she said, in a queer, choked voice. "I—" She turned away, covering her face with her hands.

In one stride Hugh was at her side.

"Sally—Sally darling," he murmured, a tender look in his eyes. "Don't cry like that, please, my dearest. The last thing I want to do is to hurt you. Don't you know that I worship the ground you tread on?"

There was a tense pause. Then, very slowly, Sally took her hands from her face and turned to look at him.

"You mean—you want to marry me, Hugh?" she whispered.

"Of course, my darling. I love you with the kind of love that only comes to a man once in his lifetime—the same kind of love that Geoffrey has for your sister! Grant me the privilege and I will do anything to make you happy!"

"Oh, Hugh!" she breathed, the swift colour rising in her cheeks.

For a long moment she looked at him, her eyes glowing with a new, shining emotion that seemed to fill her entire being. Then, with a little sigh she gave herself up to his embrace.

A little later she sighed and lifted her head from his shoulder.

"I've been very silly, Hugh dear," she murmured. "Can—can you forgive me?"

"You mean you were jealous?" he said teasingly. "Well, my love, there's nothing to forgive about that. It merely proves how much you love me."

"It's true," she nodded. "But—but that isn't all, Hugh."

"Oh?" He smiled. "What else is there to confess, young lady?"

"It's nothing, really. I mean, it doesn't matter any more. But I want you to know."

"Yes?" he prompted.

"Well, I imagined I was in love with Richard and when he became engaged to Daphne I thought my heart would break," she said. "That was why I wanted to get away from here. I felt I hated the place."

"I understand, my sweet. But all that is behind us now. All we have to think about is how soon we can be married. That, and the future. It belongs to us, you know."

"Don't you mind?"

"Why should I mind?" He bent his head and kissed her. "All that belongs to the past, as I said. Whether you really loved him or merely thought you did is beside the point. And now we're going home to tell the others our news! I don't know about you, my sweet, but I feel I want to shout it from the housetops."

A gleam came into Sally's eyes as she turned to walk with him down the hill.

"You don't need to do that in Dormanston," she smiled. "All you have to do is to whisper it. It will get round soon enough."

CHRISTMAS DAY dawned cold and bright. There had been a fall of snow during the night, and the trees, when Brenda looked out of her window on waking, were covered with frost.

"Oh, lovely!" cried Sally, coming to join her, a slender figure in a quilted dressing-gown. "It's almost a white Christmas. Oh, Brenda darling, I'm so happy I could cry!"

Then she gave Brenda a hug and a kiss and snatching up her towel, ran up to the bathroom.

Brenda watched her go, a smile on her lips. The news of Sally's engagement had come as a tremendous relief to her. Right

up to the last moment she had not been sure how strong a hold the past had upon the younger girl's affections, but now it seemed that everything had come right for her.

If only they would come right in other ways, she thought, with a deep sigh.

The previous afternoon Geoffrey had called for her in the car and together they had indulged in a whirl of last minute shopping. It had been fun, and later they had met Hugh and Sally for tea at *The Singing Kettle*, which was more than usually crowded and with everybody in a festive mood.

Somewhat to everyone's surprise Moira Hewitt had cut short her visit and gone back to London.

The excuse had been that some friends had returned unexpectedly from abroad and that she particularly wished to see them, but Brenda had her own ideas on the subject.

She had come to the conclusion that Moira had decided there was better game for her set in London than she could find at Weldon Manor.

How true that was she learned much later, when Geoffrey told her of Moira's attempt at mischief-making, of which the hint that Brenda was in love with Hugh had been only the beginning.

On the way home Geoffrey had told her that he and Richard had reconciled their differences and that his application to resign his commission had been approved by the War Office.

"Daphne was behind the whole thing," he said bluntly. "She had ideas of seeing Richard at the head of a prosperous business, not so much for the money side of it, but for the prestige it would bring her. She was keen on seeing him made an alderman and become mayor in time and all that kind of thing. And, of course, she was jealous, too. I'm older than Richard and when I announced my intention of taking an active part in the affairs of the firm she saw in that a threat to her cherished dreams."

"What's going to happen now, Geoffrey?" Brenda had asked.

"Oh, nothing very much, my dear," he had replied, with a smile. "I think, secretly at any rate, that Richard is rather more relieved than otherwise at the turn of events. He was out of his depth and allowed Daphne to influence him far more than he should have done. If father hadn't been taken ill, of course, none of this might have happened, but as it is, I feel it is my duty to take his place. At least, as far as anyone can ever take his place."

HE had gone on to tell her of his plans, of the contract to build a small fleet of fast patrol launches for the Navy, of experiments that were being conducted by the research department. And Brenda had listened attentively, putting in an intelligent question here and there.

She was deeply moved by his confidences, knowing instinctively that it had been a wrench for him to abandon his career in the Army.

Yet, deeply as she respected him for the high sense of duty he had displayed, she was hurt by his apparent indifference to her feelings, his readiness to take it for granted that she did not mind pretending to be engaged any more than he did.

It had been arranged that he and Hugh would call for them in time for church on Christmas morning.

Old Mr. Weldon had rallied wonderfully, Geoffrey told her, and Brenda had promised to go and see him later on Christmas Day. He was still confined to his room, so that there would not be much in the way of festivities at Weldon Manor.

"Richard and Daphne are going over to her parents in Ringwood almost immediately after church," he said. "Hugh and I will listen to the Queen's speech in father's room and after that he'll have to rest. Bateman, his valet, will be there to look after him, so that we shall be free to come over to your place. I can run you back later to see father."

Brenda had bought them all individual presents. There was a lovely new winter coat for her mother, a dressing jacket and two pairs of nylon stockings for Sally, a new and very expensive pipe for her father and a wrist-watch for George.

The family had conspired together to give Brenda a present that was to be from them all. It was a coach-hide handbag with a shoulder strap and Sally had added a dozen handkerchiefs on each of which she had embroidered a letter "B".

More presents arrived by post, including a beautiful scarf for Sally from an old admirer, and a shopping bag for their mother from an old friend in Bournemouth.

The previous evening Sally and Brenda had decorated a small Christmas tree which George had planted in a tub in the bay window, and there were gaily coloured streamers from the corners of the room to the light in the ceiling. Mr. Marsh's contribution to the gaiety was to fasten a sprig of mistletoe over the dining-room door.

"Not that it's strictly necessary," he had said, with a sly glance at his two lovely daughters, and was rewarded by a rich blush which stained Sally's cheeks and a smile from Brenda.

If her smile had a quality of wistfulness about it that was very near to tears, no one seemed to notice.

Hugh and Geoffrey arrived in two cars just after half-past ten. They were admitted by George, who brought them into the kitchen where Mrs. Marsh and the girls were putting the finishing touches to the dinner.

Hugh drew Sally aside and, taking a jeweller's box from his pocket, slipped a ring on the third finger of her left hand.

"There," he said, in a tone of satisfaction, "now you can't get out of it if you wanted to."

She dimpled at him and held her hand out, an awed expression coming into her eyes.

"But I don't want to, Hugh darling," she whispered shyly. Then frowned. "But how did you know the size of my finger?"

"Being in the Intelligence Corps, as you pointed out the other day, it was easy," he said teasingly. "I got Brenda to steal one of your gloves for me. Like it?"

"Oh, Hugh, it's lovely," she breathed. She ran across to her mother and held out her hand. "Oh, mummy, look!"

Mrs. Marsh smiled and glanced at Hugh.

"Bless you both," she murmured a little unsteadily. "It—it's a lovely ring, Sally. Take great care of it, my dear."

"They've stolen our thunder," Geoffrey said to Brenda, smiling down at her in a way that brought a flush to her cheeks. "Never mind, revenge is sweet. We'll steal a march on them yet! Now"—looking round—"how are we going?"

"I'll take Sally and George in my car," said Hugh. "That leaves you to bring Brenda and Mr. and Mrs. Marsh. Does that suit everybody?"

Apparently it did for it was in that order that they set off for church a few minutes later, Brenda beside Geoffrey on the front seat. She was wearing his present to her, a brooch made in the form of a horse-shoe and set with rubies mounted in platinum.

Somewhat shyly she had given him a silver cigarette case with his initials engraved in one corner. He had lost his own just before coming home on leave and had told her about it. When she handed him the packet, and he had seen what it contained, he had looked at her a little queerly and seemed about to say something other than what he did.

The church was crowded, and the service a deeply moving one. Kneeling there between Geoffrey and her mother, Brenda felt something of the peace of that holy place steal into her heart, and it seemed as if the Christmas message contained something for her that was both a promise and a release.

No doubt it did the same for every individual member of the congregation, but as the voices of the choir rose to the high vaulted nave in the lovely old Christmas anthem, she felt as if she were carried away from all the doubt and turmoil that had beset her and that, in some mysterious way she could not define, the future was bright before her.

"I wish Hugh could have stayed to have Christmas dinner with us," Sally remarked, when they were back at the house once more. "But there, I mustn't be selfish. I think it's wonderful of them to want to stay with old Mr. Weldon."

"You would do the same" said Brenda, smiling at her.

"Oh, of course. But a girl doesn't get engaged every day of the week," said Sally laughing. She glanced round the room with sparkling eyes. "And to think I once called this a dump! I'll tell you now, I wouldn't change it for a palace."

Brenda laughed and putting an arm around her shoulders, gave her an affectionate hug. Sally put her arm around Brenda's waist and for a moment the two sisters stood there without speaking, united in a bond of affection and respect that was as rare as it was beautiful.

They were standing like that, gazing into the fire, when Mr. Marsh came in.

"You both look very happy," he smiled. "That's how it should be. It does my old heart good to see you."

"Old heart indeed!" scoffed Sally, giving him a kiss. "Anyone would think you were ninety-odd to hear you talk! Don't you know that a man is as old as he feels?"

"Then you make me feel young again, my dear," he said laughingly. "When do you expect that young man of yours again?"

"About four. Hugh and Geoffrey were going to stay with Mr. Weldon to hear the Queen's broadcast and then were coming over. Brenda is going back with Hugh later to see his father."

"Splendid," said Mr. Marsh, taking out his pipe and beginning to fill it. "I suppose we shall have to start thinking in terms of wedding bells before long, eh?"

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," said Sally. "We haven't got round to discussing the date yet."

"Well, unless young men have changed very considerably since my time you'll find that Hugh won't be laggardly in bringing the subject up! What about you, my dear?"—addressing Brenda. "Have you and Geoffrey decided when you are going to be married yet?"

Brenda blushed vividly and looked hurriedly away.

"No, daddy. We—we haven't really thought about it," she said lamely. "There—there hasn't been very much time and a lot depends upon how his father is."

"I see." Mr. Marsh lit his pipe, his eyes twinkling. "As a matter of fact, it might be a good idea to have a double wedding. Think of the expense it would

save!"

Both girls laughed, but Brenda was conscious of a little pang of remorse. She felt ashamed as she thought of the deceit she was practising and wanted nothing so much as to blurt out the truth.

It was nearly dusk when she and Geoffrey set off in his car to pay her promised visit to Mr. Weldon.

"We won't stay long," he said, as he drove through the town. "Father is very frail and quickly gets tired. He's looking forward to seeing you, though."

Brenda nodded. She dreaded the coming interview, though it could not be avoided. Mr. Weldon would be sure to ask them when they were going to be married and, unlike her father, he would not be so easily put off.

She need not have worried, though. The invalid was frailer even than she had expected, notwithstanding that Geoffrey had prepared her. Half the time he scarcely knew who she was and twice called her Daphne. Then, later, he seemed to sink into the past and spoke to her as if she were a little girl again and had come to play.

"Poor darling," she whispered when they were back in the car again. "I can't bear to see him like that. Is— isn't there any hope, Geoffrey?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," he said gravely.

"Dr. Simms says that he's gradually sinking. But you mustn't be sad, my sweet, for he isn't suffering in any way. He—he's just tired, that's all."

She nodded, unable to speak.

They drove for part of the way in silence, and then Geoffrey turned the car down a street which led to the river. There was a wide carriageway lined with trees, with the water on one hand, and half way along he stopped the car.

"There's something I want you to remember, Brenda," he said, speaking with a deliberation that caused her to glance enquiringly at him. "Whatever the motives which induced you to play up to me the night my father said he wanted us to marry—whether they were induced by pity or anything else—I want you to know that you did something that can't be assessed in ordinary human terms."

"My father was a sick man *then*, and a sick man's fancies take curious forms sometimes. But you didn't smile, as some might have done. You gave him something that no one could take away—something he could hug to himself and treasure, though it was only a thought. And I—I am grateful. How grateful I would like to be able to tell you, only—well—there aren't any words."

It was quite a long speech for Geoffrey to make and by the time he ended, Brenda was near to tears. All at once she saw their little plot in its true perspective and with an almost frightening breadth of vision saw that what she had done was *right*.

She made a little restless movement with her hands.

"I—I don't know what to say, Geoffrey," she murmured. "If—if it has been possible to make your father happy, as you say it has done, then I am glad I was able to—to help. I hated the whole thing at first—the deception—all the rest of it, but now I don't think I mind any more. It—is that what you wanted me to say?"

"More than anything," he answered quietly, staring through the windscreen into the darkness. "You see, I knew you hated it. I knew pretty well just how you felt about the whole thing. But we were stampeded into playing a part, knowing that, I had to be careful not to overstep the bounds. You probably hated *me* at

times—I mean, you must have thought me pretty heartless to make light of it as I did when we were together—but it was the only thing to do. You see”—more slowly—“I had slammed the gates of Paradise in my own face.”

Brenda sat very still, her hands clasped in her lap.

Then—
“Wh-what do you mean, Geoffrey?” she faltered. “I—I don’t understand. I thought—” She broke off, unable to put her thoughts into words.

Geoffrey looked at her.

“If it hadn’t been for what happened I had intended to ask you to marry me,” he said quietly. “But, later, I felt bound to keep silent. It—it would have savoured too much of taking advantage of the situation, you see, and I couldn’t risk your thinking—what you might easily have thought. It hasn’t been an easy time for you, I know. Well, if it is any compensation to you, it hasn’t been an easy one for me, either.”

“I see.” Brenda bowed her head, her lips quivering. “I—I think I am beginning to understand, Geoffrey. But—if you thought like that—why have you told me now? The—the situation hasn’t changed, has it?”

“I think it has,” he said. “I don’t know if I can explain, but when we were in church this morning it seemed as if I had been given a message. It wasn’t anything I could put into words—it was more a feeling than anything else!—but it was as real as the sound of your voice is real. I only know that, in some mysterious way that is hidden from us, all that has happened was intended so that we would learn that love—real love—is neither selfish nor possessive, but is given to us as a sacred

trust!”

“I know,” she whispered. “I—I had it, too. The message you speak of, Geoffrey. It seemed to come from nowhere, but I knew—then—that we had done right, so I wasn’t unhappy any more.”

He turned and took her hands.

“And—and is everything all right, Brenda darling?” he asked tenderly. “Do you know what I am trying to tell you?”

“Yes.” She drew a deep breath. “I think—deep down—I have always known it, Geoffrey. Only, for a time I thought I had been mistaken. After we pretended to become engaged, that is. I—I didn’t understand how you could be so casual about it, but now I do.”

“Then—then you do love me, my darling?”

“Yes, Geoffrey. I—I can’t think of a time when I didn’t love you,” Brenda whispered shyly, the rich colour coming into her cheeks.

Meeting his ardent gaze she felt suddenly very humble and at the same time happier than she had ever felt before. It was as if the darkness had rolled away and a great and wonderful light was shining on them both.

“Darling!” he said tenderly, and drawing her into his arms, kissed her on the lips. “My darling! My dearest love!”

“Oh, Geoffrey,” she sighed, nestling against him. “Can you forgive me for doubting you as I did? I don’t know how I could have thought that it didn’t mean anything to you—that you were just casual. I—”

“You were not to blame,” he broke in. “After all, you were not to know that I regarded myself as in honour bound to

keep silent. But all that is behind us now—it belongs to the past and it has served its turn. It’s the future we are concerned with, Brenda darling—our future. For a reason we can only guess we were shown the way to reach it in church this morning and it is up to us to keep faith.”

“Oh, Geoffrey! Was there ever such a wonderful Christmas?” she sighed, resting her head against him, her heart too full for words.

“It’s only the beginning, my dearest,” he answered, taking her in his arms again. “The beginning of our own Christmas story and one which, God willing, we shall share with our children in the days to come.”

SALLY and Hugh were seated side by side in front of the fire when Brenda and Geoffrey came in, with Mr. and Mrs. Marsh on either side of them. George was at the radio, trying to get some Christmas carols for his mother. In the window the fairy lights on the tree glowed softly against the dark background of the night.

As the door opened they all looked up. Sally drew a deep breath. Without understanding why she knew, in some mysterious fashion, that for Brenda her dark journey was over and, that whatever life held in store for her and Geoffrey, they would walk in sunshine for the rest of their lives.

And, as the sound of the bells came drifting into the room, her hand stole out to find Hugh’s and she smiled with a happiness that seemed to overflow and envelop them all in its embrace. It was indeed a day of joy!

THE END.

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RING IN THE TRUE

By Hester Lane

BRIDE FROM AMERICA

WHEN Norma Fairchild received the news that her brother David had married a girl whom he had met in the United States, she gave a little gasp of surprise, and handed the letter to her husband.

“Apparently he met her at the Bullivants, in Chicago,” she said and added smilingly—“David married! I can hardly believe it. It’s so sudden!”

The Rev. George Fairchild raised expressive eyebrows as he read the airmail letter.

“It does strike one as being rather sudden, I agree, my dear,” he said. “But then your brother never does things by halves.”

Norma drew the toast rack towards her and an abstract look came into her eyes as she tried to picture her brother married.

Then her glance went to the window of the room where, beyond, the pleasant vicarage garden, the spire of the ancient village church rose above the trees surrounding it.

The news that David was married, would she knew, cause quite a bit of tongue-wagging in that corner of the county.

NO one would have called Norma Fairchild beautiful, but her charming features had an attractiveness about them that was all their own. Possessing a wealth of dark brown hair and a pair of gentle blue eyes, it was seldom that she was moved to anger; except by cruelty or injustice.

George Fairchild came to the end of the letter and shrugged.

At thirty-three he was a broad-shouldered young man with blunt, good humoured features that puckered into a grin more readily than into a frown.

A keen sportsman, he was a splendid example of what a newspaper reporter had once called “muscular Christianity”. He had been vicar of Justin St. Mallory for five years, having come to the parish originally as a young curate.

Blunt, and purposeful of manner, he did not suffer fools gladly, but that fact in no way hindered him from helping them escape the results of their folly. To young and old alike he was a guide, counsellor and friend. His boys’ club, where George put on the boxing gloves with the best of them, was but one of the many outlets he provided for youthful high spirits.

During the five years of their marriage they had plumbed each other’s character to the depths, finding in themselves the qualities which make for almost perfect love and understanding.

“As you say, it is difficult to picture David married,” George remarked, refolding the letter and handing it back. “I suppose it’s because he was always so—well, not exactly self-centred as self-sufficient. Still, I’m glad to hear it, my dear. Coombe St. Mallory needs a woman’s touch. But, he doesn’t tell us very much about her, does he?”

“Just that her name is Lesley,” Norma smiled. “But David has always been like that. When he decides to do something he just goes ahead and does it. Impulsive

isn’t the word.”

“Quite so, my sweet, but there’s a world of difference between deciding to let his house furnished while he takes a flying trip to America and—er—getting married. If I didn’t know that he isn’t the irresponsible type, who marries in haste and repents at leisure, I should be quite worried about all this.”

“I’m sure David would not marry unless he was in love,” his wife declared. “Whatever his reasons for springing it on us like this, you may be quite sure of that.” She smiled in a faraway fashion. “I do hope she’s nice,” she added.

“I’m sure she will be,” her husband assured her. “Your brother is one of those rare people who are fundamentally incapable of falling in love with a pretty face that has nothing behind it.” He smiled at a sudden thought.

“What’s so amusing, George?” she asked suspiciously.

“I was just wondering what Paula Brewster will have to say when she hears,” he replied.

“Oh, Paula! She never had a chance with David.” Usually the kindest and most indulgent of persons, Norma allowed a momentary expression of distaste to cross her face. “The way she’s chased David ever since her people came to live here has been too utterly blatant for words! Girls like Paula are just stupid. There’s nothing that frightens a man off more than being pursued.”

“Perhaps David saw the red light, and married this American girl for safety’s sake,” George smiled. “In that case you

can expect to meet someone who is quiet and demure and who—"

"David isn't as weak-minded as all that, dear," she put in smilingly.

"Anyhow, the dear boy knows his own business best, so it's up to us to wish him happiness for the future," he said. "I suggest we send him a cable to-day." He dropped his table napkin beside his plate and rose. "Anyway, I'm glad to hear that he'll be home for Christmas! I suppose you'll be busy during the next few days getting the house ready for the young couple?"

"Yes," Norma nodded. "The Blakes leave at the end of the week and I have already arranged for Mr. Neill to check the inventory with them. Mrs. Jordison is going to do out the place and help me with the curtains. There won't be a lot to do, really—the Blakes have been very clean and careful tenants."

"Good!" said George, bending to kiss her brow. "I have a vestry meeting this morning so I must be going. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help. Oh, and don't forget the Sale of Work Committee are meeting here this afternoon, will you, my love?"

Left to herself Norma cleared away the breakfast things and carried the tray into the kitchen, just as Mrs. Jordison, the daily help arrived.

AFTER that she had a great deal to do, for in addition to her usual household duties, Norma had other and more onerous responsibilities.

But to-day, not even these could prevent her thoughts from going out to her brother, whose sudden decision to visit friends on the other side of the Atlantic had resulted in the surprising news of his marriage.

What had induced David to take the important step of marrying a girl he could not have known for more than a few weeks? And why had he waited to tell them until after the wedding was over?

During the morning she took up his letter again, reading it through in the hope of finding a clue to his surprising conduct.

But she could find nothing. All it told was that he had been married a few days ago to a girl he had met in Chicago and that he and his bride would be coming to England for Christmas. The rest of the letter was taken up with details to which he wanted Norma to attend, mainly concerning the house which had been let furnished.

She re-folded the letter and put it in the pocket of her pinafore. Then going to the window, stood for a moment looking out to where the tall old chimneys of her brother's big house, called Coombe St. Mallory, could be seen above the trees surrounding the park.

It was there that she and her brother had been born and if David had not turned his knowledge of horses to good account, it would have had to have been sold to pay the death duties when their father had died.

Now his small stud of thoroughbred horses was well known both in England and abroad, and the successful training establishment which David Winter ran in conjunction with his other activities was paying handsome dividends.

It had been partly in connection with the sale of some bloodstock to America that David had gone to that country. During his absence the house had been let furnished but the rest—the training stables—had been left in the hands of Gerry Carslake, David's manager.

Norma had been eighteen when her mother had died. David, a year younger, had been at college.

Afterwards, for the two years during

which her brother had been completing his National Service, Norma had been left to cope with their father, whose moods had varied between an abject melancholy and sudden outbursts of unreasoned anger.

It had been a difficult period for both of them, for old Mr. Winter had seemed to lose all interest in anything and had become more and more a recluse. Had it not been for George Norma did not know how she would have endured it all, for the young curate, as he had been then, had proved a veritable tower of strength.

It had been George who had taken charge on that dreadful day when her father had been discovered dead in the woods, behind the house. It had been George who had wired for David to come home, sparing Norma all he could. Later they had been married in the church where he now preached.

