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# FAMILY JOURNAL

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# FAMILY JOURNAL

## HER DAY OF DAYS

### By Barbara Sutton

WHAT PAIN IT IS.

ANTHEA felt as if she could not get home soon enough. Never had an afternoon at the office seemed to go so slowly; the very hands of the clock seemed to have become stationary. Four times in as many minutes she glanced at her wrist-watch to make sure that it had not stopped.

Her unusual impatience did not go unnoticed by the other girls, and they teased her a little, in a good-natured kind of way.

"You just can't wait to see your boy friend, can you?" one remarked as Anthea cast another despairing glance at her watch. "Got it badly, haven't you, my dear?"

"Don't let him see how keen you are," was the cynical advice of another. "Keep them guessing—it is the only way to treat men. If you make a doormat of yourself they are only too ready to wipe their feet on you."

But at last Anthea was hurrying home as fast as the tube and bus could carry her.

After all, it was impossible that there would not be a letter or a 'phone call from Shaw awaiting her. There just had to be! For this would be the fourth day upon which she had neither seen nor heard from him. He couldn't possibly leave her in suspense any longer, unless—what an awful thought—he had been taken ill?

The young man in question was Shaw Desmond, a gay and good-looking young Irishman, who had taken her heart by storm. Although she had only known him for just over a month she was quite, quite certain that he was the only man she could ever love, just as he had so often assured her that she was the only girl in the world for him.

There had been almost daily meetings between them; together they had paid a weekly visit to the local cinema, or gone for a breath-taking spin on his motor-scooter.

This latter form of amusement always filled Anthea's mother, Mrs. Crawford, with secret anxiety. In her opinion the young Irishman's mania for speed was alarming on the over-crowded roads of to-day.

Now had come this uncanny silence on Shaw's part, for which Anthea could find no solution.

They had last met at a dance at the tennis club, and ever since she had been, to use her mother's words, like a cat on hot bricks, rushing down to meet the postman or sitting about waiting for the telephone to ring.

Leaving the bus Anthea ran along the quiet suburban road where she lived, certain that she would find a letter from Shaw by the second post awaiting her.

Her heart thumping fast she opened the front door and her eyes darted eagerly to the hall-table. It was bare! There was no letter from him.

"Is that you, Anthea dear?" her mother called from the dining-room. "You're nice and early, aren't you? Tea's ready."

"All right, mummy dear, I'll just pop up and have a wash."

The girl spoke so listlessly that Mrs. Crawford glanced at her husband meaningly across the table.

"Poor love, she's fretting her heart out for that Desmond boy," she whispered. "I expect she thought to find a letter from him."

"You mean that dark-haired fellow?" enquired Mr. Crawford, frowning. "Why, she didn't take him seriously, did she? I'm not altogether sorry if he has dropped out. Anyone could see that he was just a no good playboy."

Meanwhile, going up to her room, Anthea was wishing that she need not go down to tea. She did not want anything to eat, she told herself as she looked in the dressing-table glass.

All the same she did her face and setting her features in a determined smile—which did not deceive her mother—she took her place at the tea-table.

"Nobody 'phoned, I suppose, mummy?" she enquired as casually as she could.

Mrs. Crawford shook her head.

"No, nobody, my dear. The telephone has been silent all day."

Somehow or other Anthea swallowed a mouthful of hot scone, firmy convinced that some terrible accident had befallen Shaw.

But it was no use ringing him at the place where he worked because it was always shut by six and there was no telephone at his digs. But the desire to know what had happened to him was urgent, and looking at the time she asked to be excused.

"I want to get a letter off before they empty the pillar-box," she said pushing back her chair. "No, I don't want anything more to eat thank you, mummy dear," she added and fled upstairs again.

"She's gone to write him a letter, I'll be bound," her mother remarked with the uncanny wisdom parents seem to have. "Oh, I wish she wouldn't—it's obvious that he has dropped out."

"My dear, we all have to work out our own life," said her husband resignedly. "Anthea has to learn the hard way, it's no use interfering. Anyway, the letter may not be to young Desmond."

But in such matters mothers are so often right; Anthea was indeed penning a few carefully thought-out lines to the man who had been uppermost in her thoughts for the last four days.

"*Shaw darling*," she wrote, "*I can't help wondering what can have happened to you. It is so long since I heard anything of you. I hope that you are not ill? Give me a ring to-morrow just to set my mind at rest, for I'm very anxious about you. Yours, Anthea.*"

Hastily stuffing the sheet into an envelope, she stamped it, and hurried off to the pillar-box at the end of the road.

It was a lovely evening, and from many of the trim little houses in the road emerged youths and girls carrying tennis rackets, most of them hailing Anthea with a cheery greeting.

How gay and happy they seemed, she thought, as she increased her pace so as not to miss the last post. Only a few days ago and she, too, had been as gay and carefree as they——

Suddenly her heart seemed to miss a beat, her steps faltered, and she gazed in dismay at the motor scooter standing outside the Masons' red-bricked house.

It was Shaw's—she could not mistake it—and even as she stared at it in puzzled fascination she saw Julie Mason waving to her from the window of the front room. Julie, the attractive blonde girl who had only recently come to live in the neighbourhood.

Shaw had asked to be introduced to her at the recent tennis dance, Anthea remembered, and had remarked upon her smartness and beauty.

Anthea had not seen him since that day.

But she saw him now. Even as she returned Julie's wave she saw the girl drag Shaw forward to stand by her side, reluctantly it seemed to Anthea, but he, too, waved a greeting to her, and with a smile, which was a triumph of pride and heroism, Anthea waved back.

So that was it, she thought with a sick feeling inside her. He had transferred his attentions to Julie, for there was unmistakeable triumph on the other girl's face as she attracted Anthea's attention. In the midst of all her misery Anthea felt a glow of thankfulness that she had seen them before posting her letter.

How shameful, how humiliating, it would have been for her if she had sent him those few lines. At least she was saved from that.

Sick with misery she went back a roundabout way, feeling as if her heart would break. She had been so sure of him, so certain of his love, that the knowledge of his fickleness was like a blow.

As she reached her own home once more her father's car was at the gate, and the sight of her set, white face made Mr. Crawford realise that perhaps his wife was right and that his daughter had been more serious about the Irish boy than he had imagined possible. In his eyes she was hardly grown-up, and he still thought of her as a little girl.

But the expression of tragedy in her soft brown eyes disturbed him, and he blamed himself for having allowed matters to have gone so far between her and young Desomd.

"At a loose end this evening, Anthea dear?" he asked cheerily. "If you are, what about coming with me? I've got a client who wants to see a house at Woodbridge, and I'm going to meet him there to see over the place. Like to come for the ride?"

For a moment Anthea was inclined to refuse. Then she thought of a long evening in front of her, with nothing to do.

"Thank you, daddy, I'd like to come," she said, endeavouring to sound cheerful.

"But what an hour to do business!"

"Our client couldn't manage the daytime," said her father, who was the senior partner in an estate agent's business, "and it's never too late for a business deal, my child."

"All tight, I'll just pop in and tell mummy that I'm going with you," she said, "won't be a second."

All this time the unposted letter to Shaw seemed to be burning in her pocket. But there it had to remain, for there was no fire in the house and if she put a match to it in the grate her mother might wonder what she was doing.

So a few minutes later they were driving in the direction of Woodbridge, a rural neighbourhood some ten or twelve miles away in the heart of Surrey.

The house they went to view was old and large, and set in somewhat extensive grounds. It was the sort of place few people to-day could afford to live in and the elderly business man who had arranged to meet Mr. Crawford there was only interested in the land, which he proposed to turn into a building site.

It rather depressed the girl to hear them talking of cutting down trees and covering velvety lawns and gorgeous herbaceous borders with ugly villas, houses, and soon, getting bored with all the technical talk, Anthea wandered down through the orchard to a little wooded copse.

The peaceful surroundings suited her mood of lonely sadness, and finding a moss-covered boulder, she spread her cardigan upon it and sat down to indulge her grief without fear of interruption.

OH dear, had he never cared for her? she asked herself, puzzling over the Irish boy's fickleness. If he had, then why had he dropped her so ruthlessly, exposing her to the pity and humiliation of their friends?

It was heartless of him, and her tears began to flow down her pale cheeks at the realisation of her lost romance.

Fumbling for her handkerchief she found that unposted letter and told herself that here was an opportunity of disposing of it, here, in this deserted wood where no one ever came. So tearing it into tiny pieces she rose to look for some place to hide the bits.

As she did so there reached to her ears—far-off, but oddly piercing, a strange musical sound which she at first thought came from some bird. It was a queer piping note, endlessly repeated, rendered harmonious by distance like, she thought, the pipes of Pan.

Still wandering in search of somewhere to hide the fragments of her letter Anthea came across a deserted rabbit hole and decided that this would do.

Having thrust the fragments as far down the hole as her arm would reach she became aware that the strange fluting sound was still going on, although all the rest of the little wood was wrapped in an eerie silence.

What could it be? she asked herself, and her curiosity urged her to follow the direction from whence it came.

The late sunset, striking through the trees, filled the wood with a mysterious light, and had she not been so unhappy, and in a mood not to very much mind what happened to her, Anthea might have fled.

Yet there was some strange charm in those melodious notes which, as she advanced down the little winding path, grew louder with each step she took.

Suddenly, turning a corner in the path, she found the solution to her problem.

A young man, clad in sports jacket and grey slacks, was leaning against the trunk of a tree, one hand holding to his lips a flute, while with the other he was beating time like a band conductor.

All the while he was playing the same notes over and over again, a frown on his forehead, a look of intense concentration on his pleasant features.

Anthea stood watching him, a sense of amusement replacing her former unhappy mood. It was so very extraordinary to find him here, in the middle of the wood, so earnestly applying himself to his task, that she quite forgot that she was spying on what she might not be expected to see.

And then, all at once, a twig cracked loudly under her foot and the young man started and looked round.

"Great Scott," he cried in some confusion. "I'd no idea that I had an audience. Have you been there long?"

"Only a second or two," was the somewhat abashed reply. "You see, I couldn't make out what the noise was about."

He grinned.

"Noise is right. I'm afraid that is an exact description," he said. "That's why I've been driven to hide myself away in this wood, so as not to annoy anyone. You wouldn't believe——" he went on, straightening himself—"the complaints I've had from my fellow tenants in the other flats. Yet they listen-in to the most atrocious noises themselves on the radio."

"I thought it was rather a nice---er—noise," Anthea said, coming forward. "In fact I had begun to wonder if I was listening to the pipes of Pan."

"I say, thanks a lot for those encouraging words," he said, gratefully. "You don't know how gratifying they are. As a matter of fact the bars I've been trying to produce come from a composition called *Woodland Idyll*.

"You see," he continued, "the chaps I share digs with are getting up a small orchestra, just for amusement, you know, and one of them composed this tune I've been playing. I wouldn't be surprised if it doesn't make a big hit when it gets known. But as no one seems able to appreciate my efforts I drive myself down here every now and then to be on my own."

"Well, I certainly admire your perseverance," said Anthea. "But aren't you afraid of trespassing? I mean, this is private property. It belongs to that big house over there."

"It was my home long ago," he said quietly. "I used to play Red Indians in this wood—you might almost say I know every tree. The old place has been up for sale for ages, but no one seems to want it."

Anthea's eyes widened.

"My father is trying to sell it this very minute," she exclaimed.

The young man surveyed her with some astonishment.

"I say, what a coincidence," he said. "I hope he has luck, although I don't much like the idea of it being turned into a building-estate, I must say."

"Nor me," she said sympathetically. "Doesn't it make you sad to come back to it now that you no longer live here?" she added.

He looked wistful and shrugged.

"That's the way things are to-day," he said. "I say, don't look so sorrowful for me," he went on smilingly. "It's never been a real home to me since mother died."

How nice he looked when he smiled, Anthea thought. He had such nice white teeth and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"But this wood must have such wonderful memories for you," she murmured, thinking of the little boy with his bow and arrows of long, long ago.

"It's a mistake to go in for memories," the young man said sternly. "When something is over and done with what's the good of dwelling on it? That's what I say."

At that moment a series of sharp, impatient tootings on a car hooter made Anthea start guiltily.

"Oh, that's daddy," she exclaimed. "I expect he's wondering where I've got to. I must fly." She gave her companion a shy smile. "Good-bye, Pan," she said.

"Good-bye, Wood Nymph," he smiled in response.

ANTHEA sped in the direction of the derelict house, where her father awaited her.

"Sorry, daddy, I got caught up in the wood with quite an interesting young man," she explained. "He was playing the flute, and who do you think he turned out to be?"

"A madman I should say, playing a flute to the trees," was his reply. "My dear, it wasn't very discreet to get into conversation in a lonely place like that with a stranger, especially an obviously eccentric one."

"But daddy, he used to live here," she said. "His people owned this very house and he only comes down here to practise on his flute because where he lives now the neighbours complain."

Mr. Crawford looked interested.

"Why, then that must have been young Tony Harford," he said. "His family have lived here for years. I wonder what he does now, except play the flute?"

"I didn't ask him," she hunched. "Did you sell the house, daddy? Will that fat, pompous-looking man buy it?"

"Well, we don't do business deals quite as quickly as all that," he smiled. "But he's interested."

As they set off Anthea suddenly reflected that, for perhaps the better part of an hour, she had not once thought of Shaw's fickle behaviour. But as the country was left behind, and the surburban buildings came into view, all her former bitter disappointment returned.

She had been so thoroughly taken in by his vows of affection that she had confidently expected that after a while he would want them to be engaged.

He had spoken of his home in Ireland, said how much his family would like her. In fact, she seemed to hear his soft, caressing tones calling her all kinds of endearing names—fond, foolish things such as lovers murmur to one another.

And now, she thought, he would be whispering the self same things to Julie Mason, the girl with the cloud of golden hair and large appealing blue eyes.

"Oh dear I shall never get over it," Anthea sighed despondently. "I shall never know what it is to be happy again," and she turned her face to the side window so that her father should not see her tears.

"When something is over and done with what's the good of dwelling upon it?" the young man with the flute had said.

Evidently he had never been in love never known the bitterness of being let down by someone who had meant the world to one such as Shaw had to her.

Her unhappiness was by no means lessened by the sight of the young man and Julie Mason talking at the gate of the latter's house. They either did not notice her or pretended that they did not, but Mr. Crawford saw them, and saw, too, how tightly his daughter's hands were clasped in her lap, how tense her whole attitude had become.

"Worthless young scamp," he thought angrily. "I wasn't mistaken about him, then. I only hope Anthea isn't seriously hurt."

IN days to come it was something Anthea had to learn to endure, the sight of those two in loverlike companionship. Wherever she went she was only too likely to come across them, at the tennis club, the local cinema, or merely having coffee on a Saturday morning at the Tudor Cafe.

People spoke of their engagement as something taken for granted, and Julie dropped all her other boy friends in favour of the Irish boy.

"You know," Betty Driver told Anthea, Julie even asks at the library for all the books she can get about Ireland, as if it were a foreign country with quite different customs and ways! Is she completely dumb? Or is she just putting on an act?" Betty worked at the Public Library and often dropped in for a cup of tea. She was one of Anthea's closest friends and although she had been discreet enough to pass no criticisms, she had never shared the other girl's admiration for Shaw Desmond whom she thought conceited and superficial.

Although glad that the friendship between Anthea and Shaw had come to an end, Betty was nevertheless quite unaware of the pain it was causing Anthea.

"Perhaps she thinks it pleases Shaw to want to know all about his country," was all Anthea replied in response to Betty's remark.

"I think they are two of a kind," Betty pronounced a little scornfully. "Personally I dont believe all that about the property he's supposed to be going to inherit. It probably consists of a few acres of peat bog, if it exists at all."

It hurt Anthea to hear Shaw spoken of in this way. However fickle he had been she could not easily forget him. and in spite of the callous way in which he had dropped her she still wished him well and hoped that he would be happily married to Julie one day.

Perhaps Betty was nearest to the truth in her estimation of the young man's character than any of the others, who had been dazzled and charmed by his attractive personality.

Shaw Desmond had come to England from Ireland to make money to enable him to get married. The family property he spoke of existed only in his imagination and had been useful in getting him accepted socially.

But his position in the world of business was not a high one. His good appearance and glib tongue had gained for him a salesman's job in a Men's Outfitting store in London, at the rate of nine pounds a week and commission.

As for marriage, Shaw would not have dreamt of marrying any girl but an Irish one. He liked to be seen about with any smart, good-looking English girl, and indeed would have found life unbearably dull without female society.

But a flirtation was as far as he was prepared to go and it was only the fact that he had found Anthea was growing serious that had prompted him to drop her in favour of the more sophisticated and artificial Julie Mason.

Otherwise, of the two girls, he had preferred Anthea, with her gentle ways and unlimited admiration of himself.

Julie Mason he knew to be well able to take care of herself, and when he dropped her he thought he would have no trouble with Julie.

Which only goes to show that men will never really be able to understand women and their ways, for Shaw was to have quite a lot of trouble with Julie.

## AN UNPLEASANT MEMORY

SOME weeks later Mr. Crawford was able to announce that his firm had disposed of the Woodbridge mansion to a buyer.

"Your friend, the flute-player, will come in for quite a tidy little sum out of it," he told Anthea, "let's hope he makes good use of the money."

Anthea, for so long now preoccupied with only one young man, had forgotten all about her little woodland adventure. Now her father's words recalled the incident, and she wondered if the budding musician had succeeded in becoming a member of the band he had told her about.

By now she was beginning to recover her lost spirits and to realise that Shaw Desmond had not been quite so wonderful as she had previously thought him to be.

Of course she would never love any other boy, she told herself, but the first bitterness of her grief was over, and with the resilience of youth she began once more to take an interest in her former pursuits.

One of the most difficult things she had to cope with was Julie's open disdain and triumph whenever she and Anthea chanced to meet.

It seemed as if her conquest of Shaw were not enough for Julie, she had to cause Anthea every petty humiliation she could think of. Anthea's only consolation lay in the fact that never once had she betrayed her very real resentment and unhappiness to the world.

She always managed to greet Julie with a gay and casual smile, and while endeavouring to avoid her she never did so openly, so that sometimes Julie wondered if the other girl had really been keen on Shaw.

Julie was a girl with many defects of character which her home training had done little to correct. The whole Mason family thought that money was the most important thing in the world. To go one better than their neighbours, to buy smart and expensive clothes, no matter how long the baker's bill had been owing, to regard good looks as something with which to capture a wealthy husband—such was the general code of morals upon which Julie had been brought up. What their house was like inside would have surprised many people.

ANTHEA had just returned from her office one day when her mother told her that Betty Driver had been trying to get her on the phone.

"She wants you to give her a ring as soon as you can dear," Mrs. Crawford said. "She sounded quite excited I must say, but she couldn't leave a message."

Betty was indeed quite excited when at last her friend contacted her.

"Anthea—come round this evening, will you? I've got the most thrilling piece of news, something I daren't tell you on the phone."

"Well, I was going to wash my hair," Anthea demurred. "Is it really worth hearing, Betty? Can't you come round to our place?"

But no, Betty declared that to be impossible because her parents were going out and she had to stay at home to keep an eye on the two younger children.

"You can do your hair any evening," she urged Anthea, "do come, I'm simply bursting to tell you."

"All the gossip of the place seems to originate in the Public Library," Anthea laughed as she told her mother what Betty wanted. "I don't believe that people go there to choose books, I think it's just to exchange the latest rumours."

But in the present instance the rumour with which Betty was supposedly bursting had not started in the library. It was something Betty herself had overheard the previous evening at the Country Club when she had been getting out her bicycle to ride home.

Outside the shed two people had suddenly come into hearing, quarrelling violently—Julie Mason and Shaw Desmond, and so loudly had Julie spoken that Betty had been unable to avoid hearing what she had said.

"I can promise you that you can't treat *me* like that," Julie had said shrilly. "I've told my father all about it and he advises me to sue you for breach of promise, and that's just what I'm going to do. You can't jilt me like you did Anthea Crawford. I've got too much self-respect to let any man use me as a doormat."

This Betty told Anthea when the latter arrived at her house.

"So you can see why I daren't mention it over the phone," she added. "What a sensation it will be if Julie does sue him for breach, Anthea! I must say I rather hope it will come off, it will do them both good, they are a pair of no-goods, in my opinion."

"But Betty—Julie couldn't," Anthea exclaimed, "no decent girl could try to force an unwilling man to marry her."

"She's not a decent girl," was Betty's reply. "Don't forget the horrid things she's said about you, Anthea—pretending that it was Shaw who gave you up in her favour instead of it having been you who were sensible enough to drop him. She's told everyone at the Club that version of the affair—seemed proud of it, too."

Anthea's sense of honesty prevailed upon her to say quietly—

"I'm afraid that Julie was right there, Betty. It was Shaw who let me down, not the other way round."

Her friend was genuinely surprised.

"Well, I'd no idea Anthea," she said sorrowfully. "You never let on a word about it and I just imagined that you'd found out what an unreliable man he was. Oh, my dear—did you mind so very much? I must often have hurt you unknowingly by the things I've said about him at different times—I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid they did hurt sometimes," Anthea confessed. "You see I was very fond of him."

"What sort of a cad is he, anyway," exclaimed Betty indignantly, "going around making love to girls and then backing out? It would serve him jolly well right if he had to marry Julie, after all, they'd be two of a kind and would make each other wretched for the rest of their lives."

"No, don't hope for things like that, Betty dear," urged Anthea gently. "I expect that both Julie and I took him too seriously—that Irish charm of his, you know. He was one too much for us, that's the truth."

"Well, anyhow, Julie has been one too much for him this time," Betty cried. "It's his money she's after, of course, she's hoping for heavy damages, and little as I like her, I hope she'll get them, for it will be a lesson to Shaw Desmond to watch his step in future where girls are concerned."

But as it turned out there was no court case after all.

Greatly to the surprise of Julie, and to the community at large, when the lawyers came to look into the matter not only did they discover that she had no grounds for bringing a breach of promise case, but it also transpired that Shaw's possessions in Ireland existed only in his imagination—actually he was nearly penniless, for he had many debts. Even his motor scooter was on hire-purchase.

The result of all these revelations was that the young man disappeared from amongst them and was seen no more.

Much to her own surprise Anthea soon discovered that, after all, she was not quite so heart-broken as she had thought herself to be.

In fact she became rather ashamed of having bestowed her affections on so unworthy an object, although she was still quite certain that she would never be inclined to fall in love again so readily.

A pleasant seaside holiday with her parents completed her cure and Shaw became just an unpleasant reminder of her youthful folly in having been taken in by a handsome face and a gay, beguiling manner.

IT was just about this time that one of her fellow typists announced her engagement and issued invitations to a party in celebration of the romantic event.

"It's to be a supper dance," Gillian Collier explained, "and dad is hiring the local church hall for the occasion. It ought to be fun, too, because a friend of my fiance is bringing along his own band, all amateurs, you know, but quite good, according to Bill. I do hope that you'll all be able to come."

"Well I, for one, will love to," Anthea declared. "It will be my first dance for months and months."

She went home to consult her savings account, for the invitation meant a new dress and a present for the happy Gillian Collier, to say nothing of such extras as a special hair-do and a new pair of sandals.

The evening gown she eventually bought cost the earth, but the general effect was so successful that she could not regret it, and she started off for the party in that state of happy confidence which comes to a girl when she knows that she is looking her best.

Some of the guests had already arrived when Anthea entered the prettily-decorated hall, and Gillian introduced her to the nice-looking boy who was her fiance—Bill Somers.

"Bill, this is quite a special friend of mine from the office, you'll see that she gets plenty of partners."

"The trouble will be to keep them off," Bill laughed with an admiring glance at Anthea's charming figure, and then turned to a tall young man with whom he had been conversing.

"Aren't you sorry, old man, that you are providing the music for the dances instead of taking part in them?" he joked. "You will be, I assure you, when I present you to my fiance's friend—Miss Anthea Crawford."

The girl named looked up into the face of the tall young man and gave an exclamation of surprise at the same moment that he gave one also.

"Well, if it isn't the Wood Nymph!" he exclaimed. "How very nice to meet you again."

"Seeing that you two appear to know each other I'll go back to my duties," Bill commented, and left them.

"How very clever of you to remember me," Anthea smiled, thinking how very smart and well-turned-out the young man looked.

"Yes, I think it is," Tony Harford agreed, "considering that you look quite different from the wistful-eyed, Wood Nymph lured on by the magic of my fluting. I think you paid me the compliment for taking me for Pan?" and they both laughed.

"There must be something very special about your face for me to have recognised you as quickly," he went on. "You're looking so absolutely gorgeous, and yet the impression you left on my mind that evening was of sadness. Tell me, were you feeling sad?"

"Well, there is always something rather melancholy about a wood at evening," Anthea said evasively. "Besides, I was half-frightened of what I was going to find when I followed the sound of your fluting. By the way, did you ever master that elusive passage, and are you going to play the flute this evening?"

Tony laughed and shook his head.

"Afraid I had to give the flute best," he said. "I never got very far with it and now I play nothing more intricate than the homely old banjo."

"How odd that I should come to a dance where your band is going to play," said Anthea, feeling all at once very happy.

"Odd, but very pleasant, to me at all events," he returned gallantly, "and, by the way, since I shan't be able to enjoy a dance with you, may I count on having you as a supper companion? Or perhaps you are already engaged?"

"No, I'm not booked for a single dance," she said, "I hope someone will take pity on me."

"The answer to that remark is in that mirror over there," Tony assured her with a smile. "But I must leave you now, I'm afraid, the rest of the band have arrived and everyone is ready for the first dance."

They looked a nice lot, the young men who formed the band, Anthea thought, as she was whirled in the arms of her first partner, a young man who had eagerly demanded an introduction immediately upon setting eyes on her.

In fact, Bill's prophecy came true, for during the whole of the evening Anthea was one of the most sought-after girls.

It was very pleasant, and must be entirely due to the new dress, Anthea told herself, for there was very little personal vanity in her make-up and what there was had been very severely shattered by Shaw's treatment of her.

Every time she passed the platform, upon which the band was seated, she met a smile from Tony, and when the break for supper came round he hurried over to her.

"Wasn't I sensible to book you first?" he said with a grin. "I haven't seen you sitting-out a single dance in spite of the fact that there are many more girls present than men."

He led her into the adjoining room where supper was being served at little tables. A ticket bearing the word "Reserved" met Anthea's eye and she drew back saying—

"This one is engaged, I'm afraid."

"It is, by me," smiled Tony. "I took the precaution of booking it after I had asked you to be my supper partner."

When they were seated and the meal ordered, Anthea began—

"Didn't you mind your former home being sold?"

Tony shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I felt no sentimental regrets on the subject," he said. "It is a long time since it really was a home to me. Besides, it's brought me in quite a goodly amount of cash which has enabled me to start a garage, something I've always wanted to do. It's quite a jolly place and doing remarkably well. I must take you to see it one day."

"Thank you—I'd like that," Anthea said. "I'm glad it's a success, it must be so gratifying to achieve an ambition."

"Yes, to be a round peg in a round hole is one of the ingredients of real happiness," he said. "I should never have been able to stick the life of an office wallah, it would stifle me. I like being in the open, must have something of the gipsy strain in me, perhaps," and he laughed. "The only thing connected with my old home which I regret is that little wood."

"Yes, I, too, should have liked to visit it again," Anthea replied. "You were quite right in supposing that I was in a sad mood that evening," she went on in a burst of impulsive confidence. "I was feeling very unhappy, and so I should like to have seen the wood again when I was feeling in a happier mood."

He waited a moment or two for her to enlarge upon her confidence and then, being too well-mannered to question her, began to speak of other things.

But before they parted they had exchanged addresses and Anthea very much hoped that their friendship would not end there.

Although Tony was connected with the day upon which she had discovered Shaw Desmond's fickleness of heart, she was very pleased that they had met again, despite the fact that she had scarcely given him a second thought since leaving him in the wood.

How unhappy and miserable she had been on that summer evening when she had found a burial place for the letter she had so fortunately never posted to her faithless sweetheart!

Many were the bitter tears Shaw had caused her to shed, tears of which she was now slightly ashamed. But it had so shaken her confidence in men that she only half believed that Tony would take the trouble to look her up again.

As the days passed, and he neither wrote nor phoned, Anthea ceased to expect to hear anything further of him again.

Then, one Saturday afternoon, a very smart-looking car stopped outside the Crawford house and upon Mrs. Crawford going to the door, a tall young man confronted her with an ingratiating smile.

"Mrs. Crawford?" he enquired. "May I introduce myself? My name is Hartford, I have already met your husband upon two or three occasions, but to-day my business is with your daughter who kindly gave me permission to call upon her. Is she at home?"

"Do come in Mr. Harford, and I will go and tell Anthea that you are here. She's in the kitchen, baking some cakes," and so speaking Mrs. Crawford led the young man into the drawing-room and went and told her daughter.

"He said he'd come, but really I never thought he would," Anthea exclaimed, looking at her floury hands and white overall. "Mummy, I can't leave these cakes for a few minutes or the whole baking will be spoilt. Can't he come in here?"

"What? Into the kitchen? Young Mr. Harford of Woodbridge," exclaimed her mother, slightly scandalised at the idea.

Although the Harfords no longer lived in the neighbourhood they were still remembered as one of the better class families.

"Yes, he won't mind a bit, he's not that sort," Anthea declared. "But—do I look very awful, mummy? I was all decked up the last time I saw him at that dance."

"Beyond a speck of flour on your nose you're quite presentable," said her mother, thinking to herself that with her cheeks flushed from bending over the stove she looked quite charming.

Tony was of the same opinion when he followed Mrs. Crawford into the warm, shining kitchen with its delicious smell of freshly-baked bread and cakes.

"I say, what an appetising smell," he exclaimed, after greeting the girl. "How nice of you to ask me into your kitchen. I always say that the kitchen is the best room in the house."

"We spend a lot of time in ours, maids

being so difficult to get," said Mrs. Crawford. "Anthea nearly always takes the baking off my hands nowadays, but she has nearly finished for to-day, haven't you, dear?"

"Yes, very nearly," agreed her daughter, and turned to Tony with a smile. "Like a hot cake?" she enquired, "or won't your digestion stand for it?"

"Just try me, lady," was his response, and very soon all three of them were sampling the appetising little rock cakes that came steaming from the oven.

"I didn't know I was in for a treat like this," Tony declared appreciatively. "What I really came to ask was if you'd care to drive down as far as Reigate with me to inspect my garage? We could go for a little run round afterwards and with your mother's approval, have some supper out afterwards?"

"Oh, mummy, may I?" Anthea exclaimed. "It sounds lovely," and she looked at her parent appealingly.

"I promise to deliver her back safe and sound at a reasonable hour," Tony said, and the required permission was given.

Mrs. Crawford liked the look of his candid blue eyes and felt that here was a young man who could be trusted.

"Her father and I are rather old-fashioned," she said, "we don't like Anthea to be out later than ten o'clock, Mr. Harford, unless she's at a local dance or something of the sort. Run up and make yourself respectable, dear—I'll clear away the baking utensils."

UPSTAIRS Anthea hurried over her preparations in an agreeable state of anticipation.

The programme proposed by Tony attracted her. The afternoon was one of bright autumn sunshine and everything promised a pleasant outing, besides which she was glad that he had kept his word about coming to look her up.

Tony's garage was situated just outside Reigate, and the drive to it was through some of the loveliest Surrey landscape. Anthea felt as if she could have gone on forever gliding so smoothly through the beautiful scenery, and with such a pleasant companion at her side.

Unlike Shaw he did not pay her compliments all the time, but he had the gift of making himself very agreeable.

That he was proud of his garage was obvious, and although he had an excellent manager he worked in it himself quite as hard as did his small staff of mechanics.

"The only thing I don't go in for is night work," he told Anthea. "My manager lives in the flat above and if he likes to take pity on a stranded motorist or two, well, that's up to him, but he is under no obligation to do so. I like to have my evenings to myself and I wish my fellow-workers to enjoy the same privileges."

He showed her over the place and Anthea showed an intelligent interest in the modern fittings, the repair pits and all the other paraphernalia of which he seemed so proud.

"And now for a cup of tea," he said at last, a twinkle in his eye, "then we'll drive round a bit before stopping somewhere nice for supper. I hope you haven't been too bored?"

"Sounds good to me," she nodded, "but really I've enjoyed looking over your garage, Mr. Harford, it's been most interesting."

"My name is Tony," he said, "and yours is one of the nicest in the world—Anthea. A girl has to be very pretty to be able to carry off a name like that worthily."

On the whole Anthea could not remember having spent a more enjoyable few hours, and told him so in tones of warm gratitude when at last, well before the stipulated hour of ten, he set her down outside her own home.

"Thank you for coming," Tony said, "and for pretending to be interested in my garage. No, I won't come in, thank you, I've still a fairly long way to drive before I get home, you know. But this isn't good-bye, I hope, only au revoir."

"Oh dear, I do hope he'll ask me out again," Anthea exclaimed as she entered the room where her parents sat watching the television programme. "It's been simply wonderful, I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed it all. And daddy you'll be glad to hear that Tony has made good use of some of the money you got for him for the sale of the Woodbridge house. He has bought a garage and it's doing very well."

IT was a few days after this episode that Anthea had a rather unexpected experience.

She was coming home from the office when just before her she saw Julie Mason, also making her way home from the Beauty Parlour where she had recently secured a job. Although they lived in the same road the two girls seldom met nowadays, for since the humiliating ending of her affair with Shaw Desmond, Julie no longer mixed with any of the former set.

It gave Anthea no disagreeable feelings to see Julie now, but all the same she slowed down her pace a little so as not to overtake her, when all at once she saw the other girl trip and nearly fall.

Staggering on for a few steps Julie came to a standstill and Anthea heard her groan.

"Julie, what is it? You've hurt yourself," Anthea exclaimed hurrying up to her. "Why, you're as white as a sheet."

"I turned my ankle, that's all," the other girl replied. "It made me feel a bit sick for a minute or two. I couldn't have believed that it would hurt so much," and as she put her foot to the ground she groaned again.

"Don't try to put any weight on it," Anthea advised quickly. "Take my arm, Julie, and I'll help you home, it's only a few yards to go now."

For a minute the other hesitated, then, with rather an odd look on her face she leant heavily on Anthea's arm and together they made a slow and halting progress to the Masons' house, which was all in darkness.

As they crept up the little front path Anthea said—

"Ask your mother to put a cold compress on your ankle Julie, as soon as you get in. I should have a good strong cup of tea, too. A twisted ankle can be jolly painful, I know."

"There's no one in," Julie replied. "There seldom is," she continued, a note of bitterness in her tone. "My father often stays in town till the last train and mother is nearly always out somewhere. But I shall be all right—thank you for your kindness."

Anthea thought of her own bright, warm home and of the meal and welcome that always awaited her, and felt a spasm of pity for the other girl.

"If I may I'll come in and get you some tea myself," she said hesitantly. "You're not fit to put any weight on that foot. Please let me. I should like to be of some use to you."

"I believe you really mean it," Julie murmured in amazement, as she fumbled in her bag for the latchkey. "It's—it's really very decent of you, Anthea."

She switched on the light and Anthea assisted her into the lounge where, with a gasp of relief, she sank on to a divan.

"Now, we'll get your shoe off," Anthea said kneeling in front of her, "and have a look at the damage. Your ankle is swollen I must say, do you know where any bandages are?"

"I shouldn't think there's such a thing in the house," said Julie. "And if there are I haven't an idea where they are kept."

"I tell you what, I'll put the kettle on to make you some tea and while it's boiling I'll just run home and get a bandage," Anthea said brightly. "It won't take more than a minute or two and I know we always have plenty of first-aid stuff, mummy is a great one for that sort of thing."

"Anthea—why do you do all this for me?" Julie enquired weakly, "it's rather in the nature of heaping coals of fire on my head, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly," said the other girl as she made her way to the kitchen, appalled to find it so untidy and neglected-looking, considering that the Masons had always presented such a superior and ultra-smart front to the world.

There were still unwashed dishes in the sink and the stove looked as if it had not been cleaned for months.

Having put on the kettle she ran up the road to her own home, and after a brief account of what had happened to her parents, found what she wanted and was soon on her way back to Julie's, rejoicing for the first time in her life on the orderliness and neatness of her own home, things she had hitherto taken for granted.

The cold water treatment soon soothed the swollen ankle, and Julie was glad of the cup of tea. But her chief emotion seemed to be that of amazement at Anthea's kindness.

"I never thought you'd do all this for me," she said, "I haven't deserved it of you, Anthea. I've been beastly to you always, I know it, it makes me kind of ashamed to have you waiting on me like this."

"Please don't say that," Anthea said gently, "I'm only too glad to have been of use to you, Julie."

"It was all Shaw's fault," Julie pursued, reaching for a cigarette. "I was jealous of you and glad to have got him away from you. But it didn't turn out to be much of a triumph, did it?" and she laughed bitterly. "What a cad he was."

"We each took him too seriously perhaps," Anthea said. "But let's forget the past, Julie, it's over and done with."

"I see that you've got a new boy friend now," Julie observed, and as Anthea looked curious, she went on: "I saw you in his car the other day. You were going towards Reigate."

"Oh, he isn't my boy friend," Anthea said. "I hardly know him, Julie. Now is there anything you want before I go?" she added. "My mother is expecting me back, you know."

"How lucky you are to have a mother like yours," sighed the girl on the divan. "Yours is a real home, isn't it? Shaw always used to say how nice and comfortable it was. It's not like that here, as perhaps you've noticed. My mother would go mad if she knew that I'd let you see our kitchen."

"Need she know?" Anthea asked awkwardly, and Julie observed slowly: "I really believe that you're not the sort to talk about it to people, Anthea. I mean all the untidiness behind the scenes here of which I am always so ashamed."

"Of course I won't speak of such things," said Anthea indignantly, adding more gently—"Why don't you try to do a bit of tidying up yourself, Julie?"

Julie looked uncomfortable.

"Not me," she said. "I have my job, but mother has nothing to do all day except keep the place clean, so why should I do it? Besides, the front rooms are always quite presentable, so why should I care? My foot feels fine now, Anthea, and I can never thank you enough for what you've done, never," and there was genuine feeling in her voice.

It was impossible that the two girls should ever be real friends, their tastes and way of life were so entirely different.

But perhaps Anthea was the only member of her own sex for whom Julie ever felt affection and respect, while Anthea herself felt for the other girl that friendliness we always experience for one to whom we have been able to render a service.

"If I'd had her home life I might have been just like her," Julie would think sometimes, reflecting upon Anthea's generosity and kindness.

Anthea acknowledged to herself that, had she been brought up in an atmosphere like that obtaining at the Masons' house she, too, might have been another Julie.

### DRIFTING TOWARDS LOVE

ANTHEA'S friendship with Tony Harford progressed rapidly.

Each found in the other an agreeable companion, and although Tony was too busy to devote much time to entertaining the girl, he certainly brought a great deal of pleasure into her life that fine autumn.

There was nothing sentimental in their association. Tony thought her a most endearing and attractive person and Anthea was grateful to him for all the fun he brought into her life.

At least once a week he called round to take her out somewhere, or arranged to meet her in London for a meal, and sometimes the Crawfords would ask him in for the evening.

But they did it cautiously, for he was known to be a "good catch" and they did not want to be suspected of match-making.

Tony was always touchingly grateful for these invitations, for, as he said, the atmosphere of the house, its friendly and affectionate domesticity, appealed to him enormously after his long experience of bachelor life.

"I think I must be cut out to be a family man," he said one day to Anthea. "I should like my own fireside and my own family around me."

"And yet you haven't married," she said. It had long been a surprise to her that someone so nice should have remained single.

His face clouded.

"No. But it wasn't my fault," he replied. "There was someone once, Anthea. I wanted her badly, too. She was beautiful, too beautiful, I suppose, for life had spoilt her and she asked too much of it. She was fond of me, in her way, but she wanted more than I could give her. I was rather hard-up in those days—Woodbridge was still unsold and I hadn't much of a job to marry on. No, I suppose Nina was right, we should never have made a go of things on my money."

"Oh, Tony that was rough on you," Anthea said.

"It was a bit of a knock-out at the time," he agreed. "You see, she was a kind of dream-girl, or was it that I was so young at the time that my head was easily turned?

"Anyhow," he continued, "I didn't let it get me down. I just tried to forget her, to begin to think of something else the moment she came into my head. Luckily for me she went to some relations in South Africa just then, so I didn't have to see her, which was a help. I don't know how I'd feel now if I suddenly came across her again," he went on meditatively.

"Was it then that you took up the idea of joining the band?" Anthea asked.

They were seated in a warm, cosily-lighted little cafe having tea.

"Yes," he said, and laughed. "That old flute! It bested me all right. But it did one good thing, Anthea—brought you into my life," and he smiled affectionately.

A feeling of warmth and happiness stole over her at these words.

"I, too, was ready for a friend at that time," she said. "I, too, was feeling very unhappy."

"Yes," he said. "I know. You looked it. There was a very tragic look in those big eyes of yours."

"I'd just been burying the past," she said, and in a few words related her unhappy experience with Shaw Desmond.

"I was silly. I thought it was the real thing," she ended almost apologetically. "I can see now how mistaken I was. He was just a very good-looking, heartless charmer who passed from one flirtation to another. But it hurt at the time."

"Beauty is a magnet," Tony said. "No one knows that better than I. It's unfair that good looks should have such a pull with inexperienced youth. I daresay Nina wasn't half the wonder girl I thought her, but she certainly did something to me at the time."

"Well, don't think about her," Anthea urged. "You know you said to me on that first evening we met that it was no good dwelling on the past."

"Did I? Well, it is a sound philosophy, my dear girl. I never even begin to think about Nina when I'm with you. I don't know what brought her into my head just now, unless it was what you said about my not having married."

Such words could not fail to be pleasing to the listening girl. He was so sweet, she thought, such a perfect dear that she just could not understand any girl turning him down.

How silly Nina what-ever-her-name was had been to let him go, especially when he was quite comfortably off with a paying business and a private income.

"I'm glad you're happy now, Tony," she murmured, stretching her hand across the table.

He took it in his warm, strong grasp and a little thrill ran up the girl's arm.

"And you?" he asked, thinking how charming she looked with her softly-flushed cheeks and those saintly eyes of hers.

"Oh, I got over it long ago," Anthea smiled, and took her hand away, perturbed at the disturbance her gesture had wrought within her.

"Have another cake," he said prosaically, "and then if we're going to be in time for that first house we ought to get moving."

"I expect you find daddy's rule about my not being out later than ten o'clock rather boring," Anthea remarked. "They seem to forget I'm grown up now, but I know they mean well."

"On the contrary," he said, "I believe that a fellow appreciates the girl who has that kind of background, Anthea. I don't think I'd like a young daughter of mine to be roaming about half the night with a young man. I think your people are quite right and I respect their views."

IT was after this conversation that Anthea found herself thinking almost continuously about the unknown Nina, whose charm and beauty had so bewitched Tony that even now he did not know how he would be affected if he were to meet her again.

What was she like? Anthea longed to know, yet not for worlds would she have brought up the subject. That she must be a horrid, mercenary sort of creature was proved by her refusal to marry the man she professed to love because he wasn't rich enough. Surely by now Tony must realise her true character and be glad that he had escaped a marriage which could not have been a happy one?

It soon began to dawn upon Anthea that she was getting dangerously fond of Tony. She had been so certain that she would never fall in love again, after her first unhappy experience, that the possibility of losing her heart to her new friend had never entered her head.

Their friendship had been entirely satisfying, but now Anthea knew that she wanted something warmer, something more intimate and personal, something which she knew he could never return, because of that other one—that peerless incomparable Nina, whom he had loved so hopelessly and who, he felt, he could not trust himself to meet again.

"I must just try to get him out of my system," Anthea told herself firmly, as if Love were some curable disease of which one could rid oneself at will. "I can't have him as a lover, but I don't want to lose him as a friend. Oh dear, I wonder what it is about me that makes me fall in love with the wrong person?"

It is easy to resolve to do something, but not always simple to carry it into practice. The more Anthea saw of Tony the fonder she became of him, and the greater grew her longing for her love to be returned.

Sometimes he would put his arm casually round her shoulders, and while she thrilled to his touch she would will him desperately to keep it there, just as when their hands touched she knew a sweet and comforting warmth throughout her whole being.

Perhaps, she would think sometimes with secret eagerness, the time would come when he would forget that first love of his, and would turn to the one who cared for him not for his fortune, but for himself alone?

But that would be too much to expect. She wasn't worthy of such a wonderful future, she told herself humbly.

ONE day Betty Driver asked Anthea when she was going to announce her engagement.

"Really, Betty, can't a girl have a boy without people getting ideas of that sort into their heads?"

Anthea spoke with unusual peevishness and her friend shrugged her shoulders good-naturedly.

"All right. Keep your hair on," she remarked amiably. "I didn't mean to be nosey, I was just interested, that's all."

Anthea was immediately contrite.

"I'm sorry, my dear," she murmured. "You see, I—I don't know how Tony feels about me. He's never given me a hint that he feels in the least degree sentimental towards me though between you and me Betty, I'd give anything in the world if he did."

"It's like that, is it?" Betty smiled. "Well, my dear, I've seen you together and I'm pretty sure that he's keen on you. Why should he always want to be with you if he isn't?"

"Oh, I wish I knew," Anthea said. There was a certain relief in voicing her feelings now that Betty had broken through the wall of her reserve. "I'm afraid I'm very keen about him, Betty, and it's dreadful to love someone who doesn't love you."

"If you ask me, you've only got to put out your hands and grab him," Betty declared. "But then, you're not the grabbing sort, you've always had too poor an opinion of yourself, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Swear you'll never tell a soul, Betty?"

Anthea begged anxiously, "I think I'd die if it ever got back to Tony that I was making a fool of myself over him. You see," she added, when Betty had given the required promise, "there was another girl once, only something went wrong, and although he has tried to forget her I think that she will always be the one he wants."

That, of course, was the rock upon which all Athea's aspirations were shattered, that other girl, of whom she could not force herself to think with any degree of charity.

ONE evening they were walking back from a cinema through the dark, chilly streets, when it struck Tony that his companion was unusually silent.

"You're cold, Anthea," he said. "Take my arm, but first let me put that scarf-thing you're wearing more closely round your neck. There, isn't that better? You want someone to look after you, my dear little girl."

"Thank you, Tony, but really I'm not feeling cold," she said, and although she tried to infuse a note of cheerfulness into her voice, even in her own ears it sounded flat and dreary.

"I don't believe you enjoyed the pictures," he remarked, "and yet I thought it was rather a decent one."

"Oh, it was," Anthea declared, "and I enjoyed it awfully, Tony. But——"

He gave her arm a little squeeze and said—

"But what?"

"But in real life do you think that things always have a happy ending? Love-stories like that, I mean?" she added.

She must be thinking of that Irish boy, Tony thought, and he said a little impatiently—

"My dear girl, we're not just helpless pawns on the chessboard of life, you know. It's up to all of us to make our own happiness. You remember what the poet chappie wrote—'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul'. We can all have a happy ending, even if it is not the happy ending we hoped for. See what I mean?"

"Yes, you're right, of course," Anthea said hurriedly. "It's just that it struck me that in books and on the screen everything always comes out right in the end, and I wondered if in real life it really works out in the same way."

"I know what you want—the coffee and sandwiches your mother promised to have ready," Tony joked, wishing to jolly her out of her mood of depression. "I hope they will be crab sandwiches, Anthea. Do you think they will?"

"Well, you gave mummy a pretty good hint of your wishes in that direction," she smiled, "and she seems rather partial to you."

"Do you really think your mother does like me?" he asked eagerly. "I hope she does. She's always very sweet. But then, she seems kind to everyone, she's one of the very nicest people I know. That's why you are such a dear, I expect," he added lightly.

They had reached the door of Anthea's house and she was just going to ring the bell when her companion lowered his head and dropped a gentle kiss on her cheek.

How often, secretly, had Anthea longed for him to kiss her and now it had happened!

It was only a swift brushing of his lips upon her face, but enough to set her pulses throbbing so that for a moment she stood there motionless.

Upon the young man, too, the effect of that innocent embrace was electrical. He said stammeringly—

"How sweet you are, Anthea, darling," and sweeping her into his arms, kissed her ardently.

Breathless and trembling she at first made no attempt to draw away from him, but she was at last forced to do so by the advancing sound of her mother's footsteps in the hall, on the other side of the door.

"Well, my dears, I thought I heard you come up the path," Mrs. Crawford exclaimed, blissfully unconscious of having interrupted anything unusual. "Come in out of the cold, you must be frozen."

Anthea lay awake long that night, trembling between hope and doubt. She was not a very sophisticated young person and did not know a great deal about men.

But she did know that they thought little of a kiss. Some of the girls at her office openly boasted of how many boys they had been kissed by without in any way looking upon such embraces as the prelude to love and marriage.

Tony may have meant much, or he may have meant nothing, by the gesture which had been so shattering in its effect upon Anthea. But fond of her as he had always seemed he had never kissed her before, never told her how sweet she was in quite that trembling kind of voice.

Did it—could it—mean that she was as dear to him as he was to her? Nothing else in the world would ever matter, she told herself with youthful exaggeration, if only that were true.

She did not see him for the next three or four days, which was not in the least unusual, for between his work at the garage and his engagements with the band, Tony had not a great deal of leisure time.

But on the following Saturday, as she was wondering whether to go to the Club or not, his car appeared at the gate, and the next second she heard him speaking to her mother in the hall.

"I've come to ask if I may borrow your daughter for the afternoon?" were the words Anthea heard. "It's such a nice bright day I thought a drive down to the coast was indicated."

She looked up a little shyly as he came into the room where she was sitting, for the memory of their last meeting was fresh in her mind and she wondered if he too remembered that kiss which had had such a devastating effect upon her?

But he looked just the same as ever, and once more she had to remind herself that to the average man a kiss here and there meant nothing. He might be in the habit of kissing lots of girls for all she knew, she told herself despondently.

But it was impossible to feel anything but happiness when a little later she was seated by him in the car with the prospect of an exhilarating drive before her through the cold but sunny air.

"I've been working so hard these last few days I thought I'd give myself a treat to-day," he said.

"It was a nice thought to include me in the treat," Anthea smiled.

"Well, it wouldn't be one without you," he said shortly.

After that he spoke very little until they were more or less clear of the built-up areas of the South London suburbs.

But soon after reaching open country he slowed down and stopped at the side of the road.

"Why have you stopped, Tony?" she asked. "Something wrong?"

"I couldn't wait another moment to ask you something," he said in a low, moved voice. "You see, I love you, Anthea, and what I want to know more than anything else in the world, is if you care at all for me?"

It had come—that magic moment in a girl's life when she seems to have stepped into fairyland! He *did* love her, he *did* want her. All her doubts and fears had been groundless and with a little spontaneous gesture of surrender she nestled closely to him, saying—

"I care a lot, Tony—I love you—so much that it almost hurts," she murmured.

With a low-voiced exclamation of tenderness Tony put his arm around her and once more felt her soft lips on his own.

If ever mortals are permitted a glimpse of perfect happiness, that priceless gift was Anthea's on that bright winter's day when she stepped into her kingdom. Whatever the future might have in store for her that day's experience was hers forever, all else was forgotten save for the wonderful knowledge that she was loved by the man of her heart.

Even the weather seemed in a conspiracy to add to the joyous event; never had the sea looked so blue and sparkling, the sun so gay. It was a day of days, a red-letter day indeed in the annals of her life, and as a perfect finish to the golden hours there was her parents' satisfaction and approval when finally she reached home again.

They could not have been more pleased. In every sense Tony was a man to whom they could entrust their daughter's future with confidence and unalloyed pleasure. He had long been their favourite, and their welcome of him as a prospective son-in-law was genuine.

"This has been the most wonderful day of my life," Anthea murmured as in the hall, she and Tony clung in a good-night embrace.

"The first of many, I hope," he said. "You and I are going to be the happiest people in the world, darling."

## NINA ARRIVES

ANTHEA could not have said when it was that she once again began to remember that she was not Tony's first love, and that somewhere in the world there was that other girl called Nina.

A state of perfect happiness cannot last forever, and although Anthea continued to be gloriously happy in her engagement, every now and then she would be tormented by the knowledge that before her there had been another girl who had once won Tony's heart.

A woman's love is apt to be possessive, and Anthea was rather perturbed to find herself cherishing distinct feelings of jealousy where Nina was concerned.

She might not have done so had it not been for that remark of Tony's, when he had confessed that he did not quite know what his reactions would be if he were to meet Nina again.

In the midst of some of her happiest moments the torturing little doubt would come—

"Suppose he did see her again and discovered that she was really the one he wanted?"

Then swift remorse for having suspected his fidelity would overwhelm her and she would tell herself how foolish she was.

For he was so perfect that really it was the height of folly not to realise that she was everything in the world to him.

He loved her dearly, of that there could be no doubt.

Already he was anxiously talking of a speedy marriage, and only the difficulty of finding a suitable house had induced him to agree to wait until the Spring, when Mr. Crawford, in his capacity of house agent, felt almost certain that one on his books would be available.

"A Spring wedding is ideal," said Mrs. Crawford. "I'm sure you'd both be wise to wait until then, when you would have a house of your very own."

They made the best of the time of waiting by seeing each other every day, and so frequently did Tony's car cover the distance between his place of work and Anthea's home that he often laughingly declared that it could find its own way there.

On Saturday nights he slept at the Crawfords and he and Anthea would go to church next day and afterwards disappear for the afternoon, walking across the Surrey hills, making plans for their future, laughing and happy as a pair of children on holiday.

"I wonder when you first knew that you loved me?" was of course, one of the many questions she asked him, for this is always a matter of supreme importance to young lovers.

"I believe I really didn't realise my true feelings for you until that night I first kissed you," he said. "I seemed to come upon me like a flash that I'd just got to kiss you again, and very soon, too, and that it was a privilege no one else must enjoy! But I expect it really began long before that. I was always wanting to be with you. I even began to be bored with the band because it took me away from you so much. I'm glad I've given it up now."

Then he wanted to know when she first knew that she cared for him. With a confused blush Anthea had to own that it was very early in their acquaintance that she began to think how lovely it would be if he liked her enough to want to marry her.

"But I was always afraid that you might still be thinking of Nina," she added hesitantly.

"For goodness sake don't bring that old affair up, darling," he said. "It's dead as a door nail. I hardly ever used to think of Nina after you and I got friendly."

"But supposing you were to meet her again?" Anthea wanted to know.

"Darling, why are you trying to spoil this lovely walk by bringing up all that old stuff?" he asked, almost crossly. "I shall almost wish that I had never told you about her. I never give her a thought, I tell you. I was in love with her once it's true, but there's no one in the world I want now but you, my sweet."

She ought to have been satisfied, Anthea knew she ought, but always at the back of her mind, clouding some of her happiest moments, was the desire to know for certain what his reactions would be if Nina reappeared in their midst again.

Perhaps it was because she was almost afraid of being too happy that Anthea indulged in these foolish doubts. As soon as she realised that they irritated Tony she forebore to put them into words, and gradually as time went by, she succeeded in almost forgetting Nina.

Now that she was engaged, Anthea's parents relaxed the rule they had made about her always being home by ten o'clock. This meant they could dine in London and go to a show afterwards.

"Won't it be grand when we have our own little home to go back to?" Tony said one night, as they were driving back from London. "I can hardly wait. Are you a good cook, darling? I know that you make gorgeous rock cakes."

"I believe you're only marrying me to have someone to cook for you, greedy boy," was her response. "It may interest you to know that I once took a course on cookery at school and did quite well."

"Good! That just goes to show what a sensible chap I was to choose a wife who is useful as well as ornamental," he replied with a grin, and Anthea found herself wondering if the incomparable Nina would have been able to turn out a tastefully cooked meal?

It was humiliating the way her thoughts would keep turning from time to time to the other girl, and she despised herself for the weakness.