Knowing her brother as she did, Norma could not refrain from wondering what the American girl was like with whom he had so evidently fallen in love.

From there it was but a step to asking how this girl would fit into the quiet seclusion of an English village on the Devon borders. What sort of a girl was it who could marry a man she had scarcely known and come with him to a country so vastly different in outlook and tradition to the new world across the Atlantic?

Contrasted with George's patient courtship, and the slow blossoming of their love, David's headlong plunge into matrimony seemed even more sudden than perhaps, it really was. It was because she had been totally unprepared for such news that it came as such a surprise, and filled her with uneasiness.

IT was a cold, misty afternoon a fortnight later when Norma drove her brother's car to the railway junction seven miles from the village, where she was to meet David and his American bride. David had written to say that he and Lesley would be arriving at London Airport the previous afternoon and would stop overnight in London before coming home.

Her brother had left his car in Norma's charge, while he had been away, and had asked her to bring it to the junction to save having to change into a local train.

"Poor girl, I do feel for her," George had remarked, before Norma had set out. "Fancy being pitchforked into completely new surroundings thousands of miles from her own home and having to face hordes of in-laws!"

"Hordes, nothing, George. There's only Aunt Nettie in Bournemouth and your Uncle George at Tavistock—and us," had said Norma. "In any case, David's wife won't have to face them all at once."

"It's just as well," had smiled George. "By the way I hear that Paula Brewster hasn't been the same girl since she heard the news of David's marriage."

Norma had given him a glance of mingled exasperation and amusement.

"For a clergyman you take far too much notice of local gossip, my lad," she had said severely. "Put some cotton wool in your ears for a change."

"How can I help hearing when it is pumped into me by people like our Miss Simmonds?" he had demanded unrepentantly. "Besides, it helps me do my job. I get to know how people's minds work, if you know what I mean."

"That," had replied Norma, "is the most specious argument in favour of scandal-mongering I have ever heard. Really, you are the limit, George!"

"Nonsense, my dear," he had observed blandly, his eyes twinkling. "My job is to keep my finger on the pulse of things,

so to speak, and unless I know what is going on how am I to do so? As a very famous writer once said, you can don rosy coloured spectacles and sit in a room with all the blinds down, but the evil that men do is still there without or something like that."

"Oh, all right," had said Norma laughing. "I give in. Meantime you can let me have another two pounds for house-keeping money," she had continued, changing the subject. "Don't groan now! We've got to live and I have had to pay Mrs. Jordison extra this week for all she has done at Coombe St. Mallory. I'll get it back from David later."

Chuckling, George had gone off after giving her three pounds.

She had stood staring after him, an expression of deep and abiding tenderness in her eyes. Was ever love so perfect and understanding as with her and George? she had wondered. She prayed that it would prove to be the same in David's case?

WHEN the train from London eventually steamed into the junction Norma found herself almost giving way to panic.

Just what she was expecting she could not have said, but it certainly was not the quietly dressed, rather shy young girl to whom David introduced her.

Bounding forward, and looking extremely fit after his holiday, David gave Norma a resounding kiss, and then said: "Darling, this is Lesley! I know you two are going to get on well together!"

Lesley Winter put out her hand, smiling faintly, looking at Norma from a pair of direct blue eyes.

She was lovely, really lovely, in a curiously remote, childlike way that was almost breathtaking, Norma decided.

"I told David that it wasn't fair to spring me on you like this, but he wouldn't listen," Lesley said, her voice a pleasant drawl.

Smiling, Norma kissed her on the cheek and gave her a hug.

"I must say it was a great surprise to hear that David—that you were married," she said. "But we were all very thrilled. George—my husband—asked me to apologise for not coming. He couldn't be here as he has a meeting of the school governors this afternoon."

Once through the barrier, and reaching the car, David supervised loading their luggage into the boot, chatting all the time to Norma.

If she had not known him better she would have said that he was feeling a little embarrassed, but she told herself not to imagine such things. Arriving in this way was probably as much of an ordeal for him as it was for Lesley.

"You drive, David," Norma said when they were ready to go. "You can drop me off near the infants' school. Mrs. Gale came back yesterday and she has everything ready for you up at the house."

She was not sure, but she thought she saw a little shadow of apprehension come into the young bride's face.

"Oh, aren't you coming with us?" the girl asked eagerly. Almost too eagerly, Norma thought.

Smilingly she shook her head.

"David will want to show you the house without me being there," she said. "Besides, I promised George to meet him in the village. We'll come over later when you've had time to sort yourselves out! How about that?"

"See that you do, then," David grinned, giving her an affectionate pat on the arm. "I'm dying to see old George and to hear

all the latest gossip from him. I suppose nothing has happened since I went away?"

"Nothing very much," Norma admitted, as they drove out of the station. "Colonel Mainwaring is starting an agitation against the building of a new by-pass through Dene Bottom and Miss Simmonds is starting another to have it done as soon as possible. Her dog was run over in the High Street the other day, poor thing."

"Civil war, eh?" said David, grinning. "That's all I needed to tell me I was back! I'm sorry for the poor dog, though. Was it killed?"

"No, fortunately. It had its leg broken, though. Mr. Clarke, the veterinary surgeon, said it will probably be all right again."

"Well, that's something," said David. "Have you seen anything of Gerry Carslake?"

"Your hard worked manager has been too busy to spare time for social activities," Norma laughed. "But he did come to supper one evening last week and he and George talked horses for exactly three hours. At least, George listened."

"Well, Gerry will find another ready listener in Lesley," he said, with a fond glance at his young wife. "She was born in Kentucky, the famous blue grass country where they breed some of the finest blood-stock in the world. Incidentally, she has her own horse coming over by boat. Wait till you see it—a genuine cream! They don't breed them anywhere else."

"How lovely," cried Norma, smiling at the girl. "I'm glad you ride, Lesley," she went on. "David spends half his time in the saddle and knowing about horses means you'll be able to help him and Gerry."

HALF an hour later, after dropping Norma in the village, David stopped the car at a place from where they could normally have obtained a view of the surrounding Devon countryside. Now, however, it was wreathed in winter mists.

"There's Coombe St. Mallory," he said, pointing to the old house through the leafless trees. "Those buildings to the right are the stables. Gerry Carslake, my manager, lives over there." He smiled tenderly. "I hope you are going to be happy here, my darling."

Lesley gave him a quick, wistful smile. "It looks just as you described it, David," she murmured, a hint of breathlessness in her voice. "I—I hope I'll be able to live up to it all!"

He patted her hand and started the car again.

"There's nothing to live up to, darling," he said. "We are no longer landed gentry. If it hadn't been for making some money out of the horses the house would have gone under the auctioneer's hammer long ago. As it is, it is still the home of our family and will, I hope, continue to be so for many generations to come."

His voice dropped to a low undertone, almost as if he were voicing his thoughts aloud rather than actually speaking.

But there was no mistaking his meaning and the rich colour stained Lesley's cheeks as they swept up the drive to where Mrs. Gale, the housekeeper, had come to the door to receive them.

THREE hours later young Mrs. Winter came downstairs and entered the long drawing-room.

At one end was a huge, open brick fireplace, where huge logs burned redly in an iron basket. Round this were deep, comfortable chairs and an oak settle with heavily-corded cushions.

A bookcase ran along one wall, filled with a wide assortment of volumes, most

of them about horses.

Nearby was a radiogram and Lesley switched it on. But she was unfamiliar with the various English stations, so left it as it was.

After a moment the strains of a South American dance band, playing a haunting tango, filled the room, and she seated herself in a deep armchair, spreading her hands to the fire as she listened.

She was waiting for David, who was in his study with the young man who had been introduced to her as his manager. They were deep in a discussion about some urgent matter that Gerry Carslake had said could not wait, so that for the moment Lesley was free to allow her thoughts to roam.

She was just turned eighteen, and in the past few weeks, it seemed that her life had been turned completely upside down.

A year ago both her parents had died within a few days of one another, victims of a particularly virulent form of influenza that had swept the Southern American States.

Cyrus J. Bullivant, who was her godfather, had at once flown to Kentucky and brought her back to his lovely home outside Chicago, where his wife had treated Lesley as if she had been her own daughter. It was there that she and David had met for the first time.

With a sudden tightening of the heart-strings Lesley now remembered how their eyes had met across the table and how David had smiled at her.

His smile had seemed to convey a message that only she could understand, as if between them they shared a secret of a wholly amusing and delightful nature. Later he had told her all about his home in England.

He had been in America on business and partly to look up the Bullivants, old friends of his family. Mr. Bullivant was also a keen horse-breeder.

That talk had been one of many and soon she had found herself awakening to a new, broader conception of life that had this good-looking young Englishman as its centre. The next thing that had happened had been their engagement.

"It's quite the best thing that could have happened," Mrs. Bullivant had said, when David had told her the news. "Lesley hasn't got anyone of her own to worry about, and you're both fond of the same things. All you have to do now is to decide when you are going to be married."

It had been then that David had gone straight to the heart of things and said there was no point in waiting.

Lesley had protested, somewhat half-heartedly, shrinking a little from a too abrupt transition from one life to another.

But, as David had pointed out, he had to go back to England quite soon, so that if she would not marry him there and then, it would mean him either coming back to the States at some later date, or her travelling alone to England to join him in Devonshire.

"But what will your sister Norma say?" she had cried finally, raking up her last argument. "She'll think it very strange if you suddenly write home to say you are married to someone she has never even heard about."

"Listen, Lesley darling," David had said patiently. "I know how you feel but you don't have to worry, honestly you don't. Norma is a jolly good sort—she's happily married herself and there is nothing she would like more than to see me married, too."

They had gone back to a place near her old home in Kentucky for their honey-

moon and it was there that David had done something she knew she would never forget.

They had driven out to a ranch that she had often visited as a child, and had been shown several of the famous Kentucky cream palominos—some of the most graceful and intelligent horses in the world, whose cream colouring is world famous.

One, a lovely filly about two years old, had nuzzled Lesley's shoulder and she had put her arm around its silken neck.

"Oh, David," she had cried, "isn't she sweet?"

It was only when they were back at their hotel that David had told her that he had bought the filly and had also arranged for it to be shipped to England.

She had looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, David!" she had whispered brokenly. "What am I to say to thank you?"

David, understanding as ever, had taken her in his arms, holding her tenderly, in his eyes a smile that was more eloquent than words.

"You don't have to say anything, sweetheart," he had said, and had kissed her tenderly.

AND as she was thinking of that moment the door opened and David came in. He stopped and stood looking at her, an odd expression in his eyes.

As she glanced enquiringly at him, he laughed and came forward.

"It's all right, my dearest," he said. "I just wanted to make sure that you were really sitting there by the fireplace. You see, I've pictured you there so often."

She smiled and laid her hand in his.

"It's me and I'm real enough to be hungry," she smiled lovingly. "I went to find Mrs. Gale to see what I had to do about a meal but she said it was all ready." She dimpled suddenly. "And oh, what do you think she called me? Madam!"

David chuckled.

"You'll have to get used to that sort of thing," he said, shrugging. "This house is a relic of a bygone age, I'm afraid. No central heating—no lifts, no television. In fact, we have none of the things that you Americans take so much for granted. But then I warned you, didn't I?"

She took his hand and smiled.

"You forget, dear, I'm no longer an American citizen," she said teasingly. "By virtue of being married to an Englishman I'm English as well. Do you know what I'd really like?" she added.

"Yes, supper," he said teasingly.

"No." She shook her head and became serious. "One day I want you to take me to Scotland, to a little village called Glenavon. It is where my family originally came from before they went to America and I've a feeling I want to see it. You'll laugh at me, I know, but it seems as if it has got some message for me. Maybe, when I stand where my ancestors stood I shall really feel that I belong somewhere."

"Of course, I'll take you," David promised. "Better wait till the spring, though! It wouldn't be much fun motoring in Scotland at this time of the year, quite apart from the fact that we shall have Christmas and New Year on us before we know where we are."

"Thank you, David," Lesley murmured gratefully. She twined her fingers in his, gazing dreamily into the fire. "I think I'm going to be very happy here," she went on. "Don't ever think I'm not, even if I do get homesick at times, will you? It's all so lovely and peaceful."

He grinned.

"You ask Norma's husband how peaceful it is," he said, with a twinkle. "He spends more than half his time keeping the peace,

if you ask me. Joking apart, though, you could go farther and fare worse, as Mrs. Gale would say. She was Norma's nanny once, you know. Then, when we were growing up she married old Gale, who was one of the gardeners my father kept, and they went to live in the village. Her husband died a couple of years ago and I was very glad to take her on as my housekeeper. Rosemary, the maid, is her niece, by the way."

"Why is the house called Coombe St. Mallory and the village Justin St. Mallory?" Lesley enquired. "They are such lovely names?"

"I can't really say, sweetheart," he said. "The names go back to well over five hundred years ago. The village itself figures in the famous Domesday Book. It is said that the deeds of the manor of Justin St. Mallory were given by William the Conqueror to one of his knights."

"How wonderful to think that all those centuries ago someone came here and created a heritage for us to live up to to-day," she said in awed tones. She turned to him, eyes shining. "Oh, David, I want so much to be worthy of it all! Please let me help you—you know I can! I don't want to be treated like so many Americans treat their wives—someone to be wrapped up in cotton wool and worshipped. If Mrs. Gale is going to be here I won't have an awful lot to do in the house, I can see that, so do let me help you in other ways!"

"Of course you are going to help me, dearest," he said quietly. "When I first set to work to put Coombe St. Mallory on its feet again I did so to save it from falling into the hands of strangers. Now I've got something else to work for—our future and our children's! That is something worth while."

That night Lesley lay awake for a long time, listening to the old house talking in its sleep—the creaking of rafters as the wind blew between the chimney stacks, the innumerable little night sounds made by the structure as it adjusted itself to a drop in temperature.

Raising herself cautiously on one elbow she looked at David sleeping in the bed next to her own. A shaft of moonlight falling through the open window provided sufficient light for her to study his features, relaxed in slumber, and she was seized with an emotion that was the most poignant she had ever known.

For there beside her in the darkness was the man she loved, the man she had married—David, *her husband*.

A little prayer went up from her heart that their dreams would come true and that one day she would hold David's son in her arms.

MISCHIEF MAKER

IT was a bright, clear morning, some weeks later, that Lesley seated astride a horse, watched a string of thoroughbreds being taken out to exercise.

Next to her, on a roan hunter, was a young man in riding outfit.

"Well, what do you think of them, Lesley?" he asked. "Pretty good, eh?"

"Very good indeed, Gerry," she nodded, without taking her eyes off the string. "The third from the front looks as if she might make a good jumper."

Gerry Carslake laughed.

"She will, indeed," he said eagerly. "David was thinking of entering her in one of the local point-to-point races to see what she could do. It might be a good idea to enter her for a Ladies Race and for you to ride her. She's fully qualified and it's only a matter of training."

Lesley nodded. She had come a long way, both spiritually and mentally in the past few weeks and had earned Gerald Carslake's whole-hearted respect, not only for her integrity, but also for her knowledge of horses.

He had been able to teach her a great deal about the way things were done in England, so that she had quickly found her feet and was rapidly carving a niche for herself in the training establishment.

Apart from their own stock there were half a dozen other horses in the stables belonging to owners who left them to be trained for various races or contests.

Training, as Lesley well knew, involved much more than mere schooling over jumps. Among other things it comprised getting the horses into show jumping condition by judicious feeding and exercise, and a thorough understanding of the principles of equine management as well as considerable veterinary skill.

To all this she brought her knowledge and experience, for as David had explained to Norma, Lesley had been brought up in a State where horses ranked only second to human beings.

An accomplished horsewoman she displayed a skill and a verve that caused Gerry Carslake to open his eyes in wide admiration.

As the stable lads trotted the string back to their quarters Gerry said:

"I want to go over and look at the new jumps in Long Bottom. If you've nothing better to do perhaps you'd care to ride that way, Lesley?"

"I'd love to, Gerry," she answered, giving him a quick smile. "It's such a lovely morning—I can't think of anything I'd like better."

"Right, let's go, then," he said, jerking his reins.

The horses pranced on the short, crisp turf as Gerry opened the gate leading from the exercise field, the keen, frosty air making them restive.

As they turned towards the open moor they quickened their pace, the chestnut taking all Lesley's strength to hold it in.

Then, reaching the crest of a rise, with a two mile slope before them, their riders gave them their heads, and down the slope they galloped, the wind whistling in their ears.

"That was lovely!" Lesley cried, reining in. She leant forward and patted the animal's neck. "What a pity David wasn't here to enjoy it with us, Gerry."

"Yes," he agreed politely, and added casually: "When do you expect him home?"

"Late this afternoon," Lesley answered. She had noticed nothing. "Poor darling, he didn't want to go to Newmarket a bit."

"I can't say that I blame him," Gerry replied, his glance resting for a second on her fair, flushed face.

He spoke lightly enough, but there was an undercurrent of meaning in his tone which brought added colour to Lesley's cheeks. Somewhat hurriedly she changed the subject.

"Did you know that we have heard from the shipping company to-day that my horse is on the way over and should be here in a fortnight?" she said. "I'm so thrilled I can scarcely wait. She's really a beauty, Gerry."

"That I can well believe," he smiled. "I've never seen a palomino—only pictures of them."

"It's going to be fun to have her," she said. "I may enter her for the Southern Counties Championship Show at Exeter if she shows promise in her training."

"That'll cause a sensation," he said

amusedly. "You ought to do well with her, Lesley—she comes from a long line of show jumpers, doesn't she?"

She chatted eagerly about her plans as they rode on to where David had had a series of horse jumps erected in a valley. It was necessary to keep an eye on them, for they were often damaged by tramps and gypsies seeking brushwood for their fires.

However, on this occasion they were all in order and after a tour of inspection they turned their horses homeward.

DURING the time they had known each other, Lesley and the young manager had become very good friends. His guidance and good-natured advice had saved her from many a pitfall.

For she did not have to be told that David's unexpected marriage to an unknown American girl had been something of a nine-days wonder, nor that she had been an object of local curiosity, good-natured in some cases, frankly vulgar in others.

Lesley had encountered an example of the latter when she had attended the village fete in aid of the church restoration fund.

It had been the first affair of its kind that she had ever attended and she had enjoyed herself thoroughly, joining in everything that was going.

Here she had met Paula Brewster for the first time!

"So you are David Winter's wife!" Paula had commented rudely, on being introduced. "I must say you didn't lose much time in leading him to the altar, my dear."

For the benefit of those within earshot the remark had been uttered as a joke, but Lesley had not missed the venom behind the words.

Her colour had deepened and for a tense moment blue eyes had held grey across the intervening space. Then Paula's grey ones had dropped.

For in that glance there had been a challenge, spoken and answered. It had marked a turning point in Lesley's life, she had dated a great many things that had subsequently happened from that meeting.

At that moment David and Gerry had appeared, having come later as they had promised, and Lesley had slipped her hand through David's arm, smiling up at him, conscious all the time of Paula's jealous glances.

"You're just in time, darling!" she had said gaily, ignoring the other girl. "Come along—I want you and Gerry to bowl for the live pig."

Riding homeward now she thought suddenly of Paula and all she knew of her.

Nineteen years old, she was the only daughter of a retired business man who had come to live in Justin St. Mallory two years ago.

Good looking, with raven black hair and vivid colouring, Paula was undeniably spoilt. Having her own car, a small sports model in pillar-box red, there was scarcely a social event in the neighbourhood at which it could not be seen parked conspicuously amongst the others.

Although no one had actually told her, it was quite apparent to Lesley that Paula had been setting her cap at David and that she had never dreamt that he would fail to succumb to her charms. The news of his marriage must, therefore, have come as a great shock to the other girl.

That she had made an enemy of Paula soon became obvious.

In a tightly-knit community, such as that into which she had come to live, Lesley found it very difficult to avoid

meeting her antagonist. But it did not take her long to discover that Paula was not above making mischief as and when the chance offered.

At a social gathering a few days ago she had openly hinted that it behoved David to keep a watchful eye on his charming young wife and his good-looking young manager. Lesley might never have heard about it had not Norma given herself away in an unguarded moment. Then Lesley had managed to drag the story out of her.

After that she had worried whether or not David had heard anything, although Norma would never have told him.

But if he had, he had not mentioned it; that would be just like him not to do so.

All the same, he was a man, and very much in love, so that the scandalous suggestion regarding his wife might easily rankle until it assumed such proportions that it could jeopardise their whole future. That, no doubt, was what Paula had in mind.

"You seem very deep in thought, Lesley! Anything troubling you?"

Gerry's voice recalled her to the present and Lesley looked round with a smile.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, Gerry," she said evasively. "I was just enjoying my ride, really. England is very lovely," she added, half wistfully.

"It certainly is and Devon is the best part," he said, his eyes twinkling. "I say that because I was born here. But from the way you spoke I suspect a mild attack of homesickness," he added. "You do get homesick at times, don't you?"

She nodded, sighing.

"I suppose it's only natural. Though I wouldn't change my present lot for all the blue grass in Kentucky. All the same —" She laughed and gently stroked her horse's mane, unable to put into words just what she really felt.

Gerry smiled in a way that told her he understood and pointed towards Coombe St. Mallory, whose roof they could see above the trees.

"That's where you belong," he said. "Before you came it was like a frame without a picture. Now it's complete. One day you'll visit Kentucky again and then you'll understand what I mean. It isn't where you live or what your surroundings are that matters—it's what you make of them. Naturally you miss the familiar things to which you have been accustomed, but as time goes on you'll come to feel as if you had never belonged anywhere else but here."

"You are very understanding, Gerry," she said smilingly. "Whenever I feel down in the mouth I will remember that. Not that I very often am," she added hastily, lest he misunderstand. "I'm very happy here—happier than I ever dreamed I could be. It's only that I wish mummy and daddy were alive to share my happiness."

It was the first time she had bared her heart in this fashion and Gerry was at a loss for words.

But with the sympathy and understanding she had come to expect from him, he drew her on to speak of her parents, of her home in the Kentucky hills and of the happy carefree days of her childhood.

"Anyway, you have all that to remember, haven't you?" he said. "Don't forget that your parents *do* still share your happiness! Death is only a passing from one room to another—it isn't the end, by any means. And being David's wife is going to make up for a great deal, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course, Gerry," she nodded, with a deep sigh.

They came to the crest of the rise and

paused to look at the vista spread out before them.

To the east the spire of the village church rose above the trees, with the houses huddled at its feet as if for shelter and protection.

And as they waited the church clock began to strike.

"Gracious! Eleven o'clock!" Gerry exclaimed, affecting a start of surprise. "I must go, or David will be wondering what on earth I've been doing with my time. Come on, I'll race you back."

He lifted his reins and his horse dashed off. Lesley followed and they did not stop until they reached the stables.

DAVID had been away attending a sale of bloodstock at Newmarket. At first he had thought of taking Lesley with him, but in the end he had decided against it, saying that he would be so busy that it would not be much fun for her to have to stand about a stock-yard all day, especially as the weather had turned very cold.

The sale over he travelled back to London, stayed at his club, and set off for Paddington Station next morning to catch a train to Devonshire.

Armed with various papers and periodicals, to read on the long journey, he settled comfortably in a corner seat.

But his hopes of having the compartment to himself were short-lived, for presently the door was opened by a porter carrying two suitcases.

David looked idly out of the window to see whom his travelling companion was going to be and saw Paula Brewster talking to another girl who was evidently seeing her off.

A minute or so before the train was due to start Paula got in, and seeing David, gave an affected start of surprise.

"Why, David!" she greeted. "Fancy meeting you! I'd no idea you were in Town."

"Actually, I've been to the December sales at Newmarket," he said, with a smile, unaware that she had seen him come on the platform and had purposely followed to see if he was alone before getting into his carriage.

"So Lesley isn't with you," she said, as the train began to move out of the terminus. "I should have imagined that was just the kind of thing she would have enjoyed. But perhaps she had other fish to fry?"

David frowned. What the dickens did she mean? he wondered.

He ignored the remark, however, and asked instead what had brought her to London.

"Various things, including Christmas shopping and a visit to my dentist," she returned off-handedly.

Behind all this she was carefully planning how best to steer the conversation round into channels that would give her the opportunity to plant a poisoned barb or two!

What, she wondered, would be his reactions if she were to tell him that his precious wife was being talked about and that the cause of it all was Gerry Carslake? David was like so many of the quiet types—completely unpredictable and just as likely to go in off the deep end as not.

She smiled vindictively. By making that kind of mischief she would be killing two birds with one stone, for there was no love lost between herself and Gerry Carslake whom she regarded as an insufferable prig because he ignored her.

Unfortunately for Paula other travellers got into the carriage just then, so that, apart from making conversation of the most casual kind, she and David had no option but to retreat behind their papers

and periodicals.

But after an hour a dining-room steward came along the corridor announcing that lunch was ready.

David put down his paper and looked across at Paula.

"Shall we eat?" he asked, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"A good idea," she said, rising. "I hadn't realised it, but I'm quite hungry."

"So am I," he smiled. "Let's go, shall we?"

Paula led the way into the restaurant car, and chose a table for two.

"I suppose Lesley is looking forward to a real English Christmas, isn't she?" she said, as they started their meal. "It'll be something quite new to her."

She spoke as if the American girl were a heathen who did not know what Christmas meant and David felt a little stir of resentment.

"You know, they celebrate Christmas in quite a big way in America," he said a little stiffly.

"Oh, of course. But it isn't quite the same as here, is it?" she said with a tinkling little laugh. "I expect she finds a very great deal that is new and strange after living all her life in the wilds of Texas or whatever it was."

"Kentucky," said David shortly.

"Kentucky, was it? I'm sorry, but you know what I'm like—I can never remember these funny names."

David did not speak and after a moment Paula went on—

"It was quite a shock, hearing that you were married, David. I mean, well, it was all so sudden."

David twisted uneasily in his seat for there was a suggestive note in Paula's voice he did not like, a look in her eyes that left him puzzled. He hoped she was not going to start reproaching him for neglecting his friends now that he was married. That was the kind of thing people were apt to say, as if they resented the fact that a man wanted to spend all the time he could with his own wife.

"As a matter of fact neither Lesley nor I saw the necessity for having a long engagement," he said. "After all"—deliberately—"it did not concern anyone but we two."

"Oh, of course," she shrugged, toying with her spoon. "No doubt it was very wise of you to—to do as you did. I—I sometimes think it pays to go on being wise, though—don't you, David?"

He stared her in the eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Paula leant her elbows on the table and propped her chin on her hands, looking demure and reflective at the same time.

"Of course, it is no business of mine," she said, "but if I were a man, and I had a young and attractive wife, I would think twice about leaving her too much on her own."

David continued to study her in silence and under his direct gaze she flushed and lowered her eyes.

Then he said slowly—

"Just what are you driving at, Paula? I may be a trifle dense, but I'm afraid you'll have to make yourself much more clear if you want me to understand."

Paula shrugged and paused.

"I'm not driving at anything, David," she said at length. "After all, there *may* be nothing in it. You would know, of course."

"Nothing in what?" he demanded curtly. He hesitated a moment before continuing, as if collecting his thoughts. "Of course, I cannot insist on your being more explicit, but unless you are, you can't expect me to know what you are

driving at."

Paula purposely did not reply at once, but smiled in a peculiarly tight-lipped fashion instead. She had steered the conversation round to where she wanted it, now it had to be made to appear that her information was being dragged from her.

"It's nothing to do with me, as I have said," she said slowly. "But in a place like Justin St. Mallory you can't help—well—hearing certain things. I mean to say, Gerry Carslake is only a man, when all is said and done and—but you can guess can't you? After all, Lesley is a very attractive girl, isn't she?"

David's first reaction to this was to tell her that she did not know what she was talking about, but he bit back the words as they rose to his lips, and looked thoughtful.

It had never occurred to him that Gerry might be attracted by his young wife, but he knew they had become very good friends.

He had always been glad at this, for Gerry and he had served together in Malaya and knew each other's worth. But it was a double shock to learn that others did not look at it in quite the same light.

The fact that they were being talked about he put down to idle gossip. In a community such as theirs, gossip was an inevitable feature of daily life, some of it harmless, some not. Had there been anything in it, George or Norma would have warned him: they were always the first to hear of anything like that. But they had not!

"I'm sorry, David," Paula went on, a mocking note in her voice. "It's true, you know. People *are* beginning to talk. And you know the old saying about there being no smoke without fire, don't you?"

His eyes became suddenly bleak and she had an uncomfortable suspicion that, had they not been in a public place, he would have flared into anger.

"That's a very unfair thing to say, Paula," he muttered indignantly. "Had you the least justification for it, it would be pardonable. But as it is—"

"Oh, don't be such a fool, David," she interrupted, scornfully. "Just because I've taken the trouble to tell you what's going on under your nose is no reason for getting on your high horse. Your wife may be all you think she is, but all the same I would want to know what goes on when they go out riding together. If you want the truth they have been seen kissing in Copley Wood!"

The last was a deliberate lie, uttered on the spur of the moment. But Paula felt quite safe, for even if David taxed the others with it, their denial would be no more than could be expected.

Nor was it at all likely that he would ever require her to produce evidence to support the charge. To do so would be to reduce the whole thing to the level of a public scandal.

Paula knew David well enough to be sure that he would either accept or reject Lesley's word, according to the way he felt. But if the former turned out to be the case, there would always be a little nagging doubt at the back of his mind.

What he actually said was the very last thing she expected.

"I don't pretend to understand your motives in telling me all this, Paula." His voice was dangerously quiet. "But I happen to know Lesley, which apparently is more than you do. She is quite incapable of stooping to the kind of vulgar intrigue of which you have accused her and so, for that matter, is Gerry Carslake. So I would be careful, if I were you, not to repeat to anyone else what you have just

said to me. If you do, you may be sure I shall hear about it and then I shall know what to do."

By now the meal was over and he asked for their bills.

Paula stared at him, a sick feeling of dismay telling her that she had gone too far. But it was not in her nature to give in quite so easily.

"Listen, David," she said, placatingly. "I—I'm terribly sorry if I have upset you, but what could I do? We're old friends and—"

"Being friends doesn't give you that kind of right," he broke in shortly. "Meanwhile, we will say no more about it. But please remember my warning!"

With that he got up from his seat.

"Excuse me, please," he said, and without giving her a chance to reply, turned on his heels and walked out of the dining-car.

When Paula returned to the compartment a little later David was not there. A glance at the rack told her that he had taken his luggage with him!

THE LONELY ROAD

ALTHOUGH Christmas was not far off the weather was still dry and mild, and Gerry Carslake was able to exercise the horses on most days.

Sometimes Lesley went out to see them, but nowadays did not remain long, saying that she had a lot to do.

It was as if some constraint had fallen over his employer's household, and Gerry was puzzled. If such a thing had not been impossible he would have said that Lesley was unhappy, and could only put it down to homesickness.

But David seemed different as well, and seldom discussed things with him as he had in the past. He had also lost a great deal of his enthusiasm, so that Gerry found it hard going to get him to talk of plans for the future.

It seemed that Gerry was not the only one who sensed that something was wrong.

Norma walked over to tea one afternoon during the week and found Lesley crouched over the fire in the sitting-room, and though the older girl could not be certain, it looked to her very much as if her brother's wife had been crying.

When they seemed to have discussed everything, from the children's Christmas party, to the watch-night service on New Year's Eve, Norma asked bluntly if anything was wrong.

"Wrong?" Lesley looked quite startled. "What do you mean, Norma? What—what do you think could be wrong?"

"Oh, it just struck me that you didn't seem your usual self and I wondered, well, if everything was all right—with you and David, I mean."

Lesley turned away sharply, but not before Norma caught a glint of tears in her eyes.

Acting on impulse, she rose and came to sit beside the younger girl on the settee.

"Won't you tell me all about it, Lesley?" she urged sympathetically. "A trouble shared is a trouble halved, you know. There is something, isn't there?"

The younger girl tried to put a bold face on things but not since her parents' death had she felt as lonely and alone as she had done these past few days.

Thus, Norma's quiet understanding, and her desire to help, succeeded where nothing else could have done; Lesley's defences crumbled.

"I—I don't know what is wrong," she said despairingly. "It's nothing I can put my finger on, but—but things aren't the same any more, Norma. It's something I

feel more than anything else but it's *there*. I—I can't explain."

"Have you quarrelled?" Norma asked directly.

"No." Lesley shook her head. "It mightn't be so bad if we had. I mean, I would at least know where I stood. No, it's just that he seems to have shut himself away from everything. It—it's like a blanket—" and her voice trailed away.

Norma hesitated. This was going to be very difficult. Little as Lesley had given her to go on, she could gather now what was causing the trouble and she decided to act.

"Listen, my dear," she said quietly, holding the younger girl's hand comfortingly. "I think I can help you. You see"—she hesitated a bare second—"there's been a certain amount of silly talk going around about you and Gerry. It is quite possible that David may have heard something and it has upset him."

Lesley gazed at her sister-in-law in consternation.

"Talk?" she faltered, going white. "You—you mean people have been saying that Gerry and I—oh, but that's ridiculous!"

"Of course it's ridiculous, my dear," Norma agreed gently. "But you see, in a tiny place like Justin St. Mallory there is always a certain amount of gossip. No one ever means any real harm, of course, but the harm is always done! You and David were bound to become objects of local curiosity owing to the fact . . . well . . . your marriage was a little unexpected. People who knew David were rather taken by surprise, and seemed to think it all rather odd."

"I see," murmured Lesley, staring before her, puzzled. "But even so, why should they couple my name with Gerry's? We're good friends, but that is all. We haven't done anything to justify people talking about us like this."

"You don't have to, Lesley dear," said Norma, sighing. "People don't stop to think, I'm sorry to say. Someone makes a catty remark and before you know where you are it has grown like a snowball that gets bigger and bigger the farther it rolls. You and Gerry go riding a lot together and he's taken you into Exeter on occasion, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has," said Lesley indignantly. "I haven't an awful lot to do in the house, so naturally I'm often out with Gerry. He's taken me into Exeter several times on business when David couldn't go, but that is all."

"My dear, you don't have to explain to me," said Norma quickly. "I am only trying to point out that it doesn't take much to give the thing a start, particularly if there is someone interested enough to keep the ball rolling."

"And someone is interested, of course!" Lesley gave a hard little laugh. "I can guess who—Paula Brewster! She—she wouldn't miss the slightest chance of making mischief if she thought she would get away with it."

"I quite agree," said Norma unexpectedly. "But you don't know for certain that she *is* responsible. Not that it really matters. But what *does* matter is to clear up any misunderstanding that may have arisen between you and David. Look, why don't you ask him straight out what is wrong and then, if it is what you think, you'll have a chance to defend yourself? You have a right to do that, at least."

"But that would look as if I had brought it up in order to justify myself," said Lesley decidedly. She rose and bent to place another log on the fire. "I always believed that love and trust went hand in hand," she then continued. "If David is angry

because of something he has heard, then obviously he must think there is something in it, otherwise he would have told me. That being the case, I don't feel disposed to ask for favours."

"Oh, my dear, you wouldn't let pride come between you, surely?" cried Norma a little shocked.

Lesley smiled bitterly. "It isn't exactly pride," she said tersely. "It's more a question of principle."

WHEN Norma had gone, feeling disappointed and unhappy, Lesley went upstairs to her room.

Seated before the dressing table she ran a comb through her hair as she stared bleakly at her reflection in the mirror.

It was impossible to explain to someone like Norma just what *had* gone wrong. How could she put into words the fact David had retreated from her in some curiously subtle way?

In vain she had tried to break down the wall he had erected between them, to shatter his polite reserve, to find again the warm, loving companionship that had made each day an adventure. But it had been like beating her fists against a brick wall.

It was—she caught her breath at the thought, biting her lip until it hurt—as if David had decided quite suddenly that she did not want him any more!

Now she regretted having confided in Norma even to the small extent that she had done. It went without saying that Norma would tell George and seek his advice.

George, in turn, might consider it his duty to speak to David! That Lesley thought, would be too frightful for words, for David would instantly think that *that* was what she had intended!

No, far better to take Norma's advice and speak to David herself. After all, they could not go on like this for much longer.

Her hand went to her eyes and she felt suddenly weary. It was as though she could no longer force herself to continue the dreary routine of the days, the clinging to commonplace things as a defence against anything deeper, the farce that went night after night by the name of dinner.

With a shudder she turned away from the dressing table and went quickly to the wardrobe, unhooking an evening frock from its resting place. It was one she had bought in New York to wear on her honeymoon and David had said that she looked like a painting in it.

She slipped it over her head, the platinum wedding ring, set with tiny diamonds on the third finger of her left hand, catching the light.

She looked at it wonderingly. Inside the ring was engraved "David to Lesley. With all my love."

Tears came to her eyes. If that meant anything at all, it meant that David loved her. And if he loved her he must trust her, yet—

AFTER dinner David politely excused himself, saying he had some letters to write.

He had a room on the other side of the hall, half study, half office, where he did most of his correspondence and accounts. Lesley heard him go upstairs and then come down again, after which the study door was firmly closed.

With a sigh she got up and glanced at the clock. It was past eight and she went down the passage to the kitchen to speak to Mrs. Gale.

When she returned she could hear the

murmur of male voices from the study, David's a little louder than usual and with a note of irritation in it.

Evidently Gerry Carslake had come over to speak to his employer about something in connection with the work to be done, and had gone straight to the study.

Lesley went back into the drawing-room, and piled more logs on the fire. Seated there on the settee, her fingers twisting and untwisting the handkerchief she was holding, she felt as if she had been beaten with sticks.

David had not even noticed that she was wearing the "honeymoon" frock, or if he had, had refrained from commenting on it. She drew a deep, shuddering breath. Must it all end like this? All their dreams, their hopes? Must it all end in frustration and bitterness?

She sprang to her feet, unable to bear the tension any longer. She had keyed herself up to speaking to David about it all—and now Gerry had to come! Why didn't he go? Couldn't he *sense* that he wasn't wanted to-night?

The door opened and Gerry came into the room at that moment. She turned swiftly, the warm colour flooding her cheeks, aware that he had taken her by surprise and that her restless prowling must have given her away.

"Hullo, Lesley," he said awkwardly.

"I—I hope I'm not intruding? I came over to speak to David about that bay mare—the one we are entering for the county point-to-point races. You are going to ride her, aren't you?"

"Am I?" She spoke dryly, a surge of resentment sweeping through her.

What did it matter who rode the mare? No doubt Paula Brewster would be glad of the chance. She would be flattered no end if David asked her to ride.

Then she pulled herself together. After all, it wasn't Gerry's fault.

"What does David say about it?" she asked more kindly.

He shrugged, sticking his hands into his pockets and looking as he always did when something ruffled him. Rather like a small boy who has been unjustly smacked, she thought.

"I don't know *what* David thinks about it," he said. "When I asked him if I was to send in an entry form he bit my head off. I don't even know whether I'm to enter the beastly animal or not now."

Lesley forced a little smile.

"Poor Gerry," she sighed. "The way of the supposed transgressor is hard, isn't it? I'm sorry I can't help you, but, you see, we're both in the same boat. At least, I think we are."

"What on earth do you mean, Lesley?" he frowned, staring at her in bewilderment. "Have you and David had a row or something?"

"Oh, nothing so ordinary as that," she returned, her tone mocking. "I suppose you know that—you and I—are being talked about? Or don't you?"

"Talked about?" he echoed.

"Yes. Talked about," Lesley repeated impatiently. "At least, that is what Norma hinted this afternoon. Apparently I go out riding with you and we've actually been seen going to Exeter. Terrible, isn't it?"

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "Do—do you mean to tell me—oh, but people are off their heads if they think—" He broke off, unable to put his contempt into words.

Lesley rested a hand on the mantelpiece, gazing down into the fire.

"Whether people are off their heads or not, it is evidently true that some rather unpleasant things have been hinted at, Gerry," she said quietly. "I can only

conclude that David has heard something and as a result he isn't feeling very pleased about it all."

"Naturally," he said drily. "I shouldn't feel very pleased about it myself if I were in his shoes. But you don't expect me to believe that he attaches any importance to whatever has been said, do you?"

"I couldn't say." She shrugged. "He hasn't mentioned it to me."

"I see," he said slowly. "In that case, there isn't very much I can say about it, is there, Lesley? I can hardly go to David and—"

"Of course you can't," she broke in quickly, when he hesitated. "But I thought it only fair to warn you, or I wouldn't have said anything at all. I'm sorry," she added softly. "It—it rather spoils things, doesn't it?"

"I'll say it does," he agreed gloomily. He paused as if about to add something further but evidently changed his mind. "I daresay David will let me know about the mare in the morning. Good night, Lesley."

"Good night," she said gently. "Don't worry too much about it—it isn't your fault."

WHEN David came in some time later Lesley was seated in front of the fire, her chin propped on her hands. He gave her a quick glance, almost as if he were surprised to find her still up.

At that moment the clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven.

"Gerry was rather anxious to know what you intended about Starlight, David," she said, as he crossed over to a walnut cabinet in the corner and took out a box of cigarettes. "Are you going to enter her in the Ladies Race?"

"I haven't made up my mind," he said, somewhat curtly. "To be frank, I'm thinking of selling her."

"Before the meeting?" She raised puzzled eyes to his face.

"Yes. In fact, I may do quite a bit of cutting down before the year is out," he said.

He lit a cigarette, and flipped the match into the fire. There was something hidden in his manner, something almost furtive so that she felt a pang of anxiety.

What did he mean by cutting down? Was he making an excuse to get rid of Gerry?

With sudden resolution she sat up and faced him, her hands clasped in her lap.

"When you say you may be doing some cutting down, what exactly does that mean, David?" she asked, steadying her voice with an effort.

"Precisely what I said," he answered. "In plain English I am thinking of closing down the training establishment entirely."

Lesley gave a startled look.

"But—but why, David?" she stammered. "I thought—" She made a little gesture of helplessness.

"Do I have to give a reason for everything I decide to do?" he asked coldly.

Deeply hurt, she retreated to the farthest limits of the settee. Then—

"David! Won't you tell me what is wrong?" she pleaded. "*Something* has happened to—to make you like this! What have I done?"

He gave her a level glance and then turned his head away.

"You should be able to answer that all right, my dear girl," he said indifferently.

He blew out a cloud of thin smoke and then, with a sudden gesture of exasperation, flung his cigarette into the fire.

"I'm sorry, but I can't, David," she said, a mutinous expression coming into her face. "Quite evidently something has gone wrong or you wouldn't treat me as

you have done this past few days. Ever since you came back from Newmarket, in fact! If I have failed you in some way, surely the fairest thing would be to tell me what it is I have done? I can assure you I haven't meant to!"

David gave her a challenging look.

"Is that true?" he demanded. "Can you honestly say that you have nothing on your conscience—that you have been consistently loyal to me in thought, word and deed? Even when I was away?"

"Of course I can," she cried indignantly. Then she laughed scornfully. "Evidently you sister was right! You must have been listening to tales about me and Gerry. Well, all I can say is, they are not true!"

"Whether I have been listening to tales, as you put it, or not, is quite beside the point," he came back at her sharply. "I am asking you, Lesley. Can you swear, to put it bluntly, that you haven't been carrying on with Gerry? After all, he's a man and you are a very attractive girl, so perhaps it isn't to be wondered at. You won't be the first to dangle a few scalps at your belt, neither will you be the last! But what's the good?" he added hunching. "You'll only deny it."

"Of course I deny it," she cried, springing to her feet. "Gerry and I have become good friends, as you know. That wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't been your friend, too. You can question my loyalty if you wish—I can't help what you think!—but you've no right to question his. It—it's utterly unjust."

For a moment there was a little silence. Even David, angry though he was, was momentarily taken aback by her sudden vehemence.

Sighing deeply he dug his hands into his pockets.

"I have no desire to be unjust either to you or to Gerry," he said quietly. "But, quite obviously, you have both been more than a little indiscreet to give rise to the kind of malicious gossip that has coupled your names together. Perhaps you'll tell me whether there is any truth in the report that you and he were seen kissing in Copley Wood?"

Lesley gasped, going red and white in turn, fighting to quell the panic which threatened to overwhelm her.

Her lips trembled and tears hung on her long lashes.

"Gerry has never kissed me, neither have I kissed him," she said slowly. "Whoever told you that told you a deliberate lie. And I think I can guess who it was—Paula Brewster."

David frowned.

"Why should you think it was Paula?" he demanded. "It rather points to the fact that she must have had something to go on, doesn't it?"

Stung almost beyond endurance, Lesley turned on him, her eyes flashing.

"For one thing, she happens to be jealous," she cried contemptuously. "And for another she would go to any lengths to get something she wanted badly enough! Everybody in the place knows that she fancied her chances where you were concerned, so that when we were married she was prepared to hate me right from the start! In any case, she travelled down from London on your train the day you returned from Newmarket and it is since then that you have behaved so queerly. I may be all you evidently think I am, but I'm not a fool."

"I'm quite sure—" he began but Lesley gave him no chance to continue.

"You're sure of a great many things that aren't true," she broke in, her lips quivering. "You're sure that I've been flirting with

Gerry and laid you open to being pitied. Now you are sure that I am not speaking the truth because I guessed that it was Paula who has been poisoning your mind. You're sure of yourself—of your position here in Justin St. Mallory and all that goes with it. You were even sure of me—or thought you were—but you'll find out how mistaken you were!"

With that she turned and rushed out of the room, giving him no chance to reply. Her pride was up in arms and she had no intention of pleading with him, or even of defending herself. Love and trust, she had told Norma, went hand in hand.

Well, if David did not trust her, that, as far as Lesley was concerned, was the end of everything.

CHRISTMAS-TIME came and what should have been a time of happiness and rejoicing became, for Lesley at least, a hollow sham.

Outwardly she and David had become reconciled, a feat they had accomplished by the simple expedient of ignoring all that had been said, but below the surface the knowledge that he had doubted her rankled as far as Lesley was concerned.

She threw herself into helping Norma, who was one of the chief organisers of the children's party that was held annually in the parish hall, with Colonel Mainwaring, one of the local residents acting as Father Christmas.

David put in an appearance, and it was very evident that he was a prime favourite with the children, and Lesley knew a little hurtful pang when she saw him bending down to answer a question asked by a blue-eyed little girl of five whose fair hair was done up in two absurd pigtails.

The child was looking up at him with mingled awe and adoration in her face and there was such tenderness in the way David spoke to her that Lesley turned away, choking back a sob.

Later on David drove them all back to the vicarage, where Norma had prepared a supper of sandwiches and coffee.

George, beaming with good nature, his face reddened by the cold, stood in front of a roaring fire and cracked jokes until they were all laughing.