IT was just about this time that Gillian Collier—the girl at whose engagement party Anthea had renewed her acquaintance with Tony—sent her an invitation to her wedding which was to take place in three weeks time. Although it would be on a Saturday—a day Anthea liked to keep free for Tony—she felt that she ought to accept.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to do without you for once, but why couldn't they choose another day?" he grumbled.

"Why don't you come, too? You have a slight acquaintance with Gillian and Bill?" urged Anthea.

Tony shook his head.

"The only wedding I want to go to is my own," he declared. "They are a form of entertainment I'm not really interested in. No, I'll put in a good day's work at the garage instead."

It was only a small incident in the chain of events which were building up to spoil Anthea's happiness and almost bring it to ruin.

For a few days after this conversation the girl of whom she had thought so often, and whom she always called to herself the "incomparable Nina," suddenly came into her life.

Tony phoned early one morning when the Crawfords were still at breakfast to say that as he had to see his solicitor in London that day on business. He asked if he might meet Anthea when she left the office and take her out to supper.

He was always springing pleasant little surprises of this sort upon her and Anthea fell in with the suggestion gladly. It meant changing at the office into something a little more attractive than what she would be wearing during her working hours. But she had done this before quite successfully, so into a suitcase went some clothes and off Anthea went filled with pleasant anticipation of what the evening would bring.

How little one knows what life may have in store for them!

Anthea had scarcely ever felt gayer or more light of heart than when she met her fiance that evening.

She had been used to a more or less quiet life until Tony had begun to take her around, and a meal at one of the better-known restaurants was still a treat to her.

The place they went to was one where people liked to eat at before going on to a show or a theatre, and Anthea found plenty to look at while listening to Tony's conversation, for some of the diners were celebrities known to him by sight.

They were half-way through their meal when it happened—that episode which was to ruin the evening for Anthea.

A little party of four were making their way through the maze of tables to the one they had engaged when one of them, a tall fair girl of extraordinary good looks, stopped dead with an exclamation of delight and surprise, while, equally surprised, Tony sprang to his feet.

"Tony—darling—why, how marvellous! I've been trying to get you on the phone all day and now to run across you like this! I only got back from South Africa last night. Oh, how wonderful this is."

It hardly needed Tony's stammered—"Nina! A surprise indeed," to tell Anthea who the girl was. Her blonde beauty, her lovely clothes, her whole atmosphere of elegance and wealth, proclaimed her to be the one who had so often haunted her thoughts.

Tony was looking somewhat shaken. The last time he had seen Nina had been on the occasion of their parting, when he had been the despairing, rejected lover.

The remembrance of that meeting filled him with discomfort and embarrassment, emotions which showed plainly in his manner as he returned her greeting, and they were not lost upon Anthea.

Nina was looking her up and down with curious and faintly hostile eyes, and pulling together the man himself said hastily—

"Meet my fiancee, Anthea Crawford," and looking at Anthea added—"this is Nina Lascelles, darling."

The girl's heavily fringed eyes seemed to bore into Anthea's very soul.

"Your fiancee? I—I didn't know—I didn't expect anything like this Tony—— Dear me, the Past and the Present meet! How are you, Miss Crawford? Tony and I are very old friends."

"Yes, he has told me all about you," Anthea replied, trying to speak lightly.

The other girl raised her brows mockingly.

"What? *All*?" she queried. "I wonder? But I must rejoin my party. When can I see you, Tony? We must meet, you know."

"I'm afraid I can't hope for such a pleasure, Nina," he said. "I'm a very busy man these days, and naturally all my spare time is given to my fiancee. But we shall run up against each other somewhere, I expect."

He had regained his composure, the indifference of his manner being in contrast with the eagerness of the girl he addressed.

"I expect so, too," Nina said enigmatically, and with a bow, which included them both, she hurried after her friends.

"Well," said Tony, resuming his seat, "that was an unexpected meeting, I must say. Whoever would have thought of seeing Nina. I thought she was still abroad."

Then he said something which could only be described as somewhat tactless.

"I didn't exaggerate her beauty, did I, Anthea? She is rather a peach, isn't she?"

"She's lovely," was the girl's reply. "Oh no, you didn't exaggerate, Tony."

He looked at her quickly, for her voice sounded flat, two bright spots of colour had sprung to her cheeks, and a little uncomfortably he added:

"I'm sorry you were let in for this, darling, but you don't mind, do you?"

"Oh, not in the least," she said quickly. "I always wanted to see what she was really like and now I know."

"Well, you can't wonder that I made a bit of a fool of myself over her, can you?" he went on light-heartedly. "She seemed awfully surprised to hear that I was engaged," he continued musingly. "I suppose she has been thinking of me all this time in the role of a broken-hearted and discarded suitor."

"I thought she was rather impertinent when she alluded to herself and me as the past and present," Anthea said in a voice full of indignation.

"I say, darling, you're not going to make something out of this, are you?" Tony exclaimed rather irritably. "You know that it's quite a time since Nina meant anything to me. It's not my fault that she turned up, or that she showed a little cattiness to you—women are like that. You've surely got sense enough to take no notice of that kind of thing."

He, too, was feeling a bit on edge at having had the past brought up before him so dramatically or he would not have spoken so sharply. The meeting with Nina had made him feel uncomfortable, it had been an awkward moment for all of them, but he did not think that Anthea need seem so upset about it.

She made an effort to conquer the unpleasant sensations which the sight of Nina had awakened, but for her all the pleasure of the evening had gone.

Sharp pangs of jealousy assailed her, those mocking, brilliant eyes of the other girl's had given her a feeling of uncomfortable inferiority above which she found it impossible to arise.

Though she strove to smile, and assure Tony that what had happened had left her unmoved, the effort was all too apparent to the young man.

Thus, for both of them, the zest of the evening had gone.

BUT in the taxi, going to the Victoria station—for he had left his car at Reigate—Tony made an effort to disperse the cloud of gloom which seemed to have descended upon them.

"Now at last I can have that kiss I've been longing for," he declared slipping his arm fondly around her. "I've been wanting one ever since we met, darling. You're looking so sweet to-night, I think I must be the luckiest man in the whole of London."

"Then—then, seeing Nina again has made no difference?" she could not resist enquiring, even though her jealousy was soothed by his words and manner.

"Dearest, absolutely none, except to show me what a wonderful exchange I made," he murmured. "Do try to put Nina out of your mind, Anthea, you've nothing to fear from her, I promise you."

He spoke truly, for his own satisfaction was great to discover that Nina's hold on him had completely gone.

He had often wondered a little uneasily what he would feel if she were to come into his life once more, and it was a relief to know that she counted for less than nothing.

Tony was no fool, and that her change of attitude towards him was owing to his improved financial circumstances was quite obvious to him.

All that eagerness to contact him again, that veiled allusion to the past, had their origin in the fact that he was now in a fit position to support her as she thought she deserved supporting, with the added desire to make his present fiancee uneasy and suspicious.

Thank goodness for Anthea, he thought, nothing must ever be allowed to cloud her happiness or give her grounds for uneasiness, for she was now the only one he wanted.

Meanwhile Anthea allowed herself to be lulled into a feeling of security again, but at the back of her mind hovered the vision of the lovely Nina Lascelles.

So in the days which followed she often caught herself wondering if Nina would try to stage a further meeting with him, now that he was much wealthier than he had been.

Nothing is so difficult to combat as jealousy, once it is allowed to get a footing. It exaggerates events, twists and turns them to its own advantage until at length its victim can hardly recognise the true from the false.

Anthea did earnestly strive to forget that Nina existed, for she realised that her suspicions were slowly poisoning her whole relationship with Tony.

What exactly she suspected Anthea did not know. But she feared Nina, dreaded her influence upon Tony, and could not forgive her for being the cause of her present unsettled state.

"I wish that those two could find somewhere to live," Mrs. Crawford observed plaintively to her husband one day. "I think too long an engagement is a mistake—haven't you noticed how low-spirited Anthea is of late?"

"Well, now you mention it she has seemed a bit quieter than usual," was the reply. "But, my dear, they've only been engaged a few months, you can't call that a long engagement."

"Well, I wish you could find a house for them," his wife persisted. "When she doesn't know that I'm looking at her Anthea's expression is often positively sad. But, of course, men are too short-sighted to see what's under their noses."

"While a woman often imagines seeing what isn't there at all," said her husband mildly. "If ever any girl had cause to think herself lucky it's Anthea. Why, she cannot have a care in the whole world."

Although she could not hoodwink her mother Anthea managed not to betray her uneasiness to Tony, and he was only too thankful to feel that she had forgotten all that nonsense of hers about Nina.

The latter had rung him up on two occasions to see if they could arrange a meeting, but while keeping strictly on the side of politeness he had tried to indicate quite plainly that "there was nothing doing".

Upon the second occasion of his making this reply Nina had said archly—

"I really begin to think that you are afraid to trust yourself to see me again, Tony. How flattering!" and before he could deny this she had cut off.

Afterwards he had debated whether he should mention these phone calls to Anthea, and had thought it better to say nothing.

THE following Saturday was the day of Gillian's wedding, and thither Anthea took herself, looking very smart in the new winter coat which her mother had given her.

The wedding was much like all other weddings, the bride looked a picture in her white brocade dress, there were two very sweet bridesmaids and the reception which was held in the same hall in which Gillian's engagement party had been staged was all it should be.

Would her own wedding be the next that she would attend? Anthea asked herself with a little thrill of anticipation. How wonderful to think of—she would be Mrs. Anthony Harford, the most wonderful name in the world, she thought.

She had decided to return home by a Green Line bus, but as she had a little time on her hands, before it was due to start, she wandered along the street, looking in at the shop windows, thinking how nice it would be to see Tony that evening, for he was coming to her home for his usual week-end.

Suddenly she heard her name spoken in a vaguely familiar voice, and turning from the window, into which she had been gazing, she found herself face to face with Nina Lascelles.

"Why, what a coincidence," Nina exclaimed. "Don't say you have forgotten me, Miss Crawford?"

"Of course not," Anthea replied, striving to put a note of friendliness into her voice, as she allowed the other to take her hand. "I was just on my way to get a Green Line bus home," she added thinking how extremely smart and fashionable Nina looked.

"It really is odd to come across you just when I've left Tony," Nina went on. "I've been having lunch with him at Reigate and seeing that garage to which he is so much attached, it's quite a place, isn't it?"

"Lunching with Tony?" repeated Anthea involuntarily, a queer icy sensation stealing over her.

Nina nodded.

"Yes, poor boy," she said. "I'm afraid seeing me again has brought everything back to him rather painfully. I shall never forgive myself for not returning before. You know that I treated him rather shabbily, don't you, Miss Crawford?"

"I know that you refused to marry him because you considered him too poor," said the other spiritedly.

"Yes. What a fool one can be! It's too late now, of course, for you couldn't possibly be expected to give him up," sighed Nina—"not, of course, that he would ever dream of asking you to, however much he wanted," she added.

Anthea clasped her hands tightly together as she looked into the brilliant mocking face before her.

"Do you mean to infer that he does want to?" she asked.

"That is for him to say," said Nina. "I'm afraid that I've already said too much, Miss Crawford. Forget it, but do please try to make the poor boy as happy as you can," and with those words she turned and walked away leaving, she hoped, a sting behind her which Anthea could not ignore.

It was her way of taking revenge upon Tony for having turned down her overtures, and for having replaced her by another girl when she had been so certain of awaking all his former affection for herself.

Nina had discovered that Tony was now wealthy, and as she still had a soft corner in her heart for him, she had not scrupled to try to revive their old love-affair. Her failure to do so had annoyed her, and she had been glad of the lucky chance of working off her revengeful feelings upon Anthea.

Anthea went blindly upon her way scarcely knowing where her feet were taking her.

So that was why Tony had refused to come to Gillian's wedding, although only yesterday she had again begged him to accompany her.

He had arranged to give Nina lunch at Reigate—they had been spending the day together behind her back—her doubts and suspicions had not been so ill-founded as she had tried to believe.

It was a bitter blow, Anthea felt completely shattered under its impact, and alternate waves of bitter anger and pain flowed over her as Nina's cruel revelations returned again and again to torture and bewilder her.

That Tony could so deceive her was so incredible that her mind almost rejected the possibility, except that it would have been so futile for Nina to have invented a story which could so easily be disproved.

Besides, he would not come to the wedding, in spite of all the pressure Anthea had brought to bear on him. He preferred to meet Nina in Reigate—to entertain her to lunch and show her round the garage, just as he had once shown Anthea.

Oh, were men all alike? Was no one to be trusted? How was she going to bear it if Tony wanted to go back to his first love?

Her sufferings were intense enough to have even satisfied Nina, who, in fact, had already all but forgotten her encounter with Anthea, and was hurrying to keep an appointment with a wealthy, middle-aged man whom she had kept in suspense until she knew for certain what Tony was going to do. It was always wise to have a second string, she told herself cynically.

IT was not possible for Anthea's pale cheeks and dejected appearance to pass unnoticed by her mother. The girl had started out that morning looking gay and smart, and she came back with a listless expression, saying she had a severe headache.

"Go and lie down for a while, dear," Mrs. Crawford said. "I'll bring you up a cup of nice strong tea and some toast. You want to be all right when Tony comes this evening, you know."

She would never be all right again, the girl thought hopelessly, as she went upstairs to her room. As for Tony, how was she going to be able to act before her parents as if nothing had happened?

"I don't mind if I never see him again," she told herself miserably, and yet what was

life going to be like without him?

Her supposed headache accounted for her quiet behaviour at the supper when Tony sat down with them.

He suggested that it might have been because of the wedding and said that he was glad that he had refused to go to it.

"I daresay you had something much better to do," Anthea said, and something in her tone made him give her a quick glance, there was a sharp edge to it.

It was a pity that she had a headache to-night, he thought, for he had decided to tell her of his own unpleasant experience with Nina. Although thank goodness, he told himself, he had succeeded in choking-off that young woman for good and all, or else she was very much thicker-skinned than he took her to be.

"My dear, you're not going to bother with the washing-up to-night," Mrs. Crawford said firmly, when the meal was over and Anthea had started as usual to accompany Tony to the kitchen. "I'll help, Tony, and you can sit with your father and watch the television."

That would make her head much worse, Anthea said with the irritability of mental suffering, and then was stricken with remorse at having snapped at that kind mother of hers.

"Sorry, mummy darling," she said, "but honestly I'm better now and it can't hurt me to give Tony a hand with the dishes."

"They want to do it together," Mr. Crawford said, "don't be a spoil sport, my love."

"Well, I must say you do seem down in the dumps this evening, Anthea," Tony remarked as he took off his coat at the sink.

"My experiences to-day have not been so agreeable as yours," she said. "Oh, Tony, do you wonder that I feel miserable when you have deceived me so cruelly?"

"Deceived you? Just what do you mean by that?" he said sharply.

He had a quick temper and considering how very far from agreeable his experiences had been resented her accusation, while wondering what on earth she had found out about Nina's sudden visit to his garage.

"I think you know very well," Anthea said. "That was the reason why you wouldn't come to the wedding with me. You had a very much more exciting appointment to keep."

"If by some means you have heard that I saw Nina to-day I must ask you to believe that it was no doing of mine," Tony said stiffly.

He could not believe that it was his gentle, sweet-tempered Anthea who was speaking.

"You must think me even more gullible than I am," she said. "I saw Nina this afternoon and she made no attempt to disguise the fact that you and she are still in love and that you are unhappy in your engagement to me. Why didn't you tell me that you still wanted her? Why deceive and hoodwink me? I can't believe it of you, Tony."

"You seem to have no difficulty in doing so however," he replied with cold anger, the injustice of her accusation being a little too much for him. "If you trust me so little what is our married life going to be?"

"Exactly what I ask myself," Anthea cried. "How are we to be happy if you steal off to meet another girl whenever you have the chance?"

"Then you refuse to accept my word—my word of honour mind you, Anthea, that Nina's visit this afternoon was totally unexpected by me?" he asked, white with anger.

She could not reply, for her throat was thick with sobs, and with a stifled exclamation the young man seized his coat and turned to the door.

"Under those circumstances I think I had better say good-bye," he said, hardly knowing what he did say, so angry and injured had she made him feel.

At the door he paused for a second.

"Kindly tell your mother that I am not staying the night," he said, and the next minute he had gone, leaving Anthea feeling as if her whole world had come to an end.

What had she done? Where had her burst of jealous temper led her? Oh, if only she had waited to hear his side of the matter before hurling those bitter accusations at him.

And now he had gone, she would never see him again, and all because she had allowed the malice of another girl to poison her mind.

Mechanically she set about doing the washing-up, over which, as a rule, he and she had so often joked and had fun, but which they would never again do together—and all through her own fault.

Her task done, Anthea put her head round the door of the room where her parents sat.

"Tony asked me to tell you that he would not be staying to-night," she announced briefly, and shut the door again.

Mrs. Crawford looked at her husband.

"They've had a quarrel," she said uneasily. "I knew something was wrong."

"It won't be the first or the last," her husband replied wisely. "All young people have their tiffs both before marriage and after. It's all part of the business."

But upstairs Anthea was crying her heart out.

The next day at breakfast, heavy-eyed and white-faced, Anthea announced that she would not be going to church that morning.

"I'll stay and see to the dinner," she said. "My—my head is still aching rather badly."

It was, but it would also have been true to say that her heart ached too.

"Darling," her mother said, "is that all you have to tell me? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nobody can help me," the girl said with a rush of tears, "but I can't talk to you just now, mummy dear. Later on I'll tell you. The kindest thing you can do is to leave me to myself."

Reluctantly Mrs. Crawford took her at her word, and presently Anthea found herself alone, and able to indulge in the bitter tears which would not be denied and yet seemed to bring no ease to her pain.

She had been wrong, and knew it. She had been hasty in her judgment, quick to accept Nina's lies at face value, fatally ready to distrust Tony because of the foolish jealousy in which she had been indulging ever since she had seen Nina at the restaurant that night.

Tony will never forgive me, she thought. I insulted him in his honour and his integrity, I showed myself to be completely unworthy of him, and now he is lost to me forever

She looked at her ring, that precious symbol of their betrothal, and knew that she must return it to the giver, and her tears began afresh

The church bells had stopped, so that the distant sound of a car on the high road was plainly audible. Except for the fact that she knew it to be quite impossible Anthea would have taken it to be Tony's.

If only it could have been! But never again would he drive along the now familiar way, so familiar that he had always joked that the car could find its way there by itself.

The next minute she started violently her heart beginning to beat suffocatingly as—unless imagination had run away with her—that was indeed his very car now drawing up outside the gate.

Almost sick with suspense she hurried to the window, and there he was, coming to the door, Tony, whom she had thought never to see again!

Next minute he was in the room and she was in his arms, almost drowned by the waves of happiness which engulfed her.

"Anthea," he said. "My own silly, Anthea, how could you be so foolish as to doubt me? That is what made me so angry last night, darling, the thought that you did not trust me. I was unkind and horrid to you, my love, can you ever forgive me?"

"It is you from whom forgiveness must come," she murmured, "Tony, I shall never doubt you again, never, never. I don't think I have stopped crying since you went"

"You look as if you hadn't," he said with a fond smile. "Have you seen yourself in the glass this morning darling?" and still with an arm around her he led her to the mantelpiece mirror.

Anthea started back in dismay at the sight of her tear-blotched face.

"Oh, Tony—how could you bear to kiss such an object?" she exclaimed. "I look awful."

"I've certainly seen you look prettier," he said. "But to me you will always be kissable, darling, no matter what you look like. All the same, I suggest that you do something to that ill-treated little face of yours, and then I'll help you get the dinner—it will be good practice for me against the time when you are Mrs. Tony Harford."

THE END.



# PASSION'S PRICE

## By Campbell Bridges

LOVE'S DUPE.

"DO come, Molly, really it's rather a scream. You've no idea of the sort of people one meets at Adine's. Goodness knows where she collects them; goes into curiosity shops, I should think, if they kept freaks for sale. But, anyway, it'll be a change from your eternal drudgery. Don't you get sick of it?"

The speaker blew a whiff of cigarette smoke towards her companion, who turned her head away with an impatient gesture.

"Do stop being a chimney, if you can, for ten minutes, Phyllis. Really, it's a dreadful habit, smoking between the courses at meal time. I call it uncivilised."

"And I call you a back number," was the retort; but Phyl Denby crushed her cigarette as she spoke. "Look here, Molly, you intrigue me, you really do. You look so temperamental, so thrilling, I can't think of any other word, with your Spanish eyes and your wonderful figure. Byron spoke of someone in Don Juan as having a 'Figure, large and languishing and lazy, just the sort to send you crazy'?"

Molly Belford laughed, and picking up a salted almond, put it between lips as red as cherries.

"You're too idotic for words, Phyl," she said. 'Why should my being dark and having quite a decent figure make you think that I shouldn't like my job and work at it? I came to Town to work, and I'm going to do it. I find it much less exhausting than playing, I can tell you."

"Just the other way round with me," said Phyllis, otherwise Phyl, cheerfully. "Dance, why I'll beat any of the record holders of the world's dancing championship, I bet; but when it comes to work, I'm not afraid of it, no, not I. I'd lie down and go to sleep beside it."

Again Molly laughed, then grew grave as she glanced from Phyllis's audacious face to the rows of other diners in the little restaurant.

It was a small, smoke-filled place tucked away in a corner of Soho, quiet and not over clean, but the cooking was good, the proprietors friendly, and, what was in the eyes of its clients the chief merit, it was cheap.

Molly Belford and Phyl Denby met at the Bouquet of Herbs, as the place was called, once a week, to dine together and afterwards go to a concert or to the pit of some theatre.

They had been living in the same boarding-house and had become friends, Phyl was light-hearted, easy going, and avid for pleasure; Molly was two years older, reserved and silent by nature, traits that Phyl often resented.

After two days' acquaintance she had confided to Molly that she had so many admirers that she didn't know which to choose, that she wouldn't live at home because her people were so "fearfully antiquated" and that she had discovered a lipstick that absolutely would not come off—unless you wanted it to.

In return for these artless confidences, after six weeks' friendship Phyllis learned that Molly's relatives lived in the country, that she had quarrelled with them, and therefore was earning her own living—indexing a library for a man who was going to dispose of it to America.

And only a temporary job, said Phyl, whose sleekly-shining golden head was quite level and acute. Why didn't Molly look out for something else?

To which Molly replied that she was not keen on office work, so she was thankful that when applying for this interesting post she had secured it.

"How're things with you?" Phyl demanded abruptly now. They had reached the black coffee stage of dinner; the Bouquet of Herbs made a feature of including coffee in a half-crown dinner. "Your Mr. Pendare still a marvel? Considerate and chivalrous, and as soon think of kissing you as he would of teaching his grandmother the rumba?"

Molly, who had been scanning the various diners with dreamy interest, started, and the deep cream of her skin showed an angry flush.

"I don't know whether it's nature or pretence," she said. "But you're very vulgar sometimes."

"Who isn't?" demanded Phyl, cheerfully, taking out another cigarette and lighting it. "All except you, that is, Lady-on-a-Pedestal. That's what they call you in the boarding-house, you know. You're so frightfully stand-offish."

"They can call me anything they like as long as they don't speak to me," answered Molly, indifferently. "How you collect the gossip you do, Phyl, I can't imagine. You're out of the house by nine, you're never there at night, and yet—you seem to know all that's going on."

"Natural genius," answered Phyl. "You've not told me how Mr. Pendare is, by the way. Isn't he good looking? And what an English gentleman! Oh, Molly, Molly, you look as though you could kill me! My dear, do learn to put up with chaff. You think I'm vulgar, you just said so; well, mightn't I have an opinion about someone, too? I have about your boss—you squirm because I call him that—and my opinion is——"

She stopped suddenly as she saw the look of genuine distress in Molly's eyes. Phyl was kind-heartedness itself, in her own phrasing she could have kicked herself for having been such a beast as to tease Molly.

But the latter hid her anger as best she could.

"You've never seen Mr. Pendare," she said. "So you can't possibly judge what he's like."

Phyl put her flaxen head on one side, and taking her cigarette from her lips, stared at it meditatively.

"Have to contradict you, I'm afraid," she replied. "I've seen him—several times."

"Where?" asked Molly, and was unconscious of the eager interest her voice betrayed.

Phyl smiled a little maliciously.

"Oh, round about!" she answered. "You never go to any shows, unless it's one with me, my love, or a high-brow concert by yourself. How can you meet people? Now I'm for ever on the pounce. Naturally, things fall to me. See?"

She had aroused Molly's curiosity, at the same time her resentment. It seemed impossible that Phyl Denby and Humphrey Pendare could move in the same world, and be friends.

"You never told me before that you knew him," she said.

Phyl shrugged her shoulders.

"You never asked me," she said sweetly. "Besides, it's not an age-old affair. I've only run across him lately, at Adine's. He's rather keen on her work. Will you come along to-night to her place? It's going to be a decent show, for Adine's crazy on some new violin man. I wouldn't ask you if it was a petting party sort of show, but it isn't. Will you come?"

Molly was silent. Her heart was beating so swiftly that for a moment she could not speak. She was dismayed at her own power for fierce anger and jealousy.

Did she imagine, she asked herself scornfully, that Humphrey Pendare had no life outside the book-lined walls of his house in Kensington? Did she imagine that he never spoke to any woman but herself? She was not such a fool, yet to hear of Phyl's meeting him, of his going to such places as Adine Elton's Chelsea studio, hurt her horribly.

Again in her heart she called herself a fool.

"Well, make up your mind, is it to be Adine's or not?" enquired Phyl. "It'll be quite good for you to be shaken out of your groove, my child. Adine's lot would get a limpet off its rock."

Molly looked up suddenly. The dark splendour of her eyes startled Phyllis.

"I say, you really are gorgeous," the latter said impulsively. "And yet you behave as though you had a face like a horse. Don't men go mad over you, my child?"

"If they do, they keep their insanity to themselves," replied Molly. "I hardly ever come across any, so I can't tell what an awful effect I might have on them."

"I should have thought Humphrey Pendare would have been a good try-out," said Phyl. "However, he's evidently the perfect gentleman who never thinks of making love. Don't get furious, but come along to Adine's. There are always heaps of men there, she's the knack of collecting 'em."

Molly yielded. After all, she reflected, she did lead a nun-like life, her only break an occasional concert and this weekly outing with Phyl. A change of scene, seeing new people, sampling a new atmosphere, would be good for her.

Not even to herself did she admit that the real reason for being willing to go to the studio was the chance that she might meet Humphrey Pendare there.

Having paid the bill, the two girls left the restaurant and made their way to Piccadilly to board the bus for Chelsea.

It was a matter of dashing and diving and slipping nimbly through the crowd to secure a seat, and Phyl was excellent at it. She enjoyed the scramble, but Molly loathed it.

She was by nature aloof, shy, she felt embarrassed and self-conscious as she squeezed her way past people who had a better right to a seat than she had.

What was sport to Phyl was a hateful necessity to her.

"Get out at Sloane Square, then down that side street, and we're at Adine's," said Phyl, producing a tiny mirror and powder puff, and using the latter upon her pretty nose.

Molly sighed. She never could be reconciled to this blatant making-up in public.

"She has a huge studio looking right on the river. How she pays for it goodness knows. You'll like her, she's the richest thing ever invented in the way of cheek."

But when Adine's studio was reached, when Molly was introduced to Adine herself, instead of liking her hostess, Molly was repelled by her. That pallid face, with dabs of brick-red rouge on either cheek, that wide, thin-lipped mouth and long chin, that black hair, dressed in exaggerated fashion, made Adine Elton look like a doll, Molly thought.

The studio, large though it was, seemed full of people. There was the noise of voices raised and assertive, and laughter that came from the table at the far end, where cocktails were being drunk.

There were a few drawings and some colour prints, but the pictures had their faces turned to the walls. Molly marvelled. Surely an artist liked to show off his or her work.

Amongst the crowd she looked in vain for Humphrey Pendare.

"My friend's absolutely the last thing in ignorance of this wicked world, Adine," said Phyl, seizing Molly by the hand and pulling her forward. "So I thought it time for the dear little kitten to have her eyes opened. I brought her along."

"Phyl!" protested Molly indignantly, whilst Adine's black eyes ranged over her thoughtfully. "You do say the most awful things. It is very good of you to let me come," she added, as Adine said nothing, only stared. "Phyl tells me you have wonderful music, so it's awfully kind of you to let me have a chance of hearing it."

It was a conventional speech, achieved in unconventional surroundings, and Adine gave a thin laugh.

"I hope you won't be disappointed," she said. "Sometimes it's a rotten show. Take your friend over to Benny and give her a cocktail, Phyl, and there ought to be rather amusing sandwiches, anchovy and red pepper."

Realising that their hostess had had enough of her, Molly followed Phyl down the long room, embarrassed by the other girl's enquiry as to what she thought of Adine almost before they were out of hearing.

"Oh, she's very uncommon looking, I've never seen anyone like her before!" answered Molly, trying to be both truthful and complimentary, a difficult feat.

"You would notice her anywhere, wouldn't you?"

"Say that to Adine and she'll give you her last half-crown," rejoined Phyl. They were at the white-covered table, where a young man was mixing cocktails, and it seemed to Molly that the pushing and the jostling was like that of Piccadilly Circus. "To be marked out if it's only to be called the last scream, is what she wants. Hallo, Benny, be a lamb and give me two Angel's kisses! We're fading away for the lack of them."

"Plenty of the other sort about," said a young man with a very handsome face. Though he had rather impudent, challenging eyes there was something attractive about him. "Don't you want them, Phyl?"

Flinging back her golden head, Phyl gave him a glance of scornful indulgence.

"Raymond, what an elderly joke!" she exclaimed. "You know you're no good as a humorist. Stick to your violin. We're dying to hear you play. This is my friend, Miss Belford, who is a real old-fashioned music sort of person. Sit and listen to you for hours when all we others have drifted away."

"Jolly nice of her," said the young man called Raymond, and his bold eyes smiled into Molly's. He was thinking that this sweet-faced girl, with her wonderful dark and brilliant colouring, did not look like one of Adine's crowd "Do you really listen, or only just long for me to stop and hear the cackle begin?"

"I love music," answered Molly, coldly. She could not enter into this world of instant familiarity and easy chaff. The shackles of her country upbringing were not cast off.

Raymond noticed that after a sip of her cocktail, she put her glass down.

"Try another sort," he invited.

"I don't like any of them," she said. "I'd rather not try again."

Her gaze wandered from the man called Raymond over the crowd, looking, seeking for the tall form, the fair head of Humphrey Pendare.

She longed to see him, yet she hated the thought of his being one of Adine Elton's motley selection. They were all more or less celebrated—writers, artists, musicians—so Phyl in hurried asides assured her—but to Molly they appeared a second-rate, ill-bred crew.

She was out of touch with them and presently, when Phyl was talking to a knot of under-dressed young women and long-haired young men, and the man called Raymond had disappeared, she found herself alone, the only one in the whole studio who was ignored.

It was a horrid feeling. She was so tall that she felt conspicuous. Not knowing where to go, and Adine's place containing few chairs, she stood near the cocktail table, dignified outwardly, in her heart intensely shy.

Everyone seemed to know everyone else, and though the men stared at her, none liked to approach in the easy fashion that was the rule at Adine's.

There was something repellent at that moment in Molly Belford, in spite of Phyl's conviction that they would go "mad over her."

Suddenly there floated through the studio the sound of a violin, and instantly the gabble of conversation, the high-toned laughter, ceased.

Molly looked round eagerly. Facing her there was a curtained alcove that she had not noticed. The curtains were drawn back, revealing a platform, and on that platform was a piano.

Beside it the young man whom she knew only as Raymond stood his violin tucked under his chin. There was a second's silence, into which stole the notes, fluted, subdued of the piano, then into them there melted in incomparable harmony the melody of the violin.

As Raymond played, Molly slipped from the world where she now was into another, the world she had once known, but with a difference, for now it was tenanted by the man she loved.

She had tried to ignore that fact, but knew that it was the truth she could not deny. She loved Humphrey Pendare, and in a few weeks he would have passed out of her life, she would have done her work, and there would remain to her only the bitter-sweet memory of a love unasked, given in reckless, generous measure.

He was charming and considerate to her, but—she was just a useful piece of furniture to him, no more, no less, while to her he was the world itself, her sun, her glory, her splendour, the one thing that made existence possible.

It was the first time in her life that she had been in love, and in Phyl Denby's language, she was "taking it frightfully badly".

As the last passion-laden notes of the violin died away, Molly opened her eyes, to look straight into a pair of blue, rather cynical ones, set deeply under thick brows, eyes that lit up as they rested on her.

Molly's heart stood still, or so it seemed to her, then thundered on like an express train. She did not know how beautiful she looked at that moment, with her pale cheeks flushed, her face radiant with love's own light.

He was there, the man she worshipped, the man who, in the great humility of her devotion, seemed as far above her as the sun is above the world!

MOLLY stood very still as Humphrey Pendare came over to her.

His handsome, slightly cynical features wore an expression between amusement and surprise, also something that she did not guess was disappointment.

"Fancy my splendid secretary being at one of Adine Elton's shows," Pendare was thinking. "Is she like all other women who crowd here? Was I a fool to think her different, to treat her as though she were?"

But his greeting showed nothing of the contempt he felt for her in his heart, the contempt he extended to all included in what he called "Adine's crowd".

He came to the studio because it amused him to see the follies, the sins, of which the modern, hysterical, self-assertive set could be capable; but to find there Molly Belford, whom he had unconsciously regarded as something apart, something rare and precious in the best meaning of the words, startled him.

"I'd no idea that you were one of Miss Elton's friends," he said easily, as he reached Molly. "I've never seen you here before."

"I was brought," answered Molly.

She felt as awkward as a child at its first party as she looked up into the beloved face, and something in the steel-blue eyes made her give a shudder in scarcely understood ecstasy.

A wave of colour passed over Humphrey Pendare's face. He drew closer.

"There's a supper of sorts in the curtained off corner Adine calls her dining-room," he said. "Shall we have some? Music, especially that tragic sort, always makes me hungry. Has it that effect on you?"

She shook her head. In her heart she was a shy, awkward schoolgirl, dumb with the rapture of love's splendour.

With her nerves tingling from the music that Pendare dismissed so lightly, she followed him across the studio, unconscious that Phyl and Adine were watching her, the former with amusement, the latter with secret fury.

Pendare was her property, or, rather, she intended him to be so, and here was he making himself conspicuous with this out-of-the-way-looking girl Phyl Denby had brought. She resolved to give Phyl a hint that she need not bring her again.

Adine's suppers were of the sandwich and sweet biscuit type, and though she had spoken of an "amusing" variety of the former, they seemed quite ordinary, but her cocktails were superb, and she had the secret of a claret-cup that her guests so enjoyed as to overlook other deficiencies.

Pendare found a seat for Molly in a corner away from the chattering, pushing throng round the supper table, and she found an odd pleasure in being waited on by one whose employee she was.

She watched him, so tall and masterful, his fair head towering above the others, as he secured what he wanted with an air of quiet authority that amused her. She smiled at him as he returned with a glass of the famous cup and a plate of sandwiches.

"That'll keep starvation at bay," he said. "But it won't do any more. I know Adine's ideas in the catering line. She thinks that if she's fed the mind she needn't bother about the body. So I always give instructions to my housekeeper tn leave supper for me in the library. Good idea, isn't it?"

"Very," agreed Molly.

She was angry with herself for being tongue-tied, whilst Pendare was quite at his ease. Indeed, he was expansive and genial, as he had never been in their working hours, as though the atmosphere of the place had thawed him.

Molly was at once gratified and bewildered. She was afraid of betraying the love that she felt shone in her eyes. Her hero, the man she worshipped, stooping from his pedestal to her. Suddenly she gave a little laugh. She remembered that Phyl had told her that that was her nickname in their boarding-house, Lady-on-a-Pedestal.

"Do you know that's the first time I've heard you laugh," Pendare said. "You've been working for me all this time and you've never been—well, amused. I feel awfully ashamed of myself. I must have been a brute of a taskmaster."

"I've loved working for you," said Molly, impulsively, and without thinking, she raised her eyes to his.

With reason had she feared betrayal.

Humphrey Pendare stared into the vivid face, at first incredulously, then with secret exultation. He read the message those wonderful dark eyes unconsciously conveyed to him, for all her grave dignity her aloofness of bearing.

Molly Belford, he believed, was like all the other women Adine Elton collected greedy for love, with no scruples, no restraints to be conquered. If only he had known, he thought, there would not have been all this time wasted; only, strangely enough, he was disappointed that he had made the mistake in regarding Molly as being far above human frailties and sin.

Now he knew that she was not different from her sister-women, a beautiful, warm-blooded, ardent creature, and—she loved him! Her innocent gaze had betrayed the truth.

Pendare's lips twitched, in his eyes there burned a fire Molly did not understand, though vaguely it frightened her.

"Will you have anything more?" he asked. "Even sawdust and straw have a

certain amount of sustenance, and I'm sure Adine's cakes are made of them."

He took her plate from her; as their fingers met his softly caressed hers. Was it by design, was it by accident? At that moment there was the sound of the piano being played, the next moment a voice of piercing sweetness rang out, and with the first notes the lights in the studio were extinguished, with the exception of two tall rose-shaded lamps.

It was so unexpected that Molly gave a little gasp.

"It's only one of Adine's stage tricks," whispered Pendare quickly.

He had taken her plate and glass away, then had come back to her. She felt him bending over her, she felt him take her hand.

"Why shouldn't I hold it?" His lips were close to her ear, she was in a wonderful dream that could not be real. His hand on hers, crushing it fiercely, the magnificent music that rose and fell in waves of song that told of love, of passion, of the fruit of life that is for the plucking of those who dare to snatch it from the tree.

Oh, the strange magic that such a voice can hold! As Molly listened it seemed that all her will, her power of resistance were leaving her. She was no longer in Adine Elton's comfortless studio, she was in the Garden of Love, alone with Humphrey Pendare. Those other people did not exist.

So absorbed in her dreams was she, so real were they to her, that when the song ended and Pendare drew her to her feet, whispering "Come", she obeyed without hesitation.

With the air of one familiar with the geography of the place, for the lights were still turned down, he guided her to a side door that led into a quiet little street. Only when they were outside and the cool October air met them instead of the smoke-laden atmosphere of the studio, did Molly remember she had left her hat and coat behind.

"What does it matter? You can fetch them any time!" exclaimed Pendare, impatiently. "We can get a taxi here, there are always some hanging about."

She made no protest, she was as though walking in her sleep as he hailed a taxi, gave the man the address and helped Molly into it.

"I'll see you home," he said. He spoke in a carefully modulated voice, but it was unsteady. "You don't mind?"

Mind! Falteringly given, her answer was hardly heard by Pendare as he caught her in his arms, as his lips closed on hers in a burning kiss.

With that kiss a half-terrified recollection of her love for him came to her. She tried to resist, but he laughed and held her still more closely.

"Sweet, don't be foolish. You love me, I read it in your wonderful eyes. Can you deny it? If you'll say 'You're quite mistaken, I don't care for you one rap', then I'll let you go. But—can you? I know what an abominably truthful darling you are. Oh, Molly—yes, that's your dear name, I know—I've always regarded you as a queen who despised her world. That you could love I never dared to think. But it's true—you love me?"

In a second's flash Molly saw herself as hopeless, helpless in the mesh that Fate had woven for her.

"Yes, yes, I do love you," she whispered, and again his lips closed on hers.

Those kisses! They took from her all power of resistance, of knowledge of the path to which she was committed. She lay in his arms, conscious only of him; she made no protest when instead of the boarding-house that was all she knew of home, they reached his house in Kensington Square, and suddenly, it seemed to her, without any volition on her part, they were in the library where her working days were passed, and Humphrey Pendare's arms were round her.

Her head sank upon his shoulder, her eyes were hidden from him. She heard his voice, low, love-filled.

"My sweet darling, to think of all the time we've wasted. Beloved—you're mine, and I'm yours. Molly——"

At that she raised her head. Their eyes met. Humphrey gave a little cry of exultation, and to Molly Belford joy came as it comes to many loving, trusting women, clothed in sin and shame for all its glory.

### BECAUSE SHE LOVED

THE great clock in the hall of Humphrey Pendare's house struck two solemn, booming notes, reverberating through the silence as Molly Belford, after some fumbling with the lock, opened the front door and closed it softly behind her.

For a moment she paused, looking up and down the road, with a haunted expression, before she turned away.

The glamour, the wonder of the love that had swept over her as some mighty torrent, had departed. She was sane once more, and was overwhelmed by shame and remorse. She felt besmirched.

As she walked in the darkness and silence of the yet unborn dawn through the deserted streets, she thought over the events of the past night. That meeting with Humphrey Pendare, and the sudden realisation that he loved her, not as she loved him, but still—he loved her.

Her helplessness, her weakness before such love, and then when the mad exultation had died, her anguish, her shame had been such that her one idea had been to escape from her lover, and he had been bitterly hurt and indignant at her attitude.

"You don't love me, or you couldn't leave me," he had cried, and she knew that her bitter humiliation was incomprehensible to him.

It was her first experience of the selfishness that all passion holds, and it had startled her. She had tried to make him realise what she felt, but without success. When she spoke of the scandal that would follow her presence in his house at that hour, he laughed.

"Who cares for scandal?" he had demanded. "You're free, I'm free. Molly, I've got you now, I can't let you go."

Then she had felt panic, and she had fled from him, from the house, in spite of his anger, his protests.

She was scarcely sane as she hurried in the dark silence of that cold grim hour to the boarding-house, clutching with unnecessary strength the little black bag containing her latch-key and her purse.

She had remembered to snatch it up and take it with her from Humphrey's house. If the door chain was not put up, and very often it was forgotten, she would be able to let herself in and no one need know how late, or rather how early, she had returned.

Molly lifted her white, piteous face to the dark sky. Deceit! She would have to tell lies, she who had looked upon shuffling with truth as the most despicable thing on earth. Her pride was in the dust, there let it lie.

When she reached the boarding-house fortune was on her side. The door chain had not been put up.

She inserted her key in the lock, turning it with caution. The next instant she was in the narrow, linoleum-covered passage, with the smell of cooking hanging in the air. There was no light, but she knew the geography of the place too well to stumble, and silently crept up the stairs.

Once in her room she turned on the light. It seemed to her that she had been so long walking in darkness that she wanted light above everything. Involuntarily she went to the mirror, to gaze at herself as though expecting to see the reflection of a stranger.

Her eyes filled with blinding tears, her hands flew up to cover her face. She turned and fell upon her knees beside the bed.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she whispered brokenly. "I—I love you so—I love you so!"

TO the surprise of Miss Catley, who ran the boarding-house, Molly Belford did not appear at breakfast, that was served at half-past eight with a punctuality so rigid that being five minutes late meant no bacon and doubtful toast.

Phyl Denby, galloping through her own meal, noticed Molly's absence, and was worried.

She had come home so late from Adine Elton's party that she had not liked to disturb Molly, who had left much earlier; she must have been so upset, Phyl imagined, by Adine's "crowd" that she had bolted, leaving her coat and hat behind her.

Molly was a darling, reflected Phyl, but she was rather antiquated and prim. Nowadays one isn't shocked at anything.

"Do you know, Miss Denby"—Miss Catley's high-pitched, thin voice made Phyl start—"do you know whether Miss Belford is ill? It is so unlike her to be late for breakfast."

"I'll run up and see," answered Phyl, readily. "She was all right last night. Perhaps she overslept."

"If she is not equal to coming down, perhaps she would like a tray in her bedroom," suggested Miss Catley, and such unwonted benevolence made Phyl raise astonished eyebrows.

In answer to Phyl's tap at the door, a voice bade her come in. Molly was in bed, her dark eyes burning with strange intensity in her dead-white face, her air one of such suffering that Phyl paused on the threshold in consternation.

"Oh, I say, what's wrong? You look ghastly!" he exclaimed. "Is it 'flu, my poor lamb? What a beastly nuisance. You'll have to have a doctor."

"Oh, no, it's—it's just that I feel seedy, and so tired that I thought I'd rest," stammered Molly; she moved restlessly under her friend's sympathetic gaze. "I shouldn't dream of having a doctor."

Phyl seated herself on the bed and considered Molly gravely.

"You look appallingly ill," she answered. "And it's horrible here, at the top of this house with no one to look after you. Shall I see if I can chuck the office this afternoon and come back to nurse you? You'll not go to Mr. Pendare's to-day, of course?"

Involuntarily Molly closed her eyes and shivered.

"If you'll ring him up, tell him that it's impossible for me to come, I'll be awfully grateful," she said. "Will you do that for me?"

"Rather; and I'll draw such a picture that he'll be round here with grapes and jellies and soups and all the things that kind masters in books give to their people, and never in real life," answered Phyl, readily. "But look here, old thing, shan't I bolt home this afternoon? Honest, I don't like leaving you, you do look queer."

But Molly, longing only to be left alone with the bitter-sweet memories that were all now left to her, refused this offer. Also

she entreated Phyl not to make too much of her illness to Pendare.

"The last thing I want," she added, flushing scarlet, "is for him to come here, or—or make any enquiry after me. You know how inquisitve Miss Catley is."

"Righto! I'll be discretion itself, as the old man says at the office when he's going to do something idiotic," replied Phyl cheerfully. "You're not cross with me because I didn't look after you last night at Adine's? I mean you didn't slip off early because you thought I was neglecting you? Honour bright, after Raymond stopped playing I looked for you. I couldn't see you, so I came to the conclusion you'd gone, but when I found you'd left your hat and coat behind, I wondered what had happened. Did one of Adine's poodles, as she calls those idiots who are hanging round her, did one of them make love to you and scare you into bolting?"

"Of course not," said Molly, smiling at a suggestion so far from the truth. "I left, that was all. It wasn't your fault in any way, Phyl. I'd had enough."

She turned her face away to hide the anguish that she felt her eyes betrayed. Phyl pursed her lips into a whistle.

"Well, as soon as I'd got you there I saw it wasn't the right place for you," she said. "And I felt rather a beast to have brought you. Only I began to amuse myself and then I forgot you. By the way, Adine said Pendare was there. Did you see him?"

A tiny pause, scarcely noticeable, during which Molly clenched her hands as though fighting against a physical enemy.

"Yes," she said. "I saw him."

"Might have taken the trouble to give you a bright evening," suggested Phyl, slipping from the bed to her feet. "But then, ducky, you know you had rather a touch-me-not look about you. You'd have enjoyed yourself ever so much more if you'd unbent a little; you'll know better next time. Bless you, I'm off now, and I'll do the 'phoning for you."

She dropped a light kiss on Molly's forehead, though she was by no means of the caressing type, and went from the room whistling.

A sob broke from Molly as soon as she was alone. Next time! Oh, there never would be another visit to Adine Elton's studio. She must escape. She would have to leave Phyl, though the thought of breaking that friendship hurt her. She was fond of Phyl, but she must hide for ever from Humphrey Pendare. Too well she knew the weakness such over-mastering love as hers bred.

Her only chance to set her feet on the straight and difficult path of honour and clean living was never, never to see Humphrey Pendare again.

ALL that day Molly remained in her room, and not until she met Phyl in the evening did she hear how Pendare had received the message telephoned to him.

She listened in silence whilst Phyl gave a highly-coloured account of his concern on hearing of Molly's illness, and his anxiety that she should not return to work before she was fit.

"I told him not to worry, I'd see to it," added Phyl. "But he's going to look you up to-morrow. There's no reason why he shouldn't. You can have that cellar on the ground floor that old Catley calls the back drawing-room, to see him in. He seems frightfully upset about you. Do you know what I think, my child? That your man's nothing like as stand-offish as you imgine. He's got a "pash" for you unless I'm wrong, which has never happened before."

"What rubbish!" cried Molly, almost without thinking. "Really you're the most imaginative person I've ever come across! A man is decently sorry if he hears one's ill, and you concoct a whole romance out of it."

She was doing it well, very well, she thought to herself bitterly. How easy it seemed after all, to act a lie.

"Oh, well, you know your own business best!" said Phyl, carelessly. "Also your own young man. Anyway, he seemed very upset at the thought of your not being able to turn up for a day or so. He's a terror for work, I suppose, can't bear to be put out in his stride. That accounts for his being so concerned. You'll see him to-morrow."

Molly, who was resolved to see no such thing, was silent. Now that she had a secret to guard from Phyl's sharp eyes and keen intuition, she was afraid that some word might betray her to her friend.

"You're looking better," added Phyl, gazing at her critically. "I feel you're shirking your work under false pretences. You'd better get up and let me take you out and give you a decent meal. The Bouquet's too far off, but there are one or two decent eating-places near. Will you come?"

Molly hesitated, but she was afraid that Phyl might suspect there was something at the back of this illness, so that she agreed to her suggestion and promised to dress with all possible speed, so as not to keep Phyl waiting.

After all, as she reflected, she could not hide for the rest of her life. She had her living to earn, she must find another post, face the world again.

In spite of Phyl's determined attempts at cheerfulness, the outing was not a sucecss. Molly could hardly force herself to swallow food, and she found it increasingly difficult to attend to Phyl's chatter.

At last Phyl stopped dead in the middle of a sentence and gave her a resentful look.

"You're not listening to a word I'm saying," she said, indignantly. "And yet I'm at my brightest and best, full of sparkle. What's the matter, Molly? Do you know, I'm awfully afraid you aren't really well, and I oughtn't to have hauled you out; out; but I did it for the best, and like lots of things, it's turned out woefully for the worst."

"You're a darling, you've been most awfully good to me," said Molly, quickly. "But I'm rather a rag. I think I'd better go straight home, Phyl. You've been an angel, but I'm sure you've had more than enough of me."

At first Phyl protested, but finally yielded, and allowed Molly to return home, whilst she—Phyl—dropped in, as she phrased it, on some friends who had a dance on.

Molly watched Phyl's slight figure until it disappeared from view. How happy, how light-hearted Phyl was. She had made no false step that could never be recalled.

As Molly entered the boarding-house, Miss Catley met her.

"Miss Belford, there's a visitor for you," she said. "I asked him to wait in the back drawing-room. He would not give his name, as he said it was not necessary."

Nor was it, thought Molly, staring in scared fashion into Miss Catley's lined face. She must face him, and then—— In her heart was born in one second a wild exultant hope. How wrong she had been, how she had misjudged him! How little faith had she!

Whilst Miss Catley gazed in open-mouthed amazement at the radiance that shone in her eyes, Molly hurried down the passage to what Phyl called the "cellar", and Miss Catley the back drawing-room.

Humphrey Pendare, tall, fair, with that air of prosperity and distinction that some men achieve whatever their circumstances, looked extraordinarily out of place in the faded room.

She closed the door and stood looking at him. He was beside her in an instant, he had taken her hands, but something in the dark splendour of her eyes kept him from kissing her.

"I was furious with you for running away, Molly," he said reproachfully. Gently he drew her towards the unstable comfort of Miss Catley's sofa. Still holding her hands he forced her to sit down, seating himself beside her. "But I've got you again, and I won't let you go. Then, this morning, that friend of yours rang up and told me you were ill. Darling——"

He paused, his blue eyes apparently so frank, so steady, were clouded with suspicion, and Molly's heart was cold in her breast, for at the first words that hope of her had died as suddenly as it had been born.

She knew that Humphrey Pendare had not come to ask her to be his wife, nothing was further from his mind. She withdrew her hands from his.

"There was nothing for me to do but to leave," she said. "I had to think of my reputation, though it was a little late perhaps." She gave a bleak little smile.

It was not the answer Pendare had expected, and it angered him. He imagined she was laying a trap to cajole him into marriage, and the clear-cut lines of his handsome features grew as steel in their hardness.

"If you'd cared for me, you wouldn't have bothered about your reputation," he said. "Molly, I thought you loved me."

She was very pale, but at those words she flushed deep red and her eyes flamed.

"I think," she said, in vibrating tones, "I showed you that you mean everything to me."

He was silent, recalling the wonderful ardour of those moments when he had held her in his arms. He was ashamed of his words, ashamed of the mean spirit of suspicion that had prompted them. But he said nothing and Molly felt the cold blast of bitter disappointment sweep over her.

Suddenly she spoke without thought.

"I meant never to see you again," she said. "Phyl told me you said you were coming to-morrow. I should have been away before then."

"I couldn't wait," Humphrey said, pleadingly. "Molly, you are cruel! To talk of never seeing me again! Why?"

She bent her head so that he only saw the outline of one cheek, the dark lashes lying upon it.

"Because you make me forget everything but you," she answered. "You needn't force me to tell you."

She did not see the faintly contemptuous smile he gave at those words, but he touched her hand that was nearest to him softly, he spoke with wistfulness in his voice.

"Scruples, Molly—are you suffering from them? Dearest, why should you? I adore you, I've come to ask you to come to Buenos Aires with me next week, when I sail. Yes" —for she had given a terrified start—"it's sooner than I thought, but I heard this morning that I mustn't delay. Dear heart, will you let me go alone? Molly, my sweet, will you?" he pleaded.

"Oh, don't, please don't!" she murmured, and there was such agony in those words that even Pendare was startled.

"What have I done, what have I said?" he asked. "I love you and you don't love me. That's plain."

She made a little gesture with the hand he had tentatively caressed, then she passed it across her eyes. She knew the truth now. He did not love her sufficiently to ask her to be his wife.

To him she was a passing attraction and he was her very life.

She sat very still whilst Pendare talked, trying to persuade her that such love as theirs knew no law.

At length she rose to her feet, and looked down into the face that was her heaven.

"I love you, there'll never be another man

in my life," she said. "But I hope I shall never see you again."

"Molly, I can't believe it," he protested. He, too, rose and faced her. "You love me, and yet you're sending me away. For if I leave you now, it will be for ever. let there be no mistake about that. If it's marriage you want, I tell you quite frankly that I don't ntend to marry. I'm not rich enough to keep a wife; I've not the money to start all the responsibilities that marriage brings. You're free. I'm free. What can keep us apart?"

Impatiently he waited for her answer, but she raised her head and met his angry, eager gaze. She tried to tell him that because she had fallen into the mire there was no reason why she should wallow therein. Pendare brushed aside contemptuously all her halting arguments, her piteous pleadings.

"If you love me as I love you, you'll come with me," he said. "I can't get beyond that."

It was hopeless to make him realise her point of view, to make him see that honour and clean living were more than empty words to her.

She drew back, tragedy in her eyes.

"I can't make you understand," she said. "But—I must never see you again."

Against the rock of her determination his words beat like the waves of the sea, and at last he gave up, baffled, defeated.

For a moment there was hate in the fierce blue eyes he fixed upon her.

"You don't know what love is," he said. "You're thinking only of yourself. You're right in one thing, you'll never see me again. If I go now, it's final. I swear I'll never ask you again to—to——"

He stopped short, stung, exasperated by her little smile, composed of irony and sorrow.

"To give up everything for you, even my self-respect," she said. "For that is what it comes to, isn't it?"

Disconcerted by this plain speaking, Pendare made no answer. He turned away, and then she realised that this was, indeed, the end, that he was going out of her life for ever.

She fought with the wild longing to call him back, to tell him he was right, that nothing mattered save love, but she conquered it.

She turned away, she heard Humphrey open the door, she heard his footsteps in the passage outside, and the thin voice of Miss Catley as the latter emerged from the dining-room. She heard Humphrey's reply, and then the opening and closing of the front door.

He was gone! Henceforth for Molly Belford there was nothing in life but an unceasing struggle to forget the ecstasy and enchantment that she had learned was love!

She explained to Phyl that Mr. Pendare was going at once to Buenos Aires, so she was out of a job, and Phyl's sympathy and assertions that Mr. Pendare was behaving shabbily were rather hard to bear.

"He ought to have given you longer notice," Phyl declared. "He must have known."

"The whole affair was quite unexpected," Molly said hurriedly. "And I always knew the position was temporary. I shall find something else; but I wish it might be out of London."

"Adine Elton's bought a house in the country, goodness knows why, except that she's come into money, and wants the place looked after. She asked me if I knew of anyone who would run it for her," said Phyl doubtfully. "You wouldn't like the job?"

"I don't know—what should I have to do?" asked Molly. "Does she want a housekeeper? Where is the house?"