But underneath Lesley's laughter there were tears, and in the car going back to Coombe St. Mallory her armour cracked, so that she huddled in one corner of her seat, her face almost hidden in the upturned collar of her fur coat.

She had intended decorating the drawing-room with paper-chains and things, and had bought a small tree from the stores. But she had left it standing in the kitchen, its label still on it.

David had seen it there a few days ago and hesitated, torn between the desire to heal the breach and the doubts which nagged at him.

She would never know, he told himself, that the night they had quarrelled he had paced his study for hours, seeking a way out for them both.

She would never know that he had been ready to admit he was wrong—that only the knowledge that he had wounded her beyond forgiveness had prevented him from going to her so that he might throw himself at her feet in forgiveness.

ON Christmas morning they went to church, walking across the snowy fields.

Gerry was not there, having gone to spend Christmas with a married sister in Hereford. This meant that David had extra work to do, so that he was provided with a legitimate excuse for spending very little time in the house.

In fact, he spent nearly all his time at the stables, although, since there was snow, and the horses could not be exercised, his head lad could have seen to everything.

Returning from church they went across to Norma's place, where they were to have Christmas dinner.

Lesley had looked forward to having her first Christmas in England in her own home, with George and Norma as guests, but when Norma had suggested that they go to the vicarage, she had jumped at the chance. Besides, it meant that they could allow Mrs. Gale and Rosemary to have their Christmas dinner with their own relations.

Lesley received a number of presents, including several from friends in the United States. There was a new hunting crop with a chased silver handle from Gerry, and a jewelled pin for her cravat from David. Tucked inside the little parcel she found an official looking form which, when she opened it out, was a clearance certificate from the Customs people for the horse that David had bought for her in Kentucky.

She had looked up, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with sudden tears as she remembered how he had made arrangements for her to have the palomino before he told her anything about it.

She had tried to be fair, to put herself in his place, but her pride had been a boomerang to recoil upon herself, so that she had retreated to some inner fastness of the mind where he could not follow.

In another moment, however, she might have attempted to bridge the gulf which yawned between them, but the moment was not to be granted to her.

As she had opened her lips to speak, to thank him, the sudden jarring of the telephone bell had interrupted her and David had turned on his heel and gone to answer it.

Her present to him had been an enlarged photograph of herself in a silver frame, but she had hidden it beneath a layer of clothing in a drawer. Instead, at the last minute, she had substituted a silver cigarette case, a gift so impersonal that it shrieked what it was.

Paula Brewster had been in church with her parents and had joined the group at the gate afterwards and gushed her good wishes, leaving Lesley feeling faintly sick.

At last Christmas Day came to an end she and David were free to go home.

George had looked at her oddly once or twice, and though she had done her best to keep up an appearance of gaiety, Lesley had an uncomfortable feeling that her brother-in-law had seen through the pretence.

Throughout the day, George had been very kind, his tact and understanding having helped them to skate over places where the ice had become very thin.

Back at the house, she took off her outdoor things and stood in front of the fire in the drawing-room, watching while David poked the logs into a blaze.

"I think I'll go to bed if you don't mind, David," she stretched. "I'm feeling rather tired. It—it's been a long day."

"Just as you wish, of course," he answered politely.

For a moment she looked at him, seeking some flicker of response in his features, but he was staring down at the flames, apparently unaware of her glance.

With a sigh she turned away.

"Good night, David," she said quietly.

He looked up almost indifferently. Then—

"Good night," he said. "I hope you sleep well. I'll try not to disturb you."

WHEN David awoke the following morning he opened the door leading from the dressing-room. Lesley was still asleep, her hair flowing out on the pillow, and even from that distance he could see the traces of tears on her cheeks.

With a grim face he closed the door again quietly and dressed, taking care not to disturb her.

Downstairs Mrs. Gale was busy in the kitchen.

"Mrs. Winter is still asleep," he said, his expression giving nothing away. "Please tell Rosemary to be careful not to disturb her, Mrs. Gale. She can take tea up when she wakes. We were rather late getting in last night and I would like her to sleep as long as possible."

"Poor lamb! She's been looking tired this past few days, if I may take the liberty, Master David. She's been helping Miss Norma day in and day out, as you know—it will do her good to have her sleep out. What time would you like your breakfast?"

"As soon as it's ready, thank you," he said. "I've rather a lot to do and I am anxious to go across to the training stables."

"It's practically ready now," said Mrs. Gale cheerfully. "You can have it in less than three minutes."

"Thank you," he said, leaving Mrs. Gale to frown over the gas stove.

"Now, I wonder what's come between them two?" she mused, as she made coffee. "There's something and I'd give a lot to know what it is. That Christmas tree, now—she didn't buy it just to lie neglected over there in the corner. It's all very puzzling, that it is."

David had not exaggerated about having a lot to do. He was kept busy at the stables all morning and it was past one when he returned to the house.

"Is lunch ready?" he enquired, coming in through the kitchen.

"Indeed it is, Master David. It's been ready since one o'clock," replied Mrs. Gale, with emphasis. "Will you be wanting yours or will you wait for Mrs. Winter?"

"Oh, isn't my wife in then?" He stopped at the door to look back.

Mrs. Gale shook her head.

"She went out about half past eleven," she told him. "I heard her telephoning to the garage to send a car for her. She didn't say where she was going."

David started to say something, but checked himself. Then he walked quickly down the passage to the drawing-room, which looked as it always did, the fire burning cheerfully in the hearth.

Puzzled, he took off his coat and hung it up, together with his cap turned into the study. Almost the first thing he saw was the note Lesley had left propped up against the inkstand on his desk.

Snatching it up he read it through twice before the words made sense. When they did, he stood like someone carved in stone, staring into space, his world toppling in ruin around his feet.

"Please don't try to find me," Lesley had written. "I realise now that it was hopeless to think we could ever be happy again, so I am going away. I waited till Christmas was over because I did not want to spoil anything for Norma and George and because I hoped that you would say something that would tell me I was mistaken and that you really did trust me, deep down. But you evidently don't and that means you can't love me—not really love me—and so I am doing the best possible thing. I have a little money of my own, so you needn't worry about me. Good-bye. LESLEY."

Norma and George had just finished

lunch when David burst in, his face a thundercloud. As they gaped at him in astonishment he laid Lesley's note on the table in front of them and said in a hard voice, "Read that!"

"Oh, David!" said Norma distressfully, when they had both done so. "What—what are you going to do?"

"Find her, of course, and then go down on my bended knees and beg her forgiveness—if she'll ever forgive me," he said bitterly.

"Have you any idea she might have gone, old chap?" George asked. "She doesn't know anyone in England, apart from the friends she has made here, does she?"

"Not that I am aware of," said David grimly. "I've been on to the railway people but no one answering Lesley's description has been seen. She rang up for a car from the garage and had it take her to the junction, so you can imagine what that means. It's Boxing Day and there are several extra trains being run."

"You mean she could have taken a ticket and no one particularly noticed her?" suggested Norma.

"Exactly. But the fact that she went to the junction is a plain indication that she was taking a ticket for London," David said. "She would know that if she went from here the booking clerk would remember where she had booked to—that's why she went to the junction."

"Has she taken anything with her?" asked George.

"Only a suitcase," David sighed heavily. "You know what it is all about, don't you?"

"I can guess," said Norma quietly. "I warned her that she was being talked about. That awful Paula Brewster started it all."

"She finished it, too," said David harshly.

In a few brief sentences he told the others of his encounter with Paula on the train coming back from London, and of its sequel in the quarrel with Lesley.

When he ended Norma's eyes were filled with tears.

"Poor child. You were rather unkind to her, David," she said with sisterly candour. "Surely you knew her better than to believe such a tissue of lies?"

"I didn't know what to believe," he returned irritably. "Oh, I blame myself all right, don't you worry. I know that I ought to have trusted her. But, to tell you the truth, I was knocked sideways by what Paula said. I had no reason to imagine she was making mischief for mischief's sake, had I?"

"My dear chap, remember the saying—'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'." said George soothingly. "You were not to blame, any more than Lesley or Gerry Carslake. What we have to think about now is finding Lesley and making things right."

He pointed to the pathetic little note lying on the table.

"There is nothing very much wrong with someone who could put herself in the background, especially in the circumstances, in order not to spoil Christmas for others! That's something we might all of us remember."

"Yes." David jerked his head up, his eyes bleak. He picked up the note and thrust it into his pocket. "I wanted you to know," he went on. "Now I'm going."

"To London?" George hazarded. "Man, it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Where will you begin?"

David glanced at them both and something like a smile lighted his eyes. A tired smile which wrung Norma's heart to witness.

"No," he said. "I'm not going to London. Lesley would have to go there to get the connection she wanted, but I shall take the car and go direct. You see, I think I know where to find her. At least, I pray I do."

They looked enquiringly at him.

"You mean——?" Norma breathed, hope springing into her face.

"I mean that I think Lesley has gone to a place in Scotland, called Glenavon," David said. "I looked it up on the map and it's about ninety miles from Dundee, on the north-east coast. It's where her family originally came from and soon after we came to England she asked me to take her there one day. I can't help feeling that it is there that she has gone."

"Oh, David, I hope you are right," Norma said wistfully. "You—you'll go at once, won't you?"

"I'm sure I'm right," he said quietly. "Don't worry—I am leaving in half an hour's time. I wired to Gerry, who ought to be back this evening and in the meantime I've left Sam Medicott in charge. No one knows about this but you two and Mrs. Gale, by the way."

"Don't worry," said George. "We won't breathe a word. Is there anything we can do——?"

"No," said David. "Just carry on and if people ask where we are, just say that we've gone away for a few days. That, at least, is true."

RING OUT THE FALSE

DUSK was closing in on the little Scottish fishing port of Glenavon as Lesley left the cottage, where she had obtained a room, and walked down towards the harbour.

She had arrived at mid-day, after an all night journey from London, and at Edinburgh had changed trains for Dundee. Arriving there she had changed again, this time into a local train which had stopped at every station as it steamed slowly along the rocky coastline.

Glenavon was smaller than she had expected, but that was all to the good.

She had sought it blindly, almost instinctively, as a wounded animal might seek some hidden cave in which to lie down and lick its wounds.

It was the only place she knew anything about, the only name that came to her mind when she had decided to leave home, so that it was almost without thinking that she had chosen to come here. The cottage was owned by a Mrs. McDonald, a widow, who eked out a small pension by letting rooms to occasional visitors.

She had made Lesley welcome, evincing no curiosity as to why a young married woman should seek seclusion in this remote part of Scotland in December; Lesley had introduced herself as Mrs. Winter.

Now she walked slowly down between the houses to where a row of double-ended fishing boats were drawn up on the shingle.

She dared not attempt, at this stage, to peer into the future, to try to picture what David would do.

One thing was certain, he would never think of seeking her here, she reflected. Even if he ignored her request not to try to find her, he would be much more likely to go to London, to the hotel where they had stayed on their arrival in England.

She came to the harbour wall and sank on the rough stonework, spiritually and mentally weary.

All night she had lain awake, listening

to the drumming of the carriage wheels as the express bore her farther and farther away from David.

It seemed all so tragic and pitifully wasteful. Her decision to leave Justin St. Mallory stood out like a signpost between the past and the present. One way lay the future—but already the other had become shadowy, like a nightmare vaguely remembered.

She sat on, her eyes shadowed. Beyond the harbour a heavy swell broke sluggishly around the base of a half-tide rock that, like some prehistoric monster, reared itself out of the sea. On the rising ground to the left some cattle stopped feeding and lifted uneasy heads, turning towards the north, where the clouds were grey and heavy-laden with the promise of heavy snow.

She wondered which of the old cottages had been lived in by her ancestors: the great-great grandfather of whom she had heard so much. His son had emigrated to America and founded the family from which she herself had sprung.

It was queer, she thought, with a little smile, but she probably had distant relations living here who had never even heard of her. She must really ask Mrs. McDonald if there was anyone called Kilmuir in the neighbourhood.

It grew darker and a little flurry of snow came down on the wind. She shivered again and got up to go back.

As she did so the sound of quick footfalls on the cobbles caused her to look round to see, of all people, David!

"Lesley! Oh, my dearest, I've found you," he cried chokily.

She could only stand and stare piteously at him, her lips oddly out of control. Then, in a whisper, she breathed his name. "David!"

He looked tired, dreadfully pale, and she thought she understood why. To get here almost as soon as she had come he could scarcely have come by train. That meant he had driven all the way from London in this bitter weather.

"Lesley," he said again and put out his arms.

For a moment she hesitated, then went to them like a little child seeking reassurance.

Nothing mattered any more. Nothing was real, only the pressure of his arms around her, the feel of his cheek against her own.

"Lesley darling," he murmured, over and over again. "Oh, my dearest love, did you really think I would let you go?"

She shook her head dumbly, putting up a quivering hand to his face, her tears spilling over.

"I thought you—you didn't love me any more, David," she said softly.

"I deserve that," he said, with a sigh. "Lesley darling, can you ever forgive me? But, before you say anything, I want to tell you this! Even when I was angry—even though I was hurt—I never ceased to love you. I don't expect you to understand, but it's true. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, David," she murmured. "I know you must really love me or you would never have found me. You—you remembered that I asked you to bring me here one day, I suppose?"

"Yes," he said. "And knowing you, I felt sure that it was here you would come. I've driven with hardly a stop since yesterday afternoon."

"You must be very tired," she whispered sobbing. "Oh, David, I'm terribly sorry."

He looked down at her with all the old

whimsical tenderness in his eyes.

"When I got here I didn't quite know what to do and then, just as I got out of the car and was standing in the road, I saw an old lady come to the door of one of the cottages. I said I was looking for a young lady who might have come off the train and started to describe you. She gave me a funny look and said, 'Och aye, that'll be Mrs. Winter, I ken—ye'll find her doon at the harbour, I hae no doubt!'"

Lesley twined her hand in his.

"And I intended to run away from you and never, never come back," she said.

"Just try it now and see what happens," he said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "But you mustn't stand here, darling, it's getting dark and horribly cold. We—we've got quite a lot to say to each other, you and I, so the sooner we find a place where we can say it, the better."

She sighed and leaned against him.

"Let's go into my cottage," she murmured. "I daresay Mrs. McDonald will be able to put you up for the night, especially as you are my husband."

"There's one thing I have to do first," he said. "And that is, to send a telegram to George and Norma. I left them eating their hearts out with anxiety and they won't rest until they know you are safe." He paused and looked down at her, a smile lighting his eyes. "Can I say to them that we will be coming home—to-morrow?"

Lesley nodded, her heart too full for words.

LATER that evening Lesley sat on the floor at David's feet in front of a glowing fire in Mrs. McDonald's sitting-room, and with quiet courage tore down the last barriers between them, revealing herself as she had never thought to reveal herself to anyone, placing her happiness, her pride and her self-respect, in his hands for safe-keeping.

"They say that a woman always knows when a man is in love with her," she ended, speaking softly, her hands loose-clasped in her lap. "I think it must be true, because I knew you were in love with me before you asked me to marry you. And it made me very happy, for I knew that I loved you, too. And that is how I know that Gerry is not in love with me. Because of that, you have nothing to fear. He would die, I think, rather than do or say anything to hurt—either of us."

David did not speak for a while. Then he drew a deep breath.

"In the east they have a saying that you must lose something before you know how precious it is," he said quietly. "I won't attempt to tell you what it meant to me when I thought I had lost you, for there aren't any words. I can only beg you to forgive me for my unjust suspicions, my darling, and I do so in all humility, for I know now, even if I didn't before, that you love me as I love you and because of that, nothing can ever touch us." He bent and cupped her face in his hands. "I, too, would die to bring you happiness, Lesley. But I think you know that now, don't you?"

She smiled through her tears and surrendered to his embrace.

"You don't have to do anything so dreadful, my dearest," she whispered. "Just hold me tight and promise never, never to let me go!"

THEY journeyed back to London the following day, after David had sent several wires and promised to bring Lesley

back in the spring. Old Mrs. McDonald had smiled kindly on them both as she bade them farewell, saying that "she kenned the lassie was in some trouble" and had given them her blessing.

"There's a New Year beginning," she had said. "See that ye make it a right one. Life is no something tae be played wi'—'tis a precious trust for which ye are answerable to Him who sees all."

It was a shy and smiling Lesley who preceded David into the vicarage two days later.

But she need not have worried. Norma hugged and kissed her and George patted her arm. Neither of them said anything at all, but their silence, was, perhaps, more eloquent than words.

Only Mrs. Gale dissolved in tears when at last they came back to their heritage, and Lesley it was who took the older woman in her arms and comforted her.

Later David went out and Lesley knew that he had gone to Gerry's cottage, from which they had seen the light streaming forth as they came up the drive. What passed between them she never knew, but when David returned there was a look of peace in his eyes.

The following night was New Year's Eve. With Gerry they walked across the frosty fields in the bright moonlight to attend the watchnight service, and as they came out of church the bells were sending their glad message from hamlet to village, from village to town. Standing in the lych gate with her husband, one of a group consisting of Norma, George, and the others, Lesley felt the wonderful promise of the year to come stir in her heart.

"A happy New Year, everybody," said George, beaming on them all.

"A Happy New Year!" came the answering chorus. Behind them, the light from the church streamed out through the east window, making a pattern on the snow and further away, the headlamps of the various cars were being switched on as members of the congregation prepared to drive away.

Gerry turned to Lesley and David and held out a hand to each of them.

"A Happy New Year to you both," he said, with a little crooked smile.

They walked back to the vicarage with George and Norma. Gerry had excused himself and slipped away, leaving the four of them together. As they went up the path, George and Norma in front, the bells were still ringing out across the frosty fields. A pool of light splashed out as George opened the door, and stood to one side for his wife to enter.

Lesley would have followed but David held her back.

"You haven't wished me a Happy New Year yet, my dearest," he said teasingly.

She looked up at him, her face rosy.

"But I did. By the lych gate."

"Not properly," he said, his eyes twinkling.

Blushing, she put up her hands and drew his head down.

"A Happy New Year, my darling husband," she whispered, and kissed him tenderly.

And as David's arms closed around her, Lesley knew that the future would hold no terrors for her or for her husband and that whatever might come to pass, they were safe in the knowledge that the love which had triumphed over jealousy and misunderstanding would endure when all else was but a memory.

THE DINNER PARTY

MRS. COCHRAN unhooked the receiver and intimated the nature of her call. She was a homely, comfortable, attractive little woman of thirty-eight or forty, with a laughing manner, a passion for jewellery, a stockbroking husband whom she adored, and with delightfully old-fashioned ideas about everything except dress.

"Hallo! Is that— No. Double O— yes."

The Cochrans lived at "The Clough" on the north side of the river above Richmere. The house was a stolid Georgian mansion, standing in well-wooded grounds and facing south across wide lawns which sloped gently down to the water's edge.

Maude Cochran had loved the place at sight, seeing in it the house of her dreams—a country home, spacious and apart, instinct with the spirit of quietude, yet sufficiently within reach of town to preclude the possibility of any real sense of loneliness and isolation.

"Hallo! Hallo! Is that you, Lela?" "Will you come over to-morrow evening for dinner? Jim has asked a man down, and I want you to make a fourth at bridge . . ."

"That's a dear! I—"

"I shouldn't think so. He's quite unknown to me. Jim met him last summer."

"Oh—Dempster! Drew Dempster?" . . .

"Yes, Dempster. Why? D'you think you know him?" . . .

"But, darling, how nice!" . . .

"I hope so too." . . .

"Well, come along to-morrow evening and ease your mind. Seven thirty." . . .

"Good-bye, darling! Good-bye!"

Mrs. Cochran hung up the receiver and dismissed the conversation from her mind. That was characteristic of her. She was no matchmaker, too happy in her own marriage for that, too much in love with her big husband to deem him other than an exception among men.

Sometimes she would wonder why Lela Gordon never married—Lela with her good looks, her money, and her charm. But there her inquisitiveness would end. She never interfered. Nor was her complacent mind stirred to inquiry even now. She was fond of Lela—everybody was—but she had other things to do than to speculate on the romantic possibilities of her friend's interest in the identity of the man whom her husband was bringing to dinner.

She crossed the wide hall. She must see Hawthorne about flowers for the table, she thought; and disappeared in the direction of the garden.

* * *

Lela Gordon drove her car rapidly along the winding drive, wheeled round in readiness for the return journey, and halted in front of the pillared entrance. She stopped her engine, set the accumulator switch at "off," tightened her brakes—and sat still.

Now that she was here all eagerness went out of her, all confidence, all desire for movement. She was afraid—suddenly and intolerably afraid—afraid to enter the house, afraid to meet this man of whom Maude Cochran had spoken, afraid lest he

prove to be but a stranger after all. Or worse—lest she find in him the Drew Dempster of her dreams, and, finding, know him lost to her for ever!

There seemed no reason, even if it were the man she sought, why he should remember her.

They had met during the Winter Sports Season in Switzerland so long ago, had really only known each other for so short a time, but they had been days of very happy companionship, of something deeper than casual, ordinary hotel friendship—a parting kiss—"Good-bye. I'll write soon!"—and never a word! She had had never a sign of him from that day to this.

Seven years of emptiness and waiting—and all for what? For the sake of a memory, a dream, a vague and incredible chance. But, in truth, she could not help herself. These things were beyond human control. She could no more consent to marry while yet the image of him lingered in her heart than she could abandon the hope of ultimate reunion, no more cease from loving and remembering him than she could dismiss or escape from the fear which now possessed her.

"Hallo, Lela! I was sure I heard the hum of a car."

A bluff, thick-set, clean-shaven man stood in the doorway.

"Come away in!" he rumbled heartily, advancing to greet the girl.

They shook hands. Lela descended from the car.

"Hadm't I better put the hood up?" she asked, playing for time.

Jack Cochran looked up at the sky.

"I think you had," he said. "It'll soon be dark now, and there's often a touch of frost these late September nights."

They were both busy with the hood straps when the girl's hands suddenly faltered at their task.

"Let me help you," said a well-remembered voice behind her.

Her heart leaped. She wheeled about, eyes wide, staring. Drew Dempster—tall, dark, good-looking, stood before her, the smile fading from his brown, sun-tanned face.

Cochran looked up.

"That's right, Dempster," he began—and realised at a glance that the formalities of introduction might be dispensed with.

"Lela!" breathed Dempster, gazing across the years into the girl's tell-tale eyes.

They stood thus for several moments, each oblivious of all things except the presence of the other.

She was the first to break the spell.

"How are you, Drew?" she asked, offering her hand.

He took it in both his.

"Are you real?" he asked. "I had begun to think you must be dead!"

"You two seem to have met before!" said Cochran dryly from the other side of the car. "That's fine! But let's get this hood up. Lela, you go in; you'll find Maude in the drawing-room."

"Certainly," responded Dempster, without withdrawing his eyes.

The girl looked up at him, smiling happily.

"You haven't changed a bit," she said,

moving towards the house.

The man's eyes questioned her.

"No," he said in a low voice, too low for any ears but hers. "No, I haven't, Lela! And you?"

That caught her unawares. She blushed and shook her head, passing him with lowered eyes.

* * *

It was in the drawing-room after dinner, when they had settled down to their second rubber, that the excitement began.

"Your call, Maude!" said Cochran, drawing his wife's attention to the game.

Her eyes were turned in the direction of the tall windows which gave access to the lawn. She held up her hand.

"Listen, dear! I am sure I heard a cry outside."