"Well, it's near a place called Exstead, and that's how I thought of you," answered Phyl candidly. "Your people live down there, don't they?"

Molly nodded, flushing with embarrassment.

"I couldn't go there," she said, "I should be sure to meet my uncle and his wife. No, I couldn't go near it, Phyl, though it's very good of you to have thoughtof it. I don't think I should care to be employed by Adine Elton."

"Daresay you're right," agreed Phyl. "She's some nasty corners to her. I'll have to think of something else for you."

So Phyl thought industriously, and Molly haunted registry offices and agencies. She had heard nothing of Pendare beyond a formal note enclosing the amount due to her for her salary.

She tried to forget him, she never spoke of him to Phyl, who was beginning to find it was not so easy to discover the work for which her friend was fitted, when about a month after that fatal party at Adine Elton's Molly came to her with a face in which distress struggled with relief.

"You needn't worry any more about me, Phyl," she said. "I've just heard from my uncle's solicitors. They traced me out somehow, and oh, it's too dreadful, my poor uncle and his wife were both killed in a flying accident a fortnight ago. And I never heard——"

She stopped short, her eyes wet, but Phyl, quick-witted, excitable Phyl, seized her by the arm.

"Oh, Molly, does—does it mean that you come into everything, that Riversdale is yours?" she cried. "Were you an heiress all the time in disguise?"

"No; but my uncle made no will, and I'm his next-of-kin, and so everything comes to me," said Molly, smiling in spite of herself at Phyl's dramatic fashion of expressing herself. "And that's why I said you needn't bother about me any more. I shall be frightfully rich, Phyl. I can hardly grasp it yet—I'll never have to worry over money again."

### CHANGED FORTUNES.

TO Molly Belford life assumed a startingly novel aspect.

She found herself for the first time a person of importance, deferred to, consulted, treated with consideration and respect.

A great grey stone house of no particular period, set amongst gardens of wonderful beauty, a broad shallow river running through the grounds, a park that sheltered deer—such was Molly's domain.

Riversdale was perfect in her eyes, the austere rooms, where the furniture had scarcely been altered since the eighteenth century, welcomed her back.

From one to another she wandered, and then she would pause. What was known as the yellow drawing-room, a long, many-windowed, yet dim apartment that opened into a glazed-in loggia, had a view of a formal, yew-enclosed garden, beyond it a glimpse of the brown-clear waters of the river, lapping lazily at the green banks past which it slipped.

It had been Molly's favourite spot, and now it thrilled her to realise that all she looked upon was her own.

"It's absolutely the last thing in Stately Homes of England, and that lawn down beyond the yew trees is quite the ideal place for faithful tenantry welcoming ye rightful lady of the manor and all that sort of thing," observed Phyl Denby, who had been at Riversdale for the past fortnight. "But as a comfortable place to live in, I don't exactly revel in it, Molly. In summer I don't doubt it's gorgeous, but November, no, thank you. Me for the 'buses and the theatres and the crowds of people that don't let you walk at more than a mile an hour. Why, here I feel as though there wasn't a man in the world except your butler. It's disconcerting. I haven't powdered my nose once since I was down here."

Molly brought her dreaming gaze from the garden to rest on Phyl's vivid face.

"Does it matter whether you powder it or not?" she asked.

"Considerably, to me," retorted Phyl. "Shows I'm getting careless about my appearance, having no men to charm. You're a darling, Molly, and it's splendid of you to want me to have something out of your money, and you've given me a real luxurious time. But I'm not built for it. All these servants, and the feeling that I can hardly blow my nose without their offering me a clean handkerchief each time, and the people who come to call, stiffy dowagers and young women who don't talk of anything but cars and gardens and tennis, it's depressing. You're splendid at it, but you were born to it."

Phyl heaved a sigh and passed a hand over her golden curls. She was elaborately dressed in country kit.

"Do you want to go back to London?" Molly asked, reproachfully. "Tired of living with me already, Phyl?"

"I was thankful to chuck office work and live like a lady at large at your expense, pretending I'm your companion," replied Phyl. "But the country's made for week ends, if you ask me. If you stay on longer you find out its faults, and when you do that your enjoyment's gone. And you're not happy, Molly. In spite of all your money and everyone being so jolly glad to have you back again, you're not happy."

It was true; but Molly had imagined that she had hidden the fact, even from Phyl. How could she be happy, when the memory of Humphrey Pendare grew stronger, more haunting as time passed.

Sometimes she would close her eyes and conjure up a vision of him, so fair and tall and distinguished, with the smile, half-conquering, half-appealing, in his blue eyes, and the feeling that he was there in reality would be so strong that when she opened her eyes, to find herself alone, her heart was sick with disappointment.

Sometimes she tried to assure herself that he was unworthy of her remembrance, that he had proved himself a cad and a scoundrel, by rights she ought to hate him, but she was of the rare and unfortunate type that loves once and once only.

She had told Humphrey there would never be another man in her life, and it was true.

"What you want," said Phyl, suddenly, "is cheerful society, gay, even giddy, and that this old mossy retreat doesn't give. But I had the most splendid idea in all the world, or rather Adine had. By the way, you don't like her, do you?"

Reluctantly Molly confessed that she was not particularly devoted to Miss Elton. And Adine, at Crosscuts Cottage, as her place was called, always trying to be friends with the lady of Riversdale, always assuming an intimacy that had never existed, and shocking the dignified "county" by her strange ways of life, dress and speech, was a trial.

It seemed to Molly very hard that when she returned to her beloved home Adine should be there to torture her as an unconscious and perpetual reminder of what she wanted to forget.

"Well, Adine's got sense," declared Phyl. "And she tells me that you came into a heavenly villa in the South as well as this place. Why don't you go there and get out of all the fogs and cold and snow of this country? I'm pining to see the Riviera, I've never been there."

Molly gave her a startled look.

"I never thought of leaving Riversdale," she said. "My uncle bought that villa—it's somewhere near Mentone, I believe—to please his wife. Do you really want to go there?"

"Of course I do, and John Laverton's to be in the neighbourhood, and he's frightfully keen on you," said Phyl. "The poor man has a sick mother or grandmother, anyway, something ill that he has to stay with there, and he was saying how he hated leaving England, so I dropped a hint that you might be there, and you should have seen his face. That's all!"

"But, Phyl, I'd no idea of going to the villa, you'd no right to say such a thing," began Molly, indignantly.

But Miss Denby laughed.

"If we only did what we had a right to, wouldn't life be dull?" she said, cheerfully. "Come, ducky, be a lamb. Say you'll just wave your magic wand, otherwise tell your people to get busy fixing up the villa, and let's start. It'll be gorgeous."

In the end, Molly yielded. It really did not matter to her, she felt, where she was. She just could not rouse herself to feel a zest in life, to be eager over anything, whereas Phyl, released from the daily drudgery that she hated, was like a butterfly for joyous delight in all the good things that Molly's money could give her.

Phyl was in ecstacies, especially when Molly decided that a few days must be spent in Paris to buy clothes.

"That puts the top to it all," she declared. "And now I'm off to Crosscuts to see Adine. She's rather upset because you haven't been near her for ten days. Shall I bring her back with me? She raves over Riversdale, says it's the most artistic house she ever knew."

"If she wants to she can come," answered Molly, conscious that this was not an enthusiastic invitation.

That impassive doll face, with those dull yet piercing black eyes, always brought back memories of what had happened so recently, yet to Molly it seemed there had never been a time when she had not loved and been loved by Humphrey Pendare.

As soon as Phyl had gone to Crosscuts, Molly decided she would go for a walk across the park into the village. It was a late autumn day, and, the park was a golden and scarlet, russet and deep orange glory.

As she went down the path, she uttered an impatient sigh. Her hopes of a solitary walk were killed, for coming towards her was John Laverton, the young man supposed by Phyl to be in love with her—Molly.

He was a friendly youth, and Molly liked him, but at this moment he was in the way.

"Hallo, Miss Belford, what luck to meet you!" he said. His freckled face blushed engagingly as he grasped Molly's hand. "I was on my way up to the house. May I come with you?"

Molly smiled and told him she would be delighted, so he fell into step beside her, and into silence at the same time.

It was quite enough for him to be with Molly, no need to talk, besides, he knew quite well that he did not excel at conversation. He wasn't one of those clever chaps who can gas about anything, as he said; but he was clever enough to know what he wanted, and that was the love of this wonderful girl walking beside him.

It was not a very long walk from Riversdale park to the village of Riversleigh, and Laverton, wanting to prolong it, suggested that going by Crosscuts Cottage one got a magnificent view.

"And that jolly Miss Elton, who's such a good artist, is a friend of yours, isn't she?" he went on, as Molly hesitated. "She and I are great pals. You see, we're both newcomers, and people about here seem rather to look down upon you if you've not been here since the Flood. So she and I have chummed up."

"Oh!" said Molly, feeling that more unsuitable companions could not be found than open-hearted, impulsive John Laverton and exotic, sensitive, strange Adine Elton. "She is very clever. People rave over her pictures."

"I can never make out what she's driving at," answered Laverton, cheerfully. "But she has a jolly little house."

Molly made no reply, and Laverton fell into a happy silence that lasted until they neared Miss Elton's cottage.

It stood almost on the edge of Riversdale Park, it was squat, grey walled, with heavily-sashed windows, and the garden in front still showed late chrysanthemums and asters.

A gate led out of the garden into the park, and a man was leaning over it, looking at the flowers. Molly stopped suddenly. She put out her hand and clutched blindly at Laverton's arm.

For an instant he thought she was going to faint.

"Good heavens, Miss Belford, are you ill?" he asked, in alarm.

He tried to support her with his other arm, but she shrank away. She was very pale and her great dark eyes looked as though she had seen a ghost, so Laverton thought.

He was right. A ghost of love, of hope, of dreams, a ghost of what might have been, was what Molly Belford saw.

For that man lounging against the gate of Adine Elton's garden was the man she loved with the hopeless passion of her unchanging heart, the man who had ruined her life—Humphrey Pendare!

HUMPHREY had seen her; but, as Molly realised with bitter self-contempt, he had not lost his self-control, he did not look as though the earth had opened at his feet, as though the world in that one moment had changed for him.

He pushed back the gate and came towards Molly, who was still clinging to Laverton's arm, but as Pendare approached her she drew away.

"How do you do, Miss Belford?" Pendare said; he did not attempt to shake hands. "I'd no idea I should find you here when I came to stay at Adine's place. She's been telling me about you, really a romantic history. I congratulate you on having that jolly house. I noticed it when Adine was driving me from the station."

It would have been impossible, and Molly knew it, for Humphrey Pendare to have greeted her in any other manner with John Laverton there, yet a feeling of bitter resentment rose in her against him.

After the stormy, nerve-wracking interview in which each had vowed he or she would never see the other again, he could meet her as though there had never been anything but the most ordinary friendship between them.

Had he forgotten, could he have forgotten that brief wild dream of love?

"Adine was saying she must bring me over, if you'd let her." Pendare was talking at random. "I hear you have Phyl Denby with you. She's an old acquaintance of mine. I used to meet her at Adine's."

Again he paused, and looked significantly into Molly's frozen face. He was trying to convey to her the message that, however much she hated him, they must appear to their world to be ordinary acquaintances.

Suddenly she realised that he was right, that what she looked upon as insulting and insolent, was only commonsense. She must play her part in keeping her fatal secret.

So with a spontaneity and graciousness that made Pendare think her a superb actress, she replied that she would be delighted to see him, that she had not heard of his arrival at Crosscuts.

"Mr. Laverton did not tell me," she added, turning a reproachful gaze on her companion. A little sulkily, for he felt Pendare was claiming too much of Molly's attention, Laverton replied that he had never thought of telling her.

"Didn't know you were interested," he added. "I'd no idea you knew Pendare."

"Are you coming in to see Adine?" asked Pendare, ignoring Laverton's pettishness. "She'll be awfully pleased, I know."

But Molly declined.

"I'm on my way to the village," she said. "But will you tell her from me I shall be delighted if you both will dine with me to-night, quite informally, you know? Phyl and I are alone at Riversdale, but we're going to the Riviera next week."

"But how perfectly splendid; I've to go out to look after my aunt, who can't travel alone!" cried Laverton, delightedly. "If you're there it'll make all the difference, Miss Belford."

There was a half-questioning, half-contemptuous expression in Pendare's eyes as he fixed them on Molly that roused a fierce anger in her.

"What," it seemed to say to her, "are you making a fool of this boy, letting him fall in love with you, though if he knew the truth he'd never think of you?"

It was unjust of her, for no such thought was in Pendare's mind, but Molly was not in a mood to judge calmly.

Laverton followed, too full of his delight at the prospect of meeting her on the Riviera to notice her preoccupation.

He thought indeed that she was kind because she did not check him when he talked on happily of their meeting in the South, of the excursions they could have together.

Hope, that had wilted under her indifference, blossomed in the young man's heart.

After all, Phyl Denby was right when she assured him it was useless to be afraid of a woman's "No!" "Keep on," Phyl advised, "until she says 'Yes' for a change."

"If you don't mind an informal invitation, will you come to dinner to-night?" Molly asked, when her unnecessary errand in the village having been disposed of, she turned home. "That's very nice of you"—as Laverton entangled himself in enthusiastic protests of delight—"I won't take you out of your way any more. Good-bye."

So filled with Pendare was her mind that she never noticed poor John Laverton's disappointment at being thus dismissed.

Phyl met her in the great hall, having seen both Adine and Humphrey Pendare and having heard from the latter of the invitation to dine that evening at Riversdale.

Phyllis, who welcomed any change, told Molly she thought it an excellent idea, and that Adine was such a brick she said she didn't in the least mind Molly having sent her the message through Humphrey Pendare instead of to her direct.

"For though Adine's unconventional in heaps of ways she's awfully funny about some things," said Phyl, regardless of Molly's surprise. "But she's in love with Humphrey Pendare; of course she's had no end of affairs, but this is serious. She'll marry him."

"I don't think Mr. Pendare is a marrying man," Molly said. "And certainly I don't think Miss Elton is his type."

"She's made up her mind, and when

Adine does that, she's frightfully deadly," answered Phyl, carelessly. "Look here, shall I wear that frock you gave me? It's not too grand?"

"You look 'a peach' in it, as you would say," declared Molly. "And Mr. Laverton will be fascinated."

"Oh, he!" retorted Phyl, contemptuously. "He's your property. I never poach."

With the not unnatural wish to look her best, Molly wore black.

The pearls that she had inherited went well with the black georgette. She was well satisfied with her appearance as she waited for her guests in the softly-shaded light of the yellow drawing-room.

A strange mood had taken possession of her. She loved Humphrey Pendare as hopelessly as any woman could love a man, but she was conscious of an almost savage longing to make him suffer as he had made her suffer.

She had given him all in the reckless generosity of a passion that had known no prudence or fear, and he had treated her as though the gift of her love was a thing to be held cheaply.

She drew her brows together in a sombre frown as, standing before the log fire, one hand resting on the mantelpiece, she looked down into the flames.

She did not know how withdrawn from the world she seemed until Phyl, lounging in a low chair opposite, broke into a laugh.

"My dear, you do look the 'Lady-on-the-Pedestal' with a vengeance," she said. "What are you thinking of to make you so fierce?"

Before Molly could answer, the butler announced Miss Elton and Mr. Pendare. Adine, more angular and doll-like than ever, claimed her attention, and Molly, who could not but be conscious of her own beauty and charm, felt a certain magnetism in Adine that would make her a formidable rival.

At dinner Pendare was on Molly's right hand, and watched her with a close, fierce scrutiny.

She did not know that instead of staying in Buenos Aires he had returned almost at once because her image had so haunted and tortured him. She did not know that he had gone straight to Miss Catley's boarding-house, only to be told of her good fortune, and that he had cursed himself for having lost his chance.

Never would Molly now believe that he came back to England with the sole idea of asking her to become his wife. Her money was the barrier between them.

And as he thought thus, his mind a battle-ground of warring thoughts, Molly turned to him with that sudden smile of piercing sweetness that he remembered so well.

She had not smiled often, but always that smile of hers, when it came, was like sunshine on a dark day.

"I quite forgot to ask you," she said, "how it was you were over here and not in South America. I thought you were going to stay there quite a long time."

"So I was." Pendare, to his own dismay, heard his voice shake, his heart was beating at a tremendous speed, because he was thrilled by the mere sound of her voice. "But—er—circumstances made me come back. I'm at a loose end just now. I've sold my house in Kensington. You remember it?"

He put the question daringly, and was rewarded by her growing pale, by the distress that shadowed her dark eyes.

"I remember it," she said, after a tiny pause. "I worked in that library for nearly a year, you know."

She drew a dish of salted almonds towards her, and as her white teeth met on one she thought of her weekly dinner at the Bouquet of Herbs with Phyl.

How far off seemed those days of the shabby, smoky little restaurant. This cedar-panelled dining-room, with the Persian rugs upon its polished floor, this table set out with shining glass and silver, with the crimson roses in the centre in the Sevres bowl, this was her real setting. Here she was a person of importance, to be respected.

In London, working for Humphrey Pendare, she had been, in his eyes, only a defenceless woman, fair game for him.

"You'll come back to Town, I suppose, Molly," broke in Adine Elton. It was useless for Molly scrupulously to use the latter's surname; like all her set Adine ignored it. "Though I love Crosscuts for the week-end, there's nothing like London."

"I hope I shall never see it again!" said Molly quickly, betrayed into a vehemence that she knew was foolish. "I hate it!"

She spoke with such obvious sincerity that all were startled.

Adine's gaze, wandering from her hostess to Pendare, caught an expression on the latter's face that filled her with vague alarm.

Why did Humphrey look as though—well, as though he couldn't take his eyes off Molly, and yet at the same time as though he were afraid of her? Was there some understanding between them? Men so often made love to their secretaries, only as Phyl had told her Molly was so aloof.

Perhaps, now that she was so rich, Pendare seriously thought of marrying her.

Over Adine's expressionless face there swept a sudden flush. This woman, who held everything, should not steal him from her.

In that moment was born in Adine Elton the hatred for Molly Belford that was to have dire results.

## SCANDAL'S STING.

"I'M glad they're gone," said Phyl, yawning, two hours later, as she and Molly stood in the drawing-room. "It wasn't exactly thrilling, was it? Adine's sulky, why, goodness knows, and Humphrey's dull, eh? Didn't seem to have a word to say to anyone, and Laverton doesn't know there's anyone in the whole wide world but you. Quite right, I don't doubt, but a wee bit dull for me. Well, I'll drift off to bed."

She gave Molly a light kiss and went whistling from the room. Molly sighed with relief. It was good to be alone with the troubled whirl of thoughts that haunted her.

She crossed the room, drew back the heavy curtains of gold brocade that concealed the entrance into the loggia, and stepped from the warm, scented room into the scarcely less warm and fragrant night.

There was a moon, red-orange in hue, above the dark heights of the wooded banks of the river, and in the stillness the faint murmur of the gently flowing waters was audible.

Molly walked through the loggia with head raised, drinking in all the beauty and the peace that surrounded her.

It had been a dull evening, as Phyl had declared; but this moment of blessed loveliness and silence compensated for all.

The silence was broken by a footstep on the flagged path. It drew nearer. Molly turned startled eyes in the direction from which it came. Burglars, tramps, surely neither would visit Riversdale? Her question was answered by the apparition of a tall figure, of a gleaming shirt-front.

She clasped her hands as the golden orange light of the November moon showed her who it was.

"Humphrey!" She spoke scarce above a whisper, and the intruder gave a deep sigh.

"Thank goodness!" she heard him say. "Molly, I had to come back. Are you angry?"

She was trembling so that she had to lean against one of the pillars of the loggia, and she looked into the speaker's face that was wistful and pleading. Humphrey Pendare was in a new aspect, she told herself.

"I gave Adine the slip; saw her to the door of her cottage and then told her I was going for a stroll before turning in," he said. "I came back here on the chance I might see you, might get into the house, saying I'd left my gloves—oh, any old excuse would have done! I was mad to see you again, Molly."

Each time he uttered her name he made of it a caress. She closed those firm lips of hers till they made a sullen curve in the pallor of her face. She must remember the past, she told herself, she must not be weak through the love that was as a fire in her heart.

"You're angry with me," Humphrey said huskily. "And you've every right to be. Only, if you——"

He stopped short, realising with dismay how easy it would be to say the wrong thing, to spoil the faint chance that remained for him with her. If only she would speak, anything rather than this white, still scorn that her face showed.

He made an impetuous movement towards her, and she shrank closer to the pillar as though it were a protection. In the moonlight he could see the beauty of her that made him sick with wild longing.

Oh, the fool he had been to have held it once and then have lost it because he had been afraid of losing his freedom!

"You've every right to hate me," he said, in a low voice. "But, Molly, for heaven's sake have mercy——"

She cut him short with a derisive laugh.

"What a good word," she said. "What mercy did you have on me? None! I loved you, and you made me something of which I daren't think. I trusted you, and you showed me what a fool I was. Now that I'm someone, so to speak, not just a girl earning her living, you think that I should do quite well as a wife. You think that because I love you, you can pretend that you cared for me all the time. Now, it would be an excellent speculation to marry me, and you think I'd snatch at the chance of being made an honest woman." She gave a high pitched little laugh. "You made me see what sort of a man it was I'd worshipped, and I can't forgive you for that."

She raised one hand and brushed it across her eyes, and the sound of stifled sobbing came to Humphrey Pendare.

He stood silent, his mind working at frantic speed. Presently that painful sobbing ceased. Molly released her hold upon the pillar and looked up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been saying horrible things, that even if they were true I'd no right to say. And you haven't asked me to marry you, so I was rather previous in saying I'd refuse. I'm sorry there isn't much else for me to say."

She turned towards the window, through which there streamed the light from the yellow drawing-room, at war with the moon, and a dreadful fear came to Pendare that she had determined never to forgive him.

That fear spurred him into action.

"Molly"—his voice was uncertain no longer, it held a commanding note that made her pause—"do you mean that you

can't forgive me because I was a brute to you? I didn't know until I'd left England how I loved you. That's why I came back, to ask you to forgive me, to be my wife. Don't you believe me?"

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

That plain, almost brutal statement brought Pendare up as against a blank wall.

"You're wrong," he said, after a second's pause. "I've told you the truth. Molly, how can I make you believe me?"

She made a faint movement that could scarcely be called a shrug, with her slim shoulders.

"You can't make me believe a lie," she retorted, and a malicious satisfaction was aroused in her as she saw that her blow had gone home. "Please never speak of this again. That is all I ask, and I don't think it is much."

Determinedly she turned away, and he watched her as she passed into the brilliant light and so to the drawing-room. He heard her close the window, for an instant her form was outlined against the glass before the heavy curtains slid across it, blotting her from view.

Half-dazed, he stood in the loggia, staring at the darkness that was now where there had been light. He had tried and failed, he could not wonder at his failure.

At last he turned away, his mind and heart filled with Molly. He knew now the value of the treasure he had lost.

Charming and attractive as he was, he had been a spoiled darling of fate all his life, in some way he had had what he wanted. Now the thing he longed for more than anything else in the world was refused him.

Love turned to hate—was it that?

He paused as he reached Crosscuts to put that question to the silent woods—to the sky, star-strewn above him. Had he lost her for ever?

For ever, the stillness seemed to answer, and at that the natural fighting instinct in him blazed up.

She should believe him, he determined fiercely, she must accept what was the truth, that he had found life unbearable without her, that he had come back to ask her to marry him.

This cursed money had intervened, making it almost hopeless for him to convince her, but he would not be defeated. He flung back his head and squared his shoulders as he walked up the garden path to let himself into the living-room and hall combined of the cottage.

It was lit by a standing lamp near the open fireplace, and on a pile of cushions lay Adine, smoking a cigarette.

She lifted furtive yet burning eyes to him as, pausing on the threshold, he tried to conceal the fact that he was dismayed at finding her awaiting him.

"You've had a pretty long stroll; wonder you could find your way in the dark," Adine said lazily; she half-closed her eyes, peeping at him through her lashes. "I began to think you'd got lost. Did you go all the way back to Riversdale?"

The question was shot at him like a stone from a catapult, but he answered truthfully—he held Adine too cheaply to trouble to lie to her.

"I found Miss Belford on the loggia, and had a talk with her," he said. "It's a gorgeous night."

Adine opened her eyes suddenly.

"She was very good at her job, wasn't she?" she enquired. "I don't suppose you'll ever get such an efficient indexer or whatever it was, again."

"As I've sold my library, I shan't want one," returned Pendare, sharply. His mind was filled with plans for beating down the defences that Molly had raised against him, for forcing her to believe in his love. "If you don't mind, Adine, I'll turn in. I'm dog tired."

Adine raised herself on one elbow, her impassive face flushed, a sparkle that he did not understand in her black eyes.

"Look here, old thing," she said. "We've been friends for so long that you won't mind my just giving you a word of advice. This place isn't Chelsea, one has to behave nicely. That's why I imported Cousin Janet Firle, whom no one bothers about, but who is here as chaperon for me. I shouldn't have had you down unless I'd got that guarantee of respectability."

She paused, and Pendare gave an impatient exclamation.

"My dear girl, I know all that, and the old lady seems a decent sort who won't interfere with you, yet satisfies the county prejudices," he said. "But what are you telling me this for?"

"Because," answered Adine, deliberately, "I don't think you realise that you're running the risk of doing Molly Belford harm. She hasn't a watchdog, and Phyll is worse than no one. So I thought I'd give you a friendly word of warning, that's all. You don't want to start a scandal, do you? You don't want people to—well—to imagine things?"

There was a sting, an ugly suggestion in those words, thought Pendare, gazing at her distrustfully.

"You're too mysterious for me," he said. "I don't know what you mean."

Adine gave a disdainful shrug.

"You know perfectly," she retorted. "Her having been your secretary, or whatever she was, people might talk. I shouldn't take any more belated strolls in the park to find her in the loggia, that's all. Otherwise, the tale will go round that you and she are—are——"

Even Adine paused before uttering the word; the black fury of Pendare's expression startled her. But she faced him boldly after that second's hesitation.

"That you and she are lovers," she said. "And that'll stand against her making a good match. After all, now she has that money and that heavenly place, she is a very different person from what she was when she was working for you. I'm warning you not to spoil her life—that's all."

How much more lay behind those apparently amiable words, thought Pendare grimly. He knew Adine—to a certain extent—and he felt as he stared into her wooden face that he hated and feared her.

She could hurt Molly with her evil tongue, her terrible power of hinting what others did not see.

He must guard Molly, and he chose what was a dangerous course, yet its danger recommended it to him. He smiled at Adine with sudden friendliness.

"It's very decent of you to tell me that I'm a selfish fool in not thinking of Miss Belford," he said. "It's sporting of you to interfere on her behalf, for really she's rather alone in the world, with no one to put her wise. Look here, Adine, I'm going to take you into my confidence because I think you'll help me if you can, in fact, I'm sure you will. I'm in love with Molly Belford, I always have been, and I'm going to try to get her to marry me."

Of all confidences this was the last Adine had expected. Her heart slipped a beat, she wondered whether she looked as sickened as she felt. She stared at Pendare and forced her lips to form her words.

"Have you—asked her—already?"

Pendare nodded.

"Been turned down, but I shall go on," he said. "I was desperate at first, but suddenly I thought anyway I'd put up a fight. That's what it is going to be, a fight, and if I don't win in the end, well, it'll be because I wasn't good enough for her." His voice sank to a note of sudden wistfulness. "Some better chap will have the prize."

He turned away. Before him there had arisen a vision of Molly, and the thought of another's claiming what he had been fool enough to reject, appalled him. To win or lose her was a matter of life and death.

He went over to the table where stood the bedroom candlesticks—for Crosscuts was too primitive to have electric lights—and struck a match.

"I'm dog tired, as I've told you already," he said. "'Night, Adine."

"One moment, Humphrey, there's one thing I want to ask," she said sauvely. "Of course it's her money that's the chief attraction. I don't mean to be offensive, but if she had been poor——"

"You're mistaken," said Pendare. "Money has nothing whatever to do with it. It's Molly herself I want, and Molly I mean to win."

BLUE skies, and bluer seas, a garden that was all roses and Orange trees, where cypresses stood as tall, black sentinels in rows guarding all this loveliness—such was the scene upon which Molly Belford's dark eyes rested on a gorgeous day when summer seemed to have thrust winter and even spring aside.

Something was haunting her, troubling her in this paradise where, with Phyl Denby, she had been staying for the last six weeks.

The Villa Louise was secluded from all the traffic and vulgarity that now reigns in the Riviera, but it was not too secluded from the brilliant world that seems only to amuse itself, but that does this with such grace that one can only be grateful to it,

The Villa Louise was the centre of several other stately villas inhabited by the best, in every sense, of society.

Into this exclusive circle Molly Belford, as her uncle's heiress and for her own charm had been welcomed. Adine Elton was also staying at the villa with Molly and Phyl.

The Villa Louise was so large that Molly felt she would not be in the way, though Phyl had objected, pointing out that once Adine was settled in such comfortable quarters she would never move.

Phyl was right. Adine came for a week, had been there a month, and showed no signs of leaving.

But it was not Adine's presence that brought that sad expression into Molly's eyes as she sat on the marble steps looking out to sea.

She was thinking of a paragraph she had read in the local paper to the effect that amongst the guests in Mr. Van Burnes's villa near Monte Carlo was Mr. Humphrey Pendare, the well-known authority on illuminated manuscripts. It was supposed that he was returning to Buenos Aires with Mr. Van Burnes to catalogue the latter's library.

That paragraph had set Molly's heart beating madly. Though she might hate him, the mere thought of his being in her neighbourhood thrilled and disturbed her.

She looked up with an abstracted smile as Adine appeared, coming from her swim in the sun-kissed sea before lunch.

"I thought you were off for the day with old Mrs. Cardoyle, to see those ruins up in the mountains," Adine said, flinging back her wet black hair.

"Mrs. Cardoyle's maid rang me up last night to say that her mistress was ill," answered Molly, thinking how, with her hair so sleek and shining, Adine was more doll-like than ever. "I must go over later to see how she is."

Mrs. Cardoyle was the head and centre of the exclusive colony that lived in the villas on the hillside.

If she approved of you your position was sure.

"Well, that's funny," said Adine meditatively, as with one slim foot on the step beside Molly, she prepared to climb the marble flight. "I was in the village this morning, and who did I see but Mrs. Cardoyle in a car, and John Laverton was with her. He was to be at your party, wasn't he?"

"Yes," answered Molly, still thinking of Pendare, still pondering on the fact that he was within hail. "We were all going except Phyl, she said she hated ruins."

"Probably she hated Jack Laverton being absorbed in you," replied Adine, sourly. "But don't you think it's funny of Mrs. Cardoyle to say she was ill and then start off without you? I do."

"Oh, I don't know!" answered Molly wearily. Adine was a bore with her questions. "Probably she felt all right this morning and so went after all."

"In that case she ought to have let you know," Adine declared. "Rude old woman, I call her."

As Molly made no answer, either to agree or to defend Mrs. Cardoyle, Adine went into the great hall. It was a scene of beauty that aroused Adine's envy of Molly to a fierce pitch.

But on this morning, as she went to the room that Molly had allotted to her, one of the best in the villa, Adine was looking quite content.

As she went down the corridor she met Phyl, whose expression was one of anger and dismay. She paused as she beheld Adine.

"What's wrong?" Adine asked. "Have you heard anything, my dear? Of course, our dear Molly will be the last to know."

Phyl stared at her suspiciously.

"I don't know what you mean," she returned curtly.

Adine smiled.

"Oh, yes, you do," she said. "You've heard the whispers that have been about for the last fortnight, and they'll soon be more, now Mrs. Cardoyle has sat up and taken notice. She wouldn't believe in those anonymous letters when other people got 'em, but she does now, she rang up and said she was too ill to go on that excursion, and——"

"I know all that," interposed Phyl, sharply. "I was in the village this morning, and I saw her with Jack, old brute! If she'd only stuck to Molly the others would see what a vile lie the whole thing is, but if she's going to believe it——"

"It'll make things difficult for our young friend," suggested Adine. "And she hasn't noticed that people haven't been quite so nice to her for the last fortnight. She's never suspected."

"Why should she?" retorted Phyl. "You and I only heard of those vile letters from Ma Shelden, the prime scandalmonger of the place, and I spoke my mind in a way that made Ma Shelden shut up like a clasp-knife. Vile old toad! I hope to goodness that Molly won't come across her. If she does, old Shelden will let her know, and there'll be a row, though it might be best. For Molly would put the matter into the hands of the police, and we should find out who had been sending those vile letters to everyone about here."

"Would it be wise on Molly's part to stir up a scandal?" said Adine, softly. "You needn't glare, my dear, there may be a touch of truth in the whole thing, mayn't there?"

She went on to her room humming, whilst Phyl glared after her in speechless indignation.

Then she recovered herself with a little laugh. The absurdity even more than the wickedness of Adine's suggestion struck her.

With her mind filled with the thought of Humphrey Pendare, Molly paid little attention to the fact that during the next few days the Villa Louise, instead of being filled with pleasant guests, was deserted save for Jack Laverton and other men.

Jack appeared depressed, but Molly had grown so accustomed to his moods they did not trouble her. Always she hoped that he would see how hopeless was his pursuit of her, and would turn to Phyl.

She was ashamed that the knowledge that Humphrey was in her neighbourhood absorbed her to the exclusion of every other thought.

It was Adine who drew her attention to the fact that Villa Louise was being avoided by those who had frequented it hitherto.

"What had happened to Molly's friends?" she asked.

"Perhaps some of them are ill as well as Mrs. Cardoyle," said Molly.

She was in the rose garden that looked out on to the sea, and wished that Adine had not followed her there.

"Hardly, unless it's an epidemic," said Adine, drily. "I spoke of it to Phyl, but she was very snappy. I don't know if you've noticed it, but her temper's frightful."

"You say we've been deserted lately," answered Molly. "But John Laverton's here all day nearly, and Reg, Deerford, and Mr. Cordy, and——"

"Oh, my dear, the men crowd here fast enough, it's the women I'm speaking of!" interrupted Adine. "The men you'll always have; but their female relatives have cried off. Why? That's what I'd like to know."

She did not wait for Molly's answer, but picked up her sunshade and bag and went down through the rose-shaded walk singing as she went.

Molly watched her, perplexed and a little uneasy. It was true. The invitations to those charming houses, with their delightful inmates, had ceased.

She sought out Phyl, who, unusually reticent, would only declare that she had no idea why people had "chucked them". She had noticed it, but that was all.

"I don't think there's any reason; I believe it's our imagination," Molly said at length. "Anyway, I'm going to Mrs. Cardoyle's this afternoon, she's always in on Wednesdays, and she gave me a standing invitation. Will you come?"

Phyl declined, almost violently, and surprised, even a little hurt, Molly set out alone for Mrs. Cardoyle's Italian villa, white marble and gloomy cypress groves.

Ruefully, Phyl watched her friend. She knew tongues of slander had been at work, and that Molly would have but a cold reception from the old lady.

When Molly returned the silence that she maintained concerning her visit to Mrs. Cardoyle told Phyl that she knew the truth. Indeed she knew more than Phyl, as the latter realised when in a moment of expansion she confided in her.

"How did you get on?" Phyl asked. "Was it dreadfully dull? You look tired out."

"I am tired," Molly told her. "But it wasn't the dullness. It was—— Oh, Phyl, something unspeakably dreadful has happened."

"Oh!" said Phyl—that was all.

After that she waited while Molly went on, the words rushing from her lips.

"I heard two women talking about me at Mrs. Cardoyle's," she said. "It was in that conservatory of hers, and I was wedged between the palms. They said everyone had had anonymous letters about me. Oh, Phyl, who could have been so cruel? And they seemed quite pleased. They said I'd pretended to be so prim and proper, and oh—I can't tell you all the other horrible things! To think people can like to make one out so vile!"

"Don't take any notice of them," Phyl said violently. "They are all fools, and wicked ones at that. Try to think that if they weren't talking about you they'd be talking about someone else, and let it go at that."

"I—I can't." Molly's voice was broken. "I feel as if I had been seared with red hot hot irons—I——" She broke down in a passion of tears.

"Darling—ducky—it isn't true, so don't fret." Phyl's warm arms held her, Phyl's eyes blazed at the thought of those slanderous tongues. "Anonymous letters, how can anyone believe in them? We'll find out who wrote them and have them up. We'll show them what fools they've been, darling, and serve 'em right."

But Molly shook her head.

"No," she said, and slipped from Phyl's arms as she spoke. "I shan't do that, I shall leave it."

At first Phyl thought that she misunderstood her.

"Of course you can't do it yourself, darling," she said. "You'll get one of these fearfully clever detectives, and when the beast who wrote those letters is found, he'll arrest and punish her."

"No." Molly averted her face, she spoke in half-muffled tones. "I shan't try to find out anything, Phyl. I shall just leave it."

There was a hopeless resignation in her voice that ought to have told its own story, but at the moment her friend was dense, perhaps for the first time in her life.

"If you do, people will believe—I mean, you know what people are," protested Phyl, in dismay. "They'll think there's something in the vile letters. Oh, Molly, you must!"

"I can't," returned Molly, heavily. "Phyl, please don't talk of it any more."

There was that in the dark eyes she turned pleadingly upon Phyl that reduced the latter to unwilling obedience.

"Well, you know best," she said, "But I do think it's an awful shame that people should believe the terrible things that ought to be rammed down their throats. As to that beast who wrote them, if I could get hold of him I'd make him wish he'd never been born. Tell me, Molly, why do you suppose he did it? What is his object?"

With a weary gesture Molly turned away.

"How should I know?" she said. "Someone hates me, I suppose. Only why should he?"

Then she had fled. She felt she had been on the verge of self-betrayal, for there was foundation for the charge the anonymous vilification of her fair fame had made.

Who was it who had discovered that which she had thought known only to herself and one other?

## THE CLEARING CLOUD

WHEN Humphrey Pendare came to the Riviera as the guest of Mr. Van Burnes, his first thought was for Molly Belford, to see her, to force her to believe him when he told her that he loved her for herself alone, that he had never ceased to hate himself for his callousness towards her.

He knew that the Villa Louise was some way from Mentone, and resolved to meet her at some friend's where she would be obliged to be outwardly civil to him.

Therefore the first thing he did was to call on Mrs. Cardoyle, whom he knew slightly, and who as queen of that little colony, would know about Molly.

He had hoped to find Mrs. Cardoyle alone, but he found her with an elderly woman, Mrs. Shelden, to whose bead-like eyes and tight mouth he an instant dislike.

"You say you're going to Buenos Aires," Mrs. Cardoyle observed, as she poured out

his tea. "I daresay there's an opening there for young men. Better than dawdling your life away in England. What do you say, Mrs. Shelden?"

"Far better," agreed Mrs. Shelden, staring at Pendare's handsome face with reluctant admiration. "And I don't approve of the Riviera for young men. Full of temptations."

"Not in this place, all tucked away from Monte Carlo and such wickednesses," said Pendare, smiling. "Looking at the list of people in your local paper I saw the name of Miss Belford. I knew her well. She's extremely clever, helped me with some book indexing."

He threw out this information carelessly. He knew that there is a latent touch of snobbery in most people, and it would do Molly no good if he said that she had been in his employ.

"Oh, do you know her? It is unfortunate that we ever took her up," exclaimed Mrs. Shelden. "She's a dreadful person. Dear Mrs. Cardoyle has been so deceived. Really ——"

She stopped short, for the fierce glare in Humphrey's blue eyes alarmed her.

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "Miss Belford is one of the most charming women I ever met. I don't know whom I respect as I do her."

"You men generally have a respect for pretty faces," said Mrs. Cardoyle, tartly. "As you are sure to hear of it from others, I may as well tell you the story."

Which she did, to Pendare's silent fury. How for the last fortnight a shower of anonymous letters had descended upon everyone in the place who knew Miss Belford. How these letters had accused her of having led a loose life, how she was said to have had several lovers, and finally the letters declared that if there were no truth in these charges, Miss Belford would try to discover who had written the letters, but—if she were guilty she would refuse to move in the matter.

"And that's what happened," concluded Mrs. Cardoyle triumphantly. "That friend who's staying with Molly Belford Miss what's her name?"

"Denby, Phyl Denby," suggested Pendare, eagerly; but Mrs. Cardoyle waved the suggestion aside.

"No, no," she said. "Miss Elton, an artist. Well, she came to me in great distress, saying she had implored Miss Belford to to put the matter in the hands of the police, and she refused. Doesn't that look like guilt? In the circumstances, we have all agreed to drop Molly Belford. It's the only thing to do. She will understand, I hope."

Pendare was silent, his blue eyes grim, his face darkened by sullen thought, and he, of all others, could not help her! Who had guessed their secret, who had turned it to such hideous account, and why?

"I shouldn't have thought she had an enemy in the world," he said, and Mrs. Cardoyle looked indignant.

"No enemy, but someone who could not bear that we should be deceived," she said. "I'm afraid, Mr. Pendare, you have been sadly taken in by that young person. I'm afraid that Miss Denby is of the same type. A frivolous, slangy creature, her manners are deplorable. Are you going already, Mr. Pendare? I hope I shall see you again whilst you are at Mentone."

Humphrey murmured something entangled, about having no time, and made his escape. His instinct was to rush to the Villa Louise, to beg Molly to marry him without delay, but he felt that it would be useless.

Molly, fighting a world that misjudged her so cruelly, would not be well disposed towards him.

As he walked along the tree-bordered path that led from Mrs. Cardoyle's villa to the sea, by which he could reach the village and so return to Mentone he saw Adine Elton coming towards him.

At that moment he was delighted to see her. From what Mrs. Cardoyle had said she was a good friend to Molly.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, and Adine looking up, flushed vividly. The next instant her hands were in his.

"Why, where have you sprung from?" she asked. "Humphrey, it is nice to see you again. You're not on your way to the Villa Louise, are you?"

She smiled, showing him she remembered his vow that sooner or later he would win Molly Belford. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Hopeless to rush things," he answered. "But I've been having tea with Mrs. Cardoyle and an old she-thing called Shelden. What's this scandal? What do they mean by talking of Molly as though anyone were fool enough to believe in anonymous letters, and you—you seem to have been mixed up in it, going to see Mrs. Cardoyle——"

"Yes, yes, I wanted to help Molly, poor girl," said Adine hurriedly. "Don't glare at me as though it were my fault. I've done my best for her."

And she spoke as though she meant what she said.

"You'll stick to her," Pendare said, entreatingly. "It's horrible for her to have to face these ghouls, and I can't do much, no man can, but a woman's different."

Adine bit her lips to check the fierce retort she longed to utter. Patience and apparent sympathy with her hated rival must be her role.

"Do you think Molly would see me if I came up to the Villa?" Humphrey asked, hesitatingly.

Adine concealed a smile. It was strange he should ask her help in this love affair.

"You might try," she said. "Come at eleven in the morning, you're sure to find her in the garden then."

"Thanks, you're a splendid pal," answered Pendare, gratefully. "I'm not staying here long, I'm at Van Burnes's disposal and he's pushing on somewhere. When I think of Molly alone——"

The youth gone from his handsome face, haggard, self-accusing, he stood before Adine. His fault it was that this evil slander had struck at Molly, his fault that because of the germ of truth it contained, she dared not fight it to the death.

"Well, I won't keep you," he said huskily, conscious that Adine was gazing at him rather strangely. "I'll have to think things out and see what can be done."

He caught her hand and gripped it, then swung on past her down the path.

Adine continued her upward climb to the Villa Louise, her expression thoughtful, her mind at work. As Phyl said, she was "deadly" in this mood of iron determination.

When she reached the villa the swift Southern dusk had fallen, she passed through the hall into the drawing-room, where a log fire spluttered on the open hearth, and Molly and Phyl were seated beside it with Jack Laverton.

Phyl had been playing tennis, she was young and happy in her scant white frock, but Molly, leaning back in the depths of an arm-chair, was tired-looking.

"Where have you been? Jack and I had a ripping game, he'd no chance, I beat him, smashed him, pulped him," said Phyl, complacently; she stretched her graceful arms above her head and yawned to capacity. "Gracious, I'm tired. I'm off for a bath and a rest. Molly, you did ask Jack to dine, didn't you?"

"Indeed I did, if he will," said Molly, rousing herself from the silence into which she had fallen. "Do stay. I've a headache, and shall be off to bed early, so you can amuse Phyl—and Adine."

She added the last name as an afterthought, and Adine stole a furtive, malignant glance at her.

"I saw Humphrey Pendare just now," she announced carelessly. "I met him on his way back from Mrs. Cardoyle's. She'd been giving him tea, so he told me—and gossip."

There was a startled silence, broken by Laverton.

"He's fonder of venomous old women than I am, then," he said hotly. "I'd rather have tea with—with any old vulture than with Mrs. Cardoyle."

"You mean she battens on the carrion of scandal," suggested Adine, lightly. She was watching Molly; she saw her flush, and her eyes shone. "I thought she was a friend of yours, Jack?"

"Not now," he retorted. He rose and looked at Molly. "May I just bolt home and change, and then come back?" he asked. "It's awfully good of you to ask me, Molly."

"I'm delighted," Molly assured him.

When the door had closed upon him she raised an expectant face to Adine. She did not know it, but she showed the latter how she longed to hear of Pendare, how the mere mention of his name had changed the world for her.

And Adine saw all things through a blood-red mist of hatred and revenge.

She made a step towards Molly. Her hands clenched and unclenched themselves, she was panting as though she had been running, yet she contrived to speak in a steady voice.

"Humphrey knows all about those letters from Mrs. Cardoyle. He is very distressed. He—is coming to see you to-morrow."

"Why should he care what people say of me?" Molly said coldly. "It is nothing to him."

"Molly, I'm your friend, and you can trust me. I know the truth. I know that Humphrey was your lover, and—if he marries you he is only doing the honourable thing."

Molly sprang to her feet, her face scarlet with the flush of shame.

"Who—who——" she stammered. "Who told you——"

Then she realised she had betrayed herself. She stared into Adine's unmoved face with unconscious appeal, and Adine smiled.

"It's the sort of thing that can't be kept secret," she said. "Besides"—this was a daring lie, but Molly believed it—"I always suspected it. How the person who wrote those letters got hold of the truth I don't know. But there it is. Humphrey sees what is the only decent thing to do. You know what I mean."

Molly's gaze wandered from Adine round the great room as though seeking something.

Her eyes rested on a bank of tall-stemmed roses that filled the air with sweetness, but she did not see the beauty and the grace of them, she was back in the shabby bedroom at Miss Catley's, weeping her heart out because the man to whom she had given her love had failed her, because for her woman's great adventure had ended in shame and disillusionment.

And whilst she stood apparently unmoved, Adine talked on in gentle, almost caressing tones, dropping gall that masqueraded as honey, letting Molly believe that Humphrey Pendare had allowed it to be seen it was only a sense of duty that would make him marry her, that any feeling he had had for her was dead.

"But you'll not turn him down," Adine said, after these skilful innuendoes. "You're so rich that you won't get into one another's way, he's quite right there. Oh—I didn't mean to say that!" She checked herself, looking distressed. "What an idiot I am!"

After having planted that last sting in Molly's heart, she left the room.

Feeling her world was in ruins about her, Molly lived through that evening as in a bad dream.

She did not go to bed as she had meant to, but played the gracious hostess well, smiled at Laverton's jokes, and was amused by Phyl's wild spirits that told her something that she was glad to know.

"Darling, I guessed it," she said, when in the drawing-room, over coffee, Phyl announced that she and Jack were engaged. "You'll be tremendously happy, and you shall have Villa Louise for your honeymoon."

"But how ducky of you," cried Phyl, regardless of Jack's self-conscious air.

He could not forget that after finding Molly would not have him he had fallen in love with Phyl, a fact that did not trouble the latter.

"And if we get married in summer it'll be all the more gorgeous, for we can go in for that heavenly bathing down here. Jack, sit up and thank Molly prettily. Don't you know she's a fairy godmother who waves her wand and gets everything she wants for herself and other people?"

"Not for herself, I'm afraid," said Molly, with a laugh, whose artificial note only Adine heard. "But I can't tell you how happy you've made me, you two dears. Only—I shall miss you horribly, Phyl."

"And I shall you," answered Phyl. "But, duckiest, we'll see heaps of each other. Thank goodness, we shall live at your castle gates, so to speak, shan't we, Jack?"

"Rather! I'm going to settle down into a fine old English gentleman," replied Laverton, cheerfully. He thought Phyl wonderful, already she was queening it over him. "Phyl and I'll live on our own produce and run a farm. It'll be jolly. I say, it's a gorgeous night, what about a moonlight stroll? Come on, Phyl, we'll look out the orange flowers for your wreath."

As they disappeared into the soft darkness of the night, Adine rose.

"I'll be off," she said. "So——"

She paused as the door at the further end of the great room opened, and the manservant announced—

"Mr. Pendare."

"It's an absolutely unheard of hour to arrive," said Humphrey, as he came up to Molly; he seemed to have eyes only for her. "But I couldn't wait. It's a matter —of—I may say life and death. Can you give me two minutes alone?"

There was that in his face, in the resolution of his blue eyes, before which Molly's anger seemed to vanish.

She tried for the cold disdain that should tell him how cheaply she held him, but instead she found herself flushing and stammering incoherent words.

Adine, with a delicate little smile, made her way to the door that led into the great hall.

"Of course I'll make myself scarce," she said easily. "I quite understand that I'm an awkward third on this occasion."

She opened and closed the door; as she did so she drew the heavy portiere silently across, and hidden in its folds, waited and listened.

"Why have you come?" she heard Molly say. "This is the second time that you have forced yourself on me."

"Is it?" Humphrey gave a laugh. "Well, I've an excuse now. Molly, I saw Mrs. Cardoyle this afternoon, I heard of those vile letters, and I knew why you wouldn't have the scoundrel who wrote them tracked down. I knew what you thought, what you were afraid of, but give me the right to fight for you, and show all these foul-mouthed old women that you've someone to defend you, As your husband I can do this—Molly——"

Molly had broken into a derisive laugh as she backed away from him.

"That's what Adine told me you would say!" she cried. "She warned me you were coming to make me an offer out of pity, out of a feeling of shame. You're too late. I know you don't care twopence for me. Adine——"

"Stop!" Pendare's voice was thunderous, "This evening I went back to Mrs. Cardoyle's, I insisted on seeing these vile letters, and—I knew that handwriting, disguised though it was. It is Adine Elton who has written them all, who has done her utmost to poison your mind against me, and—I came at this hour to warn you that she may do away with any evidence there is against her."

"Evidence?" repeated Molly in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"Why all the papers, the blotting-paper she has been using all this time, practising new handwritings," cried Humphrey impatiently. "Don't you see? Molly, for heaven's sake believe me and let me help you. I swear it's Adine who's done this horrible thing."

"I—I—it's too awful," said Molly, passionately. "She's my friend, she——"

She gave a sobbing sigh, and in answer to Pendare's question, told him enough to show that Adine had worked against her in vile, subtle fashion.

"If I prove that she has tried to ruin you, you'll believe I came home because I couldn't bear life without you?" Humphrey said. "I told you so—and you wouldn't listen; but—it's the truth. Your money had nothing to do with it. I knew I'd been a fool as well as a brute, and I came back to tell you so. Oh, Molly—beloved——"

Suddenly, looking into his blue eyes, she knew that what he said was indeed the truth.

The next moment she was in the arms that had longed for her, the lips that had hungered for her kisses closed on hers.

"Oh, sweet, you love me as I love you?" Pendare whispered. "Molly, you can forgive me?"

"As though I could do anything else," she murmured. "Oh, Humphrey, what is that?"

For a wild scream, full of the most agonising terror, rang through the house. Again and again it was repeated. Pendare rushed to the door and tore it open.

Down the great staircase, shrieking as she ran, came Adine Elton, aflame from head to foot.

Dragging with one might wrench the brocade curtain from the door which it concealed, Pendare sprang forward, flung it over her, and in its heavy folds stifled the flames.

But too late. Adine Elton died a few hours later, and though to the world it remained a mystery how in a place of electric light and radiators she could have set herself on fire, Molly and Humphrey knew the truth.

In her room a heap of charred paper showed she had tried to destroy the evidence against her as the writer of those anonymous letters.

But the secret was kept by those two, who in the wonderful happiness that was theirs, forgave the dead woman for her attempt to destroy it.

"In a way, it brought us together," said Molly, as on their wedding night they stood on the terrace of Riversdale and looked at the young spring moon.

"Don't think of her," said Humphrey, his arms around her, her cheek against his. "I want to be your only thought to-night, my sweet, as you are mine."

He turned her face to his, and as the moon slipped behind a cloud their lips met in an ecstatic kiss.

THE END.



# DANGEROUS TO LOVE

## By Gail London

### BAD COMPANY

THE Chinese orchestra was playing a samba, a throbbing, intoxicating number that quickly filled the floor of the Hong Kong night club. Outside, the traffic hummed along the Kowloon Road, the shrill cries of rickshaw pullers mingling with the blaring klaxons of sleek American cars.

But inside the club only the haunting music captured the senses; discreet hangings shut out sounds that might otherwise have offended those who had come in search of amusement and relaxation. The lights were dimmed and only a coloured spot, directed from above, followed the dancers as they circled the crowded floor.

Captain Peter Mansfield smiled down at the girl he was holding lightly in his arms, his head bent a trifle to look more closely into her grey eyes.

"Well, you have to admit that Quong Li knows how to put it over," he said. "Soft lights, sweet music and the most charming hostesses in all Hong Kong. He must be making a regular fortune."

Daphne Westlake shrugged daintily.

"There are hundreds of places like the San Fee in Hong Kong," she said, a hint of disdain in her manner. "What with wealthy tourists and units of all the Allied forces here, there is no lack of customers."

Peter nodded. He was more than casually interested in the slim, attractive girl, whose slightly contemptuous curl of the lips caused him to wonder what she was doing working in Hong Kong's most exclusive night club.

"You know, I've often wondered what brings a girl like you to a place of this kind," he said, following up an obvious train of thought. "I mean to say, you're not like the rest."

"Really?" She gave him an amused,

mocking glance. "What makes you think I'm different?"

"Oh, lots of things," he hunched. "But this isn't the time or the place to tell you about them. When are you coming for that drive with me?"

"Hostesses are not supposed to be friendly with customers outside business hours," she reminded him, still with that mocking, elusive smile. "You wouldn't like me to lose my job, would you, Peter?"

"I shouldn't think there's much danger of that," he said, with a slightly cynical air. "As somebody once put it: 'For ways that are dark and tricks that are vain, the Heathen Chinese is peculiar'. Our friend Quong Li isn't exactly a fool and quite obviously knows a good thing when he sees it."

"You flatter me," she laughed. "All the same, I advise you to find a nice girl, amongst your friends and take *her* out. There must be dozens who'd love the opportunity."

"I'm not interested in any other girl, nice or otherwise," he said adamantly. "Now, why don't you let——"

"Sssh!" she warned as the music stopped. "We must go back."

As he escorted her to the table he had reserved for himself and some friends, Peter gave her an appreciative glance, taking in the poise of her small head with its coronet of bronze hair, the classical line of her features, the scarlet, rather disdainful set of her mouth.

They made a handsome couple, Peter in his mess-kit, with a keen, intelligent countenance and deep-set blue eyes that sometimes held an expression Daphne found somewhat disturbing.

It was not easy to say what it was, but it left her wondering if, in some uncanny fashion of his own, he had penetrated past the barrier of reserve she had erected between herself and the outside world.

They joined Peter's other guests, Lieutenant "Johnny" Butters, and an attractive red-head whom Daphne knew as Estelle. She was partly French. Someone placed a drink in front of her and looking up, she saw Leng Fu, one of the waiters.

Leng met her eyes and gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head towards a curtained archway at the far end of the room.

Daphne lowered her eyes immediately and turning, saw Peter holding out his glass to her. She wondered if he had seen Leng's signal.

"To our future meetings," Peter said raising his glass in a toast.

"Thank you," she returned lightly, sipping her own champagne.