"An owl, most likely," said her husband, impatient to proceed. "Come on, let's—"

A shot rang out. Lela looked at Dempster. Maude Cochran gasped and gazed fearfully at her husband. The men rose to their feet, scattering the cards. Cochran was at the window, fumbling with the latch. Both men vanished, swallowed up in the blackness of the lawn.

The women stood by the open window, waiting, peering into the darkness. Maude was trembling. Lela slipped an arm about her shoulders. They heard the murmur of voices, and suddenly Cochran appeared, lumbering into the light.

"Ring up for a doctor," he shouted breathlessly. "There's a man been shot, wounded, lying back there on the lawn. Hurry up!" He disappeared again.

"I'll go," said Lela. "You wait here, Maude. I won't be a minute."

She turned to find Watson, the butler, standing in the room.

"You'd better go out and help," she said, and passed on. The servants were gathered in the hall. "One of you go and look after your mistress," she ordered. "There's a man lying wounded on the lawn. Cook, you had better see that there's a supply of hot water."

She left them staring and went to the telephone. When she returned to the drawing-room she saw Jim Cochran enter through the open window, followed by the butler. Both were out of breath.

"They've disappeared!" gasped Cochran, complete bewilderment written on his face. "Not a sign of them! Watson and I have looked everywhere. The man was lying on the grass. I left Dempster with him and ran back, as you know, to tell you to get a doctor. When I went back I couldn't find a trace of them. They were gone, both of them. I can't understand it. What d'you make of it?"

His bewildered gaze wandered back and forward from his wife to Lela.

"But if the man was wounded—" said the girl.

A thought struck him.

"My word!" he cried fiercely. "It isn't possible!"

His face darkened. Lela, watching him, felt her heart grow cold.

"Jim, why d'you look like that? What is it?" Mrs. Cochran's voice was startled.

"Your jewels!" he cried, and dashed out.

The jewels were gone. There was no doubt about that. So also was Lela's car.

Cochran telephoned the police, and was now pacing the drawing-room, restless, ill-at-ease, too hot and bothered to think clearly, too disgusted to speak. His wife was in tears. She sat before the fire wiping her eyes with a lace handkerchief. Lela Gordon occupied a stool at her hostess's feet, trying somewhat vainly to comfort the distracted woman. The atmosphere was decidedly strained.

The girl's sudden anger when someone had first suggested the possibility of Dempster's association with the thieves had revealed much but proved effectual. Nothing more was said, good breeding decreeing a repression of natural instincts. But it was clear to Lela that both Cochran and his wife were now convinced of Dempster's guilt. And in her heart of hearts she did not altogether blame them.

After all, what did she or they know of the man? Very little, and on the face of things his villainy seemed plain enough. His was the traitor's part and the master brain. How else could one account for his disappearance?

The revolver shot, the man lying on the lawn—these were but features of an ingenious plan, a diversion created for the purpose of drawing the members of the household away from the actual scene of the robbery and keeping them sufficiently occupied until the thief had finished his work and Dempster and his accomplice had made good their escape. As for the car, it stood there ready to hand, waiting to be stolen.

No other construction seemed possible. Dempster stood revealed as a well-bred cracksmen, a gentleman crook! Love might protect his innocence, but women had been known to fall in love with thieves before now. Was her love, then, but father to the belief in his innocence?

Lela did not know—knew only that she felt very miserable and upset.

"Those fellows ought to be here by this time," said Cochran fretfully, halting to look at the clock. "Something must be bolder than them up."

His wife ventured to plead with him.

"Jim, dear," she wailed, "is it necessary to have the police? It will mean such a fuss, and the newspapers will get hold of it and you'll—"

"I can't help that, Maude," interrupted Cochran. "The insurance company will want—" He paused to listen. "There they are," he cried; "I'd better go and meet them."

He went out. Mrs. Cochran rose to her feet, then, excusing herself to the girl,

followed in the wake of her husband.

Lela stood alone. The sound of voices drifted into the room, rising and falling—an indistinguishable murmur.

Presently, without warning, the door opened and Dempster entered.

"Oh!" breathed the girl, hands fluttering about her throat.

The man was limping; his clothes were muddled and dishevelled, and the strips of sticking-plaster which starred his right temple added still further to the disorder of his appearance. He advanced impulsively towards the girl.

"You were a brick to believe in me, Lela!" he said. "Mrs. Cochran has just told me. She's a good little sport, even if she did think I had pinched her jewels!"

His eyes were twinkling. The girl's fingers crept along his sleeve.

"What happened? Were you badly hurt?" she asked softly, indicating his damaged brow.

"No, I'm all right," he declared. "The fellow on the lawn was only pretending; he whacked me over the head, then cleared. I was dazed for a minute or two, that was all. Then I got up and ran round the house. When I came out on the avenue I saw the lights of your car switched on. I knew it couldn't be you, so I dodged behind a bush till the car came level; then I dashed out and clung to the back of the dickey. There were two men in the car. One tried to knock me off, but he could not do much in the narrow drive without interfering with the fellow at the wheel. I clung on until we got to the gates. I thought they'd be sure to slow down, but they didn't. It was lucky for me. The car swung round so sharply into the road that I lost my grip and went flying. When I picked myself up, there was the car in the ditch and the two men underneath. The car will mend, I think—I hope so, at any rate, for your sake—but the men are both pretty badly hurt."

Cochran came in.

"Don't let me interrupt," he said; "but you'd be the better for a drink, Dempster, wouldn't you?"

Dempster thanked him. His head felt easier, but he was still feeling far from normal. The light of inspiration dawned on Cochran's bluff, good-natured face.

"Let's celebrate!" he said. "The occasion demands it. A couple of bottles of the best! Yes? Certainly, Dempster, we must drink to your very good health. You're a hero, and Maude and I are a couple of goats. But we know you better now, so just finish your story, and I'll be back in a minute."

He laughed and went off. And suddenly Drew became aware that Lela's hand was imprisoned in his and that he must have been holding it for some little time.

"There's really nothing more to tell," he admitted, taking a firmer grip of his happiness. "A car came along in a few minutes and stopped to offer help. Then more cars and more help. You know how people collect! Then the doctor came—

said he'd been telephoned for—and finally the police turned up—on their way here, as it happened—and that is all."

"Well, it's enough, and more, to make me thoroughly ashamed of myself!" declared Maude Cochran, coming into the room just as Dempster was finishing. "I don't know how Jim and I are ever going to thank you!"

"By not trying, Mrs. Cochran."

"I thought you'd say that! Very well, I won't. Only now, I think, since you hate to be thanked, that it is up to Lela to curse you soundly for smashing her car. I can see she is dying to!"

Maude Cochran laughed mischievously, glancing down at their linked hands. The girl's face reddened; Dempster, quite unabashed, tightened his hold.

"That reminds me," he said. "Hadn't I better telephone for a taxi? If Miss Gordon will accept a lift home, I'll be only too happy to receive her curses."

"How thoughtless of me!" exclaimed the hostess. "I suppose it's no use asking you good people to stay the night? No, clothes are a nuisance, aren't they? Well, I'll go and find Jim and ask him to see about a car for you." She moved towards the door. "Lela dear," she murmured, turning to address the girl, "do get your vocabulary into practice while I am gone!" She fled.

"The wretch!" Lela's eyes were wrathful.

There was a brief moment's silence; then Dempster said—

"Is my search to be rewarded, Lela—after all these years?"

She wheeled to face him.

"Why did you never write?"

"I was knocked out, crashed in a deep crevasse the day after you left and I lost my memory for a time. Then, later, I wrote several times. Some of my letters came back to me."

"Oh, Drew, if only I had known! But what was I to think? Day after day and no word from you—and then I—I fell ill, and went to friends abroad for a time."

He took her in his arms.

"Poor Lela! Did you care so much, then?"

She nodded, her face buried against his shoulder.

"And I too, Lela. But that is all over now—if you love me?"

She raised her eyes to his.

"I have never ceased from loving you," she said, her face radiant now.

THE END.

REPORTING HIS LOSS.

A man dashed into the fire-station. He was tremendously excited, and burst out with: "I'm sorry to interrupt you all, but my wife has disappeared again." One of the firemen looked up. "That's too bad," he sympathised, "but why tell us firemen? Why not notify the police?" The intruder shook his head. "I don't dare tell the police," he explained. "I told them the last time she disappeared—and they went out and found her!"

IN SEARCH OF ROMANCE

By Mona Meredith

FADED GLAMOUR.

CHRISTINE COOPER paused halfway down the shining mahogany staircase, one hand resting on the gleaming rail, to gaze at the man to whom she had been engaged for the past year.

The door of the dining-room was half-open, and she could see Blair standing with his back to her, his head a little bent, apparently staring into the empty grate.

How the sight of that muscular brown neck had thrilled her only a year ago, to say nothing of the clasp of his equally muscular and brown hands—Blair had virile-looking hands, Christine had liked them even before she had decided that she liked his dark, keen face, though his best friend could not call him good-looking.

But that was a year ago, and the romance of it had worn a trifle thin.

Christine gave a tiny sigh. Did the romance of everything wear thin to the threadbare point if one only gave it sufficient time?

"Coo-ee, Blair!" she called out gaily, taking the remaining stairs at a run. "How nice of you to come so early. We can have breakfast together."

Blair turned and in the most perfunctory way stooped to kiss the cheek she offered him, also in the most perfunctory way.

"Good morning, Christine," said Blair Cooper, and the girl gave an involuntary shrug of her graceful shoulders. She believed that was what had wearied her of Blair as a lover, his too great solemnity, his habit of taking nothing very lightly. "Thanks, no, I've had my breakfast," he added, declining the chair to which she invited him.

"You don't mind my getting on with mine?" she inquired nonchalantly, sitting down at the table. "I'm hungry. It was nearly three o'clock this morning before I got home from the Hospital Ball."

"Who brought you home?" inquired Blair Cooper sharply. "The Litchfields?"

"No, George Bedford came in the car with me," she explained a little hurriedly.

"You see too much of Bedford," said Blair. "Bedford's all right in many ways, but he is not the best friend for you."

"Don't get into a flap," said the girl flippantly. "Just because George Bedford came in the car with me."

"It must be something pretty important that made you sit down and write me an urgent letter after three this morning," said Blair drily. "The chauffeur must have cursed inwardly, if not outwardly, at being sent off with it then and there."

"He wasn't very pleased," she admitted airily. "Toast, Blair, please."

He pushed the toast rack nearer her side of the table.

"Hurry up and tell me what it's all about," he said. "I've an important appointment in less than an hour. I wonder you were not down earlier, having sent out such a frantic S.O.S. But I suppose you forgot it."

"No," said Christine slowly, "I didn't forget; in fact I've been awake nearly ever since I got home thinking of it."

"Congratulations," said Blair briefly, viewing the general air of radiant health and vitality that was one of her greatest charms with slightly sardonic eyes.

"On what?" she asked.

"On showing no outward signs of mental or physical distress."

"That is the kind of thing that has done the mischief," cried the girl, flushing warmly and flying out of her chair. "And you're angry with me for getting you here when all your heart is in your stuffy old office. But you don't lash out at me for it, you just say disagreeable things in a quiet way. I'd rather be cursed at and be done with it."

"I'm sorry," said Blair smoothly, "but it has never yet been my habit to 'curse at' any woman."

"I'm glad I've made you angry—for you," cried Christine recklessly. "It makes it easier to tell you that it is high time our engagement ended."

Blair raised his eyebrows the least fraction, but said nothing.

"It has been going on now for more than a year—time for all the romance to have evaporated. It's gone sour."

"Just what is it you've against me, Chris?" Blair asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

"I am a little too dull for you?" suggested Blair.

"Well, you have not been very lively lately, have you?" she inquired defensively.

"I don't think I was ever what could be called 'lively,'" mused Blair. "And perhaps lately I have been worse than usual. I thought you understood I have been going through rather an anxious time at the works. Oh, it's all smooth sailing enough now, but I haven't felt inclined to go out and about so much as, possibly, a man with a pretty sweetheart should. So the root of the matter is that I am too unentertaining for you?"

"I mean that we don't even fancy we're in love," she answered petulantly. "I thought you'd see the wisdom of breaking off our engagement. It's stupid to go on when all the heart has gone out of it. I am not blaming you for anything. If you are too slow-going for me, I am far too flippant for you."

"I think that what attracted me to you was your gaiety," said Blair unexpectedly. "Your happy-heartedness—yes, I think that was what I loved in you."

"And so you set to work to make me into something quite different from what I am," blazed out Christine.

"Ah," said Blair very deliberately, "so you have something definite against me. I thought you had, and that it would come to light sooner or later."

"Well, you are rather fond of lecturing me," admitted Christine.

"Since you and Bedford have gone about so much together," the man reminded her. "Since then I have registered a few objections, but not unreasonable ones, I think. I don't think that before then you had cause to complain that I lectured. As a matter of fact, I was rather inclined to be a besotted fool over you, and think everything you did was right—because you did it."

"But not now," Christine pointed out. "Nowadays, you think everything I do wrong—because I do it."

"You know that is not so, but I will not argue the point," said Blair, with a calmness that exasperated her. "Let us leave trivialities and come down to bed-rock. In plain English, you wish to break our engagement?"

"Only half of it," objected Christine. "You no longer care for me and—"

"That is not true," said Blair, for the first time showing signs of feeling.

"You don't care for me as you used to," repeated Christine emphatically. "Look at the kiss you pecked at my cheek when I came down just now." She stared defiantly at him across the room, determined not to allow her eyes to droop before his gaze. "You weren't so matter-of-fact and indifferent at first. Oh, I'm matter-of-fact enough myself now, I admit it. But it isn't fair of you to speak as if it is all one-sided. We are both thoroughly sick of this engagement, and the only sensible thing is to end it."

"You are quite right," said Blair, quietly.

To her dismay she felt a queer stab at her heart. She wanted everything to be over between herself and Blair, but none the less it hurt her that he should be so willing to agree.

"Not right in all you say, but in your last sentence," continued Blair. "The only sensible thing is to end this engagement quickly, one way or the other."

"What do you mean?" demanded Christine quickly. "There is only one way to end an engagement."

She took off the ring Blair had given her a year ago and laid it on the table. It was rather a blow to think she would never again wear the sapphire and diamond circle she had thought the most wonderful ring she had ever seen, a year ago.

"There is another way—marriage," said Blair, so quietly that the girl thought he could not really be saying the words. "The sensible thing is for us to get married straight away."

"What? Just when we have both fallen out of love?" exclaimed Christine incredulously.

"Speak for yourself," said Blair tersely. "Christine, I'm going to talk plain horse sense to you for once."

"Do you ever talk anything else?" murmured Christine, rebelliously.

"I don't quite know what they teach girls at school," began Blair unexpectedly. "Did you ever learn anything about Tantalus?"

"Tantalus?" she repeated, vaguely. "Wasn't he the man who was always being tormented by never being able to get anything he wanted?"

"Yes, the man who for his sins was set up to his chin in a pool of water, which ebbed away as he was about to drink, and various other similar tortures—that's the chap," said Blair grimly.

"What is he to do with us?" questioned Christine, puzzled.

"A long engagement plays the dickens with a man when he is genuinely in love with the girl who has accepted him as her future husband, but who puts off marrying him until some indefinite time in the future."

Christine gave an irrepressible laugh of amusement.

"Sorry, Blair," she apologised, carelessly. "I shouldn't have laughed, but it sounded too funny, hearing you compare the effects of our engagement on you with the torments of What's-His-Name? You, the most self-contained person I've ever met!"

Blair Cooper took a step forward and faced her.

"If I have seemed like that to you, can't

you realise that it was in self-defence?" he asked, a note of anger in his deep voice. "I was madly in love, and I thought you loved me. We were to be married very shortly, so of course I made love to my girl. Then came your fool idea that you were too young to marry—wouldn't I wait a year or so? I wasn't willing, but I fought the whole question out by myself. I was unwilling to be unfair to you in any way, so I agreed."

"I know that," put in Christine impatiently.

"But you don't know the price I paid," Blair told her, sternly. "I was always at your beck and call, and at first I was willing it should be so."

"You were simply lovely at first, it was only later that you became horrid," said Christine regretfully.

"Things couldn't go on like that. I found you came too much between me and my work," went on the man. "And just when the business was passing through a critical stage. If you remember, about four or five months ago I begged you to marry me then and there."

Christine nodded.

"You were still not willing, and one morning—I'd been to a dance with you the night before, and I suppose my head was muzzy with that maddening sweetness of you at your most alluring—at an important interview I made a serious slip, one that might easily have done my whole business in. That pulled me up. Since you weren't prepared to marry me, and since I wasn't prepared to let my business go smash—well, I cut you as far as possible out of my thoughts, and nowadays I kiss you as if you were your grandmother."

He glanced at his watch and made a dive for his hat.

"Great Scot!" he ejaculated. "I shall only just about do it."

"You see," pointed out Christine, detaining him a moment, "you think more of your precious business than you do of me. That proves what I have been saying."

At the door Blair paused, looking back at her, his hand on the handle.

"I am not going to be such an ass as to ask you to believe that for me and all other men, there's nothing else but love," he grinned boyishly. "There are quite a number of things, and very engrossing, entertaining, fascinating things they are. My business is one of 'em."

"I believe I hate you!" burst out the girl passionately.

"I can't stay now, I'll come back this evening," he cried hastily. "Think it over during the day, and make up your mind to be a sensible girl and marry me at once."

He was gone from the room, and the slamming of the front door told that he had left the house. Christine snatched up the ring and leant far out of the window with it.

"Blair, catch!" she cried, and sent the jewel spinning through the air.

Blair fished the ring neatly and dropped it into his pocket.

"I'll bring it back to-night," he shouted, getting into his little car and flying down the avenue.

Behind Christine the butler gave a discreet cough, and the girl drew her head back into the room.

"Madame has sent down a message, Miss Christine," he said. "Madame hopes it will be quite convenient for you to go to her at noon precisely."

Christine nodded, resuming her interrupted breakfast.

"I'll be there, Robinson," she said laconically.

It would not be convenient to visit her step-grandmother at noon in the hot, airless bedroom where the old lady spent her

days as well as her nights. Chris had intended taking a lesson in putting from the professional at the links, but that must be put off, for a request from Madame was equal to a command.

The arbitrary old lady who held court in her nearly airtight bedroom was the second wife of her grandfather. Christine, as a child of seven, remembering her father's mother, had obstinately refused to call the new Mrs. Cooper "grandmother", and neither arguments nor punishments shook her determination. She would call the lady Madame, nothing else, and gradually the new wife became Madame to the household and to the neighbourhood as well.

Christine did a good deal of telephoning that morning, and on the first stroke of twelve she tapped at Mrs. Cooper's door.

This was never a room to enter unadvisedly, thought Christine, grimacing at her reflection in the polished door panel and waiting for an answer to her tap.

Hewson, Madame's maid, and a strangely pretty one for such a mistress, opened the door after Christine had been kept standing on the mat long enough to irritate her.

The girl passed into the hot room, and Hewson passed out, going straight along the landing and down the back stairs.

From the day when old Mrs. Cooper had first been taken ill a trained nurse was in the house, but she was never permitted into her patient's presence unless her attentions were needed; for the rest, the highly-paid Hewson sufficed.

"Good morning, Christine, I am glad to see you have the saving grace of punctuality," said the old lady.

"Good morning, Madame," said Christine coolly. "You train us all in that saving grace, you know. It's rather wonderful of you, shut up here all day, and yet ruling us all with a rod of iron."

"There can be only one mistress in a house," said old Mrs. Cooper briskly. "And so long as I retain the use of my faculties, I have no intention of being anything else in mine."

She waved Christine to a chair, carefully placed so that the light from the window would fall full on the occupant's face.

Madame was an exceedingly pretty old lady, her small china-blue eyes being very bright, her cheeks very pink, while the most enchanting snowy curls framed her face.

"You have never accepted me as your grandmother, Christine," began the crisp voice.

"I couldn't," said the girl, briefly.

"And you never liked me."

"Not very much," admitted Christine candidly. "You see, I loved Granny tremendously, and perhaps I was jealous for her when you took her place. Still, you have been very good, and it wasn't your fault that grandfather left me nothing when he died."

"We have always preserved the courtesies," agreed Mrs. Cooper. "I assured you that I did not influence your dear grandfather in the disposition of his property, that it was as great a surprise to me as to you when I found he had left everything to my discretion—and you accepted my assurance."

"Of course I did," said Christine casually. "We have never been good friends, but I know you wouldn't lie to me."

"He left every penny to me without condition or reserve of any kind," went on Mrs. Cooper. "I am free to leave it all to whomsoever I choose—to Hewson, to that congenital idiot of a nurse of mine, to anybody or to any cause."

"Oh, yes," admitted Christine, with difficulty strangling her impatience, and wondering what all this preamble was leading up to.

"I quite understand why my dear third husband left his money like this," ran on the clear little voice. "He wished you to have it all—and if you are sensible you will have it."

"It will be only right," said Christine, as rebelliously as she dared.

"Your grandfather's great ambition was to found a family," ran on the old lady smoothly.

"Was it really?" enquired Christine, for the first time faintly interested. "Poor grandfather, leaving no descendant but me. What hard luck."

"Your grandfather's people had a tendency to marry late in life. He was nearly fifty when he married, and your father in spite of repeated urgings, was nearer forty than thirty when he married your mother. You are aware of all this."

"Yes, I am," said Christine bluntly. "And frankly, Madame, I don't see why you are reciting it all over to me."

"Merely to make clear the importance of what I have to say," explained Madame serenely. "I am convinced that my dear third husband left his property in my hands because he knew he could trust me to see to it that the dearest wish of his heart was to be carried out. He did not want his name to die out."

"But how absurd," cried Christine, rashly. "Such a name—Cooper! If it were Montmorency or Beauchamp, or anything distinguished, one could understand the wish to see it carried on; but Cooper! Why, the whole country is swarming with Coopers, and very few of us distinguished in any way above the common herd."

Madame's sharp blue eyes darted fire.

"If you are unable to sympathise with your grandfather's keenest desire, I will ask you to refrain from jeering at it in my presence," she said.

"I'm sorry," murmured Christine, a little abashed. "Please go on, Madame. I will not interrupt again."

"Your grandfather spoke to me of his plans for you. Every penny of his was to be yours and your husband's, on condition that he took the name of Cooper."

"I could never marry a man who would barter his own name for the sake of money," put in Christine, with a disdainful tilting of her pretty face.

"Exactly," agreed Madame blandly. "I anticipated some such childish objection from you, and I therefore looked on it as providential when a year ago you and Blair Cooper became engaged to be married. He comes of a good stock, is by no means a fool, and is not connected with this family. The match is an ideal one."

"The match is not coming off," said Christine, a little fearfully. She feared Madame most when that arbitrary little lady was her most bland. "Blair and I broke off our engagement this morning."

"He broke it or you?" demanded Madame quickly.

"Oh, I did, I suppose," admitted Christine, unwillingly.

"Then the best thing you can do is to tell Blair that you have changed your mind again," suggested Madame tranquilly.

"I'd rather die," said Christine, with the extravagance of youth. "Besides, I haven't changed my mind."

"You will when you have heard all I have to say," predicted Madame confidently. "Lately I have been expecting something foolish of this kind. You have been seeing far too much of an undesirable individual."

Christine's hazel eyes opened to their widest extent. How did Madame, shut up in her one room and rarely seeing anyone beyond the doctor, her nurse, and Hewson,

always contrive to know everything of importance that went on?