As a paid hostess it was part of her job to encourage guests to drink as much as possible.

"Better watch your step, Daphne," said Johnny Butters, winking at her. "Peter's a real wolf when he gets on the prowl. As a shining light in the Intelligence Corps he has the reputation of always getting his man, and that, I presume, includes women!"

"Be your age, Johnny," Peter rebuked him jokingly.

He had flushed beneath his tan and Daphne wondered why. Could it be that he was taking their acquaintanceship seriously? she asked herself, and sincerely hoped not.

She had learnt how to fend off those who became too friendly with her and she knew herself to be quite capable of handling almost any situation that was likely to arise. But in Peter Mansfield's case it was different.

It had been different from the very first time he had danced with her. Though why it should have been so she could not imagine.

Outwardly he was just one of dozens of young officers who crowded into the bar she could see from where she sat, so there was no reason at all why his presence should have such a disturbing effect upon her. The fact remained that it did.

She gave him a covert glance, wondering what lay behind the urbane expression he presented to others. Evidently he had plenty of money, otherwise he would not have been a frequenter of the most expensive night club in Hong Kong. She noticed, however, that he drank only in moderation and then, apparently, more for companionship than anything else.

There was a burst of laughter from a group at the next table and Peter turned suddenly, meeting her glance. Immediately her eyes dropped and she was suddenly made aware of emotions that were strangely disturbing.

It was a sensation quite new to her, and with it there was an acid bitterness against her lot; against the whole injustice that lay in the mere fact of being a woman whose mode of earning her living laid her open to the dubious attentions of men who took her at her face value—and nothing more.

Peter, at least, was not like that. Instead, he had treated her with an unfailing courtesy and respect that was like balm to her bruised heart, so that in the innermost recesses of her mind he occupied a place that was denied to others.

She looked round at the crowded tables, scarcely aware of what Peter was saying, a kind of weary disgust in her heart.

Most of the other girls there, were painted dolls, striving to snatch what they could from life before it overtook and passed them by—Russians, French and German girls, but few English.

In their view chastity was a thing of the past and all that mattered was to squeeze the lemon until the last drop of juice had been extracted.

With Daphne, however, to subscribe to such a creed, even in theory, would have been to leave herself soiled.

The music started again and Peter gave her a look of enquiry.

Smilingly she shook her head.

"You must excuse me, I have my other duties to attend to," she murmured, getting up. "Besides," she added, throwing him a little sop, "it is not midnight yet."

"You'll come back?" His eyes caressed her, bringing a flush to her cheek.

"Yes," she nodded. "Later."

DAPHNE'S progress across the room was interrupted a number of times, but she cleverly evaded all attempts to detain her, finally reaching the heavy brocade curtains which concealed a door at the far end.

Passing through, she walked down a dimly-lit corridor to the room where she knew she would find her employer.

Furnished partly as an office, it was a luxurious apartment, with an inlaid Empire desk standing in the centre of a huge rug.

Quong Li, a clean-shaven, suave Chinaman, with buttons of a mandarin on his robe, sat in a comfortable chair that had arms carved to represent dragons, the tips of his long, beautifully kept fingers pressed tightly together.

He broke off what he was saying to his companion when Daphne entered and smiled benignly at her.

"You sent for me?" she enquired, ignoring the insolent stare of the other man in the room.

Known as Brant Ferguson—and said to be an American—he possessed an unsavoury reputation as a "tough guy", a description of which he was inordinately proud. Brant was Quong Li's partner in numerous illicit activities that Daphne suspected were planned in the back room of the San Fee Restaurant.

Hong Kong, with its oriental-style opulence, its hundreds of night clubs, where every conceivable kind of racket flourished in a hot-bed of vice, was a happy hunting ground for men of Brant Ferguson's type, and Daphne had no illusions left as to her fate were she ever to fall into his hands.

"I sent for you because I need your help, my dear Daphne," Quong Li said, in perfect English.

"Tell me, how well do you know Captain Mansfield?"

Daphne stared.

"Not very well," she replied guardedly. "He comes here quite often, as you know, and we have danced together a few times. I believe he is quite well off and has private means in addition to his pay, but I'm not sure. Why do you ask?"

Quong Li waved this aside.

"Has he asked you to go out with him?"

Daphne flushed slightly, aware of Brant Ferguson's mocking gaze. From the corner of her eye she could see him lounging on the arm of a chair, a broad-shouldered figure in a dinner jacket.

"Yes, once or twice," she said. "But I have refused to go with him."

"Your discretion does you credit, my dear girl." Quong Li smiled in gentle mockery. "But circumstances alter cases, as they say. Captain Mansfield is in the Military Intelligence Corps and enjoys the confidence of his superiors, as you are aware, no doubt, so I feel that it would be a thousand pities not to take advantage of one of his invitations."

Daphne met his eyes for a moment but could make nothing of their expression, save that it was cruel.

"I don't understand," she said, with a shrug of distaste.

Quong Li smiled at her in a way that was positively benign.

"All you have to do is to cultivate Captain Mansfield's acquaintance a little more assidiously than you would do under more normal circumstances," he said. "I haven't the least doubt he will be highly flattered if you were to reveal a disposition for somewhat closer advances than your present surroundings permit. Hong Kong has rightly been described as an island paradise—it abounds with places well worth visiting when accompanied by a suitable companion, and I am confident that if you played your cards well, our young friend would lose very little time in taking advantage of your willingness to share the delights of, say, a moonlight drive to some beauty spot."

Daphne drew a deep breath, a surge of anger rising within her.

"I see," she said slowly. "So I am to lead Captain Mansfield on for some vile purpose of your own? I suppose it would be asking too much to enquire what it is?"

"Much too much, I am afraid," Quong Li sighed and studied his nails intently for a moment. "In any case, the less you know the better for you and—er—someone else. I have the greatest faith in your discretion, but life has taught me that it never pays to take chances. You will get your orders when the time comes. Meanwhile you can —er—enjoy yourself. After all, there are less pleasant alternatives!"

Brant Ferguson laughed; it was an ugly sound.

"I guess if you know what's good for you, you'll do what Quong Li suggests sister," he drawled brutally. His eyes flickered over her as if he were mentally undressing her. "We've ways of making people do as they're told an' they ain't kind of pretty."

Daphne fought down a little thrill of fear and looked directly at Quong Li.

"I came here to work for you because you said you would help me find my father," she said coldly. "You told me you had means of learning what had happened to him and whether he was still alive. I didn't agree to be a party to—to this kind of thing."

Quong Li studied her in silence for a moment. Then—

"Over there"—he gestured with one hand—"is Communist China. To obtain information from the other side of the frontier involves danger, and news—reliable news—filters through but slowly. I warned you that you must exercise patience about your father, for nothing can be done quickly. Of course, if you have lost interest, there is nothing more to be said, but it is only fair to point out that failure to co-operate—on your part, I mean—might have the most unfortunate results. Do I make myself clear?"

Brant Ferguson heaved himself forward.

"Better get wise to yourself, sister," he said harshly. "You ain't in a position to pick an' choose what you want to do. Quong Li can wrap it up in soft words if he likes, but I reckon they all mean the same. It's not going to do you *or* your father a lot of good if you're found floatin' face downwards in the river one fine morning, is it, now?"

Daphne's expression contained such an intensity of loathing that his eyes dropped and he looked away. All the same she knew that the threat was no empty one. For a long time past she had lived in terror, knowing that she had become hopelessly involved and that every movement she made was noted and reported by her employer's spies, so that she lived perpetually in the shadow of a fear.

"Very well," she said dully, after a brief interval. "I'll do as you say. What happens then?" she added.

Quong Li smiled.

"Nothing spectacular," he replied, with smooth satisfaction. "However, as I have said, you will receive your orders in due course. In the meantime, it would be as well to remember that, as far as you are concerned, discretion is the better part of valour. I would not be tempted to confide in Captain Mansfield or to seek his protection in any way. It would be most unfortunate if something were to happen to him as well as to your charming self. You may go now."

FILLED with self-loathing, Daphne waited a few nights later for Peter to join her.

Standing in the foyer of the small hotel where she was living, the contrast between Hong Kong and the quiet cathedral town in Southern England, where she had been brought up, struck her forcibly.

She had been seventeen when her mother had died; at the time she had been a student at the dancing academy run by a Miss Blake, who regarded Daphne as her most promising pupil.

Later, her father—Dr. Westlake—had joined an expedition that was to explore the lesser known regions of the Kuku-Nor, that wild and desolate territory lying between Western China and Tibet.

He had left Daphne in the care of her godmother, a strait-laced, elderly woman who prided herself on belonging to what she called "the old school." By the time her father returned, three years later, Daphne was no longer a pupil at the academy, but had become one of Miss Blake's teachers, with a class of her own.

Dr. Westlake had not stayed in England for very long. A world-famous geologist, he had left soon afterwards to follow up some theory of his own; something to do with a mysterious outcrop of uranium ore that he believed existed beyond the formidable barrier of the Yung-si Mountains.

That was the last anyone had seen of him!

Looking back, it seemed impossible that anyone could vanish as completely as Dr. Westlake had apparently done. But vanish he had, together with his native porters and equipment. It was generally believed that he had perished in a blizzard or been set upon by bandits.

But Daphne had refused to believe that he was dead. From time to time rumours of prisoners held in China filtered through to the British authorities; six months ago a missionary who had been given up as dead had been suddenly released and sent back to Hong Kong.

Using her savings to pay her passage, she had set out from England with the avowed intention of finding her father—on finding out the truth behind his disappearance.

But on arriving in Hong Kong official-dom had shaken its head and told her that it could do little to help.

Alone and friendless, with all her money gone, she had been at her wits' end when someone had introduced her to Quong Li, suggesting that he might be able to help her.

Daphne, who by this time was ready to clutch at straws, had jumped at the chance.

The straw held out to her in this instance was an engagement as hostess at the San Fee night club.

With nearly twenty thousand troops quartered on the island, and both American and Australian warships using it as a base, there was an ever-increasing demand for places where men far from home could find relaxation. Some of the night clubs were like the San Fee, eminently respectable, but others were of a far more doubtful character. Quong Li, Daphne had discovered, owned several such places, but made the San Fee his headquarters.

Desperately in need of money, if she were to remain in Hong Kong, she had accepted the job. But that she would become hopelessly involved in the dark and sinister activities of unscrupulous men, who found in her a useful tool, had never entered her mind. Now that she had awakened to the danger, it was too late to back out.

NOW there was a little stir at the entrance, and glancing across she saw Peter hurrying towards her. Catching sight of her, his face cleared and he grinned apologetically.

"I scarcely dared hope you would wait for me," he said. "I was held up just as I was leaving—an official call came through that I simply had to take. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course," she said, with a faint smile. "You are not more than a few minutes late."

"Bless you," he said fervently, his eyes resting appreciatively upon her. "I drove like the dickens all the way—a guided missile wasn't in it."

"You should be more careful," she admonished, surprised that she could speak so lightly. "It wouldn't have helped matters if you had become involved in an accident."

"I thought of nothing but you waiting for me and wondering where I'd got to," he smiled, turning to guide her to the door.

"You make too much of it," she murmured. In the car she glanced enquiringly at him. "Where are we going?"

"To the Lotus Flower Cafe," he answered, taking his place at her side. "It's both quiet and select, and about as far from the madding crowd as it is possible to get in Hong Kong. I imagined you would like it there."

"It'll be a change from the San Fee, then," she said.

She guessed why he had selected that particular restaurant for their dinner. It catered for the discerning few who preferred a peaceful atmosphere and good food. Overlooking the harbour it occupied a commanding position on a tongue of land jutting out into the sea, and was surrounded by tastefully laid out gardens.

It was a lovely night, with the light of the stars reflected dimly in the dark waters of the harbour. From all sides the scent of frangi-panni and magnolia reminded her that this was the Orient, as dark and mysterious as the sky above.

It seemed utterly peaceful, yet she knew that any moment some fresh outbreak of banditry and terror might occur.

"Comfy?"

Peter's voice broke into her thoughts, and she made a little assenting gesture, staring through the windscreen, her expression grave.

"Yes, thank you, Peter. I was just thinking how peaceful it all looks."

"Looks is the operative word," he said, with a brief nod. "It's anything but peaceful below the surface, as we all know." He paused a moment, then added—"Only this morning a British cargo vessel was shelled at from the mainland and one of the patrol boats that went to its rescue was sunk. Whether we like it or not, we've got to face up to the fact that we are engaged in a war of nerves, with the possibility that it might flare up into a shooting war at the drop of a hat. It's not a very pleasant thought."

"It's a very worrying one," she said slowly.

Peter sighed.

"Oh, it's no good worrying," he laughed. "The only thing to do is to follow the advice of one of Cromwell's generals, 'Trust in the Lord and keep your powder dry'."

The car stopped and he switched off the engine, turning his head to smile at her.

"You know, you look almost friendly," he said, in a tone of amusement. "It's quite a change from your usual 'keep off the grass' attitude."

Daphne got out, smiling at him in turn.

"Well, I must be feeling friendly or I wouldn't be here," she said.

He gave her a sharp glance, taking in the contours of her slim figure outlined against the background of sea and sky, her hair slightly ruffled by the breeze which blew across from the mainland.

About to say something, he evidently thought better of it, and instead pocketed the car keys and piloted her across the grass to where the lights of the restaurant offered a welcome.

"I booked a table, so we should be all right," he said, as they entered the foyer. "I'll wait for you here."

### STRANGE PROPOSAL

AN hour later Peter leaned back in his chair and regarded Daphne with an air of patient resignation.

"I don't believe you have been listening to a word I've been saying," he remarked, in a tone of pretended anger. "Here I've been laying pearls of wisdom at your dainty feet, and all you do is to gaze dreamily into space, nodding your head now and again."

"That's not true," she denied, blushing a little. "I listened most carefully to all

you said about your home and your parents. Your mother must be a dear."

"Oh, she is," he declared warmly, his eyes lighting up. "You and she would get on like a house on fire. You've got the same outlook on life, and, what is more important still, the same sense of humour. But the main item on the programme at this stage is to decide what to do with the rest of our evening. You don't have to be back by any special time, do you?"

"No." She shook her head, her colour deepening. Had he been on the look out for anything of the kind, he might have noticed that she avoided his eyes. "Quong Li gave me the whole evening off. He does that kind of thing sometimes when he thinks one of us requires a break."

"How very generous of him," he observed, with a hint of sarcasm. "However, let it pass. The point is, where would you like to go?"

"Where do you suggest?"

"Depends upon what you feel in the mood for," he answered. "We haven't a great deal of choice between the cinema or some place like the San Fee where we can dance. We *could* go for a drive along the coast road in the moonlight. It would at least be cooler than this place."

Daphne lowered her eyes, remembering her employer's instructions.

"I don't think I'm very keen on the cinema," she murmured slowly. "It's much too hot for dancing, too, so——"

"Then it's a drive," he said gaily, getting up. "That's what I hoped you'd say, as a matter of fact. We can go along the coast as far as Weng-weh and then back through the hills. Would you like that?"

"Very much," she replied, rising also. "But won't we be stopped by the patrols?"

"You will be under military escort," he said, with a wide grin. "No doubt the patrols will think you are a beautiful spy and wish that they, too, were in the Intelligence Corps! Perhaps you *are* one and your job at the San Fee is merely a blind for some more sinister activities," he added jokingly.

To his surprise she went scarlet, and her eyes misted.

"Oh, don't!" she exclaimed, with a little catch of her breath. "That isn't funny."

"I'm sorry," he apologised contritely. "It was only a joke. Forgive me."

"Oh, it's all right," she said huskily, turning away. "It's just that I hate that kind of thing. After all"—with a dreary laugh—"being a dance hostess at a place like the San Fee isn't much of a recommendation."

"I'm sorry," he said again, helping her on with her cloak. "I wouldn't have said anything to hurt you for all the tea in China. Please don't let it spoil our evening."

"All right." She summoned up a smile from the frozen depths within her. "But please don't ever say anything like that again—not even in fun."

She walked ahead to the car and waited until he joined her, a chill in her heart.

Sick and giddy with reaction, she felt angry with herself for her stupidity. Peter was puzzled, and would obviously begin to wonder why she had rounded on him as she had done. From there it would be comparatively easy to suspect the truth.

He joined her a moment later, his manner giving nothing away, and as they drove off she experienced a little sensation of relief.

Then she wondered if he would want to make love to her, as all the others had. Up to now he had shown no disposition to do so but she was not deceived. He had displayed too great an interest in her for their friendship to be entirely platonic.

Not that it mattered. There was no one else to consider and if it made him happy—well—she could kill two birds with one stone. So with a sigh she slipped back further into the comfortable seat and gave herself up to the contemplation of all that an *affaire* with Peter might mean.

At length he turned the car off the road and stopped on a grassy headland that encircled one arm of the bay. In the distance the lights of Hong Kong were reflected in the dark, oily waters, with those on the mainland keeping them company.

In the outer bay ships of the American Navy rode at anchor alongside a British flotilla. Nearer at hand the red and green lights of an incoming freighter revealed its darker bulk, a fleeting shadow against the stars.

"That was lovely," Daphne murmured, feeling that some kind of remark was called for. "I've never seen Hong Kong from so far away before. With the lights reflected in the water it looks like a fairy-tale city."

"It's a case of 'distance lends enchantment to the view', I'm afraid," Peter replied, with a shrug. "One of my colleagues said once that Hong Kong ought to display a large notice at the end of the Kowloon Road with 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' written on it in large capitals. I thought at the time he was merely being cynical, but I don't any longer."

Daphne said nothing. The conversation had taken a dangerous turn and she wondered, for one panic-stricken moment, if he was trying to follow up her foolish self-betrayal as they left the Lotus Flower.

Instead, he glanced sideways at her and said something so utterly unexpected that her heart gave a sudden violent lurch.

"Would it help to talk about it, Daphne?"

She looked quickly at him and then away, startled out of her calm.

"Talk about it?" she repeated. "I don't know what you mean, Peter. What is there to talk about?"

"I couldn't say." He shrugged. "But I flatter myself I can see when someone I am fond of is in deep water."

She leaned back in her seat, feeling the urgent rhythm of her heart beating, a sudden wild elation flooding through her at his words.

But all she said was:

"What makes you think I'm in deep water?"

"Well, aren't you?" he challenged. "I wasn't born yesterday and I don't have to be told that you loathe your job at the San Fee. That being the case, you must be under some pretty powerful compulsion to keep it. I've wondered more than once what induced you to take it in the first place?"

Daphne shrugged.

"I took it because I needed work," she said flatly. "And I keep it for the same reason. Beggars can't be choosers—especially in a place like Hong Kong."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "But that doesn't explain why you came here, does it? I daresay I could find out if I went to the trouble, but that would hardly be cricket. I'd much prefer you to tell me yourself."

"Do I *have* to explain my movements?" she asked.

"Of course not. But if we are friends—and I hope we are—it would be rather nice if you did."

She laughed shortly.

"What do you want to know then?"

"Quite a lot of things, the chief being why you came to Hong Kong. You must have had a good reason."

"I had," she said after a pause. "I wanted to find out what has happened to my father. He vanished eighteen months ago while exploring in the Kuku-Nor region. Needless to say I haven't discovered a thing."

"I remember now," Peter said thoughtfully. "But I hadn't realised that your father was the Dr. Westlake who went north from Tibet. I realised there was some pretty good reason behind your being here, of course. I mean to say you've got to be pretty hard-boiled to survive in a place of this kind on your own, In your case, you're more like a kitten who has wandered into a den of man-eating tigers."

"I see!" She smiled bitterly into the darkness. "And being chivalrous your first instinct is to rescue the kitten, I suppose, irrespective of whether it wants to be rescued or not."

"Not at all," he answered calmly, a curious little smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "I have no doubt you are quite sure you are capable of taking care of yourself, but you'll come unstuck, that's certain. Hong Kong isn't London, with a nice friendly policeman on every corner. Then there is another angle to the situation we haven't touched on yet. Would you like to know what it is?"

"If you consider it important—yes," she replied, in a deliberately bored tone.

"It's highly important," he said, and added seriously. "You see, my motives are purely selfish. You are the first girl I have ever wanted to marry so that I am naturally concerned about your welfare. *Will* you marry me, Daphne darling?"

For a second she was too taken aback to speak. Just what she had expected she did not know, but it was not anything like this.

Was it possible that he was really in love with her? The irony of the situation almost made her laugh. She had been prepared for almost anything—to go to any lengths so long as she made him happy. But this! It was almost too much.

"Well, is it such a difficult thing to decide?" he asked playfully, when she continued to sit in silence. "After all, lots of people do get married, especially if they if they are in love with one another."

Daphne slowly turned her head and gazed searchingly at him, her lips quivering.

"Are you trying to tell me that—that you are in love with me, Peter?" she enquired haltingly. "Seriously, I mean?"

"I am," he responded quietly, his intent manner lending emphasis to his words. "I've been in love with you since the first evening I blew into the San Fee. I knew then why there had never been anyone else—I had been waiting for you without knowing it, you see."

Daphne looked away, deeply moved by his simple confession. So it was only by a supreme effort of will that she kept her voice steady.

"I—I'm sorry," she said, at length. "I had no idea. I mean—it's just impossible—you must see that, Peter. In any case——" Her words trailed off and tears pricked her eye lids.

Peter laid a hand on hers and when she would have pulled it away, tightened his grip.

"Listen, my dearest," he said gently. "I realise, of course, that all this is unexpected, so I don't imagine you will give me your answer right away. But I am sure of one thing, and that is, we need each other, you and I, and that we can make one another happy. My overseas term of service ends in three months time, you know, and I can see no reason why we shouldn't be married before then so that we can return home—together. Will you think it over, my darling?"

Daphne stirred and withdrew her hand, uttering a dreary little laugh.

"I'm going to sound like someone out of a Victorian novel, but I can't think of any other way of putting it," she said. "I—I'm sorry, Peter, but I can't ever marry you. I shall never marry."

Peter received the surprising declaration with surprising calm.

"Let's take one thing at a time," he suggested after a pause. "I know you would not lie to me, so just tell me this—do you love me, Daphne?"

With a quick intake of her breath, she lifted her head, staring out at the distant lights.

"You are quite right, Peter," she said slowly. "I couldn't lie to you about—about a thing like that. I wish I could," she added honestly, her hands clenching and unclenching in her lap. "But it doesn't make any difference. None at all."

"Maybe not—until we've got to the root of the trouble," he said confidently. He took her hand again, holding it firmly. "Why can't you marry me, Daphne?" He laughed gently. "You haven't got a husband tucked away secretly somewhere, of that I'm positive. So what is it?"

"I—I'm sorry, Peter, but I can't tell you," she said, brokenly. "Please, my dear, don't make it harder for us,"

"Very well, then," he replied, with a sigh. "*I'll* tell *you*. Isn't it because you've got yourself mixed up in some kind of a racket and you're afraid of involving me in a scandal or something?"

"You—you've no right to cross-examine me like this," she protested feebly, her eyes clouding. "I'm not on the witness stand."

"Granted," he said firmly, refusing to be side-tracked. "But I have the right of any man who loves a girl to stop her, if he can, from making a mess, not only of her own life, but of his as well. You have admitted that you love me, so why, in heaven's name, can't you confide in me?"

Daphne stared helplessly at him for a moment, feeling as if she were caught up in a mess from which, the more she struggled, the harder it was to escape.

"What kind of a mess do you think there would be if I *did* marry you?" she burst out, recklessly unhappy. "The army is your career—you've said so often enough! Yet you want to marry a girl from a Hong Kong night-club—someone people will say is no better than she ought to be! You—you must be mad!"

The almost brutal way she said it left them both speechless for a moment.

As he was groping for the right words with which to convince her, she put her hands to her face and burst into tears.

It was the opening Peter sought.

"You silly little goose," he said tenderly, drawing her into his arms. "You don't really imagine that you can terrify me with the fact that a few ill-natured people will gossip, do you? It's what one is that matters—not what people think you are."

"It's easy enough to talk like that, but gossip of that kind can hurt," she replied in muffled tones, speaking with a kind of weak obstinacy. "In time you would be bound to regret and then I should want to die."

He held her close, his face set and stern.

"Darling," he murmured, "those things don't count. Truly they don't. If you find that hard to believe, just ask yourself how you would feel about it if I were you and you were me! Wouldn't you think any hurt we might suffer a very small price to pay for the happiness that can be ours?"

She tried to turn away but he held her tight, and cupping her chin in his hand, forced her to meet his eyes.

"It—it isn't the same." she said dully.

"But it *is*, my dearest. Precisely the same. Would *you* let a career stand between you and someone you loved? Of course you wouldn't, so why should you think *I* care? If necessary I would resign my commission and take up something else, but there will be no need. As my wife you will be——"

"Oh, stop, please stop!" she cried desperately, feeling her defences crumbling one by one. "*Please*, Peter! You are only torturing both of us. In any case——" She broke off, a sob racking her slender frame.

"Yes?" he asked softly. "In any case—?"

"You must give me time," she murmured, with a sigh. It was cruel to give him false hopes, but she could think of no other way to end a situation that had got out of hand. "I —I can't possibly decide a thing like this all in a moment."

"If we love each other I can't see that there is anything to decide," he said bluntly. "However, it is for you to say. I will be as patient as it is possible to be, but in return I want your promise not to do anything foolish, like going away and leaving me. I couldn't bear that, for it would mean, amongst other things, that you didn't trust me."

"I don't trust myself," she replied unhappily. She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Oh, Peter, why did you have to fall in love with me when there are so many others who could have made you happy?"

He laughed and kissed her tenderly on the brow.

"That's where you're quite wrong," he said. "There is only one girl in the world who can make me happy and she's right here."

## TANGLED SKEINS.

SEATED beside Peter, a week later, Daphne stared with ill-concealed disgust at the motley crowd which applauded the third-rate cabaret show they had just witnessed.

The Cherry Blossom Road House was situated on the road to Chi-weh, outside the military boundary of Hong-Kong, and had earned a dubious reputation amongst even those hardened by experience to the shoddy romanticism that posed as the real thing.

Their table was in an alcove one of many, along the walls, most of them occupied by British and American servicemen and Eurasian and Chinese girls, whose painted faces concealed the calculating awareness with which they summed up the spending power of their escorts.

Daphne was conscious of a strange feeling of detachment as if she had, without knowing it, merged her identity with that of someone who looked and spoke like her, but who was a very different person from the girl who was in love with Peter Mansfield.

Otherwise she could not have lent herself to the role she was playing, a role destined to set them on either side of a gulf that nothing could ever bridge.

With it all she had a half-frightened awareness of newly awakened desires that, born of her love, bade fair to set all her resolutions at naught. Only by remembering the reason she had come to Hong-Kong, the threat which had robbed her of the last vestige of independence, could she find the strength to go on with the task Quong Li had allotted her.

If she required anything to remind her of the servitude in which she had been caught up, she had only to glance across the room to where Brant Ferguson sat at a table with three others, a slit-eyed Cantonese and two Chinese girls. Only once had Brant Ferguson so much as glanced in their direction, but in the brief instant that their eyes had met Daphne had read both a threat and a warning.

Quong Li's orders to her had been brief and to the point earlier that day.

"You have done well," he had observed earlier. "Captain Mansfield is evidently impressionable, which serves our purpose admirably. You expect him this evening?"

"Yes," Daphne had answered, sick at heart. "He said he would come."

"Good. You will dance with him as usual, but at the right time let it be known that you will be free from midnight onwards. When, as I have no doubt he will, he makes the obvious suggestion, you will ask him to take you to see the floor show at the Cherry Blossom road house. It is hardly the kind of place you would normally wish to visit so you must explain that your curiosity has been aroused by the stories you have heard.

"After a suitable interval of, say, half an hour," Quong Li had continued, "you will become bored and express a desire to leave, making certain that you leave something behind—a scarf, say, or something of that kind. At the car you will discover your 'loss' and ask Captain Mansfield to go back for your property. While he is absent you will be approached and will hand over the packet you will be carrying to the man who will ask for it. He is a Cantonese with a pock-marked face and you will identify him quite easily—he will be at a table with Brant Ferguson and two girls. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite," had said Daphne bitterly. "It all seems a little unnecessary, however. If Mr. Ferguson is going to be there what is there to prevent him from taking the package?"

"With the increasing state of tension prevailing, the authorities have redoubled their security precautions, so that it is virtually impossible to leave or enter Hong-Kong without being stopped at the control posts. If Brant Ferguson were found taking it out it would be most unfortunate for everybody concerned."

"I see!" Daphne had given him a discerning, analytical glance, as if seeking out the hidden places in his mind.

"Aren't you taking an awful risk?" she had gone on bitingly. "I could just as easily hand the package over to Captain Mansfield and tell him how it came into my possession. He would protect me."

Quong Li had smiled, but there had been nothing friendly about his smile.

"I trust you will not be tempted to do anything so foolish," he said softly. "I am quite sure you would not wish Captain Mansfield to meet with, say, a fatal accident, and as for yourself it would distress me very much to have to hand you over to the tender mercies of a man like Brant Ferguson."

IT had not been as easy as Quong Li had made out, and before they had set out she and Peter had come very near to quarrelling.

"What on earth do you want to go to a shocking place like that for?" he had demanded incredulously, when she had suggested the Cherry Blossom. "If I had my way it would have been put out of bounds to our troops long ago. If you want a peep at the underworld of Hong-Kong I know of a dozen places much nearer home."

In the end she had got her way, but only at the cost of his bewilderment. She had been careful not to arouse his suspicions by her insistence, but that had made it all the more difficult to persuade him.

He had given in with very bad grace at last, but it was quite clear from the gloomy silence in which he drove that he was angry.

Now with a sigh she turned to answer the first remark he had made for some time.

"I'm sorry, Peter," she murmured confusedly. "You were saying——"

"I merely asked if you had had enough, or whether you wished to prolong the agony," he said stiffly.

"I think I have seen enough, thank you,

Peter," she replied, with a forced smile. "It—it is all very interesting, don't you think?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it—for those who appreciate this kind of thing," he said drily, getting up. "Shall we go?"

He held her chair and laid some loose change on his plate by way of a tip.

Daphne picked up her bag and followed him through the crush to the door, where they were bowed out by an oily individual in traditional Chinese costume.

Outside Peter raised his head and drew a deep breath.

"Heavens, what a fug," he exclaimed disgustedly. "How anyone can stand an atmosphere of that kind beats me. You must be half suffocated."

"It *was* a bit thick," she said. "But I wanted to see what it was like. I've heard such a lot about these road-houses. It was like a scene from a film."

Peter laughed shortly.

"You wouldn't find it so if you scratched a little below the surface," he said. "In a film virtue usually triumphs in the last scene—not here. These places are a hot-bed of sedition and intrigue—half the people you saw there to-night are either spies or saboteurs. One of these days——" He broke off and shrugged, as if suddenly realising he was saying too much.

Daphne's cheeks flamed with shame.

"I'm sorry," she said penitently. "I—I didn't know it was quite like this, Peter. I thought it would be rather romantic."

"Well, now you know," he shrugged. He unlocked the car, switching on the light. "H'm! Nothing stolen, apparently. No doubt they decided it wasn't worth the risk. You'd better get in—the sooner we're well away from here the better."

Daphne obeyed, her heart beating so violently that for a wild moment she thought he must hear. Her handbag, in which reposed the sealed package Quong Li had given her, seemed as if it weighed a ton and her fingers trembled so agitatedly that she nearly dropped it.

She had completed part of her task—smuggled it through the control post outside Hong-Kong. Being with an officer she had not been searched.

Peter walked round to the other side and opened the door. As he did so Daphne summoned up her courage and gave a cry of alarm.

"Oh, Peter! My scarf!" she exclaimed, infusing the right amount of dismay into her tone. "I must have left it behind where we were sitting. I——"

"Wait here and don't get out of the car—I won't be a second," he said, giving her no time to finish. He hurried off, and as his tall figure vanished in the gloom, a shadow detached itself from the shelter of a magnolia tree growing on the fringe of the car park.

She had her bag open, and as a hand came through the window at her side she placed the package in it, catching a glimpse of the evil face of the Cantonese as she did so.

The next moment he had vanished as silently as he had come, and she looked through the windscreen to see Peter walking towards her.

"I can't find any trace of your scarf," he said, opening the door. "Are you *sure* you left it there, Daphne?"

"Yes. quite sure," she murmured confusedly. "But it doesn't matter, Peter. I expect someone has taken it. I—I'm sorry you went back for nothing."

"Oh, that's all right," he returned offhandedly, getting into the car and starting the engine. He looked worried and his mouth was set in a tight line. "I'll buy you another one as soon as the shops open to-morrow."

"Please don't do anything of the kind, Peter," she said, her pride up in arms. "It was my own fault for being so careless."

The misery which gripped her communicated itself to her voice, so that she sounded as if she were on the verge of tears.

She had discharged her task, but at the cost of her self-respect. Only the dire compulsion of fear had enabled her to do so—fear, not for herself, but for the man at her side.

There was an aching sensation in her heart, a hot welling-up of emotion which caught at her breast like a physical pain. She brushed her hand across her eyes, fighting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

A leaf in the wind, she was caught up in the coils of an intrigue in which human lives had no value, honour no place. Self pity would not help her now.

Peter drove for some distance in silence. Only when they saw the lights of a road block in front of them did Daphne venture to speak.

She laid a hand timidly on his arm.

"Please don't be cross, Peter," she pleaded brokenly. "I won't ask you to take me to a place like that again, I promise. I didn't know what it would be like, truly, I didn't."

"I told you," he said curtly. "But even then you insisted on going. You can't tell me that it was just feminine curiosity, because if you do I refuse to believe it."

"No, it wasn't," she admitted slowly, quick to seize the opening with which he had presented her. "It was very foolish of me, but when you began laying down the law I felt I just *had* to go."

"I see," he said grimly. He took his foot off the accelerator and allowed the car to slow down as they approached the road block. "In other words, it was a case of showing me where I got off?" He laughed satirically. "Sure there wasn't *another* reason, Daphne?"

She felt herself tremble, but forced her voice to remain steady.

"No, Peter, there—there was no other reason," she lied, staring ahead, her hands locked tightly together. "I—I'm sorry, Peter, but I don't like being ordered about."

"You astonish me!" The sarcasm cut like a whip. "However, you needn't worry. I'm not likely to make the same mistake twice."

The quarrel had flared up before either of them was aware of it, but there was no time for anything more.

They had come again to the control post that they had previously parted on their way out—through which she had smuggled the package.

A sergeant of the Military Police, in steel helmet and battledress, stepped up to the car. Daphne noticed that he glanced at the number and then consulted a slip of paper in his hand.

"Captain Mansfield?" he enquired, poking his head in at the window. "There's a message for you from HQ. It's from Security and just says 'It's in the bag'."

"Thank you, sergeant." Peter sat unmoving, his hands gripping the steering wheel. "Is it in order for me to proceed?"

"Quite in order, sir." The sergeant saluted and stepped back.

Peter returned the salute and let in the clutch. A moment later they rounded the next bend, and Daphne saw the lights of Hong Kong glittering.

Had she harboured any illusions as to the importance of the role she had played, they would have been dispelled by what had taken place at the control-post. They had been stopped twice on the outward trip and she had seen the occupants of other cars made to get out and be searched. Their car had been allowed free passage—because of Peter.

Brant Ferguson's chances of slipping through with the sinister package would have been slim indeed. As it was, the fish had escaped the net, thanks to an act of blatant treachery on her part involving the betrayal of the man she loved.

DAPHNE opened heavy-lidded eyes and put a hand to her head, feeling as if a ton weight were pressing down on her brain. She heard herself uttering a whimpering moan, but was unable to help herself.

With an effort she sat up and looked blankly round the bare, unfamiliar room. trying to remember what had happened.

A low-powered light bulb in the ceiling revealed the peeling walls, the dirty floor, the ramshackle bed on which she was lying. It was a crude affair of string and wood, and was covered with a crumpled, dirty blanket.

With an effort she fought down the temptation to relax and sink into the velvety blackness from which she had emerged, where there was no pain, no ringing of hammers in her head.

She might have done so but for the feeling that there was something she *had* to do . . . something . . . she couldn't think what it was except that it was terribly important.

After a time she managed to sit up and then stand, supporting herself against the wall.

With a dull shock she saw that someone had removed her dress and that all she wore over her flimsy under-garments was a Chinese robe much too large for her, so that the ends of the sleeves covered her hands. Her shoes had been taken away as well, and the chill of the damp floor struck upward through her stockings.

So much had happened since Peter had driven her back to the hotel in grim-lipped since, after leaving the road house.

Had it been possible she would have told him the truth, pleading for his understanding, his forgiveness, but that way of escape was denied her.

For nothing, no power on earth, could undo what she had done. Peter had trusted her blindly, and in return she had betrayed his trust.

Apart from anything else, in using his official position in the manner she had done, she had made a fool of him and that was something no man could be expected to forgive.

She remembered going to her hotel room, blinded by the tears she could no longer hold back. For hours, it seemed, she had stood by her window, staring out over the roofs of the houses opposite, her world in ruins.

Then, suddenly and calmly, she had known that there could be only one end to the road along which she had travelled in the past year. Hitherto she had always nourished a secret contempt for the wretched souls who took the easy way out, but then she had not known what it was to carry a burden of guilt so heavy that she could no longer live under it.

How it all came back!

She had made her preparations hurriedly, for dawn had been stealing through the East with something almost sinister in its approach.

She had taken off the semi-evening frock she had been wearing and had put on instead a plain, woollen dress, replacing the frail dancing slippers with a pair of stout walking shoes. Strangely enough, she had felt no fear. All she had wanted to do was to end the mental agony that ate into her heart.

She had set off towards the harbour, where sampans had rocked gently at their moorings.

After that there was a confused recollection of running footsteps, the sudden grasp of strong hands and then a suffocating blackness as if something—a coat, perhaps—had been flung over her head, of orders in gutteral Cantonese. Then she had glimpsed the brutish features of Leng Fu, the waiter from the San Fee.

Now she sank down on the truckle bed, her hands pressed to her throbbing temples.

What had happened after that? She couldn't remember, however hard she tried. There was a tender place where her hair parted; obviously she had been knocked out!

But why? Had she fallen into the hands of one of the numerous gangs of criminals which infested the Hong Kong waterfront?

If so, what was Leng Fu, one of Quong Li's most trusted henchmen, doing there? It *had* been Leng Fu she had seen. There could be no mistaking his heavy, inscrutable features, the livid scar which ran from his temple to the corner of his mouth.

She lifted her head sharply as the sound of a bolt being drawn back told her that the door was about to open.

Staring dully at it, she watched as it swung back on its hinges to reveal Quong Li framed in the opening, with Brant Ferguson just behind.

There was a moment's silence, then Quong Li stepped into the room. The other man followed and closed the door behind him.

Quong Li regarded Daphne with a fixed stare that momentarily grew more disconcerting as the seconds passed.

When he spoke, his voice was little more than a sibilant hiss.

"I am glad to see that you have recovered from your—er—indisposition, my dear Daphne," he remarked smoothly, his eyes never leaving her face. "Much as I regret the necessity for adopting somewhat drastic measures, I am sure you will appreciate that you left us with very little choice in the matter."

She stared dully at him, not moving from where she sat, her fingers thrust into her hair.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked tonelessly.

"Isn't it obvious?" He waved a hand. "Or did you think we wouldn't realise that you had betrayed us?"

"I—betrayed you?" She straightened herself up, a flicker of wonder coming into her eyes. Otherwise her expression did not change. "I—I don't understand. I—I did what you told me to do. Nothing else."

"I am afraid obstinacy isn't going to help you, my dear Daphne," he said sharply. "You are not going to pretend that you haven't been working for the authorities, or that you don't know that the Cherry Blossom was raided a few minutes after you left there with Captain Mansfield, I hope. Fortunately for all concerned Brant here managed to escape the net that was thrown round the place and bring warning of what had happened. By the time the military police arrived I was elsewhere. That, from your point of view, was—unfortunate."

Daphne stared down at the floor, trying to puzzle it all out. The message Peter had received from the sergeant at the road-block became suddenly clear. It was intended to convey that his plans had been carried out and that the package had been intercepted.

Evidently she had been more foolish than she had imagined. In some way she could not fathom Peter must have known what she intended, and had taken the necessary precautions. Doubtless the departure of his car when they had left the road-house had been the signal for the police to close in.

Her mind ran on ahead as she put it all together; she wished it did not all fit in so neatly. Allowing that Peter had known all along that she was acting a part, it explained his attitude at the time.

Then, she had thought his cold anger out of all proportion to what, on the surface, seemed the mere insistence on indulging a whim on her part, but the truth was very different.

She looked up at length.

"I don't know why you have treated me like this," she said slowly. "I knew nothing about the raid on the Cherry Blossom. Nothing. I handed your package over and then Captain Mansfield drove me back to my hotel."

Quong Li gripped her hand and began to twist it so that she cried out from the pain.

"What did you tell Mansfield?" he snarled. "Don't try to bluff me that you haven't been hand-in-glove with him all along. There was only one possible way in which he could have learned that you were carrying that package to the Cherry Blossom, and that is through you."

"I told you she wasn't to be trusted."

Brant Ferguson came to stand near the bed, staring down with the cold, appraising eyes of a killer.

Then he shot out a hand and grasped her other wrist, jerking her roughly to her feet. Quong Li stood back.

"C'mon—talk!" Brant uttered savagely. "Talk fast! We ain't got time to fool with dames who think they're clever. *What does Mansfield know about the set-up back there?*"

Daphne shrank away as far as his grip would allow her, flinging out a hand appealingly to Quong Li.

"I don't know," she gasped hysterically. "I don't know anything. I swear I——"

"Let her go."

Quong Li gave the order in a calm, impersonal tone. As Daphne sank back on the bed he seemed to tower over her.

"Compose yourself," he went on curtly. "Quite obviously you and Captain Mansfield have been working in collaboration, and it is essential that I should be placed in possession of his plans."

He turned back his cuff and glanced at the ornate watch on his wrist.

"I will give you precisely one hour in which to come clean, as our friend here would put it. If, at the end of that time, you choose to remain obstinate, I shall be left with no alternative but to hand you over to Brant's tender mercies. I need hardly say what that will mean!"

"I tell you I know nothing," Daphne sobbed, covering her face with her hands. "If what you say is true, why do you think I was going to—to kill myself? I'll tell you! Peter—Captain Mansfield—wanted to marry me, and I—I——" She broke off, shuddering violently.

Quong Li raised his eyebrows.

"How very romantic," he said coldly. He turned away, beckoning to the other. At the door he looked back. "Remember, you have just one hour," he added.

FOR a long time Daphne lay face downwards on the bed, her head pillowed in her arms. She seemed to be without feeling, without understanding, listening in a curiously detached way to the faint sounds which filtered into her prison through the barred window high up in the wall.

She had no idea where she was. Quite evidently Leng Fu had been sent to kidnap her from the hotel, acting on orders from Quong Li, but how they had discovered which way she had gone in order to catch up with her, and whether she was still in Hong Kong or not, she had no idea.

Not that it mattered. In an hour—less, now—Quong Li would carry out his threat and hand her over to Brant Ferguson.

There her imagination stopped. She knew that the American would go to any lengths to get what he wanted—and he had wanted her for a long time. Only the fact that Quong Li had the whip hand had so far kept him from laying violent hands on her.

Suddenly she sat upright, pushing the hair back from her eyes and staring round the room with distraught eyes. It was completely bare of furniture except for the bed and, as she soon perceived, there was nothing on the walls that would help her. Not a hook or a projection of any kind, and the window was out of reach.

Presently she got up and began pacing to and fro, her mind striving desperately for a way of escape.

That she could ever hope to convince either of the two men that she really did know nothing was to indulge in wishful thinking. They would never believe her.

A muffled sound from the other side of the closed door suddenly held her attention.

Up to now she had heard only the distant sound of a passing car, and the lapping of water.

What she heard now was different. It seemed to be a combination of a groan and a thud, followed by a tense silence.

Then, to her horror, the door knob began slowly to turn.

Breathless, she turned to face whatever menace the opening door held for her, her body stiff with fear.

Then, as it opened wider, and a lithe figure in khaki shorts and a shirt stepped into the room, she uttered a stifled gasp and shrank back against the wall, her eyes wide and dark with disbelief.

"Peter!" she exclaimed, in a half-frightened whisper.

He made an urgent sign for silence, closing the door and listening. After a moment he turned to her, his face set.

In a swift registration of impressions she saw he carried a revolver and that his khaki shirt was damp with perspiration. There was a purple bruise just below his right temple.

"Quick," he said, not stopping to explain. He grasped her wrist. "Outside there's a long passage running both ways. Follow me and don't make a noise. If anyone comes leave me to deal with him. Above all be *quiet*. Come on."

Outside in the passage way her eyes fell on the still form of a huge Chinaman lying face downwards on the floor. With a quick shudder she stepped over him, realising the origin of the groan and the thud she had heard.

There was a patch of sky to be seen through an opening at the far end of the passage. It was scarcely lighter than the gloom they were leaving. Beyond that she was content to follow Peter blindly.

Presently he stopped in the opening, the grasp of his fingers the one reassuring fact in a medley of impressions.

Ahead she could see the water lapping against the piles of a rotting wharf, the riding lights of an anchored junk in the distance. A flight of stone steps led downwards, wet and slimy, and fastened to a ring near the lower one a small boat rocked gently on the tide.

"Okay!" Peter whispered tersely. "Down you go and lie flat in the bottom of the boat. Whatever happens, don't move."

HALF and hour later Peter rested on the boat's oars and listened.

Away in the distance the lights of Hong Kong twinkled and beckoned, but to Daphne they seemed as far away as when they had started.

Behind, the mainland loomed dark and mysterious, while seaward the line of the horizon was broken by the humped, mysterious shapes of the numerous small islands which dotted the bay.

"I think we're pretty safe now," Peter smiled suddenly. "Safe enough to risk a smoke, at any rate."

He came and knelt beside her on the floorboards, fumbling in his pockets. A moment later she saw the flash of his cigarette case.

"Would you ike one, darling?" he enquired gently.

Daphne caught her underlip between her teeth. Waves of emotion passed through her, keeping pace with a mounting hysteria that she had to fight down.

There was something strangely incongruous in the calm way he asked the question, coming as it did on top of all that had happened. As if, she thought absurdly, they were out for a pleasure trip in the moonlight, with not a care in in the world.

"Please," she said, in a hoarse whisper. She took the cigarette he handed to her and waited for his light.

"Open your robe," he said. "I don't want the flare of a match to be seen."

Obediently she did so, making a shield between him and the way they had come.

As he struck the match he saw that she was shivering and his brow went dark with hate.

"Quong Li will pay for this," he said menacingly. "No doubt he hoped that by leaving your frock and shoes at the water's edge we would jump to the obvious conclusion, namely, that you had taken your own life. He forgot one thing, however. In any case, I knew that you would never do a thing like that."

She looked steadily at him, but her eyes were misting.

"I—I was going to, Peter."

"Why?" he asked frowning. "What ever for?"

"Because——" She hesitated and looked away, the cigarette trembling between her fingers. "I think you know, Peter."

"Oh, my dearest," he said huskily.

He threw away his un-smoked cigarette, and next moment she felt his hands close over hers, felt herself drawn close to his strong young body.

There was a sudden blank in the working of her mind, an incapacity to take in any more, so that she could only look beseechingly at him, while tears welled from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Peter held her gently, not speaking for a moment, allowing the mere fact of their oneness to do all that was necessary.

At length he said—

"Listen, my dearest. You are quite safe now. Do you understand? Nothing can harm you, nothing touch you any more. Like a fool it never occurred to me that you were in actual danger, you see. As far as I knew I had taken care of everything and it wasn't until I learned that Quong Li and his gangster pal had escaped arrest that I woke up! By the time I got to your hotel it was too late."

"But—but how did you guess—I mean ——"

"Quong Li's henchmen had been to the hotel and ransacked your room," he said. "That told me all I needed to know. Then one of our patrols brought in your dress and shoes. They had been found on the water-front, and had quite evidently been put there *to* be found. But it didn't make sense, you see—your room being ransacked in that manner. I felt quite certain, then, that Quong Li had kidnapped you and taken you to one of his hide-outs. I suppose he thought you had been working with us and wanted to find out what we knew?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Yes," she said, after a moment. "He refused to believe me when I told him I knew nothing. I realised, of course, that you must have known all along that I—that the reason I wanted to go to the Cherry Blossom was to carry Quong Li's package, and so Quong Li was sure I had told you. If you hadn't come when you did——" She broke off, shuddering.

"Yes, I knew," he said gently. "But we can talk about all that later. Meantime we've got other fish to fry."

A sound that Daphne had been hearing sub-consciously for some minutes became louder and she recognised it for the throbbing of a motor boat engine.

Peter stood up, staring into the darkness; then he took a small electric torch from his pocket and sent little stabbing flashes of light into the night.

An answering flash shone briefly for a moment and the sound of the motor deepened as the boat from which it came turned towards them.

A minute or so later Daphne saw the sleek lines of a police launch cleaving the water, setting their boat rocking as it circled them. Then someone hailed them and there was a gentle bump as the two boats touched.

Then came Lieutenant "Johnny" Butter's voice:

"Okay, Peter? You made it all right, then!"

Afterwards the friendly faces in the glow of the hooded lights, the feel of a firm deck under her feet, the sight of the steel-helmeted military police.

Daphne was helped into the tiny cabin down three steps, and there Peter and Johnny Butters joined her.

Johnny looked very different from the cheerful young man she had seen in the night club. Now, there was an air of quiet efficiency about him that was most impressive.

"Here you are, old man," he said, handing Peter a signal pad with some notes on it. "This message came a minute or so before we saw your light. 'Operation Round-up successfully. All suspects in custody. Message ends.' Not a bad night's work, eh?"

Peter scanned the message, his face impassive in the light from the cabin lamp. Then he laid the pad on a locker.

"Well, that's that," he said, with a deep sigh. He rubbed his hand wearily across his forehead. "All being well, this should see the end of the most dangerous gang of crooks that has ever operated in Hong Kong. It's been a long job, Johnny!"

THERE was a closed car waiting at the dockside when they landed. Peter hurried Daphne across to it and helped her inside, getting in as well.

Without waiting for orders the army driver started up and drove them swiftly out of the town.

"I'm taking you to Mrs. Waters," Peter said, in answer to her question. "She's the wife of my commanding officer and you are to be her guest for a few days. Your things will be brought to you from the hotel some time to-morrow—I've no doubt Mrs. Waters will be able to lend you what you need until then."

"But——"

"There are no buts about it, my dear," he said calmly, not allowing her to finish. "For one thing, you will be quite safe there and for another, you're an important witness, so we are not taking any chances Mrs. Waters is an awfully good sort and she offered at once to have you as soon as she knew."

Daphne said nothing for a moment. She was still dazed by the suddenness with which everything had happened. There was so much she wanted to know, so many things to explain, but she knew they would have to wait until Peter was free to discuss them.

"You—you're hurt," she said at last, as the car turned into a drive flanked by flowering oleander trees. "Promise me that you will get that bruise attended to before you do anything else, Peter."

"That?" He put up a hand and fingered the bruise with tentative fingers. "That was our friend in the passage outside your room. He managed to get one in before I bonked him. They had left him on guard outside your door."

"I know—I heard him fall." She shuddered. "Oh, Peter, if you hadn't come . . ."

He turned and smiled at her just as the car stopped in front of a charming bungalow with lights streaming from nearly every window.

"But you see I *did* come," he said gently. He laid a hand on hers for a moment. "And now you must try to forget about it all. We're going to be married as soon as I can get things settled. After this, I'm not going to let you out of my sight if I can help it."

She looked up at him blankly, scarcely taking in what he said.

She got out of the car blindly, responding mechanically to the grip of his hand on her arm.

There was a bright light in her eyes and when she tried to walk she was overcome by a sensation of nausea, of utter powerlessness.

Beryl Waters came hurrying out, followed by her husband, a tall, soldierly figure with iron grey hair.

Peter said something but there was a queer singing in Daphne's ears that prevented her from understanding what was being said. She stood rigid, afraid to move.

She heard Mrs. Waters say something and Peter's low-toned reply. It was something about delayed shock and reaction but it did not make sense. Nothing made sense any more——

She felt herself being propelled into a large, charmingly furnished room, brilliantly lit. She closed her eyes against the sudden glare, shuddering and clinging weakly to Peter's arm.

"I——" she stammered weakly. "Please ——"

Beryl Waters put an arm round her shoulders.

"Leave her to me," she said quietly. Then to Daphne: "You are going to spend the night here, my dear. It's all arranged. You will be quite safe. There's a guard in the grounds and a sentry will be posted at the gate. You have nothing to worry about any more."

AFTER she had been put to bed Daphne lay for a long time with her eyes closed, unable to sleep.

Mrs. Waters had left a night light burning in the room and after bringing the exhausted girl a hot drink, had impressed upon her that both she and her husband were within call if they were wanted, and with a final injunction not to worry, had left her to her thoughts.

Beryl Waters returned to the sitting-room to find Peter and her husband, who had been discussing the night's events. Peter had been given a drink and was smoking a cigarette.

"That poor child," she said. "What she

must have gone through! You'll have to be very gentle with her, Peter. She will be in the mood to start at shadows for a long time to come."

"I know," he said sombrely. "It's probably quite unethical, but I would give a lot to have ten minutes alone in a room with that blighter Ferguson! I saw Daphne's face when I opened that door—she thought it was him come back again."

"The brute!" said Mrs. Waters. "Men like that oughtn't to be allowed to live. That horrible Quong Li, too."

"If there's any justice in the world they won't be," said Peter grimly. "Apart from all we have against them they're wanted for murder."

"How on earth did a girl like that come to be mixed up in Quong Li's racket?" enquired Colonel Waters.

Peter sighed.

"You remember the case of Dr. Westlake, don't you, sir?"

"Yes, of course. He's the explorer who disappeared while on his travels through Western China some time ago, isn't he? We had some official enquiries put out about him, I remember, with the usual negative result."

"Well, he is—or was—Daphne's father," Peter told them quietly. "I don't know the details yet, but I gather she came here to try to find out whether he was being held as a political prisoner by the Communists. One of the people she met was Quong Li who offered her a job as hostess at the San Fee when her money ran out."

"Good heavens!"

"That's not all," Peter went on. "Apparently he held out the bait of having contacts on the other side and promised to help Daphne discover what had happened to her father. As she trusted him he was able to make use of her to take messages or collect them when it would have been dangerous for one of his own thugs to do so and then, when she was sufficiently involved, he held the threat of informing the police over her head."

"So that was how he was able to induce her to take that stuff to the Cherry Blossom?" said Colonel Waters.

"It was partly that," Peter agreed, with a shrug. "Luckily, by that time we had one of our people planted in the San Fee as a waiter, so that we knew pretty well all that was going on. I knew that Daphne had the job of handing over that package and, as you are aware, we had the place unobtrusively cordoned off."

"How did she manage to hand it over if you were there all the time, Peter?" Beryl Waters asked interestedly.

"She pretended to have left her scarf at the table where we had been sitting," Peter explained. "She asked me to go back for it, and thought I had done so. Actually, I wasn't very far away and saw the whole thing. I gave the signal for the raid to start before I got back into the car."

"Poor child," Mrs. Waters murmured sympathetically. "She must have been desperate, Peter."

"I know." He nodded. "I blame myself for what happened afterwards. I didn't know until too late that Brant Ferguson had escaped to warn Quong Li, otherwise I would have acted sooner than I did. As it was, by the time I got to the hotel, where she had a room, it was too late. *They* thought she had betrayed them, you see."

"Well, you will have all your lives together in which to make up to her for what she has suffered," said Mrs. Waters softly. "Now I'm going to get some lint and attend to that bruise of yours. How did it happen?"

"I think I must have knocked into a lamp-post in the dark," said Peter, without batting an eyelid. "Frightful things, lamp-posts. You never know when there's one about."

Mrs. Waters looked properly sceptical.

"I suggest you try that one on the Marines, Peter," she said. "They might believe you—I know I don't."

## A NEW DAWN!

DAPHNE was not allowed to get up for the whole of the next day. When she protested there was nothing wrong with her, Mrs. Waters threatened to call in the doctor.

The threat was enough to cause Daphne to subside. thinking that it was rather nice to be fussed over for a change.

Truth to tell, she was in no fit state to argue. She was still suffering violently from reaction, a fact which Mrs. Waters was the first to recognise.

Thus, when Peter came to enquire how the patient was she sent him away without allowing him to see her.

"You've got to give her a little time to get over it all, Peter," Mrs. Waters said sagely. "She has had a dreadful shock—the experience she went through on that island is enough to have unhinged anyone less courageous. You can't expect her to feel up to talking about it yet."

"I don't want to talk about it," he protested mildly. "We've got more important things to discuss."

"Just like a man," she said, giving him a pat on the arm. "Evidently you don't know much about women, Peter. Don't you realise that you won't be able to discuss anything until Daphne has got the past out of her mind?"

"But she was an innocent party to it all," he said.

"I daresay she was, Peter, but she doesn't think so. Take my advice and wait another day at least. She'll feel better to-morrow. You can send her some flowers if you like."

"All right, Mrs. Waters, I'll do that. I daresay you know best," he said, taking himself off.

Daphne's things were brought up from the hotel during the morning. They had been packed by the chambermaid, a bright-faced Eurasian girl to whom Daphne had been kind on more than one occasion, and she had seen to it that everything was there.

With the luggage there was an air mail letter from Daphne's god-mother in England who knew nothing of her circumstances.

Daphne had written regularly, carefully phrased, non-committal letters that never so much as hinted she was in need of funds, or that she had taken a situation as a dance hostess in a Hong Kong night club.

The letter left Daphne a prey to a sudden nostalgia that was almost unbearable, bringing with it, as it did, the fragrance of the English countryside in June, the peace and quiet of an old cathedral town.

She had a sudden longing to go there, far away from this beautiful, exotic country where violence and terror went hand in hand with so much that was lovely and tender. Two heavy tears welled from her eyes and ran slowly down her cheeks.

She had yet to tell Peter the truth about her part in the plot to outwit the military authorities. No doubt he imagined she was an innocent party and though her partial confession in the boat should have warned him, he had been more concerned with comforting her at the time.

Once he knew——

She shivered suddenly as if a cold wind had blown in through the open window, thinking of that squalid room on the island where she had been kept a hapless prisoner, of all that had taken place there and of the miracle of Peter's arrival.

How he had discovered her whereabouts she had no idea, but it seemed likely that the security police had spies and informers working for them and it followed that, once her disappearance was known, the net would be thrown wide.

From something her hostess had let fall Daphne could guess why Peter had ventured into the lion's den alone. He had been afraid of what might—almost certainly would—happen to her if the island stronghold where Quong Li had taken refuge was raided while she was still a prisoner.

The door opened softly and Beryl Waters came in with a vase of bronze chrysanthemums.

"There! Those ought to cheer you up, my dear," she smiled brightly. She placed the vase on the bedside table and stood back to admire the effect. "Your young man sent them with his love! If you are good you shall see him to-morrow."

"He—he is very kind," Daphne stammered, her colour rising.

She looked wistfully at the lovely blooms, a little pang of emotion going through her. It was rather wonderful to think of Peter buying flowers for her when he had so much to do and to occupy his mind.

There was an air of shrinking about her that moved Beryl Waters to an extent that surprised even herself. She sat down on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on one of Daphne's.

"You're worrying about everything, aren't you?" she asked softly. "You mustn't, you know. You've been very brave up to now and you must go on being brave for Peter's sake as well as your own."

Daphne's eyes went dark.

"I'm not a bit brave," she murmured, looking away. "I—I was frightened all the time I was on that awful island. I—I'm a coward, really. If Peter hadn't come I think I would have said anything to—to——"

"But Peter *did* come," said Beryl, when her voice broke. "In any case, you can't know what you might have done. No one has a right to judge, in any case."

"You are trying to make things easier for me, but nothing will alter the fact that I have been a little fool," said Daphne miserably. "I wonder you don't despise me."

"Why on earth should I?" Beryl laughed. "We all make mistakes at some time or another, my dear. You tried to do what the authorities failed to do and landed yourself in a mess as a result. If you had had more experience of the ways of the East you would have known that it was hopeless to expect to discover news about your father in the way you set out to do. I can't think why I didn't hear about you—I might have saved you from all this if I had."

Daphne smiled bitterly. She did not remind her hostess of the social gulf which existed between the wives and daughters of high ranking officers and those not so fortunately placed.

To a woman of Beryl Water's standing it was unthinkable that an English girl should be on her own in a place like Hong Kong, with neither influence nor friends, so that she simply could not enter into the ramifications of all that had transpired to force her guest into the clutches of a notorious gangster like Quong Li.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," she said. "I felt I had to do something. Nobody seemed to mind, or they shrugged and said there was nothing to be done. And Quong Li appeared to have influence. He said he had sources from which he could obtain information about my father. Later, he asked me to do things . . . take messages . . . once, I remember, I had to

meet someone who came by 'plane from Formosa. Even then I didn't realise what it all meant—Quong Li explained it all away by saying that it was necessary to guard against the Chinese Communists finding out. He said they had spies everywhere."

"Then you are not to blame for anything that happened. It was foolish of you to be so trusting, that was all."

"No!" Daphne shook her head. "It isn't as easy as all that. I wish it were. You see, I discovered—quite by accident—that Quong Li was a Communist spy and that he was also one of the chief organisers of the drug-traffic in Hong-Kong. I wanted to leave—to refuse to act as his go-between—but he said that I was too deeply involved. He threatened to send evidence to the police and," her voice dropped a note, "he said that my father was a political prisoner in Peking and that if I didn't toe the line it would be the worse for *him*. That's what I meant when I said I was a coward—I ought to have gone to the police and told them what I knew. Instead, I went on . . . doing what I knew to be wrong."

Beryl squeezed her hand.

"You poor child," she murmured sympathetically. "I think I know why you have told me all this. But it isn't any use doing the job by halves, you know. As far as Peter is concerned I think he knows, or guesses, most of it but whether he does or not you've got to tell him. It's not going to be easy, I know, and the publicity that is bound to result from Quong Li's trial is going to try you both to the limit. I've been fending off reporters all morning and it will become worse once you are up and about. But if you really love each other, as I believe you do, then nothing can really harm you. In fact, I agree with Peter that the sooner you are married, the better."

"No!" Daphne shook her head, her mouth set in obstinate lines. "I've already told Peter that I can't marry him. You forget—I deliberately used him to carry those papers to the road-house and hand them over. Apart from all that, I would only drag him down. People would say—"

"Now you're being sorry for yourself," said Beryl severely. "Gracious, child, don't you give Peter credit for a *little* understanding? You were a pawn in a very ruthless game played by unscrupulous men—men who would not have hesitated to kill you if it suited their ends. If you want to know, I blame Peter as much as anyone for what happened that night at the Cherry Blossom.

"He knew you were carrying that package—he knew why you had suddenly agreed to let him take you out and he should have taken you into his confidence. "But to be fair to him," she continued, "I don't think he knew about the threat to your father, so I imagine he was hoping that *you* would confide in *him*. Whichever way it was, it is behind you now and you've got to look forward, for his sake and your own. You won't help matters by making him utterly miserable, will you?"

She rose to her feet and stood smiling down at her guest.

"I must go now and you've got to try to get some sleep. And . . . don't worry. It will all come right. You see if it doesn't. If there is one person in the world who will never fail you it is Peter."

It was dusk the following evening when Peter came to where Daphne was sitting in the garden. Most of the morning had been taken up by an interview with the superintendent of police, who had called to obtain a statement from her, accompanied by a shorthand writer.

A kindly, grey-haired man of about sixty, he had explained to Daphne that the case against Quong Li and his confederates was being dealt with by the civil authorities, and that in due course they would be tried on the various charges arising out of their sinister activities.

"In matters of this kind we co-operate with the military security forces, you see, Miss Westlake," he said. "They have placed us in possession of the evidence they have collected against these men, but you will appreciate that your evidence will be required as well."

"I should have thought you would regard me as an accomplice," Daphne had said bitterly.

The superintendent had smiled and shaken his head.

"What you did, you did under duress, Miss Westlake," he had answered. "We are concerned with punishing the guilty—not the innocent victim of their intrigues. You will be rendering a signal service by giving evidence that will help us to secure a conviction and that will more than off-set the fact that, had you been wise, you would have come to us when you first suspected what was going on."

The taking down of her statement had occupied nearly two hours.

At the end of the time Daphne was both emotionally and physically exhausted, so that Beryl had ordered her to lie down, and drawing the curtains, had left her to rest.

She had fallen into a deep, exhausted slumber and had not awakened until Beryl had come into her room, with a tea tray in her hands.

"Peter telephoned to say that he would be here about six," she had told the girl. "Are you sure you feel up to seeing him? I can easily telephone and put him off if you would like me to do so."

Daphne had shaken her head.

"It's all right, thank you, Mrs. Waters. I—I'm quite fit, really. Only a little tired."

"That's splendid," Beryl had declared brightly. "I've got to go out shortly and won't be back until about seven, so you will have the place to yourselves. Peter will be staying to dinner, I hope."

Seated in the garden, Daphne gazed over the bay with troubled eyes.

That Peter loved her she knew, yet had she the right to burden him with the stigma that would attach itself to her as a result of all that had happened?

She could imagine the raised eyebrows, the covert whispers that would follow them everywhere and seemed to hear the sub-acid comments that would be uttered as soon as they were out of hearing.

"My dear, didn't you *know*? She was a dance hostess at one of those simply *frightful* places in Hong Kong and got mixed up in a perfectly *horrible* case. Something to do with drug-running, I believe."

She looked up at the sound of footsteps on the gravel and saw Peter coming towards her. He was in uniform and looked handsomer than ever in the failing light, which softened the outlines of the bruise at his temple.

At the sight of it she felt a lump in her throat and tears pricked her eyelids. He had risked his life to save her and been hurt in the process . . . had she the right to deny him the happiness he sought?

"Daphne!" he said softly. "Daphne, my darling!"

He took her hands and drew her gently to her feet. Then his arms went around her and he held her as he had held her in the boat while they waited for the launch to pick them up.

She raised her eyes and searched his face.

"Oh, Peter," she said, and laid her head on his shoulder.

"It's all right," he murmured, stroking her hair. "It's all right, my dearest one. Don't try to say anything—it isn't necessary. Words don't mean much at a time like this, you know. It's how we feel that counts."

He cupped her chin and tilted up her face, kissing her gently.

Then, as he felt her lips move under his own, his grasp tightened and he drew a deep breath, half of release, half of anticipation.

"My love!" he said softly.

Daphne smiled with quivering lips.

"Such an unwise and generous love, Peter darling. Are you sure you won't regret it?"

"What have I to regret other than the time we've wasted?" he asked almost gaily. He led her to a seat beneath a magnolia tree and took her hand, holding it tightly in his own. "Beryl told me all that you told her," he went on gently. I had guessed a great deal of it, as you can imagine, so I that I knew that you were being used by Quong Li. One of the waiters at the San Fee was an agent of ours and kept us informed. What I didn't know was how you came to be mixed up with him in the first place, and for that reason I had to be cautious. Otherwise, I would have told you that my frequent visits to the night club were part of a plan to put an end to the activities of the entire gang."

"That doesn't explain why you were so angry with me the night we went to the Cherry Blossom, Peter," she said sadly.

"I was unjust," he said, with a deep sigh. "You see, I gave you every chance to confide in me—to place yourself under my protection—and you seemed to evade them. I wondered if I had been mistaken—after all, I didn't know how much *you* knew, you see, and it was always possible that you were aware of the contents of that package you handed over. It happened to contain details of a plot that would have had far-reaching consequences at a time of great international tension, as well as the names of those involved. If we hadn't intercepted it, heaven only knows what might have happened. One thing was quite certain—I couldn't take any chances."

"I see," she murmured, her eyes downcast. "I didn't know, Peter. What I did was despicable enough. I—I betrayed your trust in me."

"No, you didn't," he said quickly. "I've tried to make that clear. We were on opposite sides of the fence for the time being—that wasn't your fault but true nevertheless. In short, I *didn't* trust you. That sounds queer, considering I loved you, but what I'm trying to say is, as far as Quong Li and his activities were concerned I was fully on my guard. So you see,"—with a smile—"you haven't anything to get worked up about."

"You're determined to let me down lightly," she said, with a sigh. "It doesn't alter the way I feel about it, though."

"But you mustn't," he said. He took her by the shoulders and turned her half round to face him. "I don't need proof of the fact that you were forced to do what you did. If it were so, you gave it to me when you told me what you intended to do when you left your hotel that morning. Actually,"—he smiled with infinite tenderness—"I owe Quong Li a debt of gratitude for kidnapping you. If he hadn't done so I wouldn't have been sitting here now asking you when you are going to marry me!"

"Oh, you're impossible," she said, with a half laugh, half sigh. "Don't you realise——"

"I realise that we love each other and that nothing else matters," he broke in, almost sternly. "Quong Li's trial—not to mention Ferguson's—is going to be an ordeal for both of us and for that reason I'm going to make sure that no one can point a finger at you. I'm due for some leave and with your consent we'll use it

for our honeymoon. An American plane leaves Hong-Kong every other day for Honolulu and that's where we're going. We shall have to come back for the trial and after that we're going *home*. How does the idea suit you?"

"What about your parents? Won't they——?"

"They will love you as I do—for yourself," he interrupted. "Any more objections?"

"As long as you are sure, Peter. That's all I worry about," she murmured.

He gathered her into his arms.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," he said fervently, and bending his head, kissed her on the lips.

A little later she stirred in his arms.

"How did you know where I had been taken, Peter?"

"That was comparatively easy," he said. "It was partly guesswork and partly intelligent anticipation. We knew that Quong Li had a hide-out on the island and had taken the precaution of keeping it watched. It happens to be in Communist waters,"—he grinned—"but we have ways and means of finding out what we want to know. When I heard that a launch had been seen making for it shortly after dawn, on the morning you were kidnapped, I was sure that you had been taken there." He shrugged. "The rest was easy."

"Easy?" she whispered. "Easy? Oh, Peter, you might have been killed."

It was like a cry of pain and he answered it by gathering her into his arms, holding her so close that she could feel the beating of his heart against her own.

"All that is behind us, my darling," he said huskily. "We are all apt to lose our way in the darkness, but if we are true to ourselves, the dawn will surely break. It has broken for you and me, my love."

"Oh, Peter darling," she whispered. "Can you truly forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," he said gently, and sealed the declaration with a kiss.

THREE weeks later Daphne stood looking through the palm trees to where the surf broke on the Honolulu beach.

She was a different girl from the one with the shadowed eyes whom Peter had rescued from the island that fateful night, and but for one thing she would have been completely happy.

They had been married by special licence a fortnight earlier and life had taken on a roseate hue for both of them.

Just as Peter's gentleness and consideration moved her to depths she had not known she possessed, so did her shy passion thrill him, and Quong Li and all that was associated with him became but the shadowy memory of a nightmare.

She looked round to see Peter coming towards her, an expression on his face that puzzled and slightly alarmed her. He was holding a paper in his and hand looked excited, as if he had had some momentous news.

"Peter! What is it?" she cried, turning to meet him. Then her glance fell to the paper he was holding and she went pale. "You—you've had a cable?" she stammered

"Yes, my darling, it came just now. I wish I had been instrumental in bringing it about, for then I could have given you the news as a real wedding present. But never mind, it is what the cable says that counts. Read it for yourself."

It was a service cable, and was characteristically brief. Addressed to Peter it merely said—

KINDLY INFORM MRS. MANSFIELD HER FATHER DR. WESTLAKE ALIVE AND WELL. HANDED OVER BY COMMUNISTS YESTERDAY. PROCEEDING TO HONOLULU BY AIR TO-DAY.

Dazed, Daphne looked up, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Peter," she said gaspingly. "That means——"

"That you will be united with your father to-morrow morning, my sweetheart," he said gently. "We shall have to wait until he gets here to learn what actually happened to him, but I think I can guess. What matters is that he is safe."

She turned to him, her eyes slowly filling with tears.

"Oh, Peter," she said weakly, "you've given me the most wonderful wedding present I could ever have. I feel—oh, I can't tell you how I feel! There just aren't any words."

He smiled and put his arm around her waist.

"Did you notice what the cable said?" he asked, tenderly teasing. "Look—please inform Mrs. Mansfield. *Mrs. Mansfield!* How does it feel to be a married woman?"

Daphne laughed happily and looked up at him, her eyes like stars.

"It feels fine, Peter darling," she said softly, and surrendered her lips for his kiss.

THE END.



# LOVE IN REVOLT

## By Valerie Vincent

JESS MILWARD glanced at the clock, and sighed. Only another half-hour and it would be time for him to go.

"That beastly thing's going on wheels!" Roddy complained, following her glance. "I'll swear it said only five and twenty past three when I looked at it a moment ago, darling, now it's trying to tell me that it's four o'clock."

Jess squeezed his hand and smiled, mistily.

"You will write me to-morrow, won't you, Roddy dear?" she said. "It's going to be terribly lonely here without you."

"Oh yes, I shall write to you every day," he returned smilingly. "And you will write me too, won't you, darling?"

"Every day," Jess promised.

"Three months!" Roddy went on dolefully. "It seems an awfully long time, doesn't it, Jess?"

"Oh, but the time will soon pass, Roddy," she told him smilingly, trying hard to make her voice sound as though she believed it. "And then, if all goes well——"

"Yes, that's right, darling," he broke in, "I shall be back for Easter. After that, there'll only be another three months at Manchester and I shall be out of my time and ready for my first job. I wonder where they'll send me?"

Jess shrugged. So far as she was concerned it did not greatly matter to which branch of the firm they sent him. All that mattered to her was the all-important fact that, in six months' time, they would be able to marry and be together for always.

It was to that end that for the past two years they had both been saving every penny they possibly could. Roddy's first position when he was out of his pupil age would be only £450 a year—not enough upon which to live and at the same time to furnish a flat.

But later on, things would be very different, of course. Roddy was already a B.Sc. and in three more years he would be able to write the letters A.M.I.E.E. after his name. Then there would be no limit to his earning capacity.

But neither of them had wanted to wait until then to be married. They wanted to marry the moment he was appointed to his first job. And to make that possible, they had decided to save £300 to furnish a small flat. For two years they had done nothing and gone nowhere that cost money.

While other young couples went to the pictures, or dancing, or to restaurants for a meal, Jess and Roddy went for long walks in the country instead. They had given up cigarettes, pictures, outings, eating out, subscriptions to the tennis club they both loved—everything and anything that cost money. Even their clothes they had cut to the very minimum of necessity.

And neither had cared. To neither had it been even a sacrifice. Always they had been together; always they had been supremely happy and contented.

Jess looked at her fiance now as he sat beside her on Mrs. Cadby's sofa, and her heart yearned over him. She supposed that, for both of them, it had been a case of love at first sight.

Never would she forget that memorable morning when she had looked up from her typewriter to find Roddy standing before her—a tall, shy-looking young man with rumpled brown hair, the bluest of blue eyes, a smudge of oil across his forehead and a diffident, hesitant sort of smile curving his well-cut mouth.

"I—I'm afraid," he muttered, apologetically, "that I've got into the wrong department. I was sent to find Mr. Watkins, but I seem to have lost my bearings. Would you be so kind as to redirect me to him?"

"I'll do more—I'll take you there," Jess answered smiling, realising that he was a new man. And as they set off together across the yard at the back: "It's a pretty big place, this," she said. "It takes most people some little time to find their way about."

"I—I'm not used to this place yet," Roddy stammered. "I've come from the Plymouth factory."

Jess asked him what department he was in, and he told her the Erecting Shop.

"Actually, I'm a third year pupil," he explained. "My name is Dane—Rodney Dane."

"I am Jessiemond Milward," she told him, on the spur of the moment.

"Jessiemond?" he repeated. "That's a pretty name. I've never heard that one before."

Jess laughed.

"No," she said, "and I don't think it is a name—not really. It seems that my father wanted me christened Rosamond, and my mother Jessica, and in the end the clergyman suggested they combined the two in Jessiemond. So they did, though I've never been called anything but Jess."

"Oh, but Jess is a sweet name, too," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've been called Roddy all my life. There are lots of people

who are not known by their baptismal names, of course."

When she returned to her own office, Jess wondered if she would meet him again, wondered who he was and all about him. And she was quite ridiculously pleased that he liked her name, though why she had told him of its origin she did not know. Certainly she had never told anyone else at the works about it, in spite of the many comments that had been made concerning its unusualness.

Then, strangely enough, that same evening the young man had caught up with her on her way home, and Jess learned that he was living in lodgings, as she herself was. He had inquired of her what one did with one's spare time in Bishop's Lea, and she told him that, apart from tennis and the pictures, there was not much one could do.

"Do you play tennis?" he asked.

And when Jess told him that she did, he said that tennis was his favourite game.

The result was that they went to the Works Club later on that evening, and if Jess—as the club's Number One single's player—had hoped to beat him at the game, she was mistaken; for Roddy was obviously her master from the very first serve. After that, they had jointed a doubles set and literally wiped the floor with their opponents.

"I suppose I ought to be starting, darling?" his voice reached Jess now, as she sat thinking of those early days.

She roused herself with an effort, and again glanced at the clock.

"Yes, I suppose you had, Roddy," she had to agree. But as the shadow of his imminent departure drew like a pall across her heart, she clutched at his arm and murmured—"Oh, Roddy, I—I'm afraid!"

"Afraid of what, sweetheart?" he asked, gazing at her in surprise.

"Oh, I—I don't know," she stammered. "Everything, I think. What on earth am I going to do without you for three whole months?"

Roddy slipped a protecting arm around her shoulders.

"If I knew what I was going to do without you, darling," he said tenderly, "I *could answer that* question of yours. As it is, all I can tell you is that there is nothing in the world you need be afraid of. I know perfectly well that you and I were fated to meet, Jess, fated to love and to marry. It was written in the Book before either of us was born, and what's written in the Book can neither be altered nor rubbed out. I belong to you as surely as you belong to me, and——"

"Oh, Roddy dear, are you—are you quite sure?" she broke in.

"Of course I'm sure, darling!" he answered stoutly, as she buried her face against his shoulder. "I love you, my dear Jess," he whispered his lips against her ear. "I fell hopelessly in love with you the first moment we met and shall always love you, no matter what happens. This is our first and final separation, and there will never be another. And it will soon pass, sweetheart.

"Don't forget, darling, that every day that dawns will be one less to keep us apart," he went on, "and with every day I shall be one day nearer coming back to you. I shall buy a special calendar and mark off each day as it passes, and round the date of Easter I shall put a thick red line. And if things get too bad between now and then—why, I'll avail myself of a Sunday excursion and dash down here to see you, my love."

Jess sighed.

"It's a lovely thought of yours, Roddy dear," she said, lifting her face to his. "But we must do nothing rash, you know. For one thing, it would cost too much money to come all that way for so short a time, and I'd hate to let you go back after only a few hours together."

"Well, we'll see, sweetheart," Roddy told her smilingly. "But in any event, I shall come for Easter, and hang the expense. I get four days then, and hail, rain, shine or snow I'm spending those four days with you, my darling."

"Oh, Roddy dear!" she whispered, winding her arms round his neck in a long embrace. "I—I shan't be able to kiss you properly at the railway station," she added tremulously, "so kiss me our real *au 'voir* now, Roddy."

It was a long, exquisitely tender kiss, and when at last Roddy released her, they could only stand staring at each other in awe and wonderment.

Then, pulling herself together, Jess slipped upstairs to her room for her hat and coat, while Roddy collected his bags from the hall where he had left them when calling for her.

Jess's landlady expressed surprise when she came to the door to see them off and found that they had decided to walk to the railway station. Roddy picked up his two suitcases and laughed.

"We are saving up to get married, Mrs. Cadby," he said. "When I'm getting a couple of thousand a year, we'll have our own car. And what's more, we'll take you up to London in it for a real night out!" he added jestingly.

"That's a promise, Mr. Dane!" she told him, smilingly.

And to her it was a real promise, for she never doubted that one day the young man would be earning such a salary. Her husband, who worked for the same firm, had told her a lot about "Jess's young man", and she knew all about where he was going.

When they arrived at the station, they had not long to wait for the train, and during the few minutes they had, could only stand silent, hand in hand. To Jess, it seemed like the end of the world—as indeed it would be the end of the world she had known and loved for the past two years.

For without Roddy, she would feel utterly lost with nothing to do, and nowhere to go. For two years he had filled her world, and been all in all to her. Now, for three long months, she was to be entirely on her own.

The train came in amid a roar of escaping steam and the hiss and squeak of the brakes.

"This is it, Jess darling," Roddy said tautly, releasing her hand and picking up his bags.

His face was hard-set, his mouth tight, and Jess knew that he was hating the separation every bit as much as she was herself, but there was nothing either of them could do about it.

"Never mind, Roddy dear," she sought to comfort him, as they hurried along the platform seeking a vacant seat in the train. "It won't be for long, and what is waiting for us at the end of it will make it all worthwhile, won't it, Roddy?"

"Yes, of course it will, darling," he said, with a forced smile, "and that's what we've got to remember."

Having found a seat and put his bags on the rack, Roddy stepped out on to the the platform again.

"Be happy, my darling," he whispered, taking her hand and giving it a tender squeeze. "And Jess, you—you won't forget me, will you?" he jerked out.

"Oh, Roddy dear, how—how can you ask such a thing?" she murmured brokenly. "How could I forget you? I—I love you too much for that."

"Yes, I know, sweetheart," he confessed. "But I wanted to hear you say it again, Jess, just to—to reassure myself."

As he was speaking, a porter came along the platform banging the doors.

"*Au 'voir*, my love—I'm not going to say goodbye," Roddy said, stooping to kiss her.

A moment later he was in the train and the porter had slammed the door. Instantly Roddy lowered the window and leaned out.

"I shall write you to-night, darling," he said—"and every night, until I come back at Easter."

"Yes, please do, Roddy dear, and I—and I shall write you . . ."

The guard blew his whistle and the train began to move.

"I love you!"

She saw Roddy's lips form the words, although she could hear nothing above the roar of escaping steam from the engine.

"And I you, Roddy!" she murmured, in a broken voice.

They waved to each other until the train had disappeared from view. Then, forlornly, Jess turned and made her way back to her lodgings through streets that seemed curiously dull and drab.

Three months! Those two words seemed to be hammering themselves on her heart. Three months—thirteen weeks—ninety-one days and ninety-one nights before she could hope to see Roddy again! It seemed impossible that she could ever live through them. Nobody to call for her in the morning, nobody to walk home with her at the end of the day—and above all, nobody there to love her.

"Just in time for tea, my dear!" Mrs. Cadby greeted her when she arrived home. "Did he go off all right."

"Yes, Roddy's gone," Jess murmured mournfully.

"Then come and sit down and have a nice cup of tea, Jess, and some of this toast I've made specially for you. Now give me your hat and coat," Mrs. Cadby went on in her brisk fashion. "He wouldn't want you to mope, you know. And thank your lucky stars that it isn't the war he's gone to, my dear, like my George had to in forty-one!"

Jess felt that food would choke her, but it was easier to make a pretence at eating than to argue the matter. The tea, at any rate, would be welcome.

"And if I were you, Jess, I'd go to the pictures to-night," Mrs. Cadby advised, when presently she began to clear away. "No point in hanging about the house and making yourself thoroughly miserable, is there? I remember I went to the pictures the night my George went off to the war. I think I'd have gone stark mad if I hadn't done something—what with thinking he was going to be killed or crippled for life or something. But he wasn't, thank Heaven! Nothing's ever as bad as you think it's going to be."

"I—I think I'll go for a walk," Jess murmured.

"Well, I shouldn't, if I were you," Mrs. Cadby told her with the privilege of long friendship—Jess had lived with her for two years now and almost from the first she had taken the girl under her wing. "Walking's all right in its way, but what you want to-night is something to lift things off your mind for a bit. Now you take my advice and walk yourself off to the pictures, my dear. Then come back, have your supper and go straight to bed, and you'll wake up in the morning feeling a new girl. Having been through it all myself, I know."

"No, Mrs. Cadby, I have some letters to write," Jess said. "I don't care much about going to the pictures, as you know."

"Yes, and that's why I suggest you should go to-night, Jess. It would be something

different, don't you see ? Something distracting."

"Oh no, I'd rather not," she said, with a sudden flash of irritability.

Mrs. Cadby said no more, but she knew what was the real reason behind Jess's refusal.

"And it's silly of the dear girl," she told her husband that night in discussing the matter with him. "It isn't right that a young girl should never go anywhere or do anything. You can carry this saving business a bit too far."

Her husband, who had never saved a penny in his life, nodded approvingly.

"Gets like a blessed mania if you don't watch it, Mary," he said.

"Not but what it wasn't all right when Mr. Dane was with her," went on Mrs. Cadby. "Being together made it easy, I suppose. But now she's on her own, with nothing to do and nowhere to go except sit and mope, it's no good for her."

"No good for anybody, my dear," agreed her husband. "And I'm afraid that young man of hers won't find it any too easy up in Manchester. They be a friendly lot up there. They'll want to take him out and about, I reckon, and if he don't go they won't like it. They'll think he's standoffish and superior. I know those chaps from when I was up at the Manchester factory that time, and they can make things mighty hard for him."

MEANWHILE, Jess was upstairs in her room pouring out her heart in her first letter to her fiance. She had never had occasion to write to Roddy before, for he had never been away from her in all the two years he had worked at the Bishop's Lea factory.

Actually, like herself, although for a different reason, Roddy had nowhere to go. Jess's parents were dead, and she was entirely alone in the world; but Roddy's parents were out in the Argentine where his father was a civil engineer. They had sent their son home, to school and university, and finally to the gigantic Morgan-Lloyd Electrical Corporation to complete his training as a an electrical engineer.

Jess wrote on until a quarter to eight, by which time she had filled six double pages of notepaper. It was her first love-letter, and in it was all her heart. Largely it was a recapitulation of the wonderful hours and days they had spent together—including a reminder of that never-to-be-forgotten evening when for the first time Roddy told her that he loved her.

She thought of that again as she sealed her letter into its envelope and addressed it to Roddy. It was one evening when they had walked out to a village with the curious name of Old Wives Cross.

They had been looking round the church in which Roddy had heard there were some famous brasses—he was greatly interested in ecclesiastical architecture and wherever they went on their country rambles, their first visit was always to the parish church. Upon this particular occasion, when they came to leave, they found that it had begun to rain and had, perforce, to take shelter for a while in the porch.

It was early autumn, and they stood for a time watching the rain beat down on the overgrown tombs and cracked and crumbling memorial of forgotten men and women whose very names had long since become obliterated by the weather and time. Behind and around them was the chill of the empty church, and in front of them the deepening dusk of the wet evening.

"Jess dear, I'm afraid you're cold!" Roddy remarked suddenly, as he noticed her shiver. He whipped off his overcoat and, despite her protests, wrapped it round her shoulders. "There, now, is that better?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Yes," she answered softly. "But now you'll be cold, Roddy."

"Oh no, I'm used to it, Jess. And, anyway, I don't matter, you know," he added lightly.

"Well, I don't know that I do—not very much," she said jestingly.

"You—you do to me, my dear Jess," and then it all came tumbling out. "In fact, you matter more than anyone in the world to me," Roddy went on. "I was just thinking about it as I was looking at those gravestones. I suppose those people thought the same about their people, and that it seemed to them that their day would last for ever, just as we think ours will."

He paused, then continued—

"And I was thinking, Jess, that time is so very short, really. Only a few years and it's all over, isn't it? And what a pity it is to waste even a single day! Oh, Jess dear," he added, a little breathlessly, "I love you! That's what I'm trying to tell you. Yes, I love you, and I want to marry you, darling—that is, if you will have me!"

Jess could hear him speaking now, could see his eager young face—a misty white oval in the dusk of the porch.

"Will you, Jess darling?" he had whispered ardently.

"Yes, Roddy," she had murmured. And then, afraid lest that should sound too bold—"I—I think so," she had added.

And she had suddenly found his arms around her, and his lips were on hers in a first, ecstatic kiss.

Roddy had then opened the door behind them and drew her gently into the church again.

"Jess dear," he said, his voice hushed in the centuries old silence, "I can think of no better place than this in which a man can declare his undying love for the girl he adores. There's goodness here, and understanding. Can't you feel it my darling?"

And Jess had felt it. It had descended upon her like the peace of an evening benediction.

### THE BEST LAID SCHEMES . . .

WHEN Jess awoke next morning, she considered for a moment or two. Then, remembering what had happened, she jumped out of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown, and hurried downstairs to fetch Roddy's promised letter.

She found it lying the the hall, and her heart sank as she saw that it was only a letter-card. She stood staring at it for a second or two, remembering the long letter that she had written to him, then, at a sound from above, she snatched it up and hurried back to her room.

But it was all right, she saw, when she had carefully torn off the edging of the letter-card and opened it out.

"My very own darling", Roddy had written, and gone on to say that his train had arrived in Manchester one and a half hours late owing to fog on the line, and that he was writing this on the station in case there should be a similar delay with the mail train going south.

"*Because I want you to have something from me before you leave home to-morrow morning, sweetheart*," he wrote, "*this is just to remind you that I love you and am thinking of you all the time. I shall write a proper letter when I reach my digs, and post it to you to-morrow. So until then, my darling Jess, remember that I am your very own loving sweetheart—Roddy.*"

"*Your very own loving sweetheart—Roddy*," she murmured softly as she kissed the letter-card and held it against her heart for a long moment.

Silly of her, no doubt, Jess told herself, but Roddy's tender words had comforted her tremendously, and to-night she would sleep with the letter-card beneath her pillow—Roddy's first love-letter to her!

That morning, for the first time in two years, Jess walked alone to the office. As she left home, she had glanced automatically along the road for Roddy, but only to turn quickly when she remembered that that he was far away in Manchester.

In a way, she supposed, he would have the easier part in their separation since in Manchester there would be nothing to remind him of herself or of the days that had gone. Whereas, for her, every road and every corner was literally alive with memories—and each, as she came to it, served only as a fresh reminder of her loneliness.

She thought of Roddy a lot that day. Whenever her work permitted, Jess fell to wondering what kind of digs the firm had found for him and if they were comfortable and the food good.

One of the girls in the office had formerly worked in the Manchester branch, and during the lunch hour, Jess sought her out and asked what kind of a place it was and exactly what kind of work they did up there. The girl informed her that they made dynamos and giant transformers for power stations at home and abroad, and that nearly all the firm's pupils finished their time at the Manchester branch.

"I knew one of the young men," the girl went on, "and he told me that their whole future with the firm rested upon how well they passed through the last stage of their training."

Jess determined to pass on this information to Roddy in her next letter. Not that she had any fears for *his* future—she knew him too well for that. But it would do no harm to tell him what the girl had said.

When, at last, she had finished her work for the day, Jess still sat on at her typewriter. There was nothing to hurry for now; there was no one waiting for her and she had nothing to do save write what was to be her daily letter to Roddy. The problem she saw facing her now was how she was going to occupy herself for the rest of the evening—and the rest of all the evenings—after she had posted her letter?

Obviously she could not sit about the house all the evening until it was time to go to bed, and in the last two years she had lost touch with the girls she used to go out with before she knew Roddy. Sally Wright had a young man of her own, and Mary Coulter, with whom she had gone to the pictures and the occasional musical recitals which, from time to time, were given in Bishop's Lea, had transferred to the firm's Bristol branch where her sister worked.

In those days, too, Jess had played tennis three or four evenings a week, but now that she was saving to get married, she could not afford the subscription or the incidental expenses. Moreover, she was hopleessly out of practice after all this time.

"I must go for long walks," she told herself, "the same as I did when Roddy was here."

But somehow the prospect of walking alone did not seem particularly attractive.

In the end, she decided to make a study of ecclesiastical architecture. Yes, she would get a book on the subject from the library, and when Roddy came back at Easter, she would astonish him with her eradition!

The more Jess thought of it, the more the idea gripped her imagination. All along she had been greatly interested in visiting old churches—if only because they inter-

ested Roddy—but from now on she would be interested in her own right. She already knew the broad divisions of the subject from listening to what Roddy had explained to her.

Already she was able to distinguish between Norman, Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular, but now she would really go into it all in real earnest. But she would not tell Roddy about it—she would keep it as a surprise for when he came back at Easter.

Once decided upon a thing, Jess was not the girl to allow grass to grow under her feet. Hastily covering her typewriter, she put on her hat and coat determined to call in at the library on her way home. What she needed first was an authoritative textbook upon the subject, if there were one, and that she could find out at the County Library.

"I want a good book on ecclesiastical Architecture," she told the smiling young man who came towards her when she entered the library.

He blinked, and stared at her in surprise, evidently wondering how on earth a girl like her should be interested in the study of such a dry-as-dust subject.

"I—I beg your pardon, Miss?" he stammered. "What architecture did you say?"

"Ecclesiastic," Jess replied. "Church architecture. You know—from the Norman Conquest to Tudor times, or whenever they stopped building cathedrals and things," she added, smilingly.

"Er—yes, of course," he said, smiling back at her. "I suppose you mean plans and so on?"

"That's right," she agreed. "I know a bit about the various styles, but I want to know a lot more. I want to know about"—she searched desperately in her memory for some of the terms she had heard Roddy use—"about ribbed vaults, fan vaults, and flying buttresses and—and ordinary buttresses, if you know what I mean?"

The young man did not know, but he did his best to conceal the fact.

"I'll see what we've got on the subject, if you'll come with me, Miss," he said, on a brisk note.

Jess followed him round the bookcases to a desk, where he began to search through a big catalogue.

"'E'," he said aloud, running his finger down the column. "Ecclesiastical—here we are! Ecclesiastical Law—Customs—History—Architecture! yes, I think that will be it, Miss. An authoritative treatise by Francis Bond, entitled '*Gothic Architecture in England*'."

Jess pursed her lips.

"Would that mean churches?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes, of course, Miss," the young man answered, with more confidence than he felt.

"Thank you very much," Jess said. "Then I'll take that."

The young man had another look at the catalogue. Then—

"M'm, I'm afraid I shall have to get it specially from County Headquarters, Miss," he said, "as we do not keep a copy of it here."

"How long will that take?" Jess asked.

"Oh, a couple of days," he answered. "I'll write off for it to-night, and if you call in on Wednesday evening, I think it will be ready for you."

Having thanked him, Jess turned to leave.

"You won't forget, will you?" she called over her shoulder.

"No, I won't forget, Miss," the young man promised.

He stood watching her until she passed through the swing doors.

"I wonder why in the world a girl like her should want to delve into stuff like that?" he asked himself, a puzzled look on his face as he turned away to write out the necessary requisition note to headquarters.

THAT evening, Jess wrote another long letter to Roddy, and then set out for a walk. Although she followed one of their favourite routes, she was aware of no feeling of loneliness or even of unhappiness. For the moment, at any rate, she was too deeply absorbed in this new idea of hers. How pleased and astonished Roddy would be when he returned and found that she was able to discuss his pet subject with at least a modicum of knowledge!

"I shall study for two solid hours every evening," Jess told herself. "And at weekends I'll borrow Mrs. Cadby's bicycle and visit every medieval church for miles around so that I can see practical examples of the architecture I am studying."

She was again up betimes on the following morning, and on going downstairs, Jess found a fat-looking letter from Roddy lying on the hall mat. Eagerly she picked it up and hurried back to the privacy of her room.

There were six pages of it, and before she reached the end, Mrs. Cadby was calling her down to breakfast.

"Oh, dash!" Jess muttered irritably, and hastily turned to the last page.

"*For always and ever your own, loving Roddy*," she read, and smiled happily, telling herself she would have to read the rest of the letter at the office.

"Any news from Mr. Dane, this morning, my dear?" Mrs. Cadby asked smilingly, when Jess came downstairs and started on her breakfast.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Cadby," she answered, a beaming smile on her face, "and Roddy says everything is fine. He's attached to the Chief Engineer, which is something unusual, apparently. I haven't read all about it yet, but Roddy says they have a big power station contract in Scotland somewhere, and the experience he was able to gain at the Plymouth branch on the same kind of work is standing him in good stead."

Mrs. Cadby nodded her pleasure.

"Yes, Roddy will get on all right, my dear," she said. "He'll finish at the top of the tree, so my husband says. And what about his digs, Jess? Is he all right there?"

"Oh yes, Roddy seems to be very pleased," Jess said. "He's got rooms with an elderly widow who was once a cook, and he says she's doing him first-rate."

"Well, that's all right, and I'm very pleased to hear it," murmured Mrs. Cadby. "As long as he's having good food, there's little else to worry about. And what is she charging him, I wonder?"

"Three guineas a week—the same as he was paying Mrs. Cattermole," Jess said.

"Well, he's got nothing to grumble at there, then," pronounced Mrs. Cadby. "Nobody could do it for less—not properly, I mean."

Jess nodded her agreement, and hurried on with her breakfast.

It was not until she went out to lunch that day that she managed to find time to finish reading Roddy's letter, and for the rest of the day her heart was singing happily as a bird. Roddy loved her and was already talking of "dashing the expense" and coming down to Bishop's Lea on a Sunday excursion.

"*I've been here one day*," he wrote, "*and already it seems like a hundred years, darling. I just don't know what to do with myself this evening. I've been told that there are quite a number of very interesting churches round here, but, somehow, I seem to have lost my old zest for ecclesiastical architecture. Or, at any rate, for going out seeking churches all by myself.*"

Jess smiled. She would reawaken the old zest in him all right, she told herself, with with a thrill of excitement. By Easter, she would have mastered that book she was borrowing from the library. Already in her mind's eye she could see them entering a church together, hand in hand, as they always did, and she would startle Roddy with a knowledgeable comment upon the roof, the windows, the piers, or whatever particular feature caught her instructed eye.

On leaving the office on Wednesday evening, she hurried to the library and found the young man. He greeted her with a beaming smile.

"I've got it for you, Miss," he said. "But I'm afraid you'll need a horse and cart to take it away!" he added jokingly.

"A horse and cart?" Jess echoed, not understanding.

"Well, you see, it's an awfully big tome," he said. "Please wait a moment and I'll bring it to you."

He retired to the back regions, and presently returned carrying the book.

"Well, here it is, Miss!" he said, planking it on the table and grinning at her. "I've had a glance through it, and it seems remarkably interesting. It appears to be a detailed analysis of the origin and development of English church architecture from the Norman Conquest to the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and it tells you everything from A to Z. But I'm afraid it's going to take you a very long time to read it all."

As he was speaking, Jess was surveying the book with a doubtful eye. She had certainly never envisaged anything so ponderous as that.

"If you digest that lot, there won't be much you don't know about ecclesiastical architecture, Miss!" the young man went on, the grin on his face broadening. "There appears to be twelve hundred odd illustrations in it, and nearly five hundred plans and diagrams and so forth."

Jess shrugged.

"Are you trying to put me off?" Jess asked, somewhat curtly.

"No, of course not," he answered. "All the same, I admire your courage and industry," he added, as Jess tucked the book under her arm.

She thanked him for his kindness and then set off for home.

"Heavens above—what have you got there, my dear?" Mrs. Cadby burst out laughingly, when Jess walked into the kitchen and dropped the book on the table.

"My homework," Jess told her, with a wry smile, flexing and unflexing her cramped arm. "Gosh, it's an awful weight!"

"*Gothic Architecture in England*," Mrs. Cadby read out the title slowly. "Well!" she exclaimed, turning and staring at Jess. "Whatever will you be getting up to next, I wonder? What's it all about, my dear?"

"That's what I mean to find out," laughed Jess. "So on with the tea, Mrs. Cadby, and then I'll start work."

That was the beginning, and with every day that passed, Jess found her studies more and more absorbing. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that church buildings could have such a fascination for her. She read how the Romanesque style of building had found its way into England even before the Norman Conquest, when Westminster Abbey was begun by Edward the Confessor in 1050, and enough of it finished by 1065 to allow a consecration to take place—just in time, as it happened, for the crowning of the Conqueror himself when he landed in the following year!

That was the beginning of ecclesiastical architecture in England, and in the next century—in spite of the fact that the total

population of the country was under four million people—such progress was made that literally hundreds of churches were built all over the country.

Every evening Jess studied architecture in her room. Bishop's Lea itself possessed a Thirteenth Century church in the Early English style, and there she became a frequent visitor, familiarizing herself with lancet windows, mouldings, and the carving of foliage peculiar to that period. At weekends she went further afield on Mrs. Cadby's bicycle.

MEANWHILE, Roddy had settled down in Manchester, and, judging from his letters, he appeared to be going great guns. Mr. Winchester, the chief engineer he had mentioned in his first letter, was keeping him very busy and appeared to have taken a great liking to him.

"*We have several big contracts on hand at the moment*," Roddy wrote in one of his letters, "*and whenever Mr. Winchester goes out on a visit of inspection, he takes me with him as his personal assistant. Sometimes get no warning until he actually rings through for me, so if you don't get a letter from me at any time, darling, you will know what's happened. All this, of course, is first-class experience for your sweetheart and will tell heavily when I'm out of my time and the question arises of my first appointment as a junior executive.*"

That letter made Jess feel very proud and very hopeful—although, as Mrs. Cadby said when Jess read out that bit aloud to her, it was no more than she had expected.

But Roddy did not speak again of "dashing the expense and coming down on a Sunday excursion", and in a way Jess was glad, for it would have been an expensive journey for only a very few hours in Bishop's Lea, and they could not afford to spend money like that when they were saving so hard for their home. Moreover, she wanted to learn all she possibly could about ecclesiastical architecture before he came down at Easter.

"I want to give Roddy the surprise of his life," she told Mrs. Cadby gaily, when at last she could keep her secret no longer. "It's his one great hobby, you see, and Roddy will enjoy it more than ever when he finds that I can take an equal interest in it with him. Don't you think, Mrs Cadby, that it makes for added happiness when two people can share the same interest?"

Mrs. Cadby rubbed her chin and looked a little dubious.

"I don't know about that, Jess," she said slowly. "But if all you want is to give your fiance the surprise of his life, I should have thought a better and easier way of doing it would have been to buy yourself a new suit, if you'll pardon me for saying so. That dress you're wearing now is getting real shabby, you know, and you were so very smart when you first came here."

"Oh, that!" Jess laughed, glancing down at the offending outfit. "But I can't afford to buy clothes when I'm saving for a home, Mrs. Cadby. Besides, Roddy never notices my clothes. He doesn't mind what I wear."

The landlady smiled.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, my dear," she said. "Men talk a lot of nonsense about clothes, but if you look around you'll see that it's the smart girl who attracts them every time. You see, a young fellow likes his girl to look well-dressed and smart. It makes him proud of her—and proud of himself as well."

"Oh, but Roddy isn't that kind of man," Jess returned laughingly. "Besides, he knows what I'm saving for, and that I can't buy a lot of clothes and save money at the same time. We agreed about that long ago."

But Mrs. Cadby remained unconvinced. She was older than Jess and knew more of both men and the world.

"Yes, I daresay you did," she said. "But there's reason in all things, Jess. And to my way of thinking, you're carrying this saving business a bit too far. Manchester isn't Bishop's Lea, you know!" she added meaningly.

Jess stared at her in surprise.

"What on earth do you mean by that, Mrs. Cadby?" she asked. "Are you suggesting that Roddy might—well, that he might forget me?"

"No, no, of course not, my dear, for I know he's not that kind of man, Jess. All I'm saying is that up there he'll be seeing a lot of smartly-dressed girls—well, he's bound to, isn't he? And, automatically," Mrs. Cadby went on, "he'll become used to seeing girls well-dressed, and he'll expect you to look the same when he comes down here at Easter. He certainly won't expect to find you looking dowdy and shabby in comparison with the girls up there."

Jess laughed.

"Oh, nonsense, Mrs. Cadby!" she cried. "Roddy's got other things in his head to think about than bothering about what clothes I wear. I certainly don't worry about what he wears!"

"Well, I think you should do, Jess—a young man who's going where he's going," Mrs. Cadby remarked thoughtfully. "After all, a man is expected to dress up to his position, you know. I'll bet that chief engineer Roddy's going about with doesn't look like a scarecrow, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't like seeing his assistant as one, either. There's reason in all things, Jess—and I still think you're going a bit too far. I watched you going down the street the other day, and your coat looked real shabby, my dear, and what's more, they'll be noticing it at the office before very long."

"Oh, nonsense!" Jess cried again, although she flushed a little under the accusation.

Possibly she could do with a new suit, she thought to herself, but she was not going to take money out of the bank to buy one! In a month or two's time, when she had saved the £150 she had set herself to save for their home, maybe she would do something about it. But not before.

Nevertheless, what Mrs. Cadby had said about Roddy being among smart girls up in Manchester had stuck in her memory, and rather worried her.

THE days and weeks were slipping past, and now it was only three weeks to Easter and their long-looked-forward-to holiday together. In their letters they were already making plans and drawing up timetables for all they were going to do and Jess was conscious of a mounting excitement.

She had now read right through her book and could talk fluently about parapets and piers and bases and ogee windows, ground courses and dripstones and hood molds and hammer-beam roofs. She had filled three exercise books with her notes, and looked at them daily in case she should forget anything of all she had learned before Roddy came home at Easter.

That was her one fear, and as the time drew near it began to haunt her. Having worked so desperately hard to get a grasp of the subject and master its nomenclature and dates, it would be dreadfully disappointing if, when the time came, she could not burst into full-throated song, so to speak, and watch Roddy's face as he stood bewildered by her knowledge of his own special subject.

"But, my darling." she could imagine him asking blankly, "why have you studied all this so seriously?"

And then she would tell him.

"To please you, Roddy dear," she would say. "Because I know that you would like me to be as interested as you are yourself in your special hobby. It is my Easter gift to you, Roddy—the surprise I have been planning ever since you went away."

She knew Roddy would understand. She wanted to be "one" with him in everything, so that for all their lives they would be more, and ever more, essential to each other's happiness.

That was Jess's real aim and object, so that they should love with their minds as well as with their hearts. For, she reflected dreamily, when age and familiarity has worn the keen edge from everything else, the quality of the mind still endures in all its pristine splendour!

So she plodded patiently through her notebooks and looked forward with increasing excitement to the arrival of the all-important day. Jess had everything planned out—where they were going and what they were going to do. Four whole days they would have together—not much, it was true, compared with the ninety-one days of their separation—but glorious, even so, to anticipate.

And in order to give them more time together, Mrs. Cadby had invited Roddy to stay in her house during Easter. She had written him offering him her spare room if he would like to have it, and Roddy had written back gladly accepting her kind offer, providing it would not be putting her to too much trouble.

"Too much trouble!" Mrs. Cadby had snorted, when she read his letter. "Bless the boy! As if I couldn't do that much for him!"

She had promptly set about turning out the spare room, and by Wednesday night, everything was finished and ready for his reception. And, on Thursday morning Mrs. Cadby started baking a little mountain of the cakes she knew to be Roddy's favourites.

The train was due in at 5.25, and Jess had arranged to leave the office a quarter of an hour earlier in order to meet it. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cadby would lay tea and have everything ready for their arrival at about quarter to six.

How Jess lived through that day she never quite knew. Never, it seemed, had the hands of the clock moved so slowly, never had her work seemed so stupid and fatuous. It seemed aeons to her before even lunch hour arrived.

In the afternoon, Sally Wright came into her office. The two girls were old friends—they had been close friends before Roddy came to Bishop's Lea.

"Hullo, Jess, dear!" she said brightly. "What are you doing over the Easter?"

"Roddy's coming here to spend the holiday with me," Jess answered, a beaming smile on her face.

Sally smiled. She was a tall, dark-haired girl with brown eyes.

"I see, well that settles it, then!" she said. "I had a letter from my mother this morning saying that my brother has arrived unexpectedly by air from the West Coast, and she wants me to go home for Easter. And I wondered, if you had nothing better to do, Jess, if you'd like to come with me. But if Roddy's coming——"

"Oh yes, dear," Jess broke in, "it's all been fixed for ages. But it's awfully sweet of you, Sally, and in other circumstances I'd have loved to come with you."

"I quite understand, of course," Sally said. "But never mind, Jess. I hope you have a lovely time."

"Thanks, Sally. I know I shall," Jess said, her eyes lighting up as she envisaged all that was going to happen.

They chatted for a while, and then Jess

continued with her work until a quarter to five. When, at last, the time came for her to leave, she wished the other girls a happy Easter and hurried off to the railway station with a wildly beating heart.

In a few more minutes, she told herself, as she stood waiting at the station exit, she would be in Roddy's arms with four gloriously happy days ahead of her. Once, and only once, she glanced at her coat which Mrs. Cadby had pronounced shabby, but she could not be bothered with that now. All that mattered was Roddy and herself—clothes were a mere detail.

The rumble of the train coming through the tunnel sent her heart leaping into her throat. A moment later the engine appeared in a cloud of steam and began to slow down. Then the carriage doors were opening and people getting out of the train.

Jess stood on tip-toe trying to see if she could spot Roddy as he stepped on to the platform, but already the first of the arrivals were streaming through the exit and she had to stand back.

Eagerly her eyes searched the crowd, but she could not see the face of the man she loved. Then, when the crowd was thinning out, she stepped forward again and managed to get a quick glimpse of the platform—but still there was no sign of Roddy, and Jess's heart sank in despair.

So Roddy had not come!

The thought hit her like a physical blow, and for a few seconds, Jess stood there stunned. He must have missed the train, she told herself. There could be no other explanation, for now all the passengers were through the barrier and the platform stretched empty from end to end save for two porters.

With a roar and a snort from the engine, the train began to pull slowly out of the station, and after Jess had given one last, despairing look along the platform, the ticket-collector smiled at her and remarked:

"That's the lot, Miss. There are no more to come."

Jess looked at him and sighed.

"That—that was the train from Manchester, wasn't it?" she stammered dazedly.

"Yes, that's right, Miss," he answered.

"It's not running in—in two parts, I suppose?" she asked, with a last surge of hope.

The man shook his head.

"No, Miss," he said. "The next express from Manchester gets in at nine-forty-two."

"Thank you," Jess murmured, and walked slowly away.

So Roddy had not come! The words hammered themselves into her brain as she made her way across the station yard. At the corner of the road she turned and looked back, still hoping against hope, still unable to believe that it was true. But, alas, she realised that it was only too true! Roddy had not come.

She walked home in a daze. She supposed he had missed the train and that there would be a telegram waiting for her at the house. But even that thought did nothing to lessen the weight of disappointment that was pressing like a lump of lead upon her heart. Even if Roddy caught the next train, he would be four precious hours late, and the whole of their first evening together was hopelessly spoiled.

Still in a daze of disappointment, Jess reached the house and let herself in with her latchkey. In the kitchen she found the table set out in festive fashion—in honour of the guest who had not come. She was still standing staring at the dainty display when Mrs. Cadby came in from the scullery.

"Oh, Jess, I—I'm so sorry," she said, when she saw the stricken look on the girl's face. "A telegram came for you half an hour ago. I suppose Roddy has had the misfortune to miss the train and won't be here now until to-night."

Mrs. Cadby had taken the buff envelope from the mantelpiece while she was speaking and now handed it to Jess, who slowly tore it open.

"*Terribly sorry, darling,*" she read, "*unable to come. Am leaving for Scotland immediately on urgent work. Have written you. All my love, Roddy.*"

Jesse grasped the back of a chair to steady herself. She thought of the long hours she had spent reading up that book on ecclesiastical architecture; the miles she had walked and cycled looking at old churches; of the plans she had made, the dreams she had dreamt—and now they were all as ashes in her mouth.

A hot resentment flooded her being, and blindly handing the telegram to Mrs. Cadby, she sank into a chair and burst into bitter sobs.

## LOVE'S REVENGE.

THAT night, for the first time in two years, Jess went to the pictures.

Why she went she could not have said. She supposed it was because Mrs. Cadby was going to the cinema herself, and had insisted upon taking Jess with her.