"I have noticed that girls to-day have a tendency either not to marry at all or to wait until they are well over thirty," proceeded Mrs. Cooper. "When Blair came to the house as early as breakfast time this morning, and when in addition you come here at noon wearing no ring, I judged it was high time for me to take a hand in furthering my dear third husband's heart's desire. I have already had two heart attacks.

"At any moment I may have a third," went on Madame serenely. "I propose, therefore, to make my will, and in accordance with what I am convinced would be my dear late husband's wishes, I intend to see that you and Blair Cooper marry at once."

"You mean you are going to leave my grandfather's money to me on condition that I marry Blair within a certain time?" Christine asked, blankly.

"Dear me, no!" Madame told her. "I do not know a great deal about English law, but enough to be aware that if I made such a will, and you were unwilling to carry out the condition, all you would need to do would be to appear before the proper authority, state that you were averse to the marriage, and you would be allowed to inherit without fulfilling the condition."

"Really!" said the deeply-interested Christine, sitting up alertly. "I didn't know that!"

"Many people don't," stated Madame calmly. "But we need not go into the matter, for such a question will not arise. My intention is that you marry Blair Cooper before the end of the month, and then I will make my will, leaving everything that was your grandfather's to you both."

There was a long interval of dead silence, during which Christine stared incredulously at the apple blossom face, so inflexible in spite of its surface softness.

"But that's mad, quite mad!" she gasped at last.

"Not at all," Madame assured her affably. "For the past couple of years I have been attended by two medical men, who could if necessary swear to my complete sanity. There would be no way of upsetting my present will, under which you get nothing. My lawyer has instructions to draw up a new will, which I propose to sign immediately on learning that you and Blair Cooper are husband and wife."

"But why must it be Blair? Couldn't I marry somebody else?" Christine gasped, disjunctedly.

"If in the short time remaining you can find someone named Cooper," began Madame tranquilly. Then she stopped herself. "No," she announced firmly, "I will give you no excuse for frivolous delays. You will marry Blair Cooper before the end of the month or you lose everything."

"B-but this is the eighth of the month," stammered out Christine.

"Precisely," she said, and Christine's heart sank. She knew as surely as she knew night follows day that this was an unalterable decision, and that no argument or pleas of hers could affect it.

Madame touched the electric bell that lay on her bed.

"I am about to have my lunch," she said. "If you make up your mind to be sensible, bring Blair to see me this evening before nine o'clock. Good-bye, Christine."

CHRISTINE walked blindly down the stairs, through the hall and out at the open front door to the top of the flight of stone steps that led down to the carriage drive.

The clangour of the brass gong filled the whole house with tuneful noise, but

she did not so much as hear it.

After waiting a respectful five minutes and finding that Miss Cooper still stood as if rooted to the top step, the dignified butler came out of the house to mention deferentially that luncheon was served.

Christine gave a start. All in one moment it struck home to her that she had to marry Blair Cooper within twenty-three days or lose everything she had been accustomed to all her life.

"I'm not lunching, I'm going into the town," she said brusquely.

She sped up the stairs to her room, snatched up the first coat that came handy, and crammed the first hat she happened to get hold of well down over her fair hair. In an incredibly short time she raced back down the stairs, and by way of the side door and the now well-nigh useless stable yard round to the garage.

Almost in the same breath she had her two-seater out and was tearing down the drive.

The first person she saw when she reached the town was the George Bedford who had driven home with her from the dance the night before. When George's lazy blue eyes fell on her, his hand went up, and Christine stopped the car as obediently as if a policeman had pulled up the traffic.

Bedford, his Saxon-fair head standing out in sharp contrast with every other man in the dingy High Street, came to the side of the little car.

"What luck," he drawled, with that deceptive indolence of his. "You're lunching with me, of course. I'm on my way."

He would have got into the second seat, but the girl stopped him.

"I'd love to lunch with you," she said frankly. "But I'm on my way to the works. I've some urgent business with Blair."

She swallowed hard, and very little of her embarrassment was lost on the man.

"That imbecile engagement gone smash?" he inquired with lazy audacity, looking pointedly at the bare, ringless hands that had the wheel.

"Should I be on my way to see him at the works now if that were so?" demanded Christine diplomatically. "It is some business to do with Madame."

"Chris, what gives your eyes that shadowed look of mystery?" inquired the man suddenly. "More than once I've wondered."

"Have I a look of mystery?" inquired the distinctly gratified girl. "I didn't know."

"You have," he assured her. "I believe it's something to do with the length of your eyelashes. I don't believe you're one bit mysterious really, but the effect turns your face from that of a more than commonly pretty girl to—well, to what it is."

"And what is that?" inquired Christine, trying to speak flippantly.

"Ah, I am not going to tell you that—here," drawled the man.

His lightly-veiled love-making was becoming increasingly apt to set Christine's heart beating uncomfortably fast, and it now had its usual effect.

Perhaps Bedford was satisfied for the time being with the impression he had made, for he drew a little back from the car.

"If I wait until this very pressing business with Cooper is concluded, is there any reason why you shouldn't lunch with me?" he inquired, his bold blue eyes looking far more momentous words than that.

"I don't know that there is, but I don't know how long I shall be," Christine confessed.

"Like to come?" he drawled out.

"M'm, yes," she nodded, feeling recklessly that she must have one last—if very mild—fling.

"Then I'll wait an hour. That should give you time for transacting any business of Madame's," said George Bedford with decision. He glanced at his watch. "In an hour's time I'll be waiting for you at the Universal. Au 'voir, Chris!"

"Au 'voir," repeated the girl, all the warmth and colour into her face.

She drove her car skilfully through the traffic, for Blair's engineering works lay outside the town, and many narrow streets had to be threaded.

"I don't think you will find Mr. Cooper in the office, miss," the doorkeeper volunteered. "Something went wrong with the engine in Shed Four, this morning and, Mr. Cooper has been there since the breakdown happened."

"I'm quite sure he would be," said Christine with the friendliness that made friends for her wherever she went. "I'll go straight to the shed."

It was the dinner hour, therefore only Blair and a couple of workmen were in Shed Four when Christine went in. The engine had been persuaded to work again, and Blair, enveloped in greasy blue overalls, a great streak of engine-grease across his right cheek, was giving a final rub-up to various parts of the machinery with a handful of cotton waste when he caught sight of the girl.

"What's up, Chris?" he demanded sharply.

"It's Madame," she began. "I had to see you at once. Are you as busy as you look?"

"The engine's running again now. If you go on to the office, I'll be there in a couple of minutes," he told her.

In very little more than that couple of minutes he found her in the office.

He had discarded the overalls and got rid of the oil smudge by this time, and he went straight to the heart of the matter in his direct fashion.

"What have you come for?" he asked. "After this morning I know it isn't for the pleasure of seeing me."

"It is not," confessed Christine candidly, sitting down in his swing chair and starting to fidget with the papers on the table. "It is something Madame said after you had gone this morning."

"Don't mix those up, please," said Blair, opening a drawer and shovelling the papers pell-mell into it. "What was it Madame said?"

"It is horribly unfair," she burst out. "She has no right to say I am to have nothing out of grandfather's pile unless—"

She broke off, embarrassed.

"Out with it, Chris," the man recommended. "What did she say? Something about me?"

He leant against the table, both hands in his pockets, surveying her with a faintly amused regard.

"She knows that we broke off our engagement only this morning, and in the face of that the detestable old woman vows if you and I don't get married before this month is out, she won't leave me a single penny of grandfather's money. It is the most unfair thing I ever heard of."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Blair, looking meditatively at her. "For the nineteen years of your life you have had everything that money can buy, you've had a freer hand than any girl I know. You've dressed like a princess, you have entertained and been entertained, you—"

"All that is exactly what makes it so bitterly unfair," blazed Chris. "If I had not been used to all those things, I could quite easily do without them. But as it is—I just can't."

"I see," said Blair very quietly, as she broke off on the edge of a sob. "It's a bit

awkward for you, turning me down hard this morning, and then having to tell me you'd like all to be 'as you were'." So the long and the short of it is, Chris, that you are willing to marry me, before the end of the month?"

Christine stared at him with positive gratitude.

"You have put it more nicely than I deserve," she confessed. "But—that isn't quite all."

Her softly-tinted face flushed, and she swung the chair half round so that the man could see little more of her face than the edge of one burning cheek.

"I don't want to get married, Blair," she burst out hurriedly. "I want to be absolutely free to go about as I've done ever since I grew up and to go on having a good time."

"Let us have this straight, Chris," said the man, after a silence that seemed unending. "You mean that you don't wish to marry at all? Or is your objection only to me, personally, as your husband?"

"I mean I don't want to marry anybody," cried Christine tempestuously, after one fleeting thought tossed to George Bedford.

"Then," went on Blair relentlessly, "your proposition is that you and I go through the wedding ceremony for the sole purpose of throwing dust in Madame's eyes?"

"Yes, that is it," cried Christine eagerly. In a couple of strides Blair was before her, leaning across the table to look into her eyes.

"How dare you, Chris?" he demanded hoarsely, for once carried quite out of himself. "How dare you make such a suggestion to any man who loves you?"

"You've come to the wrong man," he went on harshly. "When I marry it will be for the sake of a wife and a home, not for any mercenary considerations. I'll have nothing to do with helping you to get hold of your grandfather's money under false pretences."

"It is no worse than the shabby way in which Madame is hectoring me," she declared heatedly. "Through my grandfather's injustice she holds all the cards, and she is using them to force me to marry you, whether I'm willing or not. I consider what—that I had in my mind was quite justified."

"It's unthinkable," said Blair, reining in his wrath with a visible effort. He pulled himself upright, took out a handkerchief and passed it over his face. "Is there any creature on earth half so cruel as a young girl? I doubt it. Yes, Chris, you were wise when you decided you are too young to marry—too young and too callously selfish."

"I'm not meaning to be selfish," protested the girl, a little scared by the storm she had raised. "I never dreamed you would see any harm in my idea. But anyway, since you look on me as a criminal for ever having had the thought in my mind, I'll go."

Blair stood with his back to her, making no move until she reached the door.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Nothing, I suppose," she told him drearily. "I shall try to persuade Madame to allow me a longer time, but she never changes her mind."

"Why this violent hurry on Madame's part?" he asked, more for the sake of gaining time than because he wanted to know.

"She is afraid she might die before she can see me married," explained Christine. "You see, she will not sign this will until I am married."

"Christine," said the man suddenly, "perhaps I am being one of the biggest fools who ever lived in being willing to marry you, after you have shown how

appallingly little you care for me. But I have the misfortune to be in love, and that puts me at a disadvantage."

Christine flew into the middle of the office, her soft hazel eyes glowing, her face alight.

"You mean you agree?" she cried delightedly.

"Not to your bargaining," said the man grimly. "I've been in love with you from the day—it must be nine or ten years ago now—when I pulled you out of the brook at the bottom of your grandfather's garden. You'd been after watercress and tumbled in. You clung frantically to me, the queerest little object in the world, and implored me to tell you you hadn't swallowed a frog."

Christine gazed at him with a little touch of awe.

"So long ago, Blair, really?" she asked in a very small voice. "I never guessed that. I can't have been more than nine. Ever since then?"

"It amounts to that," he told her sternly. "At any rate, I've never thought of any other girl as my wife. Because of that I'm fool enough to ask you to marry me at once but with no strings tied to the bargain. It isn't because I have any intention of sharing in your grandfather's money either. I can rustle for myself and you as well."

"It is just because you are in love with me," murmured Christine.

Blair Cooper nodded. He was not going to admit that another factor was his fear of losing her to another man.

"I—it's awfully good of you, Blair," began the girl uncertainly. "I suppose I've been rather a beast lately—going about so much with George Bedford—and this morning—and then coming here to you just now."

"Are you going to marry me on my terms, Chris?" asked Blair, and he turned half aside so that she might not see the terrible anxiety in his eyes.

"I suppose I must," said Christine helplessly. "It seems dull though, marrying each other now, when the glamour and romance has gone out of it all."

"I agree that there isn't much romance about your marrying me for the purpose of laying hands on your grandfather's money," said Blair disagreeably. "That's a sordid commonplace if you like, and it would take a devil of a lot of gilding to get any romance into it."

Christine made no answer, but glanced at the bald-faced office clock.

"Is that clock right?" she cried. "I'm due to meet George Bedford for lunch at the Universal in three minutes from now."

"Half a moment," said Blair, reaching for his hat.

"You're not coming?" questioned Christine in astonishment.

"Naturally I am," he told her. "You don't imagine that now we have agreed to get married I am going to stand by and see you and Bedford flaunting it all over the place?"

George Bedford stood waiting for her on the steps of the Universal. Blair wasted no time, but went straight up to him.

"Congratulate me, Bedford," he said briefly. "Miss Cooper and I are being married on the thirty-first."

Bedford shot one curious glance at the girl's face. He was prepared to swear that last night at the dance she had had no intention of marrying Cooper in three week's time. In a few well-chosen words he gave the bridegroom elect his congratulations and wished the bride-elect joy.

"You'll take my place at lunch, Cooper?" he asked with geniality. "Oh, yes, do! You and her—Miss Cooper are bound to have a thousand things to settle with your wedding so near."

Blair accepted the tactful offer in his customary matter-of-fact fashion, and the

two went into the hotel, taking their places at the table Bedford had reserved.

"You see," he said quietly, "Bedford understands and accepts the situation."

"Understands what?" asked Christine a little unhappily.

"That it's hands off my girl," he told her tersely. "He's a decent sort, is Bedford, and he'll hold back after this—unless you beckon him forward."

AT half-past eight that same evening Blair and Christine together mounted the shallow stairs and walked along the landing that led to Madame's room.

It pleased Madame to start proceedings, with a social chat about nothing at all, just long enough to give the man time fully to appreciate the charming picture she made in the centre of the carved bed. Then the shrewd blue eyes darted from one face to the other.

"There is no need for us to talk about this business, Blair?" she enquired, prettily. "Your being here signifies you are willing to marry Christine before the first of next month?"

"That is correct, Madame," Blair was saying in his deep voice. "Christine has consented to marry me on the thirty-first."

"And you will start your married life here," went on Madame. "I occupy no more than a corner of this great house, and there is more than ample room for two establishments."

"Here, Madame? In your house? I didn't understand that was part of your requirements," said Blair.

Christine would have flamed out her passionate disagreement, but Blair's right hand caught her left as it hung at her side, holding it in a very close clasp. She had the wisdom to leave it to him.

"I am sorry, Madame, but I can't agree to give up my home. It isn't as important as one as this, but my wife will have to make the best of it. And now I am sure you are wanting to be rid of us and get a rest."

Christine held her breath for a moment. People did not take the initiative like this with Madame, they meekly waited until she signified they had her leave to go. Apparently, however, nothing Blair Cooper did was wrong in Madame's eyes, and her leave taking was graciousness itself.

Once outside the door and on the landing, Christine looked at the man with tragic eyes.

"Was there ever anything so uninteresting as this wedding of ours?" she asked disgustedly. "We are doing it at the command of the most domineering old woman who ever lived."

"I am not marrying you at Madame's command, but for the reason I gave you this morning," Blair interrupted her.

"And after the wedding she will sign a will leaving me—us—all the money that ought to have come to me without any conditions at all. We'll be sent on a fortnight's honeymoon, no less because it would look bad, and no more because the works would drop to pieces if you were away from them a minute longer—oh, stodgy! So we'll have to come home and live—stodgily—ever after. Did you ever hear of anything so dull?"

Again Blair Cooper laughed. He had already one hand of hers, and he swung her round into his arms.

"It didn't strike you as dull and stodgy a year ago," he told her, his lips all but on hers. "There was glamour and magic and romance enough and to spare then. Can't we bring some of it back, Chris?"

"You know we can't," she objected, trying to release herself from his grip. "Haven't you heard that there's nothing quite so dead as a dead love?"

"I don't pay any attention to cheap

quotations from sham philosophers," he said buoyantly. "You loved me a year ago, you acknowledged it. And I can't believe it's all dead, Chris! Chris!"

Her head was held in the crook of his arm, his eyes—could they truly be Blair's cool grey eyes?—were looking down into hers in a fashion that made her heart start racing like a mad thing.

"There's lots of the glamour left yet, trust me, Chris," he muttered unsteadily, bending to crush his lips to hers.

In that moment, when the old Blair seemed to have come back, Christine could almost be persuaded that he was right.

AFTER THE HONEYMOON

CHRISTINE COOPER returned from her honeymoon over head and ears in love with her husband. All the glamour of the early days of their engagement had come back, and very much more was added to it.

A car met them at the station, and Blair promptly told the chauffeur to go on with the luggage.

"It has all been perfect, but how will it be now we are back and his tiresome engineering claims him?" Christine wondered fearfully.

"Well, Chris?" queried Blair, half turning his head to look at her as she sat at his elbow. "What price marriage so far? Is the holy estate too deadly dull to suit a tempestuous young woman who is still no more than nineteen?"

Chris slid her hand beside his on the wheel, whereupon he stopped the car to cover her hand with his brown fingers. Her softly-tinted cheek was pressed against the grey tweed of his coat.

"You've been a darling, Blair," she murmured softly. "I can't imagine why I was so stupid as not to marry you a year ago. We might have been together all these months instead of your grinding away at your works day and night and me being miserable with Madame."

"I don't remember your being particularly miserable with Madame." He laughed, then warned her, "But I'll have to grind away at the works still. They mean much to me, you know, and they always will; to say nothing of our bread and butter depending on them."

"Blair, as if I were foolish enough to dream for one moment that you would ever give up the works!" Christine's hazel eyes reproached him. "Though with all my grandfather's money, so far as our bread and butter goes, it would make no difference if they went smash to-morrow."

"You haven't the money yet," Blair laughingly reminded her, rubbing his brown face against her cheek.

"But it is as certain as if I had," she declared confidently. "Madame promised, and she always keeps her word."

"That's so," agreed Blair cheerfully. "What I meant was that Madame may live on for years, and that the most sensible thing you can do is to forget all about the fortune you're going to have until it's actually yours."

"No doubt you're right," sighed Christine. "Madame is just the sort to go on living until she's a hundred, out of sheer aggravation and the wish to spite me. If I heard this very minute that she—"

Christine broke off, for a moment hiding her face against his shoulder.

"I won't say it, I won't even think it," she murmured penitently. "I should deserve the worst punishments if I wished anyone out of this lovely world."

Blair bent his head until it rested on hers. "Then the world is a lovely place to you,

Chris?" he muttered, deeply moved. "You are happy in it?"

"Happy!" she murmured back. "Blair, I'm so happy that if I don't have another moment's joy as long as I live I'll never complain. We have had happiness enough for a lifetime crammed into these two wonder-weeks. Darling, I'm telling you this because I want to wipe out the memory of this past year when I was so horrid and thought I'd left off being in love with you. I want you to know how I love you; I want you to know it now before we start our everyday life together."

Everything but their love and radiant happiness was swept out of their hearts as Blair's arms slipped round her, catching her to him, while their lips met.

After a brief interlude the car was started again. It turned in at last at a wide-open gate and glided up the drive, where the trees were more weird and curious than beautiful, for Blair's grandfather had made a point of planting a specimen of every tree, English or foreign, that could be persuaded to grow.

"I like your funny trees, Blair," said the girl, looking at the uneven row on either hand. "And I love your quaint old house," she added, as the beautiful old house of rose-red brick with timbering of dark oak came in sight. "Do stop the car here for a moment."

Blair was more than content, and the pair sat shoulder to shoulder in the twilight, drinking in the homely charm of the long, low dwelling that looked to be stretching out open arms to them.

"I'll race you for 'first-foot'!" exclaimed Christine suddenly, referring to the old superstition that the one of a newly-married pair to get "first-foot" over the threshold of their future home is bound to be the predominating partner so long as they lived.

She had the advantage of surprise and gained quite a good start.

In spite of her start, however, Blair caught up with her before she could take a step across the threshold of the door that stood hospitably open. Without pausing he snatched her up bodily in his arms and carried her into the outer hall, and put her down.

As if someone unseen had known the exact moment for it, the inner door opened, and there, well back near the foot of the stairs, stood the maid-servants, the housekeeper at their head.

The bride and bridegroom made a decorous entrance, with no sign to show that they had signalled their home-coming by racing up the last third of the drive, save the bride's quickened breathing and the glint of amusement in the bridegroom's eyes.

"IT'S lovely, the first evening together in our own darling home," sighed Christine, sipping her coffee when they were in the drawing-room after dinner. "What are we going to do to celebrate it, Blair?" she added, her eyes like stars. "Do start the radio-gram and let's dance."

"Half a minute, there's no hurry," said her husband lazily, reluctant to cut short his deep satisfaction in for the first time seeing Christine, his wife, sitting at their own fireside, looking as deliciously at home as if she had sat there on the chintz-covered divan every night after dinner for the last six years. It was at one and the same time all so thrillingly new and so amazingly natural that Blair Cooper felt he could scarcely credit his own good fortune.

With one swift movement he was beside her, snatching her into his arms with such vehemence that the coffee cup and saucer crashed, splintering into fragments, heeded by neither.

"I can't believe it's real, Chris, having

you here, my wife, we two alone, with all the world shut out," he muttered unsteadily. "And yet it seems that there could never have been a time when you weren't here."

"Darling," she whispered back, clasping the dear dark head close.

"You're happy, Chris?" he asked a minute later, looking deep into the eyes so near his own.

"So happy that I can even forgive Madame for dragging me into marrying you," she murmured back.

Instantly Blair got up from the couch and went across to the radio gram, pushing back the rugs from the floor.

"Ready, Chris?" he called briefly. The momentary dash of cold water was forgotten, and the pair were deep in the intricacies of a new step they had seen displayed by a pair of exhibition dancers at their hotel the night before.

They squabbled amicably over it for perhaps three minutes, when the sound of the telephone bell in the hall cut sharply across the dance music.

"Who is it?" Christine asked, inquisitively, crushing close up to her husband in the endeavour to hear as well as he.

"Only Townley. It isn't anything to interest you. I'll tell you presently," said Blair, his face hardening into what Christine called its "works" lines.

"Can't be done, old boy," he said to the 'phone. "Not to-night. I'll see you at the works in the morning as early as you like, but I can't see you to-night."

"I should think not, indeed," flashed out the indignant Christine. "Doesn't the man know we are scarcely home? He seems mighty anxious to cut short our honeymoon."

Blair hung up the receiver.

"Townley has a pretty big proposition he wants to talk over with me," he explained. "You wouldn't be interested in the details, but it may mean a good deal to us."

"To your stupid old works, you mean," muttered Christine, rebelliously.

Blair caught her, making her look directly at him, though she tried to evade his eyes.

"To us, to you and me," he insisted, with good-humoured firmness. "For we are one now, and anything that touches the works and me touches you as well, my own."

"You're aching to get to your Townley man, you know you are!" said Christine, petulantly.

"Am I, Chris? Am I aching to leave you to-night for anything or anyone on earth?" he demanded passionately, turning her face up to his with one hand beneath her chin and kissing her mutinous lips until she gave him back kiss for kiss. "It would have to be a far greater thing than old Townley could offer that would take me from your side on the first evening of our homecoming."

"I know," she murmured back penitently. "I was a pig, Blair."

The 'gram was set going once more, and the new step was being fairly successfully tried, when ting-ting cut in the telephone bell again.

"I'll talk to him this time," announced Christine, darting out into the hall and taking up the receiver before Blair had time to turn off the gramophone. "Hallo! Hallo!" she called impatiently. "If it is you again, Mr. Townley— Oh, it's you, Hewson," she added more calmly. "What! Is Madame ill? Really ill? Oh!"