"I'm not going to leave you here moping your head off, my dear," she had said. "It's a bitter blow, I know, and disappointing in the extreme. It is to me, too, Jess, after all the preparations we've made—but it can't be helped, of course. The dear boy would have come if he could, and it's no use thinking differently.

"After all," Mrs. Cadby added, "his job is a very important one, as you know yourself. Oh, yes, Roddy Dane's got his head screwed on the right way, and he's not going to miss a chance, not if he can help it, for your sake as well as his own, my dear."

But Jess was feeling too painfully hurt to see it that way, she had looked forward so eagerly to his coming for too long, not to be completely shattered at what had happened. Roddy could have come if he had wanted to come, that was how she felt about it.

In any event, he need not have left it until the last moment before he telegraphed. It was thoughtless of him in the extreme—for Mrs. Cadby as well as herself. He knew of the preparations that were being made for him; he knew too that she would be at the station to meet the train, and that she had begged time off to enable her to do so.

It was so very unfair, Jess told herself, and in breaking out and spending her money on pictures, instead of saving it, she had a feeling that she was registering her protest against it all.

Actually, however, it was a gesture of defiance on her part. It is a very human reaction to hurt—and Jess had been hurt very badly. To her, it seemed incredible that after all these months of separation Roddy should allow anything to prevent him from coming back to her.

The more she brooded over her hurt, the more convinced she became that it had been deliberately inflicted. Evidently Roddy had not wanted to come, and he had seized upon this Scottish business at the last moment, as a convenient excuse. He had preferred to go to Scotland rather than come down to her in Bishop's Lea.

What the pictures were about, Jess did not know. She watched them, but she did not see them, for her mind was too busy with her own troubles. And all the time, whispering in her ear its insidious poison, was the remark Mrs. Cadby had made about Roddy seeing lots of smartly-dressed girls in Manchester and perhaps considering her dowdy by comparison.

Jess did not really believe that, but a constant drip will wear away even the hardest stone, and the more she brooded upon the subject, the likelier it became. After all, as Mrs. Cadby had said, it was the smartly dressed girls that seemed to attract men, and Jess needed no one to tell her that she was anything but smartly dressed—she had been too engrossed in saving her money to help buy their home to think of finery.

So ran her thoughts as she sat beside Mrs. Cadby staring at the screen. And because she was feeling so badly hurt, nothing seemed too far-fetched to believe. Like an avalanche her thoughts gathered to themselves other thoughts and other apprehensions until by the time the performance was over, Jess was literally buried beneath the weight of them all and in a state bordering upon despair.

That night she scarcely slept at all, and when Mrs. Cadby brought her an early cup of tea next morning, there was a cheerful smile on the landlady's kindly face.

"There you are, my dear," she said, handing her Roddy's promised letter. "Now you'll be happy again, won't you?"

Jess took the envelope, her heart sinking afresh when she felt how thin it was, and for several moments she was afraid to open it—afraid of what she was about to read.

She waited until Mrs. Cadby had left the room, then summed up courage to open the envelope. She saw that the note enclosed was in pencil, and subsconsciously stiffened herself for what she felt sure was coming.

"*Darling,*" she read, "*I've exactly five minutes before I have to leave here. There has been a miscalculation or something of the kind with regard to the big Scottish contract I told you about, and things are in a pretty awful mess. The result is that Mr. Winchester has to go there himself and he wants me to go with him. Naturally, I couldn't refuse, Jess. It wouldn't have been politic, would it? I can't tell you how dreadfully sorry I am not to be able to come to you. But it just can't be helped. Please excuse pencil—I haven't time to find a pen. With my love to you. Yours for always.*

"RODDY."

Jess read the note three times before the sense of it got through to her understanding. Then, coldly and with great deliberation, she tore it up.

So that was it—Roddy had not come because it would not have been "politic" to explain to Mr. Winchester that he had already made all arrangements to go to Bishop's Lea to spend the holiday with his fiancee. That would have meant his chief taking someone else with him instead.

Oh yes, far better to disappoint his fiancee than disappoint his friend, Mr. Winchester! Jess's thoughts ran on. What did anything matter compared with the joy of going to Scotland with his boss?

By the time she was dressed, Jess had worked herself into a state of maudlin self-pity. All the work she had put in on his favourite hobby was useless, and she might just as well have gone out enjoying herself. In all probability, Roddy had never taken the slightest interest in a church building during the time he had been in Manchester—in fact, he had admitted as much in one of his letters!

When a girl's pride has been mortally hurt, she usually reacts in one of two ways—either she dissolves *into helpless* tears, or

she is filled with a desire to strike back, and Jess Milward belonged to the latter class. All her life she had had to fight for herself and make her own way in the world.

That she loved Roddy Dane, and would never love any other man, was neither here not there. That was her own secret, Jess told herself, and no one should ever know of it save herself. If Roddy Dane did not want her, then he was at liberty to do as he pleased!

"Well, is everything all right, my dear?" Mrs. Cadby asked smilingly, when Jess went downstairs to breakfast.

"Yes, everything," Jess answered, with forced lightness.

"But why couldn't the dear boy come, my dear?"

"There's been some mistake made, apparently, on a Scottish contract, and Mr. Winchester and he have had to go up to put it right," Jess replied.

Mrs. Cadby pursed her lips.

"That must be a pretty important job they've given him, Jess?" she said. "It looks as though the lad's making his mark already up there?"

"But not down here!" Jess wanted to retort. Instead, she contented herself with a shrug.

"Well, yes, it appears so, Mrs. Cadby," she said. "At any rate, he's gone."

"You—you're not worrying about it, are you, my dear?" Mrs. Cadby asked, after a short pause.

Jess laughed.

"Of course not, Mrs. Cadby," she said. "What is there to worry about?"

"Or being silly?" Mrs. Cadby prompted. "I mean, thinking silly things about the dear boy?"

Jess laughed again.

"Oh, please don't be absurd. "Why should I worry? Rodney has his own way to make, of course. He has probably discovered the truth of the old saying about he travels fastest who travels alone. In any case, I do not know what he has in mind."

Mrs. Cadby sighed.

"But you know as well as I do, Jess dear, that if he could have come here, he would have done so," she said. "That boy loves you and——"

"Even in my shabby suit?" jibed Jess.

"Yes in any clothes at all, my girl—and don't you make any mistake about it!" Mrs. Cadby replied emphatically. "I haven't watched the pair of you over the past two years for nothing," she added. "And what's more, I know a worthy young man when I see one."

Jess swallowed, hard, and blinked back the tears that in spite of herself rose suddenly to her eyes. She had thought the same thing herself—once—but it was useless blinding oneself to facts. That letter spoke for itself, every word of it.

Five minutes he had said, but nobody was given a mere five minutes' notice to catch a train to Scotland. It was palpably absurd, of course. Why could he not have told his chief that it was quite impossible, and that he had arranged to spend the holiday at Bishop's Lea with her?

No, he had told her that for one reason only—to excuse a long letter which he had not wanted to write because it would have given him away. Moreover, he had not even given her an address to write to. "Yours, as always,—Roddy" he had signed himself, where it used to be "Your own loving sweetheart, Roddy."

Didn't that tell its own story? Was not that, of itself, sufficient indication of his change of feeling towards her? And particularly when he must have known how bitterly disappointed she would be after his telegram of the previous day.

It was easy for Mrs. Cadby to talk, but she did not know what lay behind it all Oh yes, it is easy to generalize when one is not in possession of the details.

Breakfast was a silent meal, with Jess keeping her eyes on her plate and affecting an elaborate unconcern, while Mrs. Cadby watched her surreptitiously.

"What were you thinking of doing to-day, Jess?" she asked, breaking the silence. "Will you be using the bicycle?"

Jess shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I'll walk into the town, I think, and I'll be out to lunch," Jess added, as an afterthought. "I've arranged to meet one of the girls from the office."

Mrs. Cadby nodded thoughtfully. She had not been looking after Jess Milward for two long years without getting to know a great deal about her outlook on life and her personality generally. Jess had paid for both their tickets at the cinema on the previous night, and now she was proposing to lunch out, and Mrs. Cadby thought she knew why.

Obviously, the girl was in revolt. For two years she had denied herself of everything, and now to show that she did not care what happened, she was going on a spending spree!

Well, let her do it, Mrs. Cadby's thoughts ran on. She had always maintained that both Jess and Roddy were carrying their saving craze a bit too far, and as she had told her outright the other day, Jess really was getting quite shabbily dressed. The girl needed new clothes, and if in this temporary rebellion against the man she loved, Jess did break out and buy herself a few necessary things, it would be all to the good.

So Mrs. Cadby held her peace and said nothing. And when, presently, she went up stairs to make her bed and straighten up generally, she surprised Jess glancing through her bank book, she knew she was right, though she pretended to take no notice of it.

THEN fate tooke a hand in Jess's affair, for in the little restaurant where she decided to lunch, she chanced to meet Sally Wright again.

"Hullo, Sally, I thought you were going home for the holiday," Jess exclaimed, not sure whether she was glad or sorry to have met her.

"So I am—to-morrow afternoon," Sally said. "I have several things to do and can't get away before then. But are you alone, Jess?" she added, glancing towards the door. "Where's Roddy?"

"Detained in Manchester—or rather Scotland," Jess replied, with a careless little shrug. "He sent a telegram at the last minute to say he couldn't get away."

"Oh, Jess, what beastly luck!" Sally said. "You mean—he's not coming at all?"

Jess nodded, and looked round for a table. She did not want to talk about Roddy, but Sally had other ideas.

"Well come on, and let's feed," she said briskly, and when they had seated themselves and ordered lunch, Sally went on—"I say, Jess, if Roddy's not coming, after all, what about coming home with me to-morrow afternoon? You won't want to stick around Bishop's Lea doing nothing, will you? And with my brother there from the West Coast, we're bound to have lots of fun.

"So you might just as well come with me as mope about here," Sally added. "Besides, it's time you broke out a bit, you know, my dear. You've lived like a hermit this last year or so, haven't you? Now what about it? Do please say yes."

At Sally's very first words Jess's heart had leapt. Here, she saw in a flash, was the ideal way of showing Rodney Dane that she was no more hurt or disappointed than he at his last minute change of plans. He had preferred to go to Scotland with Mr. Winchester, and she would go to London with Sally Wright—yes, and have a gay time. What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander.

Then she remembered Mrs. Cadby's comments upon her clothes and wardrobe in general, and her heart sank again. It sank further still when she made a lightning comparison between her friend's outfit and her own. Sally always did look smart, and this morning, she looked more so than ever.

"Come on, Jess! Say yes," she urged. "We can have a whale of a time!"

Jess shook her head sadly.

"I'd love to, Sally," she said. "But I've fixed up to do some shopping to-morrow—things I really must have."

"But, my dear, you'll have plenty of time for that," Sally argued. "I shall not be leaving until late in the afternoon, and that will leave you all the morning to do your shopping, won't it?"

Jess's heart lifted again. So she could—with any luck, she reminded herself. Although Bishop's Lea was only a market town, it had some very good shops and they had been stocked for several weeks past with the latest spring and summer fashions. It would cost a lot of money, of course, but she had one hundred and thirty-two pounds, as she had seen from her book only that morning. And now that Roddy—

"Come do, please say yes!" Sally urged again.

On the instant, Jess's mind was made up. She would get up early in the morning, do her shopping, and be ready to catch the train to London with Sally late in the afternoon.

"Yes, Sally, I—I'd love to come, and it's awfully sweet of you to ask me," she said. "But are you sure it will be all right with your mother?"

"Dead sure," laughed Sally happily. "In fact, we'll ring her when we've finished lunch and tell her we're coming. I'll tell Bill to meet us with the car, too. Oh, Jess, we'll have a lovely time! I know we shall."

After lunch, Sally rang her mother in London from a call box, and told her that she was bringing Jess with her. Sally then insisted upon Jess having a word with her brother, and Jess thought that he sounded very nice indeed.

"I'll book seats for us all at a theatre for to-morrow night," he told Jess, before he handed the telephone back to his mother. "This is a surprise spot of leave for me, Miss Milward," he added laughingly, "and we're all going gay!"

"Going gay!" Jess murmured to herself, and she waited for Sally to finish talking with her mother. That was just what she wanted—to go gay, and forget! She had been quiet for too long.

When her friend had left her after lunch, Jess walked round the shops window-gazing. Being Good Friday, the shops were closed, of course, but as the result of her tour of window inspection, she was able to get a good idea of where she would make for in the morning. A new suit, a new coat, a new hat and a new frock—those were the first items on her programme, and she saw several on show that she liked.

When she returned home, Mrs. Cadby noticed at once that something had happened. It was there in Jess's flushed face and in the half-ashamed, half-defiant expression of her eyes.

"I—I'm going away with Sally Wright," she said. "She has invited me to stay with her people in London, and we have ar-

ranged to catch the three-fifteen train to-morrow afternoon."

Mrs. Cadby hesitated a moment. Then—

"That's right, my dear," she said. "A change will do you a world of good."

"And to-morrow morning I'm going to buy some new clothes," Jess went on, "for I can't go to London in these old things of mine, can I, Mrs. Cadby?"

"No, of course not, Jess—not to London," Mrs. Cadby agreed. "You've needed new clothes for a long time past, haven't you?"

"Well, to-morrow I'm going to get them," Jess said, and then went upstairs to her room.

Mrs. Cadby sighed. The dear girl had been badly hurt, and no doubt she was retaliating in the only way she knew. But it was only a phase, and it would soon pass. For Jess Milward was far too sensible a girl to go completely off the rails, and Roddy Dane would soon wake up to the mistake he had made. But they were both very young of course, Mrs. Cadby reflected, and you can't put old heads on young shoulders.

### As It Was Written.

BRIGHT and early the following morning, Mrs. Cadby took a cup of tea to Jess's room.

"Now then, my dear," she said, with a cheerul smile, "you've a lot to do if you're to catch the three-fifteen this afternoon."

"Yes, I know!" Jess murmured, rubbing her eyes. "Any letters, Mrs. Cadby?" she asked mechanically.

"No, not this morning, my dear. You see, he'd barely have got there in time to write again, and with yesterday being as a Sunday, and Monday a bank holiday——!"

Jess, now thoroughly awake, hunched her shoulders as Mrs. Caddy's voice tailed off uncertainly. She did not know why she had asked the question, for she had known there would be nothing else from Roddy. And since he had given her no address, she could not write and ask for it, even had she wanted to.

But, Jess told herself, she was not going to waste time thinking of that, she had too much else on her mind at the moment. In any event, if the beginning of her holiday had been spoiled, she would take good care to see that the end of it was not.

By ten o'clock she was in the bank and presenting the first cheque she had ever written out since she had opened the account two years ago. She had written it at home, and in spite of everything, when it came to the point of filling in the amount, the task had cost her a great effort.

Until now, she had done nothing but pay in, and always she had envisaged writing her first cheque for something Roddy and she had seen and were buying for their home. A carpet, perhaps, or a suite of furniture. Or—and the mere thought of it still caused her fingers to pause and her mind to dream—her wedding dress and trousseau!

But she was over that weakness now, although her eyes were harder and more defiant than she knew when she passed the cheque across the counter to the cashier.

"In five pound notes, please," she said smilingly.

"Certainly, Miss Milward," the cashier returned brightly, when he had glanced at the amount. He opened a drawer and counted six five-pound notes. Then—"Thirty pounds," he said, pushing them towards her across the counter. And as Jess checked them—"Are you going away for the holiday, Miss Milward?" he asked.

"Yes, to London," she answered smilingly, as she placed the notes in her bag.

Then with the bag clutched tightly under her arm, Jess walked out of the bank, obsessed by a feeling of guilt. Useless to tell herself that it was her own money and she could spend it how she liked and upon what she liked—she still felt something of a thief. The money had been saved week by week for one purpose only, and a joint purpose between herself and Roddy—to buy their home!

But once out in the street again, Jess hardened her heart. Anyway, what did it matter now that there was going to be no home? she asked herself. Besides, in all probability, Roddy had already drawn on his own account, for if the girls in Manchester were so smartly dressed, doubtless he would want to be smart too.

Though the thought stabbed her, it served to stiffen her resolve. In any case, the money was her own, and she had every right to be as smartly dressed as other girls.

When, shortly before lunchtime, Jess returned home in a taxi ladened with parcels, Mrs. Cadby gave her a startled look.

"Good heavens, my dear—have you bought the whole town?" she asked jestingly.

"Not quite, Mrs. Cadby, but I've done my share, I think," Jess returned, with a gay little laugh.

The parcels were opened out on the sitting-room table to the accompaniment of admiring little gasps from Mrs. Cadby. First a light tweed suit, equally suitable for town or country, in a pretty shade of blue which exactly matched Jess's eyes. Shoes and a handbag to match, and a natty little hat of slightly deeper blue.

Then came a delightfully designed and cut two-piece, with piped sleeves and pockets, in a soft shade of brown. There followed a spring coat of some woollen material, cut in at the waist and with a waist and with a fashionable skirt, and, finally, two sets of nylon undies and two dainty nightgowns.

"Well," murmured Mrs. Cadby at the end of it all, "I'll say this for you, Jess—when you do buy clothes you certainly make a job of it! These lovely things must have cost you a small fortune."

Jess shrugged.

"Oh, well, I had the money to spend," she said. Then, glancing at the clock and anxious to avoid further comment, she added—"I'd better be getting dressed now, as I don't want to be late for the train."

Having helped Jess to carry the parcels upstairs to her room, Mrs. Cadby left her to it, but she was not at all easy in her mind. This was a break-out with a vengeance, and Mrs. Cadby could not help wondering how much she herself was responsible for it, with her talk of the smartly dressed girls Roddy would be meeting up in Manchester.

Mrs. Cadby shook her head helplessly as she entered the kitchen and began to lay the table for lunch. She had watched this love affair between Jess and Roddy right from the beginning, and felt quite sure they were made for each other and for no one else. Jess could say what she liked, do what she liked, pretend what she liked, but Roddy Dane was her man and she was his woman, and nothing in the world could alter that fact.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Jess had changed into her new suit and was staring at her reflection in the glass of her wardrobe, an approving look in her blue eyes. Her first thought was a wish that Roddy could see her now.

"I am as I was when he fell in love with me," she muttered to herself, "Before I began to save my money and became so shabbily dressed as to provoke comment from my landlady!"

All the same, Jess's idea of love went deeper than smart clothes and dressing up. Roddy, she always thought, had loved her for what she was, in the same way that she had loved him. To her, Roddy Dane had been unique—there was no other man like him. It was not a matter of what he wore—he was still Roddy—just as she had thought that she was still Jess to him, in spite of her shabby clothes!

Suddenly Jess dabbed at her eyes and turned away. It was no use being silly about it all, she tried to convince herself. These things happened, and they had to be borne. After all, she supposed it was not Roddy's fault if suddenly he had ceased to love her. No doubt it was his ambition to get on in the world that had completely absorbed him, and now he had no thought for anything outside it—not even herself!

Some men were like that, she had been told—ambitious men, who were prepared to sacrifice everything in order to achieve their goal.

"Jess dear!" Mrs. Cadby's voice reached her from the foot of the stairs. "Lunch is ready when you are."

"Coming!" she called back hastily dabbing at her eyes again and applying a touch of powder to her cheeks.

Almost Jess wished now that she had not promised Sally to go home with her. Yet, on the other hand she could do nothing by staying in Bishop's Lea, now that Roddy had so grievously disappointed her, and the only course open to her was to accept Sally Wright's invitation.

"Oh, my dear, you're looking fine!" Mrs. Cadby exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as Jess walked into the kitchen. "Now turn round," she said, eyeing her approvingly. "My dear, it fits like a glove," she added, smoothing down the waist. "I've never seen you look so nice and pretty as you do in that lovely suit."

And when, later on, Jess met her friend at the railway station, she heard much the same thing again.

"Gosh, Jess," Sally enthused, "you look like a million dollars, my dear! I can see my brother falling head over ears in love with you—yes, and taking you back to the West Coast with him. Mother's always saying Bill ought to marry—but, of course," Sally added, on a more sober note, "there's Roddy, isn't there?"

Jess nodded mechanically.

The three-fifteen was a fast train, and they arrived at Paddington shortly after four o'clock.

"There's Bill!" Sally said excitedly, waving vigorously in the direction of the barrier. "Look, Jess," she added, pointing—"that young chap wearing a pork-pie hat and grey suit. See him?"

"Yes, I see him," Jess answered, watching the young man hurrying along the platform towards them.

"Hello, girls!" he cried delightedly, as he drew near.

Sally impulsively threw herself around his neck and kissed him. Then—

"Jess, this is my one and only brother, Bill," she said. "And this is my friend, Jess Milward, but you must not kiss her, Bill, because she's already engaged," Sally added laughingly.

"Well, there's nothing like dashing a fellow's hopes right from the start!" he said, as he shook hands with Jess. "Delighted to meet you, Miss Milward, and if I'm denied the privilege of kissing you, I can at least carry your suitcase."

"And mine, too!" cut in Sally.

Bill looked at her.

"Evidently you don't know I'm on sick leave, my dear," he told her jestingly. "Or the trouble I had to get it!"

"Fiddle it, you mean!" laughed Sally. "I know you, Bill—you've never been sick in your life save when you wanted something."

Bill laughed, and picked up the two suitcases.

"I don't know what you're paying me for this job, my dear girl," he muttered, grinning at his sister. "It's already cost me a penny of my own money to get on to the platform. A wiser man would have sat in the car and awaited your august arrival."

"Which noble act, darling, makes you a volunteer!" Sally told him gaily. "And, of course, it would be an insult to offer money to a volunteer."

"Not this one!" Bill retorted. "I take anything that's offered me—even a cup of tea would be better than nothing."

"Now that's a splendid idea," Sally said. "Jess and I were saying a few moments ago that a cup of tea would be acceptable. So put the cases in the car, Bill, and then you can take us to the nicest tea-shop you know and regale us with cream buns and chocolate eclairs."

"Oh, ruinous day!" Bill wailed. "Why did I ever leave the West Coast?"

"Because you're a nice, generous brother, my dear," Sally said. "At least, that's what I told Jess," she added. "Also, that you were young, handsome, rich, clever ——"

"Yes, go on!" Bill broke in laughingly, when she paused for lack of adjectives. "That isn't half the tale, you know. I'm a lot more than that."

"But I can't think of all your many virtues at the moment, darling," Sally told him, as they reached the car and Bill stowed the baggage in the boot.

They were evidently very fond of each other, Jess realised, and she found their banter very amusing. She liked Bill very much—in some ways he reminded her of Roddy, although Bill was several years older. But the two young men had the same clean-cut features and something, at any rate, of the same keen sense of humour.

Bill took them to the station hotel restaurant for tea, and for the first time since she had gone to Bishop's Lea railway station to meet Rodney Dane on Thursday evening, Jess found herself laughing with light-hearted gaiety. As Bill had booked seats for them at a theatre that night, they did not linger long over tea.

The Wrights lived out at Ealing, in a house overlooking the Common, and Sally's mother gave Jess a most cordial welcome.

When Sally took her upstairs to unpack, Jess was very glad that she had bought herself a new outfit, now that she had met her friend's family, for, she told herself, she would have felt dreadful in the shabby clothes she had been wearing at Bishop's Lea.

Bill had booked seats for them all at the theatre that evening, and he sat between Jess and his sister. The play was very interesting and amusing, but time and time again Jess found her attention wandering to the one and only occasion when Roddy and she had sat in a London theatre together.

Now sitting there in the stalls—she and Roddy had only been able to afford seats in the pit—with Mrs. Wright on one side of her and Bill on the other, Jess found herself comparing her position now with what it had been then. Everything at that time had seemed so bright with promise. She loved Roddy, and, she knew that he loved her. They were ecstatically happy. There was not a cloud on their horizon, and it seemed impossible that there ever could be.

Jess recalled that under cover of Roddy's raincoat, they had held hands throughout the performance, and when it was over, they had taken a bus to Paddington, found a little restaurant near the station, and had bacon and eggs and coffee for supper before catching the last train for Bishop's Lea.

Her thoughts were suddenly jerked back to the present as Bill smiled at her and asked if she were enjoying the play.

"Oh yes—rather!" Jess answered, a little breathlessly. "It—it's jolly good, isn't it?

"Yes, very good indeed," Bill agreed enthusiastically. "I'm glad you like it—Jess."

He grinned as he used her name, and Jess contrived an answering smile. But, she reminded herself, it was stupid of her to let her mind wander and brood upon the past—upon what might have been!

After the theatre, Bill suggested taking them to supper, but Mrs. Wright shook her head.

"Not for me, Bill dear," she said. "But you three can stay and have supper, of course. At this time of night, my thoughts turn rather to bed than supper in restaurants, I'm afraid."

So, in the end, Mrs. Wright drove home in a taxi and Bill took the two girls to supper at a restaurant in Soho where there was dancing.

"Would you care to take a chance on me, Jess?" he asked smilingly, when they had eaten. "I'm no great shakes, but I promise to do my best."

"Heaven help you, Jess dear!" Sally said. "There may be a worse performer than that brother of mine, but if so, I've never been unlucky enough to meet him."

"My trumpeter!" grinned Bill, as Jess rose from her chair.

Next moment, they swung out on to the floor, and it was then that Jess realised, with a sense of shock, that Sally's brother was more than just interested in her. Maybe it was something in the way he held her, or something in his eyes when he looked at her!

"I wish you didn't have to go back on Tuesday, Jess dear," he said, smiling down at her.

"It—it's not a very long holiday, is it?" she murmured, lowering her eyes.

"It's no holiday at all!" he said. "I'm here for another fortnight, with nothing to do. Tell me," he added, "what do you and Sally do with yourselves in a place like Bishop's Lea?"

Jess shrugged.

"Nothing in particular," she answered.

"I see," he said. "Well, I think I had better drive down there and take you out a bit. I'm going to ask Sally if she can fix me up for a few days."

"I don't think you would like it there very much," Jess said. "Life at Bishop's Lea would be much too dull for you, Mr. Wright."

"Oh, but I would like it all right with you around, my dear Jess," he said. "By the way," he added, "you don't mind my calling you Jess, do you?"

"No, of course not," she answered lightly. "It—it's the modern fashion, isn't it?"

Bill nodded. At that moment the music stopped, and he linked his arm in hers and escorted her back to their table.

### HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

IT was long after midnight before they reached home, and late on Sunday morning, when Sally took a cup of tea to Jess's room, she exclaimed laughingly—

"I don't know how you feel, my dear, but I feel a perfect wreck this morning after our junketing last night. Mother and Bill were up and about hours ago."

Jess yawned, and Sally sat on the side of the bed and rattled on—

"Bill is used to late hours, of course. Apparently nobody ever goes to bed out there on the West Coast before two or three in the morning, and they're up again at six o'clock." Sally paused, then added—"Mother says he's talking about coming up to Bishop's Lea for a few days."

Sally nodded.

"You—you mean Bill?" stammered Jess.

"Yes," she said, "he's talking about driving down there in the car and 'wafting us round the landscape', as he puts it. I told mother that we didn't get much time for being wafted anywhere. Besides, you are engaged to Roddy Dane, aren't you, Jess?"

Jess was at a loss what to say, and her confusion showed on her face.

"Why?" she managed to ask.

"Well, I've noticed that you are not wearing an engagement ring," Sally said. "Is it just one of those informal engagements, Jess?"

To Jess, it seemed the easiest way out of an awkward situation to agree with the suggestion.

Sally laughed.

"I thought it must be, my dear," she said. "It will be years, of course, before Roddy's in a position to marry. I remember that Bill was in much the same fix until he qualified."

"Is—is your brother an engineer then?" Jess asked, trying hard to turn the conversation from Roddy and herself.

"No. Bill's a chartered accountant," Sally replied. "He's just been appointed chief accountant to a big business concern, so mother tells me, at a salary of two thousand a year. Oh, yes, my brother is going to finish up a rich man by the look of things. Now shall I put your bath on, darling?"

AFTER breakfast, Mrs. Wright suggested that Bill should take the two girls into the drawing-room and show them the photographs he had brought home from the West Coast.

"Those of Loanga, I mean, Bill," she said. "I'm sure Sally and Jess would be interested."

"Loanga?" Sally repeated, "Is that your new headquarters, Bill?"

"That's right," he said. "You're sure photographs don't bore you?" he added, smiling at Jess.

"Oh, no, I'd love to see them," Jess said. "Africa always seems such an awfully thrilling country to me."

Bill fetched a couple of albums, and explained each picture in detail. Some were of the country itself, some of the natives and native's ceremonies, of their villages and plantations. Jess learned that Bill's firm were importers and exporters of almost everything imaginable, though cocoa beans appeared to be their main line.

He then showed them photographs of the firm's offices and works, and of his own home out there. It was an attractive house built beneath shady trees and surrounded by a large garden.

"And all this time, Bill, I've been thinking you lived in the 'White Man's Grave'!" Sally said jestingly.

"Oh, but things have improved out there now," he said. "We have electric light, 'fridges, air-conditioning, hot and cold water, schools for the children, English doctors and hospitals, sports clubs and grounds, swimming baths—the whole bang shooting match, in fact. Here's one photograph of the inside of my house," he added, turning over a leaf and showing pictures of the lounge and the drawing room.

"Who's your pin-up girl?" Sally asked laughingly, pointing to a small photograph framed and hung above the writing-desk.

Bill grinned.

"Nothing to do with you, my dear girl," he muttered.

Jess at once recognised that it was a snapshot of herself, and the next page in the

album contained photographs of her and Sally taken three years or so ago on the tennis court at Bishop's Lea.

"My sister sent me those photographs," he went on, smiling at Jess. "So you see, you're no stranger to me. In fact, I feel I've known you for ages—thanks to Sally's letters and these charming photographs of you—and when I met you at the station yesterday, it was like meeting an old friend!"

So that was the explanation! Jess sat silent, motionless, not knowing what to do or say. Now she was beginning to understand what she had seen in Bill's eyes when they were dancing together on the previous night. Vaguely, too, she understood Sally's insistence upon her coming home with her for the holiday.

Obviously, her brother had been behind it all. He had wanted to meet her while he was home on leave. That was why he was talking of coming to Bishop's Lea, so that he could spend more time with her—yes, and why Sally had questioned her so closely about Roddy!

As she sat there, tongue-tied, Jess knew a wild desire to spring to her feet and tell them that it was all useless—that she loved Roddy Dane, and could never love any other man.

It was Sally who broke the silence.

"Well, my dears," she said, "what about taking the air on a fine Sunday morning like this? Let's get the car out and go places, shall we, Bill?"

"That's a good idea!" he said on the instant. "So put your bibs and tuckers on, girls, while I get the car round."

As the two girls went upstairs to their rooms, Jess wanted to tell Sally that it was no use, then changed her mind about it. For what was there she could say that would not appear ridiculous—and conceited? she asked herself. After all, the position might be nothing like what she was imagining.

"Oh, dear," she muttered to herself when, a few moments later, Sally's footsteps sounded in the corridor. "I wish it were Tuesday morning instead of Sunday!"

"Ready, my dear?" Sally called gaily.

"Yes, quite ready," Jess forced herself to answer. "Oh, if only Roddy had told me the truth!" she thought, as she followed Sally down the stairs. "If only he had been frank with me!"

Jess's mind was in such a turmoil that the only thing she was ever able to remember of that Easter Day drive was passing a church where she noticed some particularly massive flying buttresses. She had read about them, but had never before seen an actual specimen.

"Twelfth Century!" she exclaimed, without thinking. "They're too low on the clerestory walls. Later they——"

She stopped, flushing in confusion as she realised that both Sally and Bill were staring at her blankly.

"I beg your pardon?" Bill asked. "What did you say, Jess?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, with a short laugh. "I—I was only thinking about something."

And she was thinking, too—thinking that if Roddy had been there, they would have stopped the car and spent a delightful hour or two examining that lovely old church. It would have given her a chance to show off all that she had learned—that moment of delight for which she had studied so hard.

With an effort, Jess wrenched her thoughts back to the present, just as Sally began upbraiding her for wool-gathering.

"I knew you weren't listening, Jess," she was saying. "Bill and I are wondering what we can do to-night, and all he can suggest is the pictures. Have you any conscientious objections to going to the cinema on the Sabbath, my dear?" Sally added jestingly.

"Why—no," Jess answered, conscious of only one thought—that in the pictures no one could talk to her. "In fact, I think I'd rather like to go."

"Then that's settled," approved Bill. "We'll have a look at the local paper when we get back and find out what's on to-night."

In the end, however, they decided to go to a cinema in the West End. It turned out to be a thrilling picture, but Jess had too much on her mind to be able to relax and enjoy it. She was, she felt, living through days that were far more tragic and important to her than any that could be shown on the screen.

She found herself wondering if there would be a letter from Roddy waiting for her when she arrived back at her lodgings on Tuesday evening. Suddenly another disturbing thought occurred to her. How was she ever going to explain spending all that money on clothes? Even supposing that she had made a mistake about Roddy and jumped to a totally wrong conclusion, she would still have to tell him why she had squandered no less than thirty pounds of the sum she had been saving for their home.

But she was buoying herself up with false hopes, she told herself. Roddy had not written, and he probably did not intend to write to her again. That last letter of his had spoken for itself, and she was merely indulging in wishful thinking and trying to evade the fact.

The trouble was that now the first shock of bitter disappointment was over and her natural resentment had died down, she simply could not envisage a life in which Roddy Dane was not part of it. For two years he had been the mainspring of her existence. For two years her life, all her interests had revolved solely around him. Without Roddy, she would be completely lost, and there would seem nothing left to live for.

"Oh, if only Mrs. Cadby had been on the telephone, so that she could have rung her up first thing in the morning to ask if a letter had come from him! Jess reflected sadly.

They returned home from the pictures just before eleven o'clock, and upon a pretence of being thoroughly tired after the previous night's outing, Jess wished them all good night, went upstairs to her room and wrote a brief note to Mrs. Cadby asking her landlady to ring her at the office on Tuesday morning to let her know if a letter had arrived from Roddy.

Immediately after breakfast next morning, she went out and posted the letter at a nearby pillar-box.

How she managed to get through that day and keep smiling, Jess was never afterwards quite sure. In the evening they went to another theatre, and afterwards to the same restaurant for supper.

"No dancing to-night, Sally warned her brother. "Jess and I have to get up in the morning, remember."

Bill made a grimace.

"Oh, just one, Jess," he pleaded, and in the end she felt she had to give way and dance with him.

Afterwards he danced with his sister, and then with Jess again.

"Oh, Jess, I hate to think of you having to leave us so soon," he said. "I've so loved having you here. You'll probably think I'm a bit loony talking to you like this, after having met you only a couple of days ago. But as I told you yesterday, I feel that I've known you for a couple of years and more, for I've got your photograph hung above my desk and look at it every day of my life. Besides, I know so much about you from what Sally has told me in her letters.

"And now at last," he continued. "I've had the pleasure of meeting you and you're everything I pictured you to be." He hesitated, then went on—"Do you mind if I come to Bishop's Lea so that I can see you again and you can get to know me better, my dear Jess? I've already spoken to Sally about it, and she is quite pleased with the idea, as I've got another fortnight's leave."

Jess gave an inward sigh. Oh, why had he to put such an awkward question to her when she was already carrying more than she could bear? He had been so very kind to her and she hated having to hurt him.

They were dancing alongside their table, and perhaps Bill guessed something of what was passing in her mind for when, a moment later, the dance ended, he led her back to his sister.

"I think Jess is feeling tired, Sally," he said. "And seeing that we have to be up at crack o' dawn to-morrow, let's be going, shall we?"

Sally laughed.

"There now, I told you so, didn't I, Bill?" she said, rising from her chair, and they took their departure.

"GOOD heavens, my dear!" one of the office girls exclaimed when Jess walked into the cloakroom with her suitcase, punctually at nine o'clock on the following morning. "Have you been visiting at Buckingham Palace or somewhere? I've never seen you look so smashing before!"

Jess gave a forced little laugh.

"Oh, no, Betty, it was a little farther on than Buckingham Palace," she said, and then hurried off to the room in which she worked.

Five minutes past nine! She could scarcely expect a call from Mrs. Cadby yet, she told herself, as she removed the cover from her typewriter. She felt quite sure that Mrs. Cadby would not keep her waiting very long.

Jess lifted the receiver of the telephone to make sure that everything was in working order. How lovely it would be if Roddy himself should speak—that he had managed to come from Manchester after all, instead of going to Scotland!

Ten minutes past nine! Would Mrs. Cadby never ring? Or had she not received her letter? At thought of such a possibility, Jess's heart sank. In that case, she would not know anything until she arrived home that evening. She would have to go through the day on tenterhooks. But no, she would go home at lunch time, Jess told herself, even if it meant her going without lunch.

Twenty minutes past nine! Jess began to pace the office, aware that her knees were shaking beneath her. Oh, why didn't the silly woman ring?

Then the telephone bell rang, sharply, stridently, and holding her breath, Jess snatched up the receiver.

"Yes?" she gasped. "Yes?"

"Is that you, Jess?" came Mrs. Cadby's voice.

"Oh, hullo, Mrs. Cadby! Yes, of—of course it's me," she cried excitedly. "You got my letter?"

"Yes dear, but there isn't one from Roddy. Nothing at all, either yesterday or to-day. Not even a postcard," Mrs. Cadby added sorrowfully.

Jess's heart took a sickening plunge. She stood like one transfixed. It was as though her whole world had exploded in fragments about her.

"Are you there, Jess?" Mrs Cadby's voice came anxiously over the line. "Did you hear what I said?"

Jess forced herself to speak.

"Yes, I—I heard," she stammered. "And—and thank you, Mrs. Cadby. I shall be home at the usual time this evening."

She replaced the receiver in its cradle,

stood for a moment staring at it with unseeing eyes and then, feeling blindly behind her, sank on to a chair.

So she had been right from the first—it was all over between them! Only now, in this supreme moment of disappointment did Jess realise how foolishly she had allowed herself to hope again during the last few days.

For several minutes she sat motionless, her eyes blank, her mouth quivering piteously. Then, as the first sob tore at her throat, Jess sank her head on her outstretched arms and gave way to bitter tears.

She did not go to the canteen for lunch that day. Normally, she went with Sally, but now Jess felt that she could not face even her closest friend's comments and questions, for she was too utterly sick at heart. Instead, under pretence of having a blinding headache, she asked Sally to send her a sandwich and a cup of tea to her office.

How she managed to get through her morning's work she did not know. Slowly the day wore on. Sitting at her desk, with only half her mind upon the letters she was typing, it seemed to Jess that she had no strength left, no hope, no future. Nothing to look forward to, nothing to work for, nothing to live for. When first she had learned that Roddy was not coming, she had been angry with him and her anger had helped her to bear her disappointment.

But now she had not even that little support to buoy herself up with. She had nothing at all, and it was her own fault, she reflected sadly. If she had not been so foolish as to build up this fresh hope, to build hope on hope until she had deluded herself into believing it a certainty, she would not be feeling so utterly broken on the wheel as she was now.

Shortly before five o'clock, Sally came in to ask how she was and if there were anything she could do.

"No, thanks, dear," Jess answered, with a wan little smile. "I'll be all right after a night's rest. When I arrive home, I think I'll have a couple of aspirins and go straight to bed."

Sally nodded.

"That's a good idea," she said sympathetically. "It's so unlike you to be off colour like this, isn't it, Jess? I expect it's the late hours we've been keeping. I'll give Bill a piece of my mind when he comes up to-morrow, and will take good care that he doesn't do it again. He's responsible for it all, of course."

It was not until Sally had left her that the significance of that last remark seeped through to Jess's awareness. If Bill Wright were coming to Bishops Lea to-morrow, that would be the last straw! She could not, and would not, see him. She did not care what he or Sally thought, for it was beyond her strength to have him bothering her again, and be pestered with his love-making. She would not marry anybody—save Roddy Dane.

And Roddy no longer wanted her! She supposed that he felt about her as she felt about Bill Wright. It was a dreadful thought. A heart-breaking end to what had once been so bright and splendid a love.

At half-past five, Jess put the cover on her typewriter, put on her hat and coat, picked up her suitcase and started for home. She noticed a car as she turned the corner into the road where she lived, but she was almost at Mrs. Cadby's garden gate before she realised that it was standing outside the house.

"Bill!" the thought shot through her mind. "Bill Wright!"

She hesitated a moment. Then, with a desperate glance round, she would have walked straight on past the house had not the door suddenly opened and a man came rushing out.

"Jess!" he cried excitedly. "Jess! Where are you going?"

She stood stock-still, her heart thumping violently, not daring to turn. Next moment he was standing in front of her and had gripped her by the hand.

"Jess!" he was saying breathlessly. "What—what is the matter with you darling?"

"Roddy!" she gasped.

For a moment or two, Jess thought she must be dreaming. It was as though a mist were enveloping her. In a vague kind of way she was aware of Roddy picking up her suitcase and leading her into the house. But everything seemed unreal to her.

"Your sudden arrival has given the dear girl a shock, Roddy," she heard Mrs. Cadby say.

Jess managed to fight her way out of the mist at last. Now she could see the man of her dreams clearly—the man she loved and had thought she had lost.

"Oh, Roddy!" she murmured shakily. "So you—so you have come back to me!"

"Yes, of course I have, darling," he said, throwing his arms around her and giving her a tender embrace. "Mrs. Cadby has been telling me all about it, my dear Jess. I—I'm afraid I've been awfully clumsy over this," he went on, "but I wasn't sure that it would come off, darling, and I didn't want to raise your hopes only to have to dash them again."

Jess gave him a puzzled look.

"Raise what hopes, Roddy?" she asked. "I—I don't understand. You mean about—about coming here for the holiday?"

"A sprat to catch a mackerel!" he answered smilingly. "But that can wait, darling. What I am worried about is that you could ever have thought that I did not want to come to spend the Easter holiday with you. Do you know me as little as that, my love? Have you so little faith in me?"

Jess tried to speak, but the words would not come. It seemed utterly impossible to recapture all the little thoughts and fears that had gone to build up the nightmare of the past few days.

"It—it wasn't that, Roddy, dear," she got out at last. "It was the—the bitterness of the disappointment when I received your telegram. And then—and then those few pencilled lines you sent afterwards, They—they didn't tell me anything, Rodney," she stammered on—"not even that you still loved me. It was as though you—well, that you didn't want me any more!"

"Oh, my darling, how could you ever think such a thing?" he asked, gazing at her in amazement. "And—and between you and me!"

"And I—and I received no word from you on Saturday, Roddy."

"Yes, my dearest, that was because there was no post from the village where I was living," he explained. "The last post on Thursday evening had gone long before we arrived there. After that, there was nothing until to-day, and I left there at four o'clock this morning."

"Four o'clock this morning?" Jess echoed, staring at him blankly. "And is—and is that your car outside? Have you come all that way by road, Roddy?"

Roddy grinned like a little boy with a secret up his sleeve.

"At the present moment, darling," he said, "you are speaking to an executive of our firm—in other words, to Mr. Rodney Dane, Resident Engineer of the Strathbeg Hydro-Electric Scheme, as he will be known when he goes back. And that car standing at Mrs. Cadby's garden gate has been lent to the said Resident Engineer by the firm!" Roddy laughed, and added—"Haven't you noticed my smart clothes, my dear?"

He stood back so that she could have a better look at him, and for the first time Jess noticed his smart grey suit, and on the spur of the moment, she held out her arms, mannequin fashion, glad that it was not only she who had spent money.

"And haven't you noticed my smart outfit, Roddy?" she asked tremulously.

He gave her an appraising look, then laughed.

"Sweetheart, you look absolutely lovely," he said, "and I apologise for my blindness. The truth is, I've been too intent on gazing at your adorable face to notice what you are wearing!"

"I—I've spent some of our money, Roddy," she confessed, with a rueful smile.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Jess," he said, smiling back at her. "Because I've had to, too, and it worried me quite a lot. It didn't seem right, somehow, but really I had no option. You see, Mr. Winchester and I had to be with the directors a good deal, and he advised me to dress the part if I wanted to win their confidence and approval.

"So I chanced it, darling—and it came off," Roddy added gleefully. "And now, Jess dear, I'm out of my time and fixed with my first appointment. And at what salary do you think?"

Jess shook her head. She felt completely bewildered by what he was telling her.

"Six-fifty a year, darling!" he told her triumphantly. "With one hundred and fifty a year increase for three years, and after that a review of the whole position!"

"Oh, Roddy!" she gasped.

"And that's why I could not write you a proper letter, sweetheart," he went on. "You see, I knew from Mr. Winchester that it was on the cards, but nothing was actually settled, and I didn't want to tell you until it was definitely settled, in case it didn't come off. I was so bursting with the all-important news that I knew that if I wrote you a proper letter I'd be bound to let it out, because it means such an awful lot, darling."

Jess held her breath, not daring to speak, and Roddy took her hand in his, and went on—

"It means, darling, that we can now get married whenever you wish. And we can spend the money we have saved on ourselves. The firm will supply us with a furnished house in the village, and we shall be there for three years—the period of the contract. I take up my new appointment in six weeks' time, and until then I'm on leave, so we've plenty of time for everything, my dearest.

"I'm on full pay now," Roddy added gaily. "And the car outside is, to all intents and purposes, our own. So all that remains for us to do is to put up the banns and decide where to go for our honeymoon."

Jess was stunned at the wonderful news. In the space of five days she had been tumbled from the heights to the depths, and now she was being whisked at breathless speed to heights she had never even contemplated in her wildest dreams.

"Oh, Roddy," she murmured, "I really don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels. It—it is all like a wonderful dream to me."

He slipped his arm around her waist, and with an odd little catch in her throat, Jess lifted her face to his.

"Oh, Roddy dear," she whispered, "you make me feel almost afraid of such happiness."

"Then let me kiss your fears away, my love," he said, and pressed his lips to hers in a long, tender kiss.

It was much later on that evening when Roddy suggested something that seemed to put the coping stone upon Jess's happiness. They were speaking of their honeymoon.

"There's one idea that has occurred to me, darling, though I don't know if it would appeal to you," he said, "and that's a tour of Normandy in the car. It has always been a hope of mine that one day I might have a chance to browse around the cathedrals and churches there and which are pure Romanesque—I mean, before the Gothic influence got to work. But probably you will find that a bit boring, Jess?"

Remembering the tome she had read with such labour, and her collection of notebooks upstairs, Jess knew an odd little thrill of excitement. What a day or two ago she had been sadly morning as a shocking waste of time, was now to become, what she had always intended it to be—a means of holding her closer still to the mind and heart of the man she adored.

"On the contrary, Roddy dear, I think a visit to Normandy would positively thrilling!" she said. "In fact, there is nothing I would like better."

And when he looked at her, a little startled by her enthusiasm," Jess added smilingly—

"I, too, have my little secrets, you know Roddy, darling," and offered him her lips again.

THE END.



# WEB OF DESTINY

## By Malcolm Trevor

JEST OF FATE

LENA HAMMOND sighed as she turned from her books and looked thoughtfully round her little shop.

It was still turning in a living, she supposed, but it was no use trying to hide from herself the fact that the shop was not doing what it had been doing—still less what she had hoped it would do—when eighteen months ago she had bought the place from Phyllis Brand.

It was Phyllis who had taught her the trade. Lena had answered an advertisement for an assistant in a small flower shop—being country born and bred, and fond of gardening, she knew a great deal about flowers—and she and Phyllis had taken to each other on sight.

But after a year and more of working together, Phyllis had fallen in love with a flying officer in the RAF, and when he was ordered to Germany, Phyllis determined to go with him, and had given Lena the first chance of buying the business for three hundred pounds.

The chance was too good to be missed, and with the last money of the small legacy left her by her father, Lena had taken the plunge. It was only a little lock-up shop sandwiched between two emporiums in a side-street, but it did a good business and she felt quite sure she could make a go of it.

Lena had ideas, too, and the first thing she had done was to have the shop front painted in gay, attractive colours and give the place a new name.

"Change the name, change the luck!" she could still remember one of the girls where she lived saying at the time. But Lena had taken no notice of that. Tall, graceful and attractive, healthy in mind and body, she had no use for outworn superstitions.

Besides, she had always thought that "Phyllis" was rather a silly name for a shop. It did not tell people anything. So she decided that "The Flower Basket" was a much more suitable name—at least it informed the public that flowers could be bought there.

Or, rather, that she had flowers to sell, Lena reflected ruefully as she glanced round her wares. That was the only part of the business the disliked—the quantity of beautiful flowers that were left on her hands.

There were several bunches now, she noted, that would not last more than another day or two, no matter how she coddled them. On the other hand, she had managed to get rid of four of the six dozen roses she had risked buying that morning, at an exorbitant price, in order that she would not be down on that particular item even if she were left with the remainder.

Yes, it was chancy work—the flower trade. One day everybody seemed to want something she had not got, and the next, when she had them, nobody wanted them.

On this particular afternoon, however, trade seemed rather brisker than usual, and when it drew near to closing time, Lena was feeling quite satisfied with her day's work. She was already beginning to remove the remains of her stock into the cold room at the back of the shop when the telephone rang.

She picked up the receiver and said, in her crisp, business-like voice:

"Yes, this is the Flower Basket."

It was a man's voice that answered.

"Have you any roses?" he asked. "Red roses, I want?"

Lena smiled. This was definitely her lucky day.

"Yes, sir," she said, glancing across the shop to the last of the six dozen she had bought that morning. "I have just two dozen left, but they're rather expensive, I'm afraid."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," he returned, jauntily. "The question is, can you have them delivered to Flat Three, Number twenty-seven, Westerham Road, after half-past six this evening? I shall be unable to get back to my flat before then, and there's no one to take them in and pay for them. Could you manage to do that for me?"

"Yes, of course, sir," Lena replied, omitting to mention that she would deliver the flowers herself.

"Thank you, that's fine," he said. "The name is Murray," and he repeated the address.

Lena made a note of it: "Mr. Murray, Flat 3, 27, Westerham Road". That was over on the other side of Ealing. But no matter, she was prepared to go further than that to sell those last remaining couple of dozen roses, she told herself elatedly. They were two-and-six a bloom, representing fifteen shillings profit on the transaction—quite a nice little coping stone on the day's trading.

"Very well, at about seven o'clock, sir," she said. "Would that be all right?"

"Yes, quite all right, thank you, Miss, and I'm greatly obliged to you," he replied.

Lena thanked him and rang off. Birthday present for a sweetheart, she supposed, as she set about wrapping up the roses. A man buying flowers for his wife, invariably asked the price, but not so a young man buying a bouquet for his fiancee—he never stopped to inquire the cost.

"Love's young dream!" she laughingly murmured to herself, "Anyway, whoever the girl is she will be delighted, for these roses are really lovely and they'll be lovelier still when they open out."

Lena took them to her boarding-house after locking up the shop, and left them in her bedroom when she went downstairs to dinner.

"What about the pictures to-night, Lena?" asked the elderly man sitting on her right at the dining-room table at "Blair House"—they all called him 'Uncle', though nobody quite knew why. "Helen has promised to come with me," he added.

Lena shook her head.

"Sorry, Uncle, but I've got a job to do after dinner," she replied. "I've got to deliver some flowers at seven o'clock this evening—a special order."

"What you need, my dear, is a messenger,' put in Helen Heyward from the other side of the table.

"Yes, and I'd have one if I could afford it!" Lena assured her gaily. "Two, in fact. But, unfortunately, I can't, so I must do my own delivering."

"I'll deliver the flowers for you if it will help any, Lena," volunteered Bill Mellor, another of the guests, who was sitting at the end of the table. "I've got nothing to do this evening."

"That's kind of you, Bill, but I have to go myself," Lena said.

Helen giggled, for as they all knew, Bill Mellor was very keen on Lena. Altogether, there were eight of them lodging with Mrs. Green at "Blair House", and it so happened that they were all good friends. Most of them had been there for some years—"Uncle", who was a retired civil servant, for ten years.

Lena often told herself that they were like a big family, with Mrs. Green mothering them all impartially. Helen Heyward, who had tried a number of places before coming to "Blair House", openly avowed that she would never leave there until she got married and had a home of her own.

At five minutes past seven that evening, Lena was walking briskly along Westerham Road looking for Number 27. It turned out to be one of those old. four-storey houses that, in days gone by, were occupied by good class Victorian families but which had now been turned into flats.

Flat 3, she discovered, was on the top floor, underneath the attic—scarcely the place she would have expected to find a man who could afford to spend the sum of three pounds on a bunch of roses for his fiancee—but one could never tell in these days, of course, for the difficulty was to get in anywhere at all.

The stairs were covered with lino—badly worn, she noticed. And the lighting was none too good. On reaching the top landing, Lena found a door marked Flat 3. There was no bell, and she knocked on the door then stood back to await events.

There was no immediate answer, and it was while standing looking round about her that she noticed a card pinned to the wall near the door. As she leaned forward to read what it said, the door suddenly opened and a young man appeared.

"Ah, the flowers!" he exclaimed delightedly. Then, as Lena stood gaping at him—"Is anything the matter?" he asked,

on a somewhat curt note.

Lena quickly pulled herself together.

"No," she answered awkwardly. "It was only that I—that I happened to notice the name of Miss Lavina Murray on the card."

The young man gave her a questioning look.

"Well, what about it?" he demanded.

Lena hesitated a moment. Then—

"I—I know it may be rather silly of me," she stammered on. "And, of course, a coincidence. But I used to know a Miss Lavinia Murray—and Lavinia is quite an uncommon name, isn't it? Actually, she was my teacher in the village where I first went to school, and——"

"Teacher?" cut in the young man.

"Yes, and afterwards she became a great friend of mine," Lena said. "But I lost touch with her and have often wondered what can have happened to her."

"I see. And what was the name of the village to which you refer, may I ask?"

"High Holding, in Kent!" Lena replied. "Miss Murray lived there for several years."

"Yes, I know," the young man said. "Well, I'm her nephew—Jim Murray."

Lena caught her breath. Then it must be dear Lavvy! she told herself with suppressed excitement.

"Oh, may I see her?" she asked eagerly. "Would you mind telling her that Lena has called—Lena Hammond, from High Holding?"

The young man smiled and took the roses from her.

"Please come in, Miss Hammond," he said. "I have often heard my aunt speak of you—so you're not exactly a stranger even to me, you see," he added, as Lena stepped past him into the tiny hall.

Even now she could scarcely believe that it was true. It seemed incredible that, by the sheerest chance, she had come to the very house where her old friend Lavvy was living—and after the efforts she had made to trace her over the years.

The young man opened a door and stood aside for her to enter. But the eager smile died on Lena's lips when she saw that the room was empty.

In the same moment she became aware of the shabbiness and untidiness of the room, which was so strangely at variance with what she remembered of Lavvy's almost pernickerty sense of having a place for everything and everything in its place. There were even what appeared to be the remains of somebody's breakfast still on the table.

She turned questioningly to the young man, and for the first time became aware of something in his expression that she had not noticed before, something to which she could put no name but which in a vague kind of way frightened her. But before she could speak, he broke the silence.

"Miss Hammond," he muttered gravely. "I—I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Lena's heart sank.

"What—what do you mean?" she stammered staring at him in surprise.

"You're too late," he said. "Aunt Lavvy is dead!"

Lena gave an odd little cry.

"Oh, no!" she got out involuntarily.

He nodded.

"She died two days ago—in hospital—after a long illness," he said. "I'm very sorry to have to tell you this. Won't you sit down, Miss Hammond?"

Lena fumbled for the nearest chair and sank into it. Only two days ago—oh, the pity of it! And the irony of it, too, after all the years she had been trying to contact her dear old friend.

"Please excuse me for a moment," he said, and then hurriedly left the room.

Lena was hardly aware of his going. Her heart was too full, her thoughts miles away in the days when old Lavvy had lived at the school-house, and in the intervals of teaching the village children had tended her little garden. Not that she had been "old" then, for Lavvy was no more than thirty-five or forty—although as children, she had seemed old to them.

A dear little lady, rather old-fashioned but very sweet, Lena could see her now as she was then, wearing a big straw hat and leather gloves, lovingly tending her roses in the garden.

Roses! The memory stabbed her like a knife, and involuntarily she lifted her eyes to the roses she had brought with her and which the young man, her nephew, had left lying on the table.

How very strange, Lena thought, that it should have fallen to her lot to provide the roses for poor Lavvy's last journey—for that was their purpose, she realised now. Lavvy's favourite flowers, and by the irony of fate—from her shop!

"And I thought they were for the young man's sweetheart," she told herself, with a tremulous sigh.

The rattle of crockery jerked her back to the present, and a moment later, Jim Murray came in carrying a tray of tea-things.

"I've made you a cup of tea, Miss Hammond," he said, a little awkwardly.

Lena murmured her thanks, and he poured out for her, then filled a cup for himself.

"Sugar?" he asked.

Lena shook her head, and he handed her the cup and saucer.

"It—it's such a pity," he said, "for I know that my aunt would have loved to see you again. She often spoke of you and of High Holding—your father was the vicar of High Holding, wasn't he, Miss Hammond? And wasn't it he who was instrumental in having Aunt Lavvy appointed to the school?"

Lena nodded.

"Aunt Lavvy used to speak such a lot of those days," he went on. "She actually wrote to you from here—to the vicarage, I mean—but her letter was returned 'Not known'."

"When was that?" Lena asked.

"About a couple of years ago, as far as I remember," he answered. "I think it was just after I came here to stay with her."

Lena sighed. It was five years since her father had died, she explained, and she had left the vicarage to find a job for herself.

"I don't even know who is the vicar there now," she said. "In any case, he would not know what had become of me."

Jim Murray pulled up a chair, and was in the act of sweeping aside the debris of the breakfast things when suddenly he remembered his guest and sprang to his feet again.

"I'm sorry about this mess," he said apologetically. "I'd clean forgotten to clear the table."

Lena asked him not to bother as it did not matter in the least. But he paid no heed to her.

"Aunt Lavvy would never forgive me if she thought I'd brought you into this shambles," he went on, piling everything on to the tea-tray and hurrying outside with it. "I do hope that you will forgive me, Miss Hammond. You see I've been looking after myself for the last week or two, and I'm afraid everything's got into a dreadful state of untidiness. I expect you know how is when one has to be out all day."

Lena nodded understandingly.

"What was wrong with your Aunt Lavvy?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Oh, several things, I'm afraid," he answered dolefully. "She'd been ailing for a long time, although she insisted upon being up and about and attending to things. Then, three weeks ago, she slipped and fell, fracturing her thigh. Fortunately, it was a Sunday and I was at home."

Jim shook his head sorrowfully, and went on—

"I managed to get her off to hospital and the operation was successful. But last week, Aunt Lavvy had a relapse. Pneumonia set in, and—well, from that moment there was little or no hope."

"Oh, dear, I'm so dreadfully sorry," Lena said. "I would have given anything to have known she was living here. It seems so tragic that we should have been so near to each other and neither of us aware of the fact. Lavvy left High Holding to stay with her sister in Bedfordshire, and that's where I used to write her. Then, suddenly, my letters started being returned to me, and when I went there to find out what had happened, the people in the house were strangers and could not tell me anything about either of them."

"Yes, and that's when the trouble began," Jim said. "My aunts decided to move nearer London, and one of the last bombs to fall in the war demolished the house they'd just moved into. Aunt Agatha was killed outright, and Aunt Lavvy was badly injured in the head. For several months she knew nothing about anything. Apparently, it must have been a whole year before she was anything like her normal self again, and by that time other troubles had begun to develop. She was in and out of hospitals for a long time, and finally came to London for special treatment."

"Oh, poor darling!" Lena whispered.

"Yes, it was anything but an easy time for her," Jim went on. "But she recovered quite a lot under this special treatment, and eventually she took this flat and settled down more or less comfortably. She used to attend the hospital for treatment twice a month, and she got well again. I came here to stay with her. It was then that she tried to get in touch with you again, Miss Hammond, but you'd left High Holding, apparently."

"My father died suddenly," Lena explained. "And after everything had been settled up, it was obvious that I should have to find myself a job of some kind. Up to then, I'd been keeping house for my father, and had had no training in anything else. It was therefore a big handicap when I began looking for a job, for the first question everybody asked was 'What experience have you had?—and, of course, I'd had none at all."

"Yes, I quite understand," the young man said. "And it all seems stupid, to me. How on earth is one expected to gain experience if nobody will give one a chance to learn? That's why I like the American approach. In the States they say to one, 'There's the job, and if you can hold it down, it's yours. If you can't, you're out.' At least they give one a chance to show what one can do. Tell me, Miss Hammond," he added, "what did you eventually start at?"

Lena told him about Joe Best, who grew flowers for the London market. He had glass houses in a village near High Holding, and when he heard of her plight, he offered her a job looking after his correspondence and so forth.

"That's where I learned about flower-growing," she said, "and flowers generally. I stayed eighteen months with Joe Best, and then I saw an advertisement in a newspaper for an assistant in a small flower shop in Ealing, and I answered it."

She told him about Phyllis Brand, and how eighteen months ago—when Phyllis married and left England—she had bought the business from her and renamed it "The Flower Basket".

"And how long have you been there?" Jim asked.

"A little more than two and a half years," Lena replied.

"And Aunt Lavvy has been here for about the same length of time," Jim mused. "It seems incredible, doesn't it? Not more than a mile or so away, and yet neither of you had the faintest idea of it."

"If only Lavvy had walked past the shop!" Lena murmured thoughtfully. "She would have been bound to stop to look at my display of flowers—for she never could resist flowers—and then she would probably have seen me! Oh, the pity of it!"

"But, unfortunately, Aunt Lavvy couldn't walk that far," Jim said. "In fact, it was only very seldom that she ever left the house—and only then when I was with her. She was very uncertain on her legs, poor dear. And, of course, the stairs were an additional handicap, but this was the only place she could get and she was so determined to have her own home.

"Then when I came to Ealing," Jim coutinued, "Aunt Lavvy insisted that I must live with her. I pointed out that I should be only an additional burden on her, because it was as much as she could manage to look after herself. But she could be very obstinate, and when the doctor told me that it would probably do her good to have someone to fuss over—well, I gave in, and I'm glad to say it worked splendidly. It would have been dreadful had the poor dear been here alone when she had that fall, wouldn't it?"

Lena nodded. Poor old Lavvy! She could have done so much for her had she only known that she was living in Ealing, as she reminded Jim.

"So near—and yet so far," he said. "That comes of living in a big city, I suppose. The odd thing is, Miss Hammond, that I myself have passed your shop many times during the past two years, and upon most occasions have seen you inside—but, of course, I had no idea who you were.

"Had your name been over the shop, it might have been different," Jim added, "because had I seen 'Lena Hammond' up there, instead of 'The Flower Basket', I should certainly have risked coming inside and asking you if, by any chance, you were Aunt Lavvy's Lena Hammond from High Holding."

"Yes, it seems to have been fated, doesn't it?" Lena remarked thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact, I did think of putting my name up, but I thought 'The Flower Basket' would be a better name for the shop. Yet you did come to me in the end, Mr. Murray, whereas you might easily have gone to one of the other shops for your roses."

"Save that I knew yours best," he said. "And that reminds me—ought I to put those roses in water, Miss Hammond?"

Lena glanced at them as they lay on the table.

"Are they—are they for Lavvy?" she asked. And when he nodded—"When?" she added, in a low voice.

"To-morrow afternoon," he answered, "at three o'clock."

Lena sighed. Red roses—for Lavvy! It seemed utterly impossible. Lavvy had always been so proud of her roses. She got up and examined them carefully.

"If you can get me some water, and some soft paper or a rag, I'll fix them for you," she said. "I would like the roses to be at their very best—for Lavvy!"

Jim Murray looked at her for a moment, then swallowed hard.

"There's water in the kitchen," he murmured. "But I don't know about paper, or a rag."

"Let me go into the kitchen and see what I can find, will you?" Lena asked.

"Oh, no!" he said quickly. "I'll go, Miss Hammond, as the place is a shambles. I—I haven't done any washing-up for several days."

So that was it! Several days and no washing-up in Lavvy's kitchen! How dear old Lavvy would hate it! Here, at least, was something she could do for Lavvy.

### Birth of a Friendship

PRESENTLY, up to her elbows in soap-suds, Lena looked round to see if there were anything else to be washed up, but apparently there was not.

"Well, that's something done!" she told Jim, who had been drying-up for her and was using the third cloth.

She then swabbed the sink, washed her hands under the Ascot, and turned to help her assistant finish the drying-up.

Jim gave her a rueful smile as their eyes met.

"I just don't know what to say nor how to thank you, Miss Hammond," he said. "I feel awfully ashamed of myself for allowing you to do all this."

Lena shrugged.

"Don't be silly," she said. "Now if you'll just tell me where Lavvy kept her rags and papers——"

Jim looked vaguely round the kitchen.

"I really don't know," he muttered. "Maybe we'd better look in the kitchen drawers."

"Or that cupboard over there," Lena suggested. "That's the more likely place. Do you mind if I look?"

"Yes, please do," Jim said. "I'm sorry to be such a simpleton, but Aunt Lavvy would never let me do anything—she always insisted that it was 'her work' to run the flat. She wouldn't even have me in the kitchen when she was doing anything."

Lena smiled. She could readily believe that, for Lavvy had always held strong views on what was woman's work and what was man's job.

She smiled a little sadly as she opened the cupboard, and saw how methodically and neatly everything was put away, just as in the old school-house. Lena could seem to hear again Lavvy saying in that soft, sweet voice of hers—

"There's a place for everything, my dear, and everything should always be in its place. That way, you never lose anything."

In a corner, Lena found some old paper patterns—which were just what she was looking for. Soaking the paper in water, she wrapped a little of it round the bottom of each rose stem and one by one stood the lot upright in an empty bucket.

"Will that keep them all right?" Jim asked curiously, when she was finished.

"Yes, and it will prevent them from opening out too soon," Lena replied.

"I—I'm awfully grateful to you, Miss Hammond," he stammered, as they returned to the living-room. "I'm sorry that I—that I can't let Aunt Lavvy know how kind you've been to her nephew. The only thing I feel uneasy about is that I've been trading on your friendship for her, and I would hate you to think that."

"When I do, I'll let you know, Mr. Murray," she told him smilingly. "Tell me," she added, "what arrangements have you made for to-morrow?"

"Arrangements?" he echoed. "Why, I I've left everything to Kemp and Smith."

"Yes, but it's customary to give the mourners refreshments of some kind when they return from a funeral, you know," she said.

"You—you mean Kemp and Smith's men, Miss Hammond?"

"No, the people who have been asked to attend the funeral," Lena explained, as he stared at her blankly.

"I—I see," he murmured. "But no friends are coming. We—we haven't any friends round here. Aunt Lavvy seldom went out, and nobody ever came to see her. In fact, I think you must be the first person to have stepped over the threshold of the place other than Aunt Lavvy and myself."

"You mean—you're going to the funeral alone?" Lena asked.

"Yes, of course—that is, unless you would like to come, Miss Hammond? Would you?" he asked eagerly.

Lena considered for a moment. The shop was the problem, but she hated the thought of dear Lavvy going on her last journey with only one man there to mourn her passing. Why, had it happened in High Holding, the whole village would have turned out to show their respect and to do the dear old lady honour!

Suddenly she remembered Bill Mellor, her friend at the boarding-house. Bill had his own business—he was an ironmonger a little farther along the High Street, and had two assistants who could look after his shop. No doubt Bill would gladly take over her flower shop for an hour or so while she was away, if she asked him.

"You—you said the funeral was at three o'clock, didn't you, Mr. Murray?" she murmured.

"Yes, at the crematorium," he replied. "The car is calling here for me at half-past two. But if you would like to come, Miss Hammond, I could have the car earlier and pick you up at your shop or your home—whichever would be the most convenient for you. Naturally, I'd like you to come, and I'm sure Aunt Lavvy would, if she could know."

Lena felt that, too—it was her main thought, in fact. It was now the only thing she could do for dear old Lavvy.

"Very well, Mr. Murray," she said. "Please ring me up at the shop to-morrow morning and I'll be able to let you know definitely one way or the other. And now I think I'd better be going," she added, picking up her coat and hat from a chair.

"I'll come with you, if I may," Jim volunteered. "It's late for you to be out alone."

"Oh, please don't bother," Lena said. "I can catch a bus that takes me right to my door."

"Then I'll come with you as far as the bus stop," he said.

As they walked along the street, they continued to talk about Lavvy. It warmed Lena's heart to realise how fond Jim had been of his aunt, and of the comfort he must have afforded her during the last days of her life.

That much was evidenced in the affectionate way he spoke of her.

It was not until they reached the bus stop and were standing waiting for the bus, that Jim suddenly remembered the bill for the flowers.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Miss Hammond!" he said. "I clean forgot to pay you for those lovely roses." He took his wallet and extracted three pound notes. "I think that's right, isn't it?" he added, as he handed them to her.

Lena shook her head. She could not take a profit on flowers for poor Lavvy.

"No, two pounds five shillings," she said.

"Oh, no—three pounds!" he insisted. "I happened to see the roses in the shop as I passed there this morning, and they were marked half-a-crown a bloom."

And when still she refused to take the notes—

"Please don't let us argue about it, Miss Hammond," he went on, with that attrac-

tive smile of his. "I know just how you feel and what you're thinking, but this is business, you know. Besides, Aunt Lavvy would not wish you to lose your profit," he wound up, using the most potent argument he could think of.

As he was speaking, the bus came along, and reluctantly Lena took the notes, slipping them into her coat pocket as he helped her aboard.

"I'll ring you at the shop at ten sharp to-morrow morning," he said, smiling at her.

"Very well, I'll be there," Lena promised, smiling back at him as the bus started.

When, a moment later, she peeped through the window, she saw that he was still standing hat in hand on the pavement to have a last look at her. On her way home, as Lena pondered over the events of that astonishing evening, she found herself obsessed by a curious feeling of unreality.

Had all these startling things really happened? she asked herself. Only an hour or two ago she had set off in the ordinary way of business to deliver a special order to a certain address, there had been no thought in her mind but to deliver the flowers and collect payment for them.

And now the address had proved to be that of no less a person than the friend she had lost sight of for years—dear old Lavvy Murray! That alone would surely have been coincidence enough for one night. But no, by the cruel irony of fate, she had found Larry's address too late.

It seemed utterly incredible, looking back on it all, yet still more incredible things were to come, apparently, Lena told herself. She had found a strange young man in possession of Lavvy's home, and had been talking with him as naturally as though she had known him all her life.

True, he was Lavvy's nephew—and Lena conceded that that might have made a difference. But even so, it could not wholly explain the easy friendship which had sprung up between them.

The washing-up in the kitchen, for instance. Looking back on that episode, Lena was a little amazed at herself. She had slipped off her hat and coat, rolled up her sleeves, tied one of old Lavvy's aprons round her, and taken possession of the kitchen with no more thought than if it had been her own.

And Jim Murray had dried up for her. He had stood beside her, and above the clatter of dishes had talked of this and that as easily as though it were a nightly performance in which they had both been engaged for years.

Yes, in retrospect, it all seemed unbelievable. Had anyone told her, when she set out for that address, that within an hour or so she would be washing up plates and dishes with a man she had never seen before, and in a flat she had never entered—and with her sleeves rolled up and an apron tied round her—she would have said they were crazy. Yet it had happened—and what was more, it would probably happen again to-morrow!

Lena was not sure whether she liked that thought or not. She had her business to attend to, and she did not really want to be drawn into any other commitments or complications.

On the other hand, she could not let dear Lavvy make her last journey alone. Such a thing was unthinkable. She must do honour to her old friend's memory, if only because of the affection that had always existed between them, in spite of the great difference in their ages.

And, of course, Lena's thoughts ran on, she could return straight to the shop after the ceremony—there was really no need for her to go back to the flat with Jim Murray. In any case, she would not be able to do so, as Bill Mellor had his own business to attend to, and would not want to stay in the flower shop a moment longer than was necessary.

All the same, she reminded herself, it would be rather dreadful for Jim Murray to return to the empty flat alone. He would certainly not think it very friendly in one who had known his aunt so well.

Lena sighed as she glanced through the window to check the bus's progress, and for a moment the current of her thoughts changed. She recalled what Jim had said about passing her shop several times a day, and fell to wondering where he worked. Odd that she had not noticed him, for she knew most of the people who daily passed the shop. He must have stopped and looked in the window, too, she reflected, since he had noticed the price of the roses.

Still, there was no particular reason why she should have noticed him, except for his height and build. There was certainly nothing of dear old Lavvy about him. Lavvy had been short and slight—a dainty, frail little woman. Whereas her nephew was at least half a head taller than Lena herself, with the shoulders of a rugger player, and fair hair that had a distinct kink in it.

Lavvy had been dark, and had brown eyes, while her nephew's eyes were a deep blue. No, he did not resemble Lavvy at all. Lena then began to wonder why she had taken such particular stock of the young man, and supposed it was because he was a relative of Lavvy's.

When she arrived back at Blair House, Lena went straight upstairs to her room. It was some considerable time before she fell asleep, however, for her thoughts would keep harking back to those halcyon days when she had kept house for her father in the old vicarage at High Holding—those days when Lavvy was the village schoolmistress, and she had come so frequently to the vicarage for tea.

Lena recalled the many interesting conversations they had had together, and the things Lavvy had told her about herself and her family. Yet, oddly enough, she could not recollect her ever having made mention of a nephew.

Of her sister Agatha she had often spoken, and of their plans to set up house together when Lavvy eventually retired. There was another sister, too, named Charlotte, who had married a man in Bristol.

The only brother Lavvy had ever mentioned was Edwin, who had died abroad somewhere. Yet obviously there must have been another brother, since the young man she had met that night was Lavvy's nephew, and his name was Murray, the same her own.

The next morning Lena was up betimes, and after breakfast, approached Bill Mellor about looking after the shop for her during the afternoon. Without going into details, she told him of her old friend's death and of her desire to attend the funeral, if only she could find someone to look after the shop while she was away.

"It wouldn't be for more than an hour or so, Bill," she explained, "and I was wondering if you could help me?"

Bill Mellor was fortyish, short and squat and already showing signs of going bald. He was a bachelor, but it was common belief among the rest of Mrs. Green's boarders that Lena had only to say the word for him to rush to change that status.

As she put her problem to him, Bill gave an ingratiating smile.

"My dear Lena," he said, "you know I shall be only too glad to be of help to you. Of course I'll look after your shop while you are away. What time would you like me to be there?"

"Oh, Bill, how awfully kind of you!" she said impulsively. "Could you manage to come along at about quarter-past two?"

"I'll be along at a quarter-past one, if you want me to, my dear girl,"

"Oh, no, Bill, the car's calling for me at a quarter-past two," she said.

"Then I'd better be along at two, Lena. What time is the funeral?"

She told him at three, and Bill made a rapid calculation.

"Look, Lena!" he said. "You can't possibly be back at the shop until just before closing time and there's no point in your rushing back for those few minutes, is there? Besides, the ceremony takes longer than you think. So just you leave the shop to me and I'll fix everything for you. I'll attend to the locking up and bring the keys here for you. That would be the best thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"But your own shop, Bill?"

"Oh, young Lawson can look after that for me," he said. "As you know, the afternoon is always a slack time with us. So please leave everything to me, Lena, and forget all about your shop. In any event, you could scarcely leave your friends the moment the funeral ceremony is over, could you? Naturally, they'll be expecting you to go back to the house with them."

The thought flashed through Lena's mind that it was all ordained by fate.

"What a good friend you are to me, Bill!" she murmured gratefully. "I can't see how I can ever make it up to you, but should the opportunity occur——"

"Oh, that's all right, my dear Lena," he broke in smilingly. "Who knows—one of these days, such an opportunity might occur, and——"

He stopped abruptly as Helen Hayward came hurrying towards them.

"Very well, at two o'clock sharp," Bill added, then turned and left her with the other girl.

AT ten o'clock Lena was waiting beside the telephone in her shop, and punctually at ten it rang.

She lifted the receiver and said softly—"This is 'The Flower Basket'."

"Good morning, Miss Hammond. Jim Murray speaking. Have you managed to make any arrangements yet?"

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Murray," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Well, yes, I shall be able to come this afternoon."

"That's fine!" he said. "Then it will be all right if I call for you at quarter-past two?"

"Yes. I'll be quite ready, Mr. Murray.'

"Good," he said. "Well, I mustn't detain you, Miss Hammond, as I expect you're very busy. Very well, until a quarter-past two, then," he added, and rang off.

Lorna had a very busy morning, and had time for only a sandwich and a cup of tea sent in from a nearby shop. At two o'clock Bill Mellor came in, Having glanced at the cut flowers and studied the list of prices she had prepared for him, he announced himself ready to take over.

"And remember, Lena," he said, "you needn't hurry back. I happen to know what these unhappy occasions are, and I don't want you to feel that you're tied down to any set time. You can never be sure of anything on such occasions, and least of all of getting away for all sorts of demands are likely to be made on you that you can't possibly foresee."

"All the same, Bill, I shall do my best to get back before closing time," she said. "I'm putting you to quite enough trouble as it is."

Bill smiled, and shook his head.

"There are times when one rather likes being put to a little trouble, my dear Lena," he told her, a meaning note in his voice.

Lena made no answer to that. She pretended to be engrossed in rearranging a bunch of gladioli in a vase. She wished he would not say such things, for it made it very difficult and embarrassing for her.

"Well, I think I'd better be getting ready now," she murmured, and went out to the little room at the back of the shop where she kept her outdoor things.

Fortunately she had a black suit, and coat, and hat. She selected a sheaf of dark red roses, which made a vivid splash of colour as she held them in her arms. And that was how Jim Murray saw her when, promptly on the stroke of quarter-past two, the car pulled up outside the shop and he jumped out to greet her.

"I'm so glad you have been able to manage to come, Miss Hammond," he said, as he shook hands with her.

Jim helped her into the car and they drove off. For a while they sat silent, both busy with their thoughts, though Lena's were mostly memories of the old days at High Holding and of the happiness she and Lavvy had known there.

At last, Jim remarked—

"It's rather odd that you should have gone in for flowers, isn't it, Miss Hammond? Anything else and you would never have found us. Almost it would appear like fate."

Lena nodded.

"Yes," she said. "But what a pity it couldn't have happened before, Mr. Murray? I mean, if you or your Aunt Lavvy had ordered flowers from me earlier on, it would have all been so different, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, that is so," he agreed. "But I suppose that is the meaning of fate—the uncertainty of it, the apparent lack of either point or purpose or over-all design. It's an odd and blind thing, I sometimes think."

"I've often thought that, too," Lena said. "But I suppose it's because we can't see far enough into the scheme of things as a whole. My father, for instance, was helping to decorate the church for Easter when the ladder slipped and he fell. He never recovered from the effects of the accident and died within a month. It seemed—well, so unfair to me, if you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, it seems so pointless to me," Jim said. "It's rather like the case of a missionary I read about some time ago. He'd spent six years in building a church in the heart of the African bush, and on the very night that it was finished, the building caught fire and was burned to the ground. What could have been the point in that, I wonder?"

Lena shook her head. She glanced at the man beside her, and the thought came to her that, belatedly as fate had moved in the matter of weaving the chain of circumstances that was to bring her into touch with Lavvy again, it had still achieved something inasmuch as it had brought her into contact with Lavvy's nephew.

That was the thought uppermost in her mind, when, an hour or so later, they stood side by side while the last rites were said over the mortal remains of dear old Lavvy. Lena was glad she was there to support Jim, and she knew that Lavvy would be glad, too.

They did not speak as they walked back to the car, and it was not until they had driven some distance that Jim broke the silence.

"Do you mind if I call you Lena?" he asked suddenly. "Somehow, it seems all wrong to me to go on addressing you as 'Miss Hammond'."

"Of course I do not mind," Lena answered, once she had recovered from her initial surprise.

"You see," he went on, "you always have been 'Lena' to me. In fact, I don't think I ever heard Aunt Lavvy mention your surname."

"Did dear Lavvy often speak of me?" Lena asked wistfully.

"Oh, yes, very often," he replied. "This last year I think she lived most of her time in the past. Aunt Lavvy was always talking about High Holding, about her school there, and about you and your father. I gathered that she was a frequent visitor to the vicarage, and her memories of those visits seemed to give her great pleasure, for she would always smile happily when she spoke about it all."

"Yes, they were happy days for her, I know," Lena said. "She loved her school, my father used to say that Lavvy knew more about the village than he did, and certainly more about the children."

"Oh, yes, Aunt Lavvy loved children," Jim said. He paused, then went on—"You are coming back to the flat with me for a little while, aren't you, Lena? I'd like to show you some things belonging to my aunt and ask your advice about them. You see, I'm rather all at sea at the moment, if you know what I mean."

Lena hesitated a moment. Then—.

"Very well," she said, "if you think I can be any help to you, I'll come back for a little while."

## A Helping Hand

JIM MURRAY opened the door of the flat and stood aside for Lena to enter. She went straight through into the sitting room, and to her surprise, saw that the table was already laid for tea.

"Oh, but you shouldn't have done all this, Mr. Murray," she said, gazing at the cut bread and butter and the large cake he had bought.

"Well, I thought you might be hungry, Lena," he said with a shy smile. "Now do please sit down and make yourself comfortable while I make the tea. I left the kettle on a low gas, and it must be boiling by now."

Lena laughed.

"In that case, I should think it will have boiled dry by now," she said.

But it had not, for within a moment or two, he came back from the kitchen with the teapot and they sat down.

Lena found that she was hungry, for she had had only a sandwich for lunch. For a while they ate in a companionable silence. Then—

"By the way, Lena, did Aunt Lavvy ever tell you about me?" Jim asked. "Or about my father?"

"No," she answered, "Lavvy never mentioned your name to me, Jim, and I've been wondering just where you came in. Lavvy used to talk a great deal about her sisters—about Agatha and Charlotte. She also told me about a brother of hers named Edwin who died when quite young. And there must have been another brother, I imagine."

Jim shook his head.

"No, Lena," he said, "there was only the one brother—Edwin—and he didn't die when he was quite young. He left home under a cloud of some kind. I don't know what it was. In any case and for whatever the reason, Edwin Murray left home when he was eighteen years and went out to the West Coast of Africa.

"So far as I have ever been able to make out," Jim went on. "he appears to have been a rolling stone. Then, when he was forty years of age, he married my mother in Lagos—and promptly disappeared soon after I was born. Therefore, I never knew him, but from the little I've been told, he doesn't appear to have been of much use in the world."

He paused while Lena poured him a second cup of tea.

"He died when I was ten," Jim added. "And my mother took me to her own parent's home, where I was brought up."

"You—you mean in Africa?" Lena asked.

"Yes, South Africa," he answered—"Durban, to be exact. My mother was employed in a government office in Lagos, and when I was twelve she died of fever there. Meanwhile, by some means or other, my grandfather managed to get into touch with Aunt Agatha, and she invited me to live with her in England. So I came over when I was fourteen. Aunt Lavvy had just given up her school at High Holding and for a few months the three of us lived together.

"Then, the two aunts decided to move nearer to London so that I could attend the Polytechnic and be trained as an engineer," Jim continued, "They came to St. Albans, and I went to school there. Then, shortly afterwards Aunt Agatha died. Fortunately, she left enough money to pay for my training, and I eventually came here to my first job. By then Aunt Lavvy had rented this flat, and she insisted on my coming to live with her. That was just over two years ago, and we've been here together ever since." Jim sighed, and added sorrowfully—"And now dear Aunt Lavvy has gone."

Lena sighed, too.

"You—you have had a hard life, haven't you, Jim?" she murmured, now using his Christian name as easily as though she had never known him by any other. "Yes, and an eventful life, too."

"Eventful—perhaps," he agreed. "But I've been very lucky in the people who have cared for me and given me my start in life. I've always had a home, Lena, and that means so very much to me. My one great sorrow is that Aunt Lavvy couldn't have lived a little longer so that I could have repaid her for her wonderful kindness to me. I was her only living relative, you see."

"Then has Charlotte gone, too?" Lena asked.

"Yes, some four or five years ago," Jim replied. "She was the eldest of the three sisters—I think she was eighty-three when she died. Aunt Lavvy came next, and then Aunt Agatha. My father came last—he was some seven years younger than Aunt Agatha."

"I—I suppose you will be Lavvy's heir, then?" Lena ventured to suggest.

"Yes, Lena," he said, "and that is one of the things I want to talk over with you. You see, I really don't know what to do with the stuff here," he added, glancing round the room.

"But, Jim, won't you go on living here?" she asked.

"I couldn't afford the rent," he answered frankly. "I'm only just starting, you know—I'm in the Borough Engineer's Department, but I have to complete three years' service before I get any real salary, and I've only just completed two. Apart from which, I couldn't manage to look after myself when I'm out all day."

"I suppose Lavvy left nothing—no money I mean?" Lena remarked.

"No, poor darling! She had only her pension, you know, and the little that I could give her. In fact, things have been pretty tight with us, Lena, but we've managed to get along all right. And Aunt Lavvy did so want a little place of her own."

"Yes, of course," Lena murmured. "Well, and what are you proposing to do, then, Jim?"

He spread his hands.

"There's only one thing I can do," he replied. "I shall have to sell everything for what it will fetch and go and live in a boarding-house for the time being. Not that the things will fetch much, for it's all

second-hand stuff that we managed to pick up here and there.""

Lena looked round the room with an appraising eye. Yes, it was certainly all old stuff and very shabby, she told herself.

"Would you like to see what there is here, Lena, and tell me what you think would be the best thing for me to do?" he asked, after a short pause.

"Yes, if you would like me to," she answered, rising to her feet.

"Then I'll show you Aunt Lavvy's room first," he said and led the way into an adjoining room. "But before you have a look at the furniture, I'd like you to see these," he added, crossing to the dressing-table and picking up a small wooden box containing Aunt Lavvy's jewellery.

Lena took the box, and for a moment stood gazing at it intently.

"Oh yes, I remember this box quite well," she murmured at last. "Lavvy always kept it on her dressing-table when she lived at the school-house at High Holding. In fact, I can almost tell you what is in it, Jim."

"Well I want you to have it, Lena," he said. "I know that is what Aunt Lavvy would have wished."

Lena shook her head.

"Oh no," she protested. "It is left to you, Jim."

She opened the box—and there it was! All the odds and ends that Lavvy had loved so dearly—the heavy gold chain, the pendant gold watch that her old friend used to pin on her breast, the early-Victorian brooch containing painted flowers behind an oval of glass, several rings, a gold bangle with a tiny chain, a gold cross, the big old-fashioned belt clasp of gold and enamel, and the topaz ring in its antique silver setting.

"Please take them, Lena," Jim said, as she stood staring at the jewellery. "I know it would have been Aunt Lavvy's wish."

Again Lena shook her head.

"Anyway, take something—if only for remembrance, Lena," he urged.

"Yes, I certainly would like something," she said, turning the things over in the box while she mentally assessed their value.

The topaz ring would fetch least, Lena decided, and she had always had a great liking for it. The stone was large and the heavy silver setting somewhat barbaric, but such rings were quite fashionable now and she could wear it.

Lena slipped the ring on the third finger of her right hand—the finger upon which Lavvy had always worn it—and it fitted like a glove.

"If I may, Jim, I would like this," she murmured softly.

"Yes, of course," he agreed. "But I wish you would take the whole lot, Lena, for I know that's what Aunt Lavvy would have wanted."

"No, I would rather not, Jim," she said. "All the same, I think the jewellery is far too valuable to be left lying about unused in a drawer."

"Yes, I know, but I don't think I could bring myself to selling Aunt Lavvy's treasures," he said. "I don't mind disposing of the furniture, but her jewellery was so—well, so intensely personal to her, wasn't it?"

Lena gave him a curious look. He was more sensitive than she had thought, and she liked him all the better for it. There appeared to be greater depths in Jim Murray than she had supposed, and subconsciously her heart warmed to him.

"Yes, Jim, I see what you mean," she said. "But there is another side to it all, of course, as I rather think Lavvy would have been the first to see it, for she was a very practical little body, you know."

Jim nodded his agreement.

"All the same, Lena, it doesn't alter my feelings," he said. "I still think that you ought to take the lot. I wish very much that you would for it would take a heavy load off my mind."

Lena made her decision swiftly—with reservations she was careful not to mention.

"In that case, I will, Jim," she said, closing the box and replacing it on the dressing-table. "Now let us look at the other things, shall we?"

He was obviously delighted at having won his point, and they started to look round the room. Lena opened the wardrobe and glanced at Lavvy's dresses and coats—all of which were cheap stuff, mute evidence of her straitened circumstances.

"I thought of packing up those old things and dumping them in the dustbin," Jim remarked.

"Oh, no, I think we had better give the clothes to the nuns for their poor people," Lena advised. "I can arrange all that for you, and I know Lavvy would approve of such a thing."

Jim nodded.

"The more I think of it, Lena," he said, "the less sure I am of the truth of what I was saying this afternoon about fate—destiny if you like to call it—acting without point or pupose. True, it brought you here too late to see Aunt Lavvy, but on the other hand, it did bring you in time to clear away a lot of my problems and difficulties by putting to good use the things the old dear left behind and which I should have destroyed. Anyway, I'm grateful to fate, or destiny for that."

"Oh, but I'm only too glad to be of any use to anyone whom Lavvy loved," Lena said. "Tell me, Jim," she added, "how were you proposing to sell the rest of the stuff?"

"That's what I don't know," he muttered. "How does one set about such a thing, Lena?"

She replied that it depended upon how long he intended to stay on in the flat, If he were remaining on there for a month or two, Lena suggested that it might be advisable to advertise the things in lots. On the other hand, if he decided to leave right away, then the best thing would be to call in a second-hand dealer and get a price for everything as it stood.

Jim pondered this for a moment or two. Then—

"The truth is, Lena, I don't want to stay here a moment longer than I have to. For one thing, I can't afford the rent; and for another, the place is too loaded with memories of Aunt Lavvy. Therefore, I'd like to leave as soon as I possibly can."

"I see," Lena murmured. "In that case, I think you had better get into touch with a good second-hand dealer. Do you happen to know of one?"

Jim shook his head.

"Do you, Lena?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I do," she answered. "So if you like, I'll arrange for him to call here—he'll probably offer to buy the whole lot."

Jim heaved a sigh of relief.

"You—you're absolutely marvellous, Lena!" he said, smiling at her. "I just don't know what I would have done without your assistance. You walk into my life when I am up against it so badly and straighten everything out as easily as though you were a fairy with a magic wand! If Aunt Lavvy could see us together at this moment, I know she would be smiling happily."

"I'd like to think so, Jim, for it's all I can do for the old dear now," Lena remarked thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes, I know she would!" Jim affirmed confidently. "And more than ever I'm convinced that it was her hand which pointed out to me 'The Flower Basket', when I decided to order those roses at your shop. For although there are other florists in the High Street whose names I know quite well, it was the 'Flower Basket' that came all unbidden to my mind when I went to the telephone."

"Well, I'm very glad it was," Lena murmured. "I would have felt dreadful had I learned later, on that dear Lavvy had died almost within a stone's throw of me, and I had not known a thing about it. It's some comfort to me, at any rate, to have been able to pay my last respects to her memory."

At last, when Jim had shown her everything and they had had a final cup of tea together, he accompanied Lena to the bus stop. As they walked along, Lena asked him if he had any idea where he was going to live when he left the flat.

"Well, no, I haven't," Jim admitted. "How much do you think I'll have to pay for a decent place around here—I mean, for a room with breakfast and a meal in the evening, Lena?"

"It depends upon the type of place you have in mind," she replied. "But I think you ought to find somewhere quite decent for, say, four guineas a week."

"I—I see," he muttered. Then, after a pause, "I suppose, Lena, you don't happen to know of a place you could recommend?"

"Offhand—no," she said. "But I'll tell you what I will do, Jim—I'll ask my landlady if she knows of any such place in the district."

"Oh, thanks very much," Jim said, his face brightening up. "But I don't like putting you to so much trouble, Lena."

"Please don't worry about that," she told him smilingly. "It's no trouble at all really. Well, here's my bus coming," she added hurriedly. "Very well, Jim, I'll contact the second-hand dealer to-morrow and fix an appointment. When would you like him to call at the flat?"

"Any night after half-past six," he answered. "But won't you try to be here when he comes, Lena? I'd be awfully glad if you would."

"Very well, I'll see what I can do about it," she promised, as the bus pulled up. "Ring me to-morrow morning at about eleven, and I'll let you know if I've been able to arrange anything with the second-hand dealer," she added, as he helped her into the bus.

They waved to each other as the bus moved off. Then clutching Lavvy's jewel box in her hand, Lena made her way along the swaying bus to a vacant seat.

It had been a strenuous, emotion-racking day, she reflected, as she sat staring with unseeing eyes through the window. She was a little surprised to find herself feeling so happy and excited. Somehow, such a feeling of elation did not seem right to her, seeing how she had loved dear old Lavvy, who had now passed away. Even so, Lena tried to convince herself that what she was doing for Jim Murray was in some way, being done for Lavvy herself. For, in helping her old friend"s nephew, was she not doing what Lavvy would have wished?

That was why she felt she must do what she could to see Jim properly settled, of course—she was doing it all for dear Lavvy's sake.

It was not until she reached the door of Blair House that she remembered Bill Mellor and her shop. That gave Lena something of a shock. Not since she had walked out of her shop and left everything in his care had she as much as given a thought to him. And now it was too late, for when she opened the street door and switched on the light, she saw to her amazement that the clock in the hall showed it to be nearly half-past eleven and all the guests had gone to bed.

### DESTINY WEAVES HER THREAD

"HULLO, Lena?" Bill greeted her when she entered the dining-room next morning. "You were late getting back last night, weren't you?"

"Yes, dreadfully late, Bill," she admitted. "I'm awfully sorry. I really had intended to get back in time to close the shop."

"Well, I told you there was no need to hurry, didn't I, my dear girl?" Bill took the keys of the shop from his pocket and gave them to her, and from another pocket, he drew out an envelope. "The money paid to me after you had left the shop yesterday afternoon is in that envelope," he went on handing it to her, "also, a list of what I sold, together with the figures for the various items."

"Oh, Bill, I'm afraid I've put you to a lot of trouble," Lena murmured apologetically.

"Nonsense, my dear Lena," he said laughingly. From a third pocket he produced another envelope, and went on—"That contains the money from the till, I cleared that when you didn't come back—I thought it the safest thing to do before I locked up. You can check the amount against your till strip. I think you'll find everything all correct, Lena."

"Yes, of course I shall, Bill," she said, smiling at him. "What I'm worried about is the trouble I've given you."

"Oh, but I enjoyed it all," he said. "Nothing I can ever do for you is a trouble—you know that, don't you, Lena?"

She nodded mechanically. and glanced at the figures he had given her.

"Well, I must say you did splendidly, Bill," she said. "You actually sold more flowers than I did all the morning."

"That's because of Bill's irresistible well-known appeal to soft-hearted females," Helen Hayward put in laughingly—she was sitting opposite them at the breakfast-table and had overheard Lena's remark. "You ought to appoint Bill your official assistant, my dear, and he'd make your fortune in next to no time!"

Bill frowned.

"I've got quite enough to do in running my own business, Helen," he told her curtly.

"But you and Lena could always amalgamate, couldn't you, darling?" Helen retorted. "You would like that, wouldn't you, Bill?"

At that moment, much to Lena's relief, Mrs. Green came in with breakfast, and that put an end to the baiting.

After breakfast Lena deliberately dodged Bill Mellor under pretence of having to go upstairs to her room. She felt horribly ungrateful, but she had to admit that she was becoming rather apprehensive about the man, for she realised that he was now beginning to carry his ardent admiration for her a little too far, and she dreaded the moment when she would have to tell him so.

Lena waited until, from her bedroom window, she saw him leave the house to go to his shop, then came down to have a word with Mrs. Green. She found the landlady in the kitchen.

"I wonder, Mrs. Green," she said, "if you happen to know of a house around here where a young man could get comfortable lodgings. He is a friend of mine, and I promised to make enquiries for him."

Mrs. Green considered for a moment or two. Then—

"Well, as a matter of fact, Miss Hammond, I've been thinking lately of letting that room at the back—you know, the one I used to use as a sewing room. I wonder if that would suit your friend?"

Lena was completely taken aback, and for a moment she was at a loss what to say.

"I think I could let it a bit cheaper than any of the other rooms," Mrs. Green went on—"three and a half guineas, say, if you think your friend would be interested?"

Lena's heart leapt. Three and a half guineas! Jim would certainly not get anything cheaper than that—and with such a kind and efficient landlady as Mrs. Green.

"Very well, Mrs. Green, I'll tell my friend about it and let you know what he says," Lena remarked smilingly. "He is an engineer in the Borough Engineer's Office, and I'll advise him to take the room."

"Well, I'll be glad to have any friend of yours here, of course, my dear," Mrs. Green said. "Perhaps you would like to bring the young man along and let him see the room for himself."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Green. Yes, that's what I will do," Lena said.

It was scarcely forty-eight hours since she had met Jim Murray for the first time in her life, yet already it seemed that she had known him all her life, Lena reflected, as she made her way to her shop. That, she supposed, was largely because of his relationship to Lavvy. The problem she had to face now was how things would be likely to develop if she and Lavvy's nephew lived beneath the same roof?

That was the question Lena posed to herself over and over again that morning as she arranged her flowers in the shop. But no answer came. She liked Jim Murray very much, but was her interest in him solely upon Lavvy's account or his own?

She did not know, nor could she decide the point. In any event, Lena told herself, she would have to do what she had promised to do for him. So she rang up the dealer she knew and made arrangements for him to call at the flat and to have a look at the furniture that evening.

Promptly at eleven o'clock, Jim rang up.

"Good morning, Lena," he said. "I hope I'm not too early—but you did say at eleven o'clock, didn't you?"

"Yes, Jim," she answered, and then proceeded to tell him of the arrangement she had made with the second-hand dealer.

"And now about lodgings for you, Jim," she went on. "I spoke to my landlady at Blair House, and she said that if you liked you could have a room there."

"You—you mean in the same house as you, Lena?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course," she murmured, a little breathlessly.

"Oh, I'd like to be with you, Lena," he said—"that is, if you wouldn't mind. You see, I don't want you to think that you have to—well, put up with me bothering you with all my troubles just because you were so very fond of Aunt Lavvy." I'd rather do anything than——"

"Oh, please don't be so silly," Lena broke in, with a forced little laugh. "Mrs. Green said you could come and have a look at the room, if you like, before you made a decision. She wants three-and-a-half guineas for the room, which includes breakfast and evening dinner."

"Splendid!" Jim said delightedly. "That's just what I can afford. Surely, Lena, Aunt Lavvy must have taken a hand in all this!"

Lena smiled to herself. It seemed to her that dear, old Lavvy was taking a pretty big hand in the matter. Accustomed as she was to making her own decisions, she felt now that she was being carried along like a cork on a swift-flowing river, and there was nothing she could do about it.

The thought worried her all day, but when evening came and she locked up the shop preparatory to going over to the flat in Westerham Road, the whole problem seemed to slip from her mind and she found herself stepping out blithely and with a pleasant sense of exhilaration in the direction of the bus stop.

Jim was waiting for her when she alighted from the bus.

"I hope you don't mind my coming to meet you, Lena," he said shyly, as he shook hands with her. "You see, I happened to be down this way, and I thought that if you closed the shop at the usual time and were lucky with a bus and——"

"Yes, of course," Lena broke in smilingly.

When they arrived at the flat, she found that tea had already been laid in the sitting-room. There were thinly cut bread and butter and a plate of cakes on the table and she realised at once that he had planned everything with great care in order to please her.

"Oh, Jim, you shouldn't!" she exclaimed.

"Shouldn't—what?" he asked, in well-feigned surprise.

"Gone to all this trouble, of course," Lena replied, indicating the spread on the table.

He grinned.

"Oh, but it's only tea," he said. "Now please take your outdoor things off and I'll be back in a moment," he added, and then went into the kitchen.

Presently he returned, a beaming smile on his face, bearing a silver teapot on a tray.

"Lavvy's best!" Lena exclaimed involuntarily, recognising it at once from the old days at the schoolhouse.

"That's right," he said. "I found it at the back of the cupboard and cleaned it up. Do you like it?"

Lena nodded—it was a teapot of many tender memories for her.

"On special occasions Lavvy always used to bring that lovely old teapot out," she said softly. "It was one of her proudest possessions, and I think it had belonged to her mother. What are you going to do with it Jim?"

"Give it to you!" he answered promptly.

"Oh, no," Lena protested. "I'm not going to accept that. You could sell it, couldn't you?"

"No, I'll keep it for you, Lena," he said. "You can sell it if you like—but I'm not going to. Do you know what Aunt Lavvy used to call it?"

Lena shook her head.

"Her 'remains of rude magnificence'!" he told her smilingly. "It only appeared on the table at Christmastime and on our birthdays." Jim paused to fill their cups, then went on—"About this question of lodgings, Lena. Tell me—what do you really think about it?"

Her thoughts panicked for a moment, then steadied. Everything seemed so different when she was actually with him, and her fears and apprehensions vanished like a morning mist."

"I—I think you'll scarcely do better, Jim," she said.

"Yes, Lena, but the point is this—you may not want to have me continually under your feet, as it were. I think I've been quite enough bother to you as it is, and I'd hate to plank myself on you because—well, because you feel you ought to do what you can for me for Aunt Lavvy's sake. So please be quite frank with me about it all, my dear Lena. Don't be afraid to speak your mind. The place is a boarding-house, isn't it?"

"A Guest House!" she corrected him quickly. "Never let Mrs. Green hear you refer to Blair House as a boarding-house, Jim."

"Well, a guest house, then!" he said laughingly. "But for all that, if I come to live there you might feel that—well, that you *had* to be pleasant to me and the rest of it. You—you see what I mean, don't you, Lena?"

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, after a

short pause. "But I rather think you are making a mountain out of a possible mole-hill, Jim. After all, I'm not the only person at Blair House—there are eight of us, three of them men. So that you would soon have other friends there as well as me."

"So you—you really think it would be all right, Lena?" he asked.

"I don't see why not," she replied, conscious that she was making a momentous decision. "But, Jim, you may not like the room Mrs. Green has to offer you," Lena added, as an afterthought.

"Oh, yes, I shall like the room all right," he said confidently. "That's a foregone conclusion."

"Well, you'd better see it before you decide," she said. "You could do that to-night, if you like, after you've settled everything with the dealer who is calling here to see you."

"Right you are, Lena," he answered with alacrity. "I'll come back with you, if I may?"

Lena nodded her agreement, and having finished tea, they cleared the table and did the washing-up in the kitchen.

Shortly afterwards, the dealer arrived, and for more than an hour they discussed the price of the furniture, piece by piece. After a great deal of haggling and bargaining, Lena succeeded in securing a figure closely approximating to her own estimate.

In the end, the dealer gave Lavvy's nephew a rueful smile.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Murray," he said. "Your friend Miss Hammond knows what's what! She ought to be in this trade of mine herself, for she'd soon make a fortune, as I've told her before."

Lena laughed.

"Oh, come, Mr. Armstrong, you flatter me, you know," she said. "I've quite enough on my hands with my own business, without trying to compete with you in your trade."

When the dealer had gone, Jim looked at Lena and drew a long breath.

"Well, Lena, you—you absolutely amaze me," he said, "and I just don't know how to thank you for everything. I wouldn't have been able to manage half of what you've managed to get for the stuff."

"Oh, but I've had some experience in handling dealers, you see. Well, now," Lena added, "shall we go and see Mrs. Green about that room she has to let?"

## LOVE WAS THEIR STAR

JIM MURRAY moved into Blair House at the end of the week and was an instant success with Helen Hayward.

"Gosh, Lena, where have you been keeping him in hiding?" she whispered, when they rose from the dinner-table that first evening. "I suppose it's too much to expect that such a handsome cavalier is still free?"

Lena smiled. She was used to Helen. "Uncle" often declared that "a pair of trousers on a line" were enough to attract Helen's roving eye.

"I don't know," she answered. "You'd better ask him, Helen."

But Bill Mellor made no attempt to hide his dislike of the newcomer.

"Who is he, Lena?" he muttered, frowning. "I've never heard you speak of him before."

"Oh, Mr. Murray is the nephew of a very old friend of mine," she explained.

"Well, why did he have to come here, I should like to know."

"I know of no reason why he shouldn't," Lena retorted.

Bill looked at her for a moment, and fear was plain in his eyes.

"Lena," he said, "you—you're not—I mean he isn't——"

He broke off, overcome by shyness, his cheeks scarlet.

Lena sighed wearily.

"Listen, Bill," she said gently, "I like you quite a lot, but there it ends. I've nothing else to give. You—you do understand, don't you?" she stammered on. "I wouldn't like you to go on and—well, compel me to have to hurt you."

"But, Lena——"

"I'm sorry, Bill," she broke in. "There's nothing else I can say," and she turned and hurried upstairs to her room.

It grieved her to hurt Bill Mellor, but he had left her with no option. Sooner or later, Lena reminded herself, she would have had to make the position clear to him, and it was better to have done it sooner than later, for the hurt would have been worse the longer she left him in doubt.

Switching on the fire, Lena stood for a moment or two deep in thought. She was thinking of Helen Hayward and her effusive reference to Jim Murray. Of course, the girl always spoke in superlative terms, and although she had not previously thought of it, Lena had to admit that Jim really could be dubbed "handsome". He had clean-cut features, and his complexion carried the permanent tan of South Africa.

Yes, no doubt Jim Murray was a very attractive young man. Often, since she had met him, she was reminded of dear Lavvy by the things he said and the odd way he occasionally phrased his sentences. It was a family trait, Lena supposed.

Armstrong, the dealer, had cleared the flat that morning and handed Jim a cheque for the agreed amount—and now here he was installed under the same roof as herself.

The more Lena thought of it, the more incredible it all seemed. And it had all come about through the sheerest of chances—the chance of Jim ordering those roses from her shop when he could as easily have bought them from any other florist in the neighbourhood—roses which, at the time, she had supposed would be for his sweetheart but which, alas, were for dear old Lavvy's funeral!

Lena shook her head in bewilderment. She had often heard it said that truth was stranger than fiction, but now she had been given concrete proof that it was so. "Fate", Jim Murray had called it, and she supposed it was—a tangling of the threads of Destiny.

By the time she had finished writing several business letters, it was nearly nine o'clock—which meant that she would have to go to the main post office since she wanted them to go off to-night.

Reluctantly she put on her hat and coat and went downstairs, hoping that she would not run into Bill Mellor. Much to her relief, there was no one in the hall, but when she opened the street door, she came face to face with Jim Murray, who was just coming in.

"Hullo, Jim," she said. "I thought you had gone to your room to unpack."

"So I have been, but I went out to get some cigarettes," he explained. Then, noticing the letters in her hand, he added—"Can I post those letters for you, Lena?"

She shook her head.

"No, thanks, Jim," she said. "I've got to take them to the main office."

"Well, I could take them there for you, couldn't I, Lena?" he suggested smilingly.

"Yes, but on the way back I want to have a look at my shop," she said. "I generally do, last thing at night—I don't know why—except that the former owner of the shop once had burglars in the place."

"I—I see," Jim murmured. "In that case, perhaps I had better say good night, Lena."

"Good night, Jim," she returned, and was about to walk on when something in the very quietness with which he had spoken struck through to her understanding, and on a sudden impulse, she said—"Would you like to come with me, Jim?"

His eyes lit up.

"Is that—is that invitation genuine, Lena—or have you asked me out of some mistaken sense of duty?" he demanded, smiling at her.

Her instinct was to prevaricate, to ask what he meant, but she knew what was in his mind. He evidently thought that she was making excuses for not wanting him with her.

"Oh, no, please come along, Jim, if you would like to," she said. "You and I are friends in our own right—as well as friends of dear old Lavvy, aren't we?" she added smilingly.

"I certainly hope so, Lena," he said, smiling back at her. "All the same, I don't want to intrude. You've been so wonderfully kind to me, and it's difficult to know where kindness ends and pity begins. And it's so easy to become a nuisance, you know."

"Good friends can never be a nuisance, Jim," she said. "Now tell me," she added, anxious to change the subject, "do you think you are going to be comfortable in your room?"

He assured her that he was, and once the initial awkwardness was overcome, they were soon talking easily together.

It was when she was posting her letters that Jim mentioned his typewriter.

"Do you have much writing to do in your business, Lena?" he asked.

"Yes, Jim, more than I like doing," she answered, with a rueful smile. "And I'm afraid my handwriting does not do me much credit," she said jestingly.

"Well, I have a little portable typewriter I could lend you if it would help you in any way," he said. "I bought it second-hand when I was at the Polytechnic, but I seldom ever use it now. Would you like it, Lena?"

"I certainly would, if only I knew how to use it," she replied. "But I don't know even the first thing about typewriting."

"Then why not let me type the letters for you?" he suggested. "Your business letters, I mean—that is, of course, unless they are confidential?"

"Oh, no, they are just ordinary business letters, and there's nothing confidential about them," she said. "Even so, I don't see how it would help, Jim, as I would still have to write the letters for you to type."

"Not necessarily, Lena. If you just told me what you wanted to say—dictated the letter, I mean—I could take it straight down on the machine. That would save you lots of time, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, Jim, but what about your time?" she objected.

"Well, I shall be free in the evenings,"

he said. "I have nothing whatever to do after I leave the office. In fact, I'd be glad of something to do, if only to pass the time."

"But don't you go out in the evenings?" she asked, in surprise. "I mean to the pictures and so forth?"

"I think I've been to the pictures only twice in the last two years," he told her, with a rueful little laugh. "You see, Aunt Lavvy couldn't walk even to the nearest cinema, and we couldn't always afford a taxi."

"You—you mean you stayed home with your Aunt Lavvy every night, Jim?"

He shrugged.

"Oh, well she was alone all day, you know, Lena, and I had to be out all day, of course. And she did so love talking to me when I got back from work in the evening. Besides, there were lots of little chores I could do for her. It often occurred to me that her time on this earth was getting short, and I considered that it was up to me to make her life as easy and pleasant as possible," Jim added, a tender note in his voice.

Lena glanced at him with a new interest not unmixed with admiration. Few young men, she was thinking, looked at things in that light, and fewer still were prepared to give up their own pleasures for the sake of an old lady.

"Tell me, Lena, what do you do when we arrive at your shop?" his voice broke across her musings.

"Oh, just peep inside and try the door to make sure it's locked," she answered. "I don't know why I do it night after night, really, except that it has become a habit of mine."

"Sort of robbing the bobby on the beat of a job, eh, Lena?" he teased.

"Sort of," she agreed, with a wry smile, when they reached "The Flower Basket". "It's stupid, I suppose, to allow a habit to become one's master."

Jim watched her peep through the shop window, then try the handle of the door. Everything was in order, apparently.

"Is that all?" he asked, as she was about to turn away.

"Yes, that's all," she said. "I suppose you think it rather silly of me don't you, Jim? But I sleep all the better for having done it."

"Sort of sleeping draught, in fact?" he suggested, with a boyish grin. "Though there's one thing about it, Lena—that's a little job I could relieve you of any night when you may not feel like turning out, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, of course, Jim," she admitted, on the spur of the moment.

"Good!" he said. "Any time you like, Lena. Just say the word, and it shall be done."

When they arrived back at Blair House, Jim opened the street door with the latch-key Mrs. Green had given him, and they walked up the staircase side by side.

When they reached the first landing, the junction of their respective corridors, Jim held out his hand to Lena, and for a moment their fingers gripped and held.

"I—I shall always be deeply indebted to my Aunt Lavvy for many things, Lena," he said, in a low voice, "but for none more deeply than the chance by which she brought me to you. Good night, Lena," he whispered tenderly.

"Good night, Jim," she whispered back, and then hurried along the corridor to her room.

As she sat before the mirror brushing her hair that night and pondering those last words of his, it occurred to Lena that it would have been equally true if Jim had said that it was his dear old Aunt Lavvy who had brought her to him!

ON her next early closing day, when she had the afternoon free, Lena picked out everything that was of gold from Lavvy's jewel box and took it up to a West End firm who specialised in buying old jewellery. In common with Jim himself, she was not particularly enamoured of the idea of selling Lavvy's treasures; but against that purely sentimental feeling, she set the fact that the stuff was quite useless and unwearable. Therefore, it was better to sell it than to have it lying about in a drawer.

She had not told Jim of her intentions, preferring to present him with a *fait accompli*. Still, when she returned home in the early evening—having done considerably better than she had ventured to expect—and was faced with having to hand him a cheque for fifty-seven pounds five shillings, Lena had to admit to a feeling of distinct uneasiness.

In the end, she decided to put the cheque into an envelope, addressed to Jim, and leave it in the letter rack for him. Unfortunately, however, just as she was slipping the envelope into the rack, Bill Mellor appeared in the hall and saw her.

"Just a moment, Lena!" he said, striding up to her. "Please come into the lounge, as there's something I want to say to you."

Lena shook her head.

"It's no use, Bill," she murmured wearily. "I've said all I want to say on that subject, and——"

"Well, I haven't!" he cut in obstinately. "I'm in love with you, Lena, as you know quite well, and I think I'm entitled to at least a hearing. I've known you for a long time now, and we've always been good friends, haven't we? But since this Murray fellow turned up, you've no use for me at all. What can he do for you that I can't? That's what I want to know.

"Why, I could buy and sell him before breakfast," he went on. "I happen to know all about him, and I tell you that he couldn't keep a dog in comfort, let alone a wife. I, on the other hand, can offer you almost anything you want—a house of your own, a car of your own, and all the rest of it, for I've never spent a tithe of my business profits. So why do you have to run away from me just because that Mr. Nobody has suddenly turned up here?"

He had spoken so fast that Lena was unable to get a word in edgeways, and she stood for a moment shattered by the force of his diatribe. She had never dreamt that Bob Mellor could work himself up into such a state.

"Don't be utterly silly, Bill," she began at last, and that was as far as she got.

"Silly, you call it?" he stormed. "It's not me who's silly, it's you, Lena. There's nothing silly in my loving you, is there? Nothing silly in wanting you for my wife? Nothing silly in telling you what I can do for you in return? Nothing silly in my wanting to know why you've thrown me aside for this young upstart! I gather that you are allowing him to type your letters now, and——"

"I think, Mr. Mellor," she broke in indignantly, "you had better be careful of what you're saying. I don't know what's the matter with you, but the sooner you pull yourself together the better. And for your information let me tell you this: After having made such an exhibition of yourself, I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth!"

Lena then turned and left him, her head high, although her knees were shaking beneath her.

Upstairs in her room, she sat down to recover her breath. Well, one lived and learned, she told herself grimly, but it was now going to be very awkward living in the same house with Bill Mellor. Awkward for Jim, too, of course.

The violent slam of a door sent her with quick suspicion to the window. Peeping through the curtains, she was just in time to see Bill Mellor's back as he stamped away down the street. A few moments later, Lena's bedroom door opened and Mrs. Green entered.

"Did you happen to hear that violent outburst of temper, Miss Hammond?" she asked, a little breathlessly. "Was it at you that Mr. Mellor was shouting in the lounge just now?"

Lena nodded.

"I'm afraid it was, Mrs. Green," she answered. "Really, the man seems to have taken leave of his senses."

"Yes, and he'll be taking leave of me when he comes back," the landlady muttered grimly. "I've had just about enough of Mr. Bill Mellor these last few days. He's been like a bear with a sore head, snapping and snarling at anyone who goes near him. I think he must have gone stark crazy. The house fair shook when he slammed that door, and I'm not standing for his tantrums any longer. If he can't behave like a gentleman about the place, he'll have to go, and I shall tell him so when he comes back. You know what it's all about, of course, Miss Hammond?"

"Well, he certainly did his best to make it plain to me," Lena replied.

"Yes, and as he's made it plain to everybody else in the house," Mrs. Green said. "Trailing you everywhere you go and scowling every time you speak to anybody, I never knew anything so ridiculous in all my life. As if a girl like you would ever look twice at a man like him, my dear! Why, apart from anything else he's old enough to be your father. Yes, and I'll tell him to go. This has always been a happy house, and it's going to stay so. Don't you worry, Miss Hammond. I'll settle with his nibs when he returns."

With a reassuring nod, the landlady then left the room, looking more than capable of dealing with a regiment of Mr. Bill Mellors, Lena was thinking.

She then began to wonder what Jim Murray's reaction would be to the note she had left for him in the letter rack. She hoped that he was not going to be angry with her, too.

Lena decided that the best thing for her to do would be not to go down to dinner until the others had started, because by then Jim would have found the note and she would be able to judge from the expression on his face just what he was thinking about it all.

Accordingly, when the gong went, she lingered in her room for several minutes; then, bracing herself, she went downstairs to face whatever she had to face. The first thing she noticed as she crossed the hall was that her note was gone from the letter rack. So Jim had found it all right, and knew what she had done.

Her eyes flew to his as she entered the

dining-room, and as it always did when he saw her, his face lit up with a welcoming smile. Suddenly, the thought shot through her mind that he had slipped the envelope into his pocket without opening it, and, therefore, still did not know that she had sold the jewellery.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," he whispered, as she took her seat beside him. "Have you had a pleasant afternoon, Lena?" he asked smilingly.

She nodded, certain, then, that he had not opened her note. It was Helen Hayward who noticed that Bill Mellor was missing.

"Hullo—where's Bill got to this evening?" she asked, of the table at large.

No one knew, and Lena offered no information. Then, presently, when Mrs. Green brought in the sweet, Helen put the same question to her, but the landlady merely shrugged.

"I haven't the faintest idea where he is," she muttered sombrely.

"It's his afternoon off, isn't it—the same as Lena's?" Helen remarked.

Mrs. Green shrugged again, and it was now plain to everybody that something was radically wrong. That was when Helen laughed and glanced pointedly from Lena to Jim Murray.

"Poor old Bill has had his 'love-life' upset, I expect," she jibed. "And he's taken to drink, in all probability!"

And when Lena flushed, in spite of herself, Helen gave another derisive laugh.

Lena was heartily glad when, at last, the meal was over, though a little scared by the prospect of being alone with Jim when he opened her note. But there was no getting out of that now, for he had arranged to check her account books for her that evening. He had started on the task the night before, but had been unable to finish it.

When Mrs. Green began to clear the table, Lena went upstairs to her room, with the idea of affording Jim a second chance to open her note while she was away. But when she came back, a quarter of an hour or so later, she realised at a glance that he had still not done so. Surely he would not have just stuffed the note into his pocket and forgotten it? Besides, it contained the cheque.

He took the account books from her, opened them out on the table and set to work, occasionally looking up to ask details of a particular entry and smiling ruefully at the explanation she gave—Lena never had been good at book-keeping.

At last, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she said—

"Jim, don't you think you had better open the note I left for you in the letter rack?"

"Note?" he echoed, looking up from his figures. "What note, Lena?"

"The one I put in the letter rack for you, Jim."

He seemed not to understand.

"The letter rack in the hall," she explained. "I put a note there for you late this afternoon."

"Did you?" he muttered. "Well, I haven't got it, Lena. There was nothing for me in the rack when I came in."

She stared at him in bewilderment.

"But—but I put it there myself, Jim!" she said. "It was important, too, for there's money in it."

"Money?" he repeated, rising to his feet, and more mystified than ever.

Lena followed him out into the hall, but they found the rack was empty.

"But, Lena, what money could you be putting into a note for me?" he asked, as they stood staring blankly at each other.

With the note gone, she had no option, She now had to disclose to him what she had done.

"You—you sold Aunt Lavvy's jewellery!" he gasped at the end of it all.

"Yes, Jim, but—but please don't be angry with me," she pleaded. "It was no use keeping it, really it wasn't, for I couldn't have worn it myself, and the jewellery would probably have got lost lying about in drawers. And—and I'm sure dear Lavvy would rather you had the money—even though they were her treasures."

"Yes, my dear Lena, but I told you——"

"I know, Jim," she cut in. "And of course I ought to have asked you first, before I——"

She broke off at the sound of the door closing behind her, and for a moment stood transfixed as she turned and saw Bill Mellor coming in. He hesitated for a moment, then strode forward to where they were standing. Lena noticed that his face was very pale.

"I—I owe you an apology, Lena," he said, speaking with considerably difficulty. "I've been a fool and a knave, and I've come back to tell you as much. Also, to return this!"

He then handed her the note she had written to Jim.

"You—you took this note from the letter-rack?" she stammered indignantly.

"Yes," he admitted shamefacedly. "I—I saw it there and I took it."

"But, my dear fellow, it's addressed quite plainly to me!" Jim put in sternly, glancing at the envelope. "You couldn't possibly have thought it was for you."

"Yes, I know, and that's why I took it," Mellor muttered. "And since you've a right to know the reason, I'll tell you. I was seeing red. Lena had just turned me down—for you! I hated the sight of you Murray! I saw how the land was lying on the very first day you came here, and you've been a thorn in my side ever since. "Then, this afternoon," Mellor went on, "I determined to have it out with Lena, but I lost my temper and made a fool of myself. And when I saw that letter in the rack, the kick-out for me, but a *billet-doux* for you, something snapped in my head, and I snatched it out of the rack. I shoved it in my pocket and went out, and—and eventually opened it!"

Mellor gave a bitter little laugh, and continued—

"Instead, I found—that! A cheque for fifty-odd pounds and what appeared to be a list of jewellery someone had sold. Obviously, I had to bring it back—and there it is. I'm sorry, and I apologise. It was a fool thing to have done, I can see that now. But at the time I didn't stop to think."

He looked from one to the other, and again gave a bitter laugh.

"Anyway, I shall be gone from here first thing in the morning—gone for good," he said, then turned and went upstairs to his room.

They watched him go, and when he had disappeared from sight at the top of the stairs, Jim murmured—

"Is—is the man stark mad?"

Lena sighed.

"I don't know what possesses him," she said. "But, at any rate, you have the money, Jim—and that's the main thing."

"Is it, Lena?" he asked softly.

She did not answer, but she knew what he meant.

"Is it really the main thing, Lena?" he persisted.

She gave him a long, speculative look. Then—

"For the present—yes," she answered, in a low voice.

Jim nodded understandingly.

THE disappearance of Bill Mellor from the Blair House scene on the following morning took most of the boarders by surprise. But not Helen Hayward. And it was not long before the others came to know what was in the wind, too, for it was impossible for anyone with eyes to avoid realising that Lena and Jim Murray were deeply in love with each other.

Lena was almost deliriously happy. Her hours alone in the shop dragged heavily. It was only when Jim was beside her that life seemed complete. All his Saturdays he spent helping her in the shop. He attended to the book-keeping, wrote letters for her, and did everything he possibly could do to please her.

Although she was so deeply in love with him, Lena had not told him so—yet. That she was keeping for the "Great Day", as Jim called it, when he started his real career as a civil engineer. On that day, he had told her, over and over again, he would have "something very important to say to her"!

Actually, it came rather sooner than either of them had expected. Jim called at the shop early one evening, and finding Lena alone, he impulsively threw his arms around her and kissed her.

"Lena dear," he said breathlessly, "I—I have been hopelessly in love with you from the day you walked into Aunt Lavvy's flat. So—so will you marry me, darling?

"I've got a real job at last!" he rushed on. "We shan't be rich, to start with, but a little later on we shall be on velvet!"

Lena caught her breath.

"Oh, Jim, how—how lovely!" she murmured ecstatically.

"Will you promise to be my wife, darling?" he asked.

"Yes, of—of course I will, Jim dear," she answered, her eyes aglow with joy.

"I shall never fail you, my love," he went on, "or cease from loving you, because this, I'm perfectly sure, was intended from the first."

"Yes, I feel that way, too, Jim dear," she said. "It—it was all fated from the very beginning."

THEY were married a month later. The bride carried a sheaf of red roses—red roses for remembrance—and as she joined her waiting groom before the altar, and Jim saw the topaz ring on her finger, he knew in a moment that the same thought was in both their minds.

"She's here, you know—Aunt Lavvy," he whispered. "She's watching us, Lena dear, and smiling her happiness."

"Yes, I know," Lena murmured.

For a moment—even on that, her Greatest Day—Lena's thoughts swept back to the old schoolhouse at High Holding, and she thought again of the amazing chain of circumstances that had brought her from there to where she stood now, beside the man she adored and who, in a few moments, would be her husband for all time. She thought, too, of the one vital link in that chain, without which none of this could have been accomplished, and a tender little smile curved her lips.

"Thank you, Lavvy darling!" her heart whispered in gratitude across the timeless space that divided them. "Thank you for—for everything!"

THE END.

# THE DARKEST MOMENT

(1)

WITH handsome and happy Dick Gainsborough by her side, Eileen Foster came out of the shadowy church to streets that seemed almost unfamiliar in their Sunday hush.

It was the first time she and Dick had met by appointment, and they had decided to attend evening service in the church where often they had gone to hear the lunch-time singing—both were employed in a huge block of offices close at hand. The congregation had been scanty to say the least, but the organ had that mellow sweetness which some old instruments acquire, and the sermon had told of the blessings life holds for all who seek the sunshine.

And the hearts of the boy and girl beat in harmony with the teaching. For them all was beautiful in this best of all possible worlds, because they were together.

They wandered on, almost believing they were in an enchanted land, so different was this silent city from that of their workaday world. Presently they came to another church and passing up a comparatively narrow street beside it, saw ahead a little oasis of greenery in this desert of city stone.

Eileen paused.

"It's a forgotten graveyard." Her voice had a touch of sadness. "And we who work a stone's throw away did not know it existed. It is so tragic—these neglected graves——"

"It's very old, though most of the graves are nearly modern," Dick stood by her side looking through the railings. "It's the churchyard of St. John Zachary that was burnt down in the Great Fire and never re-built."

"And doesn't it belong to that church?" Eileen asked.

"In old London, churches must have been close together," Dick said. "That church—it's St. Anne's in Aldersgate Street—had nothing to do with this bit of land. Mr. Lascelles lent me a book about London churches and it mentioned this one. No one knows who St. John Zachary was, but his church stood hereabouts, and after the great Fire they left the churchyard to be used as a cemetery. Burials took place right up to the days of Queen Victoria, but they've been forbidden for years now."

"Mr. Lascelles is awfully clever, isn't he?" Eileen remarked, anxious to change the subject, for the little graveyard was shadowy and depressing in the fading light.

Dick flushed with enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes, he's the most wonderful chap I've ever known," he said. "The books he lends me—the kindness he shows—I'm awfully lucky to be his own particular clerk. I can't be grateful enough to him for everything."

Eileen gave a little shiver. "Don't let us linger here," she murmured. "The place seems to tell of despair—of parting——"

"You little goose! It's not going to part us, any way." Dick's lilt of laughter made her smile almost against her will. They left the desolation of those forgotten graves to face the happiness of their own young lives.

(2)

Six years had gone since that happy Sunday evening. Six years which had seen dreams fade and high beating hearts grow heavy. Eileen and Dick had been engaged barely three months when the blow fell. The Mr. Lascelles who had seemed a paragon, was arrested for a series of complicated frauds, and Dick was accused of being his accomplice.

Eileen tried to see her lover, but he avoided her. She wrote many times though there was no reply. After the police court proceedings, he was committed for trial, remaining in prison because no one offered to go bail for him.

"He is innocent," the girl maintained to anyone who spoke against him. "I know he has been wrongly accused." And her steadfast faith never faltered.

Then came the trial. Lascelles received a long term of imprisonment, but as a first offender, Dick was "bound over".

An account of the trial was in the evening papers, and at once Eileen hurried to his home, expecting to find him there. She was met by his stepmother—his own mother had died in his babyhood. The present Mrs. Gainsborough prided herself on her respectability and on her sacrifices in saving money. Dick had brought disgrace on his home and Mr. Gainsborough had insisted on paying counsel for his defence.

"Sixty pounds it's cost," shrilled Mrs. Gainsborough. "Practically he's robbed his poor father as well as the firm. I'll see to it that he never enters this door again."

Sick at heart, Eileen turned away. Dick was lost in the whirlpool of London life. She felt a door had closed between them, and when thinking of the happy hours they had spent together, she remembered the neglected graves which marked the site of the church dedicated to the saint who was as completely forgotten as the dead who slept under the turf.

The sense of desolation and of eternal parting lay heavily on her lonely heart.

War broke out within a few months of the trial, and Eileen, joining the Wrens, was drafted to a lonely station. The upheaval was four years old before she came to London for a special course, and on her first leave, she went alone to the City, seeking the narrow street with the offices where she and Dick had worked.

Old landmarks had been swept away. The bombs had done their work, no trace of the offices remained. She hurried blindly from the empty spaces, the water storage tanks with their red brick walls, the shattered remnants of broken buildings standing stark and aloof.

On that far-away, always remembered Sunday evening the city had been strangely silent. Now pulsing life was round her, but she saw only the wreckage. She was in St. Martin's-le-Grand, and caught sight of a blitzed church close to a side turning.

"Eileen!" said a voice suddenly.

She swung round. A soldier was at her side, a grave-faced man who bore little likeness to the laughing boy she had loved. Yet to her they were the same.

"Dick—oh, Dick!"

On the verge of tears, she held out both her hands to him. He did not take them.

"Since I came back to Blighty I've come here every day," he said. "I thought of you working in the city still, and hoped I might get a glimpse of you. I didn't dream you'd stop to speak to me."

"But why not, Dick?"

His laugh hurt her, it was so harsh.

"Have you forgotten I've been in prison?" he asked.

"That could not come between us, Dick. My faith in you has never faltered. Always I have known you were innocent."

Again that bitter laugh.

"Then you don't agree with the judge and jury. They had no doubt of my guilt."

"They were cruel, they were unjust," she cried passionately. "I don't pretend to know how it happened, but in all these years I have never doubted your innocence. You have been cruelly wronged."

"Have I?" His voice sounded dull, as that of a man who was dazed.

"Oh, my dear, how you have suffered! Dick, let us forget the past. Let my faith in you—my love—make up for all."

She lifted her face to his, her eyes shining in her brave faith, and he knew, as he had never known before, how great a treasure he had won in her unfaltering love.

Of all he had suffered, and his sufferings had been great, that was his darkest moment. His moment of temptation. Adrift from his home, the shadow of crime upon him, he had fought a lone battle. Now he need be alone no longer. He had only to keep silence, he need not speak a lie, and this dear girl's loyal love would be his inspiration.

The temptation shook him. Then came awakening. A lie need be none the less a sin because it is wordless, and it would be a poor return for her loyalty if he claimed her love by falsehood.

He spoke thickly.

"You were wrong, and the jury were right."

"Guilty!" Eileen breathed the word and the faith she had treasured seemed to crash. She swayed a little. His hand was on her arm, he drew her down the side street which leads to that old graveyard.

"Don't think I'm putting all the blame on Lascelles." He found himself telling his story disjointedly. "I stumbled on something which told me his accounts weren't in order, and I spoke to him. He said it didn't matter, he was going to pay it back. So I—I kept his secret while things drifted from bad to worse. In that way I helped him, and I lied to save him—again and again I lied. But I never touched a penny of the money."

So all was told, the ugly story of a bad man's influence and of a lad's generous folly. And the broken confession that would reveal all to the girl's trustful eyes, lay his full atonement.

"And since—since?" she whispered.

"I tried to start again, very much at the bottom of the ladder. I took any work that offered and scraped and saved to pay my dad the money he spent on the lawyers. It isn't all paid yet, but I'll never rest till it is. War came and I joined up. Then there was Dunkirk and I was a prisoner in Germany. I've just been repatriated. Now I'm waiting to go overseas again.

Even if you could forgive me it would be of no use. You remember the old graveyard along here—you said it spoke of partings."

Instinctively she looked beyond him to where that little space of sadness had been.

A cry broke from her.

"Dick, look—look where the forgotten graves were hidden. It is a garden now, roses are blooming there, and flowers that tell of hope!"

His eyes followed hers. The forlorn graveyard had gone. Shattering the pathetic traces of the past, a bomb had left a greater desolation, but from the ruin brave hands have made a garden to give life and hope and beauty where neglect had been. Paths wander between flower-borders and shrubs, a bird-bath had given delight to city sparrows, pleasant nooks hold seats where the young may sit to dream their dreams and the old rest as in a haven.

"The Fire-Watchers' Garden" they named this little plot that once was the graveyard of the forgotten church.

The sense of hope, of promise, caught the hearts of the two who paused where the gate had been.

Eileen spoke softly—

"Flowers and beauty and young green leaves. Oh, Dick, what of the lesson they teach? The past is gone, but the future is full of hope. 'Men may rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things'."

He caught both her hands and held them close.

"Pray God I'll be a better man because of what has been." His voice was deep with emotion. "I'll never forget the lesson of this garden, my dear Eileen, and I'll make you proud of me yet."

"I'm proud of you now, Dick dear," she said softly.

THE END



# WHERE PATHWAYS MEET

## By John Tracy

### LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

THE sun was setting in a riot of crimson and gold, as Ruth Norris came out into the clearing and had her first glimpse of the caravan.

Setting down her suitcase, she stood for a moment drinking in the scene, all the artist in her responding to its exquisite beauty.

Then her lips parted in a little smile as she thought how surprised her father would be when she appeared before him so unexpectedly.

Dear daddy! It would be good to see him again, for it was nearly a month since he had set out on a caravan tour, for the sake of his health.

He had refused to take her with him, as he thought the life would be too rough for her, so he had taken one of his pupils instead — a young man named Boris Quentin, whom Ruth had never met—and had left her to finish her term at the Art School in London.

She was supposed to spend the holidays with some fellow-students who were going on a sketching tour of Cornwall. Instead of which she had decided to join her father, taking him by surprise, so that he would have no time to object to the scheme.

When she had shut up her little flat in Chelsea, and had taken the train to Stokely Bridge, the village in Kent where she knew the caravan was at the moment, it had not occurred to her to wonder whether there would be room for her in the caravan. She supposed they would be able to manage somehow; as to "roughing it"—well, that would be all part of the fun.

Since her mother's death, when she was a child, she and her father had been inseparable companions, and she guessed that the past month had been as miserable for him as it had been for her.

Hastily she picked up her suitcase, and went on over the soft turf towards the caravan, passing the horse, which was tethered at the end of a long rope.

At the foot of the steps she stopped, set down her bag, and peeped inside.

Yes, there was her father, pencil in hand, just as she had imagined he would be, for he was never happy unless he was working.

Courtland Norris was a composer, and although he was well known, he was far from rich, for he was a true artist, and refused to write music merely for commercial purposes, although he had once appeared on television.

"Daddy!"

He looked up with a start and dropped his pencil as he saw his daughter standing in the doorway.

"Ruth, my dearest girl!"

The next moment they were in each other's arms.

There followed explanations, to which Ruth's father listened with an expression of mock reproof, but there was a happy smile in his eyes, and at the end he told her she was a disobedient daughter but that he was glad she had come.

"I don't know where we are going to put you, though," he added. "We must consult Boris when he returns. He's gone down to the village to get some food. Ah, here he is!"

Ruth turned to see a young man coming towards them across the clearing, swinging a basket of groceries from one hand and a bottle of milk from the other.

He was of average height, but slim, which gave him a taller appearance, and as he came nearer, Ruth decided that he was the most romantic young man she had ever seen.

Ruth felt a stir of interest as her father introduced her.

Boris Quentin put down his parcels and took her hand with an easy deference that had something curiously un-English about it. Ruth felt his eyes upon her face with open admiration, and was annoyed to feel herself colouring.

To cover her embarrassment she said gaily—

"Father tells me you are the billeting officer. Do you think you will be able to find room for me?"

"I am sure we shall," Boris told her eagerly. "We brought a tent with us, in case of emergencies. If the professor is willing he and I can sleep there, and you can have the caravan."

"Oh, no, I am not going to turn you out of the caravan," Ruth protested. "I shall love to sleep in the tent. It will be great fun. I have never slept under canvas before. I am sure father would be more comfortable in the caravan, wouldn't you, daddy?"

"There will probably be spiders in the tent," her father told her, laughing.

"I won't mind," Ruth said recklessly. "I'm not going to be squeamish, seeing that I've invited myself. I'm determined to show you that I don't mind roughing it. So I'll have the tent—spiders and all."

So it was settled, and they all set about preparing supper.

It was almost dark now, and when the oil lamp inside the caravan was lighted, and the odour of baked beans and bacon rose upon the air, it was all very cosy and romantic.

They sat around the little camp table, and ate with appetites sharpened by the open air, and afterwards, when Ruth and Boris had washed up, the men lit pipes, and Ruth and her father sat in the door of the caravan, while Boris perched himself on the steps below.

The night was warm and still, and presently, as they talked of the happenings of the past month, the crescent moon swam into view above the trees.

As so often happens, when nature gives us a glimpse of her wonders, there was something of sadness in that still, exquisite beauty. Ruth felt it stealing over her, until it became almost a physical ache at her heart. She asked herself why she should be sad on such a night as this, with the one being whom she loved best of all the world beside her. And yet that vague feeling of unrest would not leave her.

Perhaps her father shared the feeling, for suddenly he spoke—

"Play to us, Boris, won't you?"

He reached behind him and brought out a violin case, which he handed to the young man.

"What shall I play, sir?" Boris asked as he tuned up.

"Oh—anything! One of those Hungarian folk-dances of yours—the Czardas. It will appeal to Ruth."

The first weird, pulsating notes quivered out upon the still evening, and Ruth sat spellbound while the music gathered impetus, sweeping her out of her surroundings into the wild mountain fastnesses of Hungary.

She leant back in her chair, closing her

eyes, and saw dark-eyed men and women in the gay costumes of their nation, whirling faster and ever faster in the intricacies of the national dance.

She forgot the player—forgot everything—in the binding spell which the music laid upon her, as it soared to wild abandon, then died suddenly to infinite pathos that stirred her to the soul.

As it sank into silence, Ruth felt as though every nerve in her body was quivering and vibrating to the strange, mad rhythm.

No one spoke for a few moments, then her father said, in a voice that showed traces of emotion—

"I have never heard you play so well Boris. It was perfect."

He turned to Ruth, and she was glad that the darkness hid the tears that stood in her eyes.

"Well, my dear, what did you think of it?"

"It was marvellous," she said.

She hoped the young man could not detect the tremor in her voice and he appeared not to do so, for he spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It is the very essence of Magyar music—the Czardas. In Hungary I have heard it played on the zither—you remember it was in that film "The Third Man"—but the violin is its best interpreter. No other instrument can catch that weird blending of joyful abandon and melancholy which is so typical of the Magyars. It is real Hungarian gipsy music."

"You know Hungary, then?" Ruth asked curiously, her eyes on that upturned face below her, which was lit by the moon.

"Yes. My mother was a Tzigane—a Hungarian gipsy. My father who was English, met her when he was travelling in Hungary, and fell in love with her beauty and married her. He brought her back to England, but she did not live long after I was born. She hated the life of cities, and craved for the colour and freedom of her old life. My father took me to Hungary several times during my school holidays."

Ruth sat in silence, wondering about this strange young man of the romantic personality. She did not know whether she was attracted towards him or not, but of one thing she was certain—he was not the sort of person one could ignore.

She had a curious feeling that he had not come into her life like this for nothing. Even in the darkness she could feel his dark eyes upon her face, and she felt as though she wanted to escape, to get back to the world of everyday things, away from the dangerous glamour which the weird music had shed around them all.

THE next day Ruth had forgotten her inexplicable sadness of the previous night, as the caravan set off along the road.

It was all new to her and delightfully exciting. Sometimes she sat in the driving seat, while the old horse plodded placidly along, and sometimes she walked beside the caravan, talking to Boris.

As the days went by, her cheeks acquired a lovely glow and her hair a new gleam of sunshine, for she never wore a hat.

Boris Quentin's eyes followed her continually, held by the lovely picture that she made in her neat pleated skirt and jumper, her hair blown about by the wind, her brown eyes shining.

Her father, engrossed in his work, left them very much to themselves, and Boris gradually told her all about himself and his ambitions. She learnt that he was taking this holiday before setting out to earn a living by his violin.

He had been studying with her father, but was now anxious to get a job in an orchestra, with hopes of one day giving concerts of his own.

She in turn showed him some of her sketches, and told him how she longed to make a name as an artist.

Ruth learnt that Boris was twenty, the same age as herself, though sometimes he seemed younger, sometimes older. There was something very boyish about him, and yet, in the evening time, when he played to her, he seemed a different being. His music delighted her, but she liked Boris best when he was just a pleasant companion.

The weeks sped by while they drifted on from one pleasant spot to another, and Ruth began to feel uneasy as she noted the growing adoration in the boy's eyes whenever he looked at her.

Her father, wrapped up in his own dreams, saw nothing and Ruth began to wonder whether she ought to leave the caravan and return to Town again. She felt sorry for Boris, for she grew more and more sure every day that he could never appeal to her, save only as a comrade and he began to avoid being alone with him.

One evening after supper, when they were camped beside a stream, her father took his pipe and went for a walk in order to think out some difficulty of composition that was worrying him.

After she had washed up and cleared away, Boris came and sat beside her on the steps of the caravan and said abruptly—

"Ruth why do we never have those long talks nowadays that we used to have? Is anything the matter?"

She tried to laugh lightly, though there was something in his tone, and in the smouldering depths of his eyes as he looked at her, that made it difficult.

"Of course, nothing is the matter," she said. "Why should you think there is?"

"Because you are avoiding me."

Again she laughed, nervously.

"I am sure you are mistaken. There is no reason why I should avoid you, Boris. I suppose it is just that there is so much to do and see. But why should we waste time talking about such stupid things? Play to me, Boris."

The suggestion was made in order to turn the conversation from the dangerously personal direction it was taking. Boris seemed to guess as much, for he looked at her hesitantly for a minute or two, then went for his violin.

Ruth heaved a sigh of relief. Once more she had averted the words which she knew instinctively had been trembling on his lips. She knew that he loved her, and she did not want him to tell her so, for once he had done that their comradeship would be at an end.

She liked him too well to wish to hurt him—and also, deep down in her heart, was a vague, unreasonable fear, she could not have said of what. Perhaps it was because of the way Boris had of looking at her with that long, smouldering gaze of his.

To her surprise, this evening, instead of playing one of the Hungarian dances of which he was so fond, he broke into a well-known melody.

Suddenly she was startled by him laying down the instrument and seizing her hands. She tried to draw them away, to stand up, but he held them fast, bringing his face nearer, and gazing up into her eyes with a flame in his own.

"Ruth — Ruth — darling — I love you! Don't think me mad—to speak to you like this—when I have nothing to offer you. But, Ruth—if you will love me—I will do anything for your sake—I will work hard—and win success—to lay at your feet—if only you will love me—as I love you——"

"Boris, don't! Please, please——"

"Why not? Why shouldn't I tell you that I worship you? I loved you as soon as I saw you——"

"But, Boris, we are too young—it is impossible——"

"You mean I am too young," he said angrily. "You think I am only a boy with my way to make. So I may be, in years; but remember I am not wholly English. I have Southern blood in my veins, and in the south we come to manhood sooner than the people of the north. I am old enough to love you—madly. If I knew that you loved me, too, I could do anything for your sake——"

"But I don't, Boris! I don't love you, not in that way. I like you——"

"Like me!" His voice, low and husky, was passionate, as he leant nearer. "Can't you love me, Ruth? Can't you—can't you? I adore ou——"

"Boris, please don't! I hate to hurt you, but I can't love you. We can't make ourselves love people, not in that way."

He looked at her in silence for a long time, then he said deliberately—

"I—will—make—you—love—me."

Ruth began to feel annoyed. She longed for the scene to end, and it seemed to her that Boris was being stupidly melodramatic.

"Please let me go," she said. "Father will be back at any moment."

"I will make you love me," the boy repeated doggedly. "I will go on loving you all my life, and from this moment I will set out to be successful in my career, so that one day I shall have something to offer you. I do not believe you know your own mind yet. You do not know what love is. But one day you will know—and then——"

"Boris, please don't make is so difficult for me," Ruth pleaded, in desperation. "I have told you that I can never love you——"

"Very well," he said, standing up suddenly. "So you say—now. But one day you will change your mind; but I shall never change mine. You are the only girl in the world that I could ever love—and I shall always be waiting for you."

Ruth felt a wave of pity rush over her. He looked so young standing there in the twilight, his eyes very dark in his pale face. She wished that she could have loved him. She put her hands on his shoulders and smiled up at him.

"I hope you will forget me," she said gently. "After all, we are both very young. This may be just an infatuation. I am sure we should never be happy together, married. We are so different in temperament. One day you will find a girl who understands you and will make you happy."

He did not answer, but only looked at her steadily, until she felt her eyes drop before his and the colour flood into her face.

Suddenly he seized her in his arms, and before she could move or cry out, had kissed her several times.

"This will show you whether it is just

an infatuation," he said savagely. "I love you—I love you—don't you understand?"

He released her just as suddenly, and she fell back on the step, white and angry.

"How dare you?"

"Ruth—forgive me! I must have been mad. You looked so sweet, standing there like that. I lost my head—for a moment. Forgive me—won't you?"

He looked so utterly ashamed that she could not find it in her heart to go on being angry.

"Very well, I forgive you," she said at last. "But it must never happen again. We must forget this conversation ever took place, or it will be impossible for us to go on seeing one another. I shall have to go back to Town."

"No—don't do that," he pleaded. "I promise not to annoy you any more."

At that moment the return of Ruth's father put an end to the scene, for which she was duly thankful, and she was relieved to find that he seemed to notice nothing.

THAT night she lay for a long time staring into the darkness of her tent, asking herself whether she ought to go back to Town. She knew Boris could not go—her father found him indispensable, for he acted as a sort of secretary-assistant—and she felt that it would be impossible to go on just as before, after the scene of that evening.

Why was it that people so often fell in love with the wrong person she asked herself.

Like most girls, she had a secret dream, deep down in her heart of the man to whom she would one day give her love. If only Boris had been the personification of that ideal, what a wonderful time they could have had in this carefree happy-go-lucky caravan life!

But she knew that what she had told Boris that evening had been the truth. She could never love him, though she was ready to admit that many girls would have been fascinated by his dark, romantic good looks.

Her ideal was someone tall and strong and loose-limbed, and she did not care very much whether he was handsome or gifted, so long as he possessed that indefinable something which would make her recognize him at sight.

The next day she was relieved to find that Boris had returned to his normal behaviour, except that he seemed to avoid her—but she was glad of that, rather than sorry.

They were plodding along the highroad when Ruth, who was in the driving seat, caught sight of something dark lying at the side of the road, some way ahead. Some distance back a car had passed them, going very fast, and she did not connect that fact with the dark object until suddenly, as they drew nearer, it dawned upon her that the object was a body.

She called to Boris, who was walking beside the horse, and had apparently been too engrossed in his own thoughts to notice anything.

Immediately he ran on ahead, and she saw him stoop down, then look up again and beckon to her. With a hasty word over her shoulder to her father, she jumped down, and ran to join him.

Boris was bending over the unconscious figure of a young man.

"Is he—dead?" she asked anxiously.

"No, only unconscious. It must have been that car. Evidently it struck him and knocked him aside, and the brutes didn't stop. Hold his head, will you, while I go for some water?"

Ruth took the young man's head on her lap, and looked down pityingly at the still white face, one side of it begrimed from the dust of the road. She noticed that beside him, in the road, lay a knapsack. It looked as though he had been on a walking tour, she thought, and looked again, with greater interest, at his face.

She saw the eyelids flicker and gradually open. Then she was staring down into a pair of the bluest, clearest eyes she had ever seen. And so they looked at one another for several seconds, and Ruth felt a queer, inexplicable stirring at her heart while that long gaze lasted.

"Who—are—you?"

Before she could answer, Boris Quentin had returned with the water, and was explaining to the other man what had happened, as he held the bottle to his lips.

Ruth, watching them, was thinking that Boris had only been away a minute, and yet something had happened to her in that time, so that life would never be quite the same again. It was as though the corner of a veil had been lifted, giving her a glimpse of something so wonderful that it took away her breath.

Was this love? Was it possible to look into a pair of eyes and recognise the one being in all the world who holds the key to one's heart? Could it really be that if she never saw this stranger again his image would remain as clearly imprinted in her mind and soul as though she had known him from the beginning of time?

Her father joined her at this point, and suggested that they should stop a passing motor-car, and get the young man taken into the town, a few miles ahead, where there would no doubt be a hospital. It was plain that his right arm was broken, and there might be other, more serious internal injuries.

A few minutes later a saloon car came along, and stopped at their signal. The driver willingly agreed to take the young man to the hospital, and the three men, with great difficulty, managed to lift him into the car. During the process Ruth saw him go white to the lips, and knew that he must be in acute pain, though he gave no other sign.

Boris got in beside him, and arranged to join them at the camping ground, outside the town. Just as the car was about to start, Mr. Norris caught sight of the knapsack lying in the road, and threw it in after them.

Ruth's heart was beating heavily as she watched the car disappear in a cloud of dust. They two had met "like ships that pass in the night." Would they ever meet again?

She knew nothing about him—not even his name. He must be twenty-six or a little older. He might even be married. There might be a thousand and one reasons why, even in the unlikely possibility of their ever meeting again, he could never mean anything to her.

And yet she knew that if that were so, life would never be the same again. Something vital would have gone out of it, never to return.

Her father was walking back to the caravan. She turned slowly to follow him, and her eye was caught by a white object lying on the side of the road. She stooped and picked it up, and saw that it was the photograph of a very beautiful girl, whose face bore the unmistakable stamp of birth and breeding. Across the corner was written—

"*With love—Cynthia.*"

It must have dropped from the young man's pocket, or from his knapsack. Who was this girl, and what was she to him?

Ruth stared at the words for a long time, without moving, her heart thumping wildly, and a sense of bewilderment oppressing her.

Who was "Cynthia"? Sister—sweetheart—wife?

### TRAGEDY FOR RUTH.

THEY had not planned to camp so early in the day, but Ruth's father suggested, as they went on along the road, that it would not have been very kind to go on without waiting to see whether the stranger they had found was going on satisfactorily.

Ruth agreed, and apart from her desire to see the young man again, was glad that they had decided to rest, for she thought her father was not looking very well. The last day or two had been very hot, and although she had repeatedly suggested that they should rest for a few days, her father was always anxious to go on, pointing out that it was no strain upon him, as he did very little walking, whereas the constant change of scene inspired him.

For several days Ruth had been watching him anxiously, and when, just outside the town, they came to a suitable place for camping, she bought some milk from the neighbouring farm, and made him a strong cup of tea, after which she persuaded him to lie down in the shade and rest.

She sat down on the steps of the caravan with a book, but she did not read. It lay in her lap unopened, while she sat with hands clasped round her knees, watching the dappled light and shade on the turf beneath the trees, and thinking of the injured stranger.

When Boris returned, he told them that the doctors had found no internal injuries, but had set the broken arm, and the young man was expected to make good progress.

Ruth told him of the photograph that she had found, and mentioned her intention to take it to the hospital. Boris at once offered to do it for her, but she assured him she would like the walk. She thought that he looked at her rather intently as she spoke, and was annoyed to feel herself blushing.

After tea she set off along the road. As she drew nearer to the town her heart began to beat faster, and when at last she stood in the entrance of the little hospital it was beating almost to suffocation.

A smiling, white-capped nurse led the way into the ward. The stranger was lying staring at the ceiling, but when he heard her step he turned his head with a start, and a slow, deep flush spread over his pleasant face.

"Oh, I say—this is very kind of you!" he began eagerly.

Ruth knew that her colour had mounted, and to hide her embarrassment she said hastily—

"You dropped this in the road. I thought I had better bring it to you at once, or you might be worrying about it."

She held out the photograph, and her quick eyes noted the young man's change

of expression as he took it.

"Thank you so much. It was very good of you."

His voice sounded flat, suddenly, and for one wild moment it occurred to Ruth that perhaps he had hoped that she had come to see him for his own sake. On an impulse she added—

"I should have come anyway. I wanted to be sure that you were quite comfortable, and that there were no complications. Is there anything I can do for you—write to your friends, or anything of that kind?"

"Thanks awfully, but I won't bother you. I shall be fit again quite soon, no doubt. I shall be up again to-morrow, and then, if they will let me, I will finish my journey. I have been on a walking tour, and was on my way to see some friends of mine who have a house a little further on. It was rather stupid of me to get knocked down in the last stages of my tour, wasn't it?"

"Better than in the early stages," Ruth said, with an answering smile. "I am so glad it is no worse. But if you are going on, you must let us give you a lift. You are not fit to walk, and I am sure my father will be delighted. We are on a caravan tour, and we do not mind where we go. We just drift along from place to place."

"Do you? What a grand holiday! It's nice of you to offer me a lift. If you are sure it will not upset your arrangements, I accept gladly."

Ruth's heart leapt. He would be with them for a few hours—perhaps a day! One whole summer's day—not very much out of a lifetime, but enough, if she never saw him again, to feed her memories for years to come.

Like all people who are in love, she was content to live for the moment, sipping its honey to the full. The future might have in store heartache and heartbreak, but the present held nothing but happiness, and she was content.

She went away with a singing heart, and, back at the caravan, told her father of her offer to give the stranger a lift, to which he readily agreed. She had ascertained from the hospital authorities that the patient would be well enough to leave on the morrow, and had arranged to pick him up as they passed through the town.

As she helped to prepare supper that evening, there was a faint smile on her lips—the reflection of that queer, excited happiness that she felt at the thought of to-morrow. Beyond that she would not look.

She caught Boris looking at her strangely once or twice, and wondered if he guessed anything, but she did not care. Nothing mattered except that she loved the young man with the blue eyes, and that to-morrow she would have a whole day with him—one long, glorious summer's day, to be for ever remembered.

She deliberately kept her thoughts away from that photograph and the words written upon it—"*With love—Cynthia.*" She wanted only to think of happy things to-night.

The young man was waiting for them outside the hospital next morning, with his arm in a sling, but otherwise, apparently, in good health and spirits once again. Ruth loved the look of him, standing there in the sunshine, so tall and broad.

He introduced himself as Hugh Marvin, and thanked her father for his kindness. As he shook hands with Boris, Ruth thought that the latter looked rather sulky. He had not seemed too pleased when she told him of the arrangement to give the stranger a lift.

However, she did not intend to waste time trying to understand the queer workings of Boris's mind, and was relieved when he went off to walk beside the horse, while her father settled down to work, and she and Hugh Marvin, who had been warned at the hospital not to walk too much, sat at the open door, talking.

He was a delightful and entertaining companion, and he talked freely about himself, telling Ruth that he was in his father's business—Marvins, the big engineering firm. But not once did he mention the girl of the photograph, though she could not be his sister, for he explained that he was the only child.

"My people think I'm mad to go off alone on a walking tour for my holidays, when everyone goes by car, these days," he said, with a twinkle. "But I love the sense of freedom, after being cooped up in an office most of the year. We've been extra busy the last few months, too, so father gave me a month off, now we're slack, and I set off to enjoy myself in my own way. There's a wonderful fascination about the open road, isn't there?"

They discovered that they shared a taste for adventure, for books, and for many other things. By lunch time, when they stopped at a wayside inn for cold beef and salad, they seemed to have known one another all their lives.

Boris hardly spoke at all, and Ruth's father seemed tired. She looked at him anxiously, and suggested that he should lie down during the afternoon.

She was rather alarmed to find that he agreed so readily, for usually it was difficult to persuade him to rest, but she made him comfortable on the folding bed inside the caravan, and she and Hugh Marvin walked beside Boris, who was rather sulky. He seemed to cast a certain constraint over them, to banish the easy comradeship of the morning, and Ruth felt heavy-hearted as she thought of the precious hours slipping by, to the time when she and Hugh must part.

Presently they came to an old stone wall, which Hugh told them belonged to the house for which he was bound.

"You must camp in the paddock to-night," he said. "My friends will be only too delighted to be of service to you—especially when they know how good you have been to me."

Ruth wondered who these friends were, and whether they were connected with the girl of the photograph, but she asked no questions. And when they came to a broad drive, leading up to a solid, grey stone house, Hugh went on ahead to make the necessary arrangements.

He returned in a few minutes, with a girl at his side, and as they came near, Ruth recognised, with heavily beating heart, the girl of the photograph.

Mr. Norris was up by this time, and Hugh made the necessary introductions. It appeared that the girl's name was Cynthia Wendell, and that this was her house. She was very lovely, and despite the unhappy jealousy that tore at Ruth's heart, she could not help liking her, she was so friendly and charming. She at once gave them all an invitation to stay as long as ever they liked, and suggested that they should let her put them up in the house.

"It is a great barracks of a place," she told them, smiling. "There is heaps of room. I should be delighted if you would stay."

Ruth looked at her father, guessing that he would not wish to accept the invitation, for he loved the caravan life. As she had expected, he courteously declined the invitation, saying that they would be quite comfortable in the paddock, if they might have the use of it for one night.

"For as long as ever you like to stay," Cynthia Wendell told them. "And if you will not stay with me, you shall at least have tea with me. I insist upon that."

They finally accepted and presently were sitting in a pleasant, shady drawing-room enjoying a dainty tea.

Ruth spoke little, leaving the conversation to her father and Miss Wendell—who, it appeared, was keenly interested in music and excited at meeting the famous composer of whom she had heard so much.

Presently, she persuaded him to play to them—and it needed little persuasion, for his eyes had roved lovingly to the magnificent piano that stood by one of the long windows leading into the garden.

The music was wonderfully soothing. Courtland Norris, not having touched a piano for so long, was thoroughly in his element, and glided on from one Chopin nocturne to another, and then on to Debussy, while they all sat in a dreaming silence.

The two young men scarcely took their eyes from Ruth, as she lay back in her chair gazing into the quiet peace of the garden, though Cynthia made an exquisite picture in her nylon frock, as she sat watching the pianist.

Ruth was trying to fathom the secret of the relationship between Cynthia and Hugh.

There was an easy, affectionate intimacy between them which would have made her think they were engaged, but Cynthia wore no ring. Cynthia's companion, too, a middle-aged woman named Mrs. Roach, who seemed to be busily bustling about the house all the time, had called him "Mr. Hugh", as though she knew him very well.

The question remained unsolved when the party broke up, and Hugh escorted them across the grounds to the paddock where their caravan stood.

Cynthia's eager hospitality had provided them with milk, water, and everything else they could possibly need, and she had begged them to let her know if there was anything else she could do for them.

Hugh and Ruth found themselves dawdling behind the others, but they did not seem to have much to say to one another. Ruth had an instinct that he was feeling something of the constraint which lay over her own heart.

As they shook hands, and said good night, their eyes met in a lingering glance that sent a thril through Ruth.

"I shall come and see you to-morrow, if I may," Hugh said. "You will not go without letting me—us—know, will you? I should hate to come here, and find nothing but a withered heap of flowers—such as the gipsies leave when they take the road again."

He smiled as he spoke, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness in his voice.

"We shall probably go on again to-morrow," Ruth told him bravely. "My father hates to stay long in one place, however pleasant. But, of course, we will not go without seeing you—and thanking

Miss Wendell for her hospitality."

He hesitated, as though he would have liked to say something else, but the words remained unsaid. He turned aside with an abrupt good night, shook hands with her father and Boris, and strode off across the darkening fields towards the house where Cynthia Wendell waited for him.

After she had said good night to her father and Boris, Ruth sat for a long time, motionless, on a fallen log, her eyes on the glimmer of light from Cynthia's house, that shone like a star through the trees.

She was thinking of Hugh's words about the withered heap of flowers. Perhaps it would be better if she could have slipped away like that.

Her lips moved, though no sound but a whisper came from them as she murmured the words to herself.

Presently, the light from the house went out, and as the darkness swallowed it, Ruth's heart was drowned in a wave of loneliness and longing.

The next day it was very hot again.

Ruth anxiously noted the dark shadows under her father's eyes, and his pallor and listlessness, and determined to try and persuade him to rest here for a few days.

She did not know whether she wanted to stay or not. In one mood she could not bear the thought of going away and not seeing Hugh again, and in another she felt equally unable to stay and watch him with Cynthia Wendell. But of one thing she was certain—that her father was not strong enough for the roving life which he loved so much.

So worried was she that she was ready to go to Cynthia and ask her to give her a room, so that her father could have the tent, where there was more air than in the stuffy caravan, at night. And yet she shrank from the intimacy with Hugh and Cynthia this would bring—the continual torture of watching them, and wondering about them.

They both came down to the caravan during the morning, and invited them all up to the house for lunch, but Ruth was already preparing their usual picnic lunch, and she invited them to stay and share it, if they did not object to the "simple life". They willingly accepted, and the five of them had quite a jolly lunch together.

After lunch, Cynthia said she had some calls to make, and Hugh went off with her, it having been arranged that they should all go up to the house to tea again —for Ruth had managed to persuade her father to stay one more night, at least.

"But I must go into the town to get some more score sheets," he announced. "I have none left, and I have just had the birth of an inspiration for a symphony of a Summer's Day. I must work while I am in the mood."

"You are always in the mood, daddy," Ruth told him, with a whimsical smile. "I don't believe you know what it is to rest—and you ought to, you know. The doctor told you to take things easily."

"What nonsense! I am perfectly strong. I don't get sufficient exercise, that is all that is wrong with me. A walk will do me good."

"Let me get them for you," Ruth pleaded.

"No, no, my dear. You stay here and talk to Boris. I want to be alone, to catch the music of the birds, and the bees, and the wind through the trees."

Ruth knew that it was no use arguing with him, so she let him go.

Boris came and sat beside her when he had gone, and for a moment she was afraid that he was going to reopen the forbidden subject between them, but she was reassured when he began talking of everyday things. Gradually the subject seemed to work round to Hugh Marvin—perhaps because he was uppermost in both their minds.

"I suppose he'll have pots of money one of these days," Boris said. "His father's very wealthy. So is Miss Wendell—her father was a partner in Marvin's before he died. When they are married they'll have a mint of money."

"Married?" Ruth echoed, with a curious constriction at her throat. "How do you know they are going to be married?"

"Oh, well—it's fairly plain that they're in love with one another, isn't it? Besides, I remember reading a paragraph in a society paper, not very long ago, to the effect that it was expected their engagement would shortly be announced. From what I can gather, they've known each other since they were children, and it has always been an understood thing. I remember Miss Wendell's father only died last year—so I expect that's why they are waiting to announce their official engagement."

Ruth sat silent, staring before her, the blood thundering in her ears.

Yes, of course. What Boris had told her threw a new light on the relationship between Hugh and Cynthia. It explained that easy, affectionate comradeship, and the photograph.

There was a sharp pain at her heart, as though a sword had been thrust into it.

And yet, she was not really surprised. From the first, she had had a feeling that Hugh was not for her—that her love for him was foredoomed to frustration.

At that moment Ruth looked up and saw a maid from the house running across the fields towards them, and with a sudden feeling of panic she got up and went to meet her.

"Oh, miss, will you come at once, please?" the girl said, breathlessly. "The professor—he's had a stroke, or something. Miss Wendell picked him up in her car, and brought him back to the house. She's 'phoned for the doctor——"

Without waiting to hear more, Ruth was running across the grass, her face as white as a sheet.

"Oh, daddy—daddy!" Her breath came in little, sharp gasps.

Hugh was waiting for her in the hall, concern and sympathy on his face.

Without a word, he led the way upstairs to a big bedroom, where Cynthia was bending over a motionless form that lay on the bed.

"Daddy—daddy!" Ruth cried, and could have sobbed with relief as she saw the eyelids flutter open and the shadowed eyes turn slowly in her direction. She saw his lips move, and put her ear close to them.

"Sun—too—hot," he gasped, painfully. "Don't—worry—little—girl."

She kissed him, and chafed the hands lying so stiff and cold at his side, turning anxious eyes to Cynthia as she did so. The latter put an arm about her shoulders.

"We've sent for the doctor. I shouldn't worry, my dear, it is probably only a touch of the sun."

Ruth grasped eagerly at the comforting words, trying to believe them. And yet as she looked at the blue shadows under her father's eyes, and about his mouth, there was an awful fear at her heart.

The doctor arrived a few minutes later. He made a swift examination, and when he turned to Ruth, his face was very grave.

"His heart is diseased, and he has been overstraining it. We must get him undressed and into bed, and he must not move or do anything for himself without my permission."

"Do you think—there is any—danger?" Ruth managed to stammer.

"There is always danger in a case of this kind." Then, as he saw Ruth sway, and look at him with agonised eyes, he added kindly, "But you must be brave, my dear. Complete rest and careful attention can work miracles, you know."

There was only a faint comfort in the words, but such as it was, Ruth grasped it eagerly. She allowed Cynthia to lead her downstairs.

"Sit down there, my dear," Cynthia said, compassionately. "It has been a great shock for you. But you mustn't worry. I am sure everything will be all right. He shall stay here until he is absolutely well again—and you must stay, too."

"How good you are to us!" Ruth exclaimed. "And we were perfect strangers to you until yesterday!"

"You were my friends as soon as I heard what you did for Hugh," Cynthia said, quietly. "But now you are my friends for your own sakes. And it is a friend's privilege to give a helping hand in time of need. My house, and all that I have, is at your disposal for as long as you need it."

Ruth thanked her as best she could, for there was a lump in her throat, choking her. She wondered if it would have made any difference if Cynthia had known that she, too, loved Hugh—but in her heart she felt sure that it would not.

Cynthia's ready kindness came from a naturally sweet and sympathetic disposition, and would not have been influenced by petty jealousy. Ruth felt ashamed that she, herself, had ever experienced such a feeling in regard to this girl who had proved herself such a friend in need.

Her gratitude swelled and deepened as the hours went by, and Cynthia helped to nurse Ruth's father as sedulously as though he had been her own.

Ruth would not move from his bedside, and Cynthia sat with her, in silent sympathy.

But it became all too plain, as the night came, that the professor was sinking. He lay motionless as a log, his face sunken, and veiled in blue and grey shadows.

Ruth tried to tell herself that there was no change in him, but at last she could deceive herself no longer, and she asked Cynthia to go and phone for the doctor, who had left instructions that he was to be sent for if there was any change.

When he came he applied restoratives, but he took Ruth aside and told her that they could have only a temporary effect, at best. She must be brave. Her father was sinking fast.

Ruth closed her eyes for a moment, and thinking she was going to faint, he put out an arm to save her. But she pulled herself together by a supreme effort and went back to the bedside.

Her father, under the influence of the restoratives, was now lying with his eyes open. She knelt beside him, her lips pressed to his cold hand, and Cynthia and the

doctor, helpless in the face of a power greater than their science or their friendship, went across to the window.

Ruth fought back the sobs that shook her frame, for she knew that if she yielded to them she would increase a thousandfold the pain of her father's last hour. So she clenched her teeth, while the tears coursed down her cheeks, and when she saw that her father was trying to speak, she got up and bent over him.

"So—tired," he whispered. "But—not—afraid—only—grieved—for—my—little girl ——"

"Oh, daddy darling!" Ruth sobbed, unable to contain her agony any longer.

"Kiss—me—Ruth—my—darling."

Ruth kissed him, long and tenderly, then put her head beside his on the pillow, her wet cheek against his, while her free hand gently stroked his thin face.

### A NEW START

THE shock of her father's death was a terrible one for Ruth. They had been more to each other even than the average father and daughter, and it was a long time before she could fully realise that she would never see him again. Had it not been for Cynthia's never-failing kindness, she felt that she would have broken down.

As soon as the funeral was over, Boris came to say good-bye. He must go back to Town, and start looking for a job, he explained. It was plain that the professor's death had been a great blow to him.

"There will never be anyone like him again," he said to Ruth.

Ruth looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

She looked very frail in her black frock, with the dark shadows under her eyes that told of sleepless nights.

"He was very fond of you, Boris," she said. "And I know he expected great things of you. I am sure he will be watching. You won't disappoint him, will you?"

"No. I feel that I've just got to justify his faith in me—and there are other reasons, too."

He looked at her steadily, and her eyes