She covered the mouthpiece with her palm and turned to her husband.

"What with your Townley man and the works and now Madame, they're not giving us a chance," she said desolately. "I can't imagine how everyone knows we came home to-night. That's the worst of

living in a place this size, everybody's so hideously interested in your comings and goings."

"Is Madame ill? Does she want you?" enquired Blair.

"That is what I thought," said Christine vexedly. "No, the selfish old woman isn't ill. She has just heard we are home, and would like us to drop in for a few moments before she settles down for the night. Did you ever hear of anything more unreasonable? Of course we're not going."

She was about to send a vigorous refusal over the wire when Blair intervened.

"Suppose you let me hear what Hewson has to say?" he suggested. "Hallo, Hewson! Yes. What exactly did Madame say?" He listened attentively, and then said, "Very well; tell Madame we will be with her in less than fifteen minutes."

"I am not going," cried Christine, her eyes defiant. "I will not humour a tyrannical old woman. If she were ill it would be different, but she is only dragging us there to gratify her love of power, and I won't go."

"It's tiresome, darling," said Blair. "But Madame is a very old woman, and lonely."

"Don't you believe it," scoffed Chris. "For all Madame is shut up in her bedroom, she pulls countless strings and has her finger in no end of pies that you don't dream of."

"Still, there is no denying that she is old and alone, and it would gratify her if we ran the car over," pointed out Blair. "I don't want to go any more than you do, but I think we ought not to refuse. Really, we must go."

"Don't be so painfully conscientious. You said just now that it would have to be a very much bigger thing than your business with Townley to take you away from me to-night, and yet here you are, ready to rush off to Madame the moment she lifts her finger. I don't believe you would be so eager if it were any other old and lonely woman. But she has got tons of money at her disposal, and—"

She broke off under the look Blair turned on her. She simply could not go on.

"I don't mean that," she owned, unwillingly. It hurt, having Blair look at her like that.

"I hope not," he said, quietly. "Chris, I forbid—strictly forbid—you ever to say a thing like that to me again."

"I've said I didn't mean it," murmured the girl petulantly. "But about Madame—Blair, I won't go. She must learn that I am not at her beck and call any longer. If you must go, you will have to go without me. I am quite certain she would far rather see you than me; and I am not going, even if she does want me."

"Very well," said Blair, coldly. That jibe about Madame's money had cut deep. "Then I will go alone."

"Make any excuse you can think of, tell any lie you like to Madame," said the girl airily, still defiant on the couch.

"I have no intention of making any excuse for your absence," said Blair, bringing in his overcoat from the hall and getting into it. "Madame will see you are not with me, and that will be sufficient."

He went out, but almost instantly he was back again beside her, his arms round her unresponsive form.

"Chris darling, need you be like this over such a silly trifle?" he asked her. "Don't come out if you'd rather not, but don't let's quarrel on our first evening at home."

She was not to be so easily softened. "I loathe quarrelling," she said, unyielding as a young sapling in his embrace. "And if you will ring up Hewson and tell her that you will call to see Madame

in the morning on your way to the office, and stay with me now—"

And she paused invitingly.

"Certainly not!" said the man, his arms falling away from her. "I should never forgive myself if I refused an old woman's request to see me for a few minutes."

"I could quite easily forgive myself if I never set eyes on Madame again," vowed Chris, rashly. "I don't like her, and she doesn't like me."

At this Blair, hurt and annoyed though he was, committed the unforgivable sin of laughing outright.

"You absurd infant," he said, rubbing the back of his hand indulgently against her cheek. "I'll be back in half an hour, and we'll get on with that dance step."

Christine sat perfectly rigid, more carried away by anger than ever before in her life. She was in exactly the right frame of mind to do something that might imperil all the happiness of her life with Blair, when the opportunity arose, as inevitably would happen.

For the third time since dinner the telephone shrilled out its summons.

"It's all right, Kate, I'll answer it," said Christine, going into the hall. "Hallo! Mrs. Cooper speaking. Oh, it's you, Carol! Yes, we are back, got home late this afternoon."

"Do come here, you and Blair," came Carol Gurney's voice, half choked with laughter. "Half a score of them have turned up, a sort of surprise party, and we're having no end of a binge. Hurry up, they're all clamouring for you."

"I'd love to come, but Blair has had to go out, and he's got the car," she hesitated, with one lingering trace of prudence.

"Of course you must come. One of the boys will run over for you in two twos," cried the jubilant Carol. "Bye-bye for ten minutes."

AT fifteen minutes past three in the morning "one of the boys" ran Christine home again in her car. To do the girl justice she had not intended staying so late, but the time flew before she noticed it. Blair opened the door almost before she rang.

"Hallo, Kent!" he said hospitably. "Thanks many for bringing my wife home. Come in and have a drink before you go on."

"No thanks," laughed the young fellow. "Rotten luck, Cooper, your not being able to come. We've had a whale of a time. Good night, Mrs. Cooper, good night!"

While Blair locked and bolted the front door, Christine, still holding her cloak about her, walked back into the room she had left more than five hours earlier.

"Well," she said challengingly, turning on the hearthrug to face her husband, "I wish you'd say all you've got to say and get it over."

Blair shut the door and stood with his back to it a moment, gazing sombrely at her.

"There are several things I could say, Chris," he began when the silence had begun to make her wretchedly uneasy. "Such, for instance, that it wasn't very sporting of you to let me down in the eyes of our neighbours by going off alone to a party on this one night of all others."

"I—I didn't enjoy myself one atom for thinking of you," she burst out like a child, finding to her horror that great tears were rising in her throat. "Blair, I wish I hadn't gone, I do truly!"

The fur coat fell to the ground, and all Christine's resentment with it. She ran across the room, flinging herself into her husband's arms and burrowing her face into his shoulder.

"It was beastly of me," she murmured. "I wanted so badly to get a bit of my own back for your going to see Madame."

Blair could not hold out against the disturbing charm of her.

He held his weeping wife close, crushing her to him; but for one aching moment he wondered—though every fibre of him responded to her touch—how long would it be before his wife grew up?

"BYE, darling! I may be late, but I'll get home in time for the bridge party if I anyhow can."

Blair Cooper pushed back his chair, rose hastily from the breakfast table and bent over his wife's chair to kiss her pretty, clouded face.

Christine pettishly turned her head so that the kiss fell on the edge of her right ear.

"The bridge party was last night," she said aloud in a chilly voice. "And as you didn't get home in time, I had to be host as well as hostess for the umpteenth time since we were married."

"Last night, was it? I clean forget," responded Blair absently. "I should have got here in time, as it happens, if Madame hadn't particularly wished to see me. She rang me up at my hotel before I left London, and I had to drop in, though it was after eleven when I got in."

"Madame again?" said the girl icily.

"Sorry, darling!" he said. "But once get this month over and things will be easier. I shall have more time to go out with you and to back you up at your parties."

"I wonder," said Christine, with no wonder in her tone, and the soft hazel eyes looked as coldly at him at this in their power to look. When it isn't your work, it's Madame; and on the very rare occasions when it's neither your work nor Madame, you are occupied with Mrs. Johnston's and Dinah's affairs. It was most inconsiderate of Mr. Johnston to make you their trustee, or whatever it is, and then die the very next week, as if you hadn't more than enough to do without that."

In spite of his hurry, Blair came back for a moment. He laughed indulgently.

"I've Johnston's affairs pretty straight now," he consoled her. "And so far as Dinah is concerned, my responsibilities end when she marries. She's an attractive girl, and no doubt she'll soon be off my hands."

"If she is wise, she'll never marry," Christine called after him, but since he was getting into his coat in the hall he did not hear.

Left alone in the breakfast-room, Christine stared desolately out of the window, and her hazel eyes slowly filled with tears.

"He has forgotten all about it," she half whispered to herself, and straightway the tears were scorched out of existence by the heat of her anger.

Her twentieth birthday and her husband had forgotten it!

No wonder she felt she had a genuine grievance against him for once. A stack of letters and cards and packages had come from outsiders, but Blair had not so much as noticed the crowded state of the breakfast table. Christine would have died rather than draw his attention to the fact that she was twenty to-day.

It was unfortunate that the first few months of her marriage should have chanced to be the time when Blair's business occupied him more than ever. The matter about which he had been rung up on the night of their homecoming had proved very important, the works had been

enlarged and a huge additional number of workmen engaged.

This meant more and more calls on his time, and on his thoughts as well, and possibly Christine had some excuse for thinking herself neglected by her new-made husband.

If she had any domestic duties to occupy her time, things would have been better for all concerned; but Mrs. Mitton ran the house to perfection, without a single hitch from the beginning of a week to its end. There was nothing for Christine to criticise, to suggest, to alter, nothing that could be improved upon. They would not have been so comfortable if Christine had done her own housekeeping, but it would have been good for both of them.

As it was, the girl sat over her breakfast on the morning of her birthday, with a long, empty day stretching out before her, hours upon hours during which there was absolutely nothing that she need do.

If Carol Gurney had not at that instant burst headlong into the room with no preliminary announcement, Christine probably would have wept tears of self-pity; but there was no chance of anything like that with Carol.

"Chris, you've to take pity on the pageant," she burst out with no other greeting. "Yes I know in the beginning you refused to help in it, being just married and all that," she gabbled on, anticipating any objections, which as a matter of fact Christine was not at all likely to make.

The girl's lip curled with delicate scorn of herself. Had she ever considered she would have no time to help in the pageant? She must have been demented.

"That stupid what's-her-name, who was being the Saxon lady the Viking abducted and carried off in his ship, has broken her leg, a motor accident," explained Carol, volubly. "She never was a bit like any Saxon lady who ever ed, even with her gold wig and the pain. Inches thick on her face, so her being knocked out would be a mercy for the pageant, if there was anybody who could take her place at a minute's notice. But there isn't. You'll have to be her."

"How ridiculous!" scoffed Christine. "I don't know a thing about it, and the pageant is to-morrow."

"And the dress-rehearsal this afternoon," groaned Carol. "Chris, you've got to come. All of us who might have been the Saxon Princess at a pinch are already somebody else. The other girl got the part because she was light enough for the Viking to toss over his shoulder when he carries her off. There's nothing to say, and we can easily coach you up by this afternoon in the little you have to do. Come on, Chris, be a sport!"

"Oh, I'll come!" she assented ungraciously. "I've nothing else to do, so if you think I shan't make too much of a hash of the episode, I'll come."

It was Carol Gurney's way to live in a feverish whirl of excitement, and in no time she had whisked Christine into her waiting car and off to The Grange. There she drilled her as far as time allowed in her role in the love story of a centuries' dead Saxon Princess.

After a stiff morning's work and a hasty lunch, the two girls whirled off in the car to the remains of a Norman castle which had been built on an old Saxon site. There were grassy stretches, giving ample room for the pageant, slopes for the seating of an enormous audience, and best of all, the shining curves of the river wound its way between green banks at one side of the ground.

Christine felt inclined to rub her eyes, for on the blue water rode what looked

to be a genuine Norseman's ship, long and narrow, painted red and blue and with a dragon for figure-head. There were the curved ends, riding high out of the water, the double row of oars, and all complete.

"Good, isn't it?" commented Carol complacently. "You'd never dream the most imposing part of the contraption is nothing more than cardboard."

The Saxon episode came early in the proceedings, and the double rank of rowers were already seated at their oars when the girls arrived. As Christine turned her eyes that way, there strode up to his ship a veritable figure of romance, a tall heroic Viking, all shining and glorious, tunic ending above his knees, almost met by his laced white war hose. His gold breast-plate shining in the sun, a short cloak over one shoulder, his face deeply bronzed in the shadow of his gold, winged helmet—truly a magnificent figure, striding out of the fabulous past.

Christine gasped audibly.

"Yes, isn't he great?" chuckled Carol, answering the unspoken thought.

"I hear you are to be my Princess," said George Bedford five minutes later, coming up to where Christine stood. She was garbed in a long blue woollen gown, loosely girdled with gold, two thick fair plaits hanging from her gold-banded head, a cloak of dull purple flying out in the breeze.

"I shall muf it frightfully and spoil the whole episode," she said. "I know I shall."

"Oh, no you won't!" George reassured her confidently, folding his arms, where gold bracelets reached all but to the elbows, across his chest. "You've only to look—well, as you're looking now." Here his bold blue eyes told her his precise opinion of how she was looking. "You are at the gates of your father's house, a couple of serfs attending you. You know nothing of the raid until the fighting is practically over. When you come on the scene my warriors are racing down to the ship with the spoil. I leave the castle last, and come upon you. I—well, naturally, having seen you, you're my share of the spoil."

"Carol told me that," chimed in Christine in a matter-of-fact way. "You grab me and I scream."

"I snatch you up, do in your two attendants who try to stop me, pelt off with you to the ship, where the men are waiting at their oars, and off we go double-quick, the Norseman and his bride."

The pageant master took up his position and started giving directions through a megaphone. In the twinkling of an eye the broad grassy stage seemed to resolve itself into the outskirts of a Saxon village, with the humble folks going about their daily toil.

George Bedford betook himself to the transformed barge, which retired from view round the bend of the river.

Suddenly a peasant, long, matted hair blowing about his terrified face, ran up from the river, raising the alarm. The North-men were coming, their ship was even now in the river, bringing the dreaded marauders on one of their plundering expeditions. They were near—they were here.

There was no time for resistance, even if these humble folks could have made any, and only the feeblest effort was made at the gates when the fierce Norse warriors, headed by George Bedford, leapt from their painted war barge and charged up the slope, sweeping through the terror-stricken village. Two of the invaders were left on guard, and the leader with the rest of the party at his heels rushed through the gates. A tumult of screams arose, and then, almost before Christine could get her

breath, the successful Norsemen ran out with their plunder.

Lastly, moving more slowly than the rest, and pausing at the gates, came the Viking, carrying no spoil, but breathing deeply, for he had borne the brunt of the fighting. His bronzed face was set in exultant lines, the light of battle was in his blue eyes.

Carol gave Christine a push.

"Go on," she whispered urgently, and Christine, followed by her waiting maid and two serfs, stepped forward as if in a dream, her blue wool gown dragging over the dry turf.

The horror of the scene came upon her all at once; she stopped dead, her terror-filled eyes swept round. The girl actually felt the blood drain from her cheeks, so real was it all to her at the moment.

The Viking caught the Princess by the arm and pulled her roughly round to face him. The screams were stilled upon the lady's lips; blue eyes and hazel were locked, so fast that it was as if they could never again look away.

"Get on with it, get on," bellowed the megaphone; but if the Viking and the Princess heard they made no sign. The pause, the unrehearsed silence, were so effective that the pageant master intervened no more, but let them work out the episode in their own way.

Nearer and nearer to the lady's pearl-white face came the bronzed features and bold blue eyes that went so well with the winged gold helmet.

For seconds the pair held their breath.

Then down clattered the round, embossed shield. The Viking caught up the slim blue form in one arm, holding her so fast to his great chest that the rough leather and mail were crushed into her tender skin. One swift drive to the right and a second to the left with the stained sword. The lady's two defenders were laid low, the sea-robber passed with swift strides down the river bank to the painted barge.

"Scream, yell for all you're worth, Princess," ordered the megaphone, and though Christine mechanically obeyed, she could think of nothing save the fierce beating of the heart to which she was crushed.

The Norseman bore his prize to the high prow of the ship, while on the instant the rowers sent the vessel down towards the river mouth.

George Bedford still held Christine gathered to him in his left arm.

"Set me down," she murmured uncertainly, unable to free herself by so much as an inch. "The acting is over."

He obeyed so far as to set her feet to the ground, but his great arm was round her still.

"Those were days," he said, with a triumphant laugh. "A man saw the woman he wanted, and he took her."

"They were brutal days," shuddered Christine, not meeting those hot blue eyes.

"And the woman, if she were the right woman, came to her man joyfully, even if he had killed her father and half a score of her kin to get her. Those were days indeed!"

"I—I'm very glad they're over," gasped Christine, all the more emphatically because in that bewildered moment she was none too sure that she did mean it.

"There was high romance, adventure and love that was love," blazed out George, carried out of himself. "They were days when a man's thews and muscles stood him in good stead."

Breathless and scarlet, Christine shook herself free, and a moment later was glad that she had, for a panting messenger hove in sight.

"I say, Bedford, are you and Mrs. Cooper deaf? Old Jewell's raving about wanting that scene all over again. He vows we weren't smart enough."

Twice the episode was repeated, but not again did Christine get that inrill of reality, and not again did any words pass between herself and George Bedford.

At last she was released, and before going off to the improvised dressing room she stood on one side watching the pageant unfold itself.

Consequently when one of the officials sought her out an hour later she was still the Saxon Princess, lily-fair, slim and alluring in her long blue wool robe and heavy gold plaits.

"Mrs. Cooper, I am afraid I have some bad news," he told her gravely. "No, nothing to do with your husband," he added hastily, as the fair face paled. "It is Madame Cooper. She has had a seizure, and I fear—"

"You mean Madame is dead?" queried Christine a little shakily.

"The seizure was almost instantly fatal," said the official, sympathetically. "Mr. Cooper rang up and asked me to tell you. He was sorry he could not come for you himself, but he is sending the car."

"I won't stop to change, I'll go as I am," said Christine, hard put to it to keep her teeth from chattering in the warm sunshine. "Please ask Miss Gurney to send me my clothes, and I will return the Princess's costume to her."

George Bedford came up as she was getting into the car.

"I have just heard of Madame's death," he said quietly. "Can I be of any use if I drive home with you?"

"Thanks very much, no," replied the girl dully.

"Jove, this puts the stopper on your taking part in the pageant!" exclaimed the official. "It's a pity Madame's illness was not a few days later, for I'm afraid we shan't get hold of another Princess so exactly like the genuine article. Excuse me, Mrs. Cooper, I'm wanted. Bedford will see you off. I'm no end sorry for your trouble."

In silence George Bedford—back again in everyday grey tweeds—and Christine turned to the car. He opened the door in silence, and the girl stepped in.

"Sure you'd rather I didn't come?" he persisted.

"No," she answered George crossly. "What help could you be? Blair is there."

George Bedford's powerful hands were grasping the edge of the car, and his grip tightened until his knuckles went white.

"It's a good thing you're not acting in the pageant," he said harshly, his face a dull, ugly red.

Without further farewell he drew back, gave a sign to the chauffeur, and returned to the pageant crowd.

At the time the words went in at one of Christine's ears and out at the other. But she remembered them later.

THE WIDENING RIFT

ALL her life long, Christine Cooper looked back on the days that followed as a nightmare. Once again, if there had been any duties she was obliged to perform, it would have been better for her; but as usual there was no place for her in the domestic machinery, while Blair attended to everything connected with Madame's death.

The three-days pageant occupied the time and attention of her friends, and the girl was literally left to herself.

"I feel the biggest hypocrite alive," she thought restively as she and Blair were

driving to the church on the day of Madame's funeral. "I can't make myself feel sorry. I never liked Madame, and she detested me, so how can I be expected to grieve when she dies at the most inconvenient moment she could choose? Somehow I can't help feeling she is enjoying my discomfiture."

She stirred restlessly, and Blair slid his hand over hers.

"You're awfully pale, darling," he said with concern. "I'm going to send you straight home after the service. Buck up, the ordeal will soon be over."

An unwanted sob rose in Christine's throat; she wretchedly considered herself a greater hypocrite than ever, and had to force herself not to snatch her hand away.

"Blair is giving me credit for all sorts of proper feelings that I haven't got," she thought miserably.

"Madame's lawyer—she always employed a London man, you know—has written that he will attend the funeral," went on Blair. "And as everybody who is to benefit under Madame's will is to be there, he wants to read the will before he catches his train back to Town. I've told Robinson to have the library ready."

"I can't be there," said the girl irrepresibly. "If I have to be pleasant to Madame's dear first husband's relations, and her dear second husband's relations I shall scream."

"Chris darling, you're not going to be hysterical?" asked her husband anxiously.

"Of course not," she said, trying not to speak pettishly.

"You need not be there. I can tell you all there is to hear when I come home."

"There won't be anything much to tell, with every detail cut and dried," murmured Christine, stifling a yawn.

In this conclusion, however, the girl found herself mistaken. Madame's affairs were by no means as cut and dried as she took for granted.

THE dinner hour was long past when Blair came home. He went straight upstairs to where Christine was curled up in a huge easy chair before a cheery fire in her bedroom. She sat up, stretching her arms above her head, slim and charmingly pretty in soft ivory georgette with a fur edge.

"Well, was it very dreadful?" she asked, without acute interest. "Poor old Blair, you've had a long and hideously trying day. Don't you think we might go off for a little holiday somewhere after this? You badly need it, and I—I feel as if I shall die of stagnation if something doesn't happen."

Blair bent to impress a somewhat absent kiss on her warm white cheek.

"You'll find sandwiches and things on that table," went on Christine, a little sleepily. Then she caught sight of his strained face, and sprang from the chair, pushing him down amongst the cushions in her place. "You sit there, and I'll bring you what you want," she cried.

It was the first pleasant incident in a most unpleasant week, waiting on Blair, bringing him the daintily-cut sandwiches and mixing him a whisky and soda.

"It's comfy, isn't it?" she asked happily, putting the cigarette she had lighted between his lips and taking one for herself. "The old tired lines are smoothing out like magic." And she laid a kiss, soft as the touch of a butterfly's wing, on his forehead.

She curled herself on the rug at his feet, resting against his knee until both cigarettes were smoked out.

"Feeling better, old boy?" she enquired, smiling up at him from under her lashes.

"Tons better," he smiled back, reaching

down to lift her to her feet and draw her to his knee. "Chris darling, if you could guess what it means to have you to come home to after the disgusting exhibition of greed and chagrin those people put up this afternoon."

He drew her closer, dropping his head to her breast, so that his lips brushed the soft skin where the georgette fell away.

Christine's arms went round him, her gold head drooped to his dark, rough hair.

"Were they very beastly?" she murmured. "But of course, they were. Any relatives of Madame's dear first husband or her dear second husband's couldn't be anything but odious."

"Don't, Chris darling," protested Blair, but a little half-heartedly.

He had been through a revolting scene with Madame's relatives-in-law, and could have said far worse things of them, but he did not like to hear Chris speak in this strain.

"And I'm a relative of Madame's dear third husband," went on the girl, with a tiny grimace. "That must account for all the things you hate in me, Blair."

Blair's arm suddenly tightened about her, and he kissed the mutinous face with swift passion.

"That's how I hate you," he muttered huskily.

There was an adequate interlude until Christine, her face flushed, her eyes shining, flung back her head, so that her husband's kisses fell on her soft throat.

"Let's be sensible a moment, darling," she murmured. "Just while you tell me about Madame's heirs. Were they very awful?"

Blair's face darkened at the recollection of what had happened.

"Without exception they are a common, underbred lot," he growled. "Snapping and snarling like dogs after a bone."

"Surely they didn't expect to get any of my grandfather's money—my money?" she flashed sharply. "What insolence, what cheek! Of course grandfather had heaps more money than the others, but what is that to do with them? Did they say very horrid things about me, Blair? I wish I had been there now."

"It would have been all right, they wouldn't have had a word to say, no matter what they thought, if Madame had left it all by name to you," began Blair.

"If Madame had left it to me?" cried Christine blankly. "But she did leave it to me. She said she would, and Madame never lied."

"I wish to Heaven she had not left the fortune in my name instead of in yours," he groaned. "Though she knew it is the same thing, and that in any case it was up to me to take the trouble of it off your shoulders."

"You mean you have my money? That Madame left it to you and not to me?" she breathed.

"You've caught the idea," said Blair, grimly, getting up out of his chair. "But you know as well as Madame did that it makes no difference. It's yours just the same."

"You mean that you can pass it over to me? Make it legally mine? That is what you mean?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Blair, wearily. "Madame guarded against that. It is out of the question for me to hand you over a single penny of the capital. It's all worked out very cleverly. And yet they accuse that woman of being of weak intellect when she made that will," he ended savagely.

He walked towards his dressing-room, pulling off his coat as he went.

"Blair!" called the girl imperiously.

"Hullo!" he responded, opening his door. "Darling, need we discuss it tonight? Can't the whole thing wait until the morning? Indeed, since you know and I know that it won't make one penny's difference to you, need we discuss it at all?"

"How can you say that?" cried Christine. "How can your having the money make no difference to me, when I shall have to come to you for every penny I want, account to you for every penny I spend, and have you cut off supplies if you fancy I'm being extravagant? That's how it will be, and yet you declare it will make no difference. It's not fair, not just. Madame has played me a shabby trick, soothing her conscience, no doubt, by telling herself that what's yours is mine."

"As it is," said Blair briefly. "There's nothing to make a fuss about."

He disappeared into the dressing room, leaving the door open, but when, a minute later, Christine called him, he came back immediately.

"Blair," cried the angry girl, "you'll hate me for it, but I am going to say what I think about this."

Blair lounged into the middle of the room in the deceptively indolent manner that was his when he was in danger of losing his temper.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he advised her curtly. "By the look of you I should say it would be wiser not."

"I'm not a hypocrite," she flared out passionately. "And I didn't think you were. I see it all quite clearly now. I refused to be at Madame's beck and call after we were married, I wouldn't let her order me to the house whenever she felt like interfering in my business. I went to see her once a week—and that was once too often for her as well as me, if the truth were known. But you—"

"Yes, but I?" put in Blair, as even the reckless Christine paused.

His deep-set eyes were very hard as he looked at her.

"You let her drag you up there at all hours of the day and night. You were always attentive, always ready to lackey for her; too busy to go out with me, or remember my birthday but never too busy to pander to her vanity. Your zeal stood out gorgeously against my indifference, so Madame made another will, leaving everything to you."

With a tiny gasp Christine broke off short. She was a little frightened now she had said it, though at the moment she had meant it, every word.

The lines on Blair's face became more deeply cut.

"That is your considered opinion?" he asked quietly, though in the face of the girl's excitement and quivering anger, the question was absurd. "You actually believe that I pandered to Madame, flattered her, fooled her, made myself indispensable to her, for the set purpose of cutting you out of her will and putting myself into your place?"

"That is exactly what I do believe," she cried hotly.

Blair gazed at her as if she were a stranger he was seeing for the first time.

"Then I have made the worst mistake of my life in marrying you," he said, in tones that cut like steel. "My wife knows me less well than a casual acquaintance. It's a terrible thing to be married to a Peter Pan of a girl."

He turned away, to pause a moment at his door.

"I had better tell you that Madame did not make a fresh will. She signed this,

the only one she made after our marriage, within one hour of the wedding, as she had promised; before I had time to start the systematic course of pandering to her that you give me credit for."

Again Christine gasped. This was unexpected.

"I don't ask you to believe my unsupported word," added Blair, coldly. "Madame's lawyer will show you the date on the will."

"Blair!" breathed the girl, her eyes full of appeal.

"As to your birthday, I admit you have some cause for complaint," went on the man sternly. "I remembered it sufficiently to order a present a month earlier, but I did forget all about it on the morning itself, and after, through the press of business following Madame's death. For that I sincerely apologise."

NEXT morning the birthday present arrived by post. It was addressed to Mrs. Blair Cooper, and with listless fingers Christine opened it.

There lay a long chain of exquisitely carved square crystals, alternating with platinum links and jade beads. It was loveliness itself, but if it had been a venomous reptile Christine could not have shrunk from it with greater aversion.

It went straight into a drawer, beneath a pile of rose-perfumed under-garments, and she felt that never again could she endure the sight of that beautiful jade and crystal chain.

GROWING UP.

MADAME had been dead nearly a couple of months when Christine felt she had come to the end of her tether.

Towards the middle of a beautiful autumn afternoon she resolved to go for a long tramp and "think things out."

She scarcely knew where she intended going, at least she told herself so, until she turned in at the door of George Bedford's office. Then all her miseries, resentments, grievances seemed to rush at her like a tidal wave, and in a moment her mind was made up.

"Mr. Bedford? He is in, at liberty?" she asked the clerk who rose from his desk.

"I will see if Mr. Bedford is disengaged, madam. It is Mrs. Cooper, is it not?"—and the man disappeared into the inner office.

"Mr. Bedford is able to see you, madam," he came back to tell her before Christine's impatience had become unendurable.

George Bedford met her on the threshold of his room, virile, blond and upstanding, almost as much the Viking in his sober lounge suit as in the skins and gold of his Norseman's garb.

"What luck for me that I hadn't gone before you came," he exclaimed.

"I have come on business," she said. "I want some legal advice."

Instantly Bedford's manner changed. Without being less cordial, he became more professional.

"A client? I see. Then you may sit in the client's regulation chair," he said lightly, placing it for her.

He sat down at the writing table, across which the girl faced him.

"I don't act for your husband, you know that?" suggested George, as she seemed to have some difficulty in starting on what she had to say. "His affairs are all in Smiley's hands."

"I know; I shouldn't have come to you if you had been Blair's solicitor," said Christine hastily. "The fact is, George, ought I to be calling you Mr. Bedford,

since I am consulting you professionally?" she broke off to ask, more for the sake of putting off the moment of revelation than for any other reason.

"We need not be so formal when there's nobody else about," he assured her. "By the way, does Cooper know you have come to consult me about this little difficulty, whatever it may be?"

"He certainly does not," she exclaimed. "In spite of everything he would be furious if he knew."

The smile died from George Bedford's handsome face, the idle curiosity he had been feeling vanished and he became altogether the man of law.

"Then forgive me, Christine, I have no wish to lecture you," he said quietly; "but you had better think carefully before you tell me what it is all about. You are sure it is something you would rather I did for you than Smiley?"

"Of course I'm sure," said the girl positively. "The first thing Mr. Smiley would do would be to tell Blair that I am trying to break our marriage."

"What?" ejaculated George incredulously. "Trying to— You don't mean that?"

"I do," persisted Christine. "I can't go on any longer, I can't endure my life; everything has grown impossible, and you must find a way out of it for me."

"You want a divorce?" questioned the man, still incredulous.

"I suppose so," said Christine restlessly. "There isn't any other way out of a marriage, is there?"

"You mean you want to divorce your husband?" continued Bedford. "Cooper? But it's unbelievable. Why, he's mad about you."

"You are an outsider, and that's all you know about it," retorted Chris, pursing up her pink lips.

"Then there is—that is what you're telling me—there is another woman? Cooper has given you grounds for divorce?" rapped out George.

Christine's face grew scarlet, and she felt unjustly furious with the man who regarded her closely.

"I don't see that there is any need for you to ask me questions like that," she flashed out hotly.

"That question is nothing compared with those that will be put to you in court, if it ever comes to that, particularly if Cooper fights your petition," George pointed out grimly. "Chris, it's impossible for me to help you if you decline to give me your full confidence. Come, you know I'll make it as little unpleasant as I can, but until I know the circumstances I can do nothing. Do I understand that your husband has fallen in love with someone else?"

"No, that he hasn't!" she declared positively. "At least not that I know of," she added a trifle uncertainly.

It had not occurred to her before, but was this the cause of what she described to herself as Blair's neglect of her? Had he possibly grown too fond of Dinah Johnston?

"Suppose you tell me all about it from the beginning?" suggested Bedford, and in somewhat rambling fashion Christine did so.

Bedford got up from his chair, went to the fireplace, and, one hand deep in his pocket, with the other arranged and rearranged the papers on the mantelshelf.

"You have appealed to me, Chris," he said in an oddly strained voice. "That, if nothing else, puts me on my honour to give you the very best advice I can. Go home, my dear, tell your husband frankly that you came to me, and why. Talk

things over with him, show him all your heart."

"I didn't think you would take Blair's part against me like this," breathed Christine.

"It is only fair and right that I should tell you Cooper is a rattling good sort," and Bedford raised his eyes for one moment to the reproachful little face.

Christine turned from him, and as she did so her handbag fell to the floor. They stooped for it simultaneously, and together grasped it, George's hand closing over hers.

Each still holding fast, they straightened themselves, and as if the bag they held in common made some connecting link between them, they stared into each other's eyes.

The girl slowly went as pale as the string of pearls about her soft throat, while a dark red flush suffused the man's face, strong brown neck and all.

"I'm the last man in the world you should have come to, Chris," muttered Bedford. "God knows I've done the best I could for you, given you what we both know is the best advice you could follow. If I hadn't touched you again, I hope I should have let it go at that. I think I could. But I've got your hands"—he had them both by this time. "It's the same with you as with me, isn't it, Chris? Doesn't it tell you you're rightly mine?"

Christine caught her breath, looking fearfully up into the deeply-moved face bent over her.

It was as if a strong magnetic force ran from Bedford's hands to hers, and from thence to every remotest fibre of her being.

"You do know," George exulted, and with a fierce rush he swept her into his arms, holding her until it felt as if every bone in her must crack with the strain, while with the fierce passion of the far-away ancestor who had, perchance, on a day seen the woman he loved, and had straightaway swooped and snatched her, even from her husband's side, his lips sought hers.

"God knows I've tried to do the level thing by Cooper," he vowed unsteadily. "It's in him to make a far better husband than I could ever be. I've done my best—and failed. If you hadn't come here—if I hadn't touched you—"

He broke off, and though he held her fast, there was remorse as well as passion in the bold blue eyes.

"If I hadn't come—" she began uncertainly.

"We can't think about that now, Chris," he told her roughly. "You did come, and we have found out—if it needed any finding—what we mean to each other, you and I."

He bent and again kissed her lips until the girl's head reeled.

"Let me sit down, George," she pleaded faintly, and he put her gently into his own chair, going down on one knee beside her and gathering her into his arms.

"You must not hold me like this. How can I think?" she gasped.

George Bedford laughed triumphantly. "You can't," he exulted. "And why should you try? There's nothing for you to think of but you and me—us"—and his lips brushed hers. "Chris, you'll never in a lifetime be able to divorce Cooper. So we must take the other way."

"You mean?" she queried shakily. "I mean that it's up to us to cut the knot," he said masterfully. "A secret hole-and-corner affair wouldn't suit either of us. What we do, we'll do openly, make a bolt of it, and leave it to Cooper to set you free."

Christine set the palms of her two hands to his great chest, trying ineffectually to push him away.

"Please let me go," she begged. "You are right, I can only think of you and me while we are like this, and I must think of Blair."

"Not now," he declared. "The time for that has gone by. Blair had you, and couldn't hold you. As far as we're concerned he's done with, wiped out. Chris, my own woman, I love you—so—I could break every bone in your soft little body, I love you so!" he ended violently.

All the girl's thoughts of her husband were swept away as if by the fierce rush of a whirlpool. She was unresisting, if not responsive, when George's lips closed on hers.

"I—I do love you, George," she whispered. "But please, please let me go now."

"Not back to Cooper, never back to him," he jerked out jealously.

"Blair is in London, he won't be back until the middle of next week," she cried. "But I must go back now."

"But not for long," he said imperiously. "When do you expect Cooper—next Thursday? Then we must not drive off our going too late, say Tuesday. No, Chris, no!" he silenced her. "You can't expect me to allow Cooper to come back and find you there."

Christine passively agreed, feeling too stunned by what was happening to protest.

"But we must not meet in the meantime," she stipulated. "It would be too cheap, while I'm living under Blair's roof."

George rather unwillingly consented, and, still feeling dazed, Christine got into the taxi that was summoned and drove home.

She had no idea of backing out of the bargain she had made, but the bewildering sense of unreality was so strong that even when Monday came, the day before her projected flight, she had done no packing, made no preparations of any kind. She decided, if she thought about it at all, that at the last moment she would throw what was necessary into a bag.

This state of bewilderment was still oppressing her when, in the middle of Monday afternoon, George Bedford's clerk rang her up.

Would Mrs. Cooper be good enough to run down to Mr. Bedford's office immediately? Yes, the matter was urgent, concerning the business that was discussed when she was at the office last Friday.

Christine guessed that George had not called her up himself to avoid the risk of being overheard by prying ears. She ran her own little car out of the garage, and in a few minutes walked into the office.

The instant the door was shut the man took her into his arms.

"Don't try to put me off," he said huskily when she would have drawn back. "Chris, you don't know how I've longed for this!"

He would not be denied, but kissed over and over again her lips and her eyes and the soft curve of her throat.

"No, you owe Cooper no allegiance," he said when she murmured something about its being mean of them, since she had not yet left Blair, and she, carried away before the force of his passion, protested no more.

"I mean that literally, Chris," he said a minute later; "you owe Cooper no allegiance, for you are not his wife."

"Not Blair's wife?" she cried, resolutely freeing herself from his arms. "But that's absurd. We were married here, at the parish church, fifteen months ago. You are not going to ask me to believe that Blair has another wife living?"

"Not that," replied Bedford, reining himself in. "But for all that you and Cooper are not man and wife. I didn't expect to find out anything, but by accident, and by investigation on behalf of a client, I happened to

notice that the parson who married you was a stranger."

"Yes," assented the puzzled Christine. "The vicar was away on a holiday, and this other man, Kesteven I believe his name was, took duty in his absence."

"I don't know what made me look up this man's record," went on Bedford, visibly excited, "but it's all plain and clear, the fellow was an imposter, not in Holy Orders at all. I don't think he married any other couple here, but at this moment he is serving a term of imprisonment for another escapade of the same kind."

Christine sank limply back into a chair. "I can't realise it, it doesn't sound true," murmured Christine, white to her very lips.

"You are sure there is no is no mistake?"

"Quite sure," he told her confidently.

"Chris, loveliest, aren't you glad?"

"Y-yes, I'm glad," she hesitated. "Of course I am."

"Of course you are," he repeated buoyantly. "Think of it, Chris, only a very short time and you will belong to me wholly and utterly."

He caught her to him, his rough cheek against her face.

"You cold little mortal," he reproached her. "I don't believe you care after all."

"I do care, George, you know I do," she said trying to shake off the inertia that had her in its coils and respond to him. "I do love you. Would I have agreed to go away with you to-morrow if I did not?"

"That is the only regrettable thing about this discovery," declared George a minute later. "I am afraid, speed things up as I may, that it can't be to-morrow. But there's one thing that's dead certain, Chris, you can't stay in Cooper's house an hour longer. The Gurney's will take you in for a few days, won't they?"

"Yes," said Christine vaguely. "Carol will be pleased to have me. No, I need not ring to say I'm coming. Carol has often come to me without notice. I will go back for some clothes and then drive there."

"And I will come to the Gurneys to-night to see you," said George. "It will be as well not to take Carol too far into your confidence until everything is settled, but it will be quite all right for me, as your legal adviser, to call on you."

Christine tried to think clearly as her hands were busy with the wheel. Would she ever see and feel sharply again? Even George and his wonderful, glamorous love for her, though it had the power to set her heart beating thunderously, did not seem altogether real.

CHRISTINE left the car at the foot of the steps and ran into the house.

Afterwards she could never have told what it was that impelled her to go through the hall and down the long passage to the untidy little room where Blair kept his guns and fishing rods, and where he often wrote his letters. Her obvious course was to go straight up to her own room, pack what clothes she needed for the present, go back to the car and make her way to the Gurneys.

Instead of which she ran as directly as if she had previously made up her mind to do so along the dark passage, halting at the half-open door of Blair's den. Firelight flickered on the panels; two days before his time Blair had come home. He lay stretched out in unwonted idleness, every limb relaxed, in a shabby old leather chair, his stubborn dark head crushed back into an old leather cushion, apparently drowsing.

Christine stood as if rooted to the cocommating that covered the passage floor, gazing and gazing at the unwitting Blair as if she had never seen him before.

The sight of him lying there, his ruffled dark head, his dark face, the brown hand that dropped over the arm of his chair—all these were doing strange things to Christine.

She leant nervously against the doorpost for an instant.

Blair, weary, perhaps dispirited, half asleep, alone in the dreary room. He had come home to find her out. Never again was he to come home and find her there.

Some little inner secret spring of joy and pain was touched in Christine's heart and tears sprang to her eyes; but for all that she saw more clearly than for many weeks past. Gently closing the door so that Blair might not awaken, she retraced her footsteps and ran down to the car, no one being aware that she had been into the house at all.

By this time dusk was gathering thickly, and she turned on the lights as she started the car. She had been gone so short a time that George would probably not have left his office. If he had—well, she must follow him.

The street lamps were pricking out through the deep gloom when again the little car stopped. George's office windows were alight, too, and Christine fairly flew through the outer room to the inner one. George was placing bundles of papers in a japanned tin box, and he stared at her in astonishment.

"Chris, something has happened. What is it?" he exclaimed, dropping his papers and coming quickly to her.

He would have taken her hands, but she mechanically slipped them behind her.

"George," she gasped out as breathlessly as if she had been running all the way instead of driving. "I had to tell you the moment I knew. I have been mad, a blind, blind fool. Of course I can't leave Blair. He and I belong to each other—he's my husband and I am his wife. Nothing on earth can change that so long as we are both alive."

"My dear girl," Bedford began as patiently as his perplexity permitted, "Cooper and you are not husband and wife. I made that perfectly clear."

"But we are," said the girl, conviction in her shining eyes.

"I tell you the scamp who married you was an imposter. He had no more authority to marry a couple than I have," rapped out George sternly.

"That has nothing to do with it," declared Christine, astonishingly. "Having words read over you doesn't marry you to anybody. It's living together, loving each other, having silly little disagreements, and making them up; it's—oh, it's a thousand subtle ties that you can't possibly know anything about," she assured him earnestly.

A slight, ironic smile crossed George Bedford's handsome lips. Christine flashed out at him in a moment.

"I know what you're thinking," she cried. "I'm not so simple as not to guess that there have been women in your life, that you had had 'affairs', more or less serious. But they can't have taught you anything of marriage—and—and love—the love of husband and wife."

"You think not?" queried George Bedford, sardonically.

"I know it," she returned, still with that light of conviction shining in her eyes.

"Last Friday, here in this room, and again this afternoon, yes, and long before then too, you loved me, I swear you did!"

he said heavily.

"I will be perfectly honest," she said, forcing her voice not to tremble too violently. "You did attract me, as I attracted you. I am not quite ignorant, and I know as well as you do that the attraction was physical—that there could never be anything beyond it to make it worth while—to make it count at all—against real marriage. No, not if you and I were husband and wife for twenty years."

"And yet if you'd married me, I'd have made you quite a good husband."

"As good as you know how," the girl conceded, the flush dying, though her eyes remained starry. "But my own idea is that after the first passion we'd hate each other. George, don't you see?" she cried vehemently. "Blair and I aren't two people at all, we're one. I must have been crazy to think anything else, even for a moment. You have all been urging me to grow up. How I've done it. When I saw Blair lying in that lonely house, all at once I grew up."

"Cooper was at home when you got there?" asked Bedford sharply.

She nodded.

"Half asleep, he didn't see me. Don't look so vindictive, George. I know I've treated you badly, as well as Blair. But that was before I grew up."

The smile to which she had twisted her lips was at once one of the loveliest as well as one of the most pitiful things Bedford had ever seen. He turned away.

"I know better now," she went on. "Oh, I'm going to suffer, too. Do you suppose I am going to enjoy telling Blair that I came here begging you to find a way of getting me a divorce?"

"You are going to tell Cooper that I wanted you to make a bolt of it with me?" he asked, his face half lost in the shadows.

Christine paused, then spoke gently.

"I will tell Blair that you found out our clergyman was a fraud, and that you gave me the best advice any man ever gave a foolish, headstrong girl."

"Tell him the whole thing, make a clean breast of it while you're about it. I can stand the racket," said Bedford roughly.

"No," she said more gently still. "I want you and Blair some day to be friends."

"Do you imagine Cooper and I can ever be friends?" demanded Bedford, sceptically. "Feeling as I do about you, Chris, you little know how hard you've hit me. You've thrown possible 'affairs' in my teeth, but—darling—there's been no one that I've ever loved as I could have loved you."

"As you could have loved me," she pointed out. "Perhaps, so, but you have not loved me so wonderfully. The glamour and the romance caught at us both, but it has gone no deeper with you than with me."

"And you fancy you love Cooper better?" he asked, his handsome face haggard.

An unquenchable smile lit her face.

"It's all so different. Blair's me; I'm Blair," she half whispered. "He is my home, my warm hearthstone, the deep content that is going to be mine now that I've grown up."

The light on her face, shining for another man, never for him, tormented Bedford beyond endurance.

He strode forward.

"And for how long do you imagine this 'warm hearthstone' business is going to

content you?" he demanded, huskily. "You will always draw me, and I you, as inevitably as the tides feel the pull of the moon. Can't you understand that as sure as you live there will come a day when you'll regret the sweet, wild madness that may even now be ours if you keep your word to me. Don't let me down! What if it doesn't last for ever? Won't it be well worth anything we have to pay for it? Chris, it's now that you'll be the blind little fool, if you let love pass you by, instead of letting it sweep you to the stars like a great storm wind."

Christine, her fingers unsteady, pulled her hat more firmly down over her hair.

"We mustn't play with fire, George," she whispered. "There is just enough truth in what you say to make us dangerous to each other. So this—must be good-bye."

"You're sure?" he persisted, barring the door a moment.

"Sure that I love Blair with all my heart? Yes, so very sure," she said, with gentle confidence.

Silently he set open the door, and in silence he went beside her through the outer office and put her into the car.

"I must hear from you just once," he said compellingly. "Tell Cooper as much or as little as you please, but I must hear how you fare. But for that, since you will have it so—Good-bye."

He held her hands in a grip that hurt, and was gone.

SOME days later he had a letter from Christine, posted in London.

"I have told Blair everything from start to finish," it ran. "It was even more horribly difficult than I had feared. But because he loves me as I love him, all is well between us now. We are not coming back to East-borough for months, perhaps never, for the headquarters of the works are being transferred here. Blair is convinced that half my discontent came from having too little to do. I believe he is right, and I am going to run my house myself. I am writing you all these things because I know you want to be assured that all is well with me."

"All is well, and, George, if ever a passing mood comes in which I—who always reached out eager hands to romance—regret that when romance and high adventure came my way, I was not bad enough, or big enough, whichever may be the right word, to grasp it, then I will lay to my heart your advice, and try to make life with Blair a better thing than it has ever been. It will be so, I know it. George, he is so dear, so terribly dear. I love everything about him, even to the way a silly tuft of hair stands out at the back of his head, and the way he rages when I've crumpled his newspaper before he's seen it. So you see, George, dear, that I am fit for the little dear things of life, and that a great passion is not for me."

For the moment George Bedford read no further. He clenched the sheets of paper in his hand and went blindly to the window, his blue eyes darkening, his strong white teeth biting savagely into his under lip.

Every drop of blood in his body cried out for her; and yet George Bedford knew himself through and through, and in his heart he acknowledged that Christine had taken the way that would lead to her greater happiness.

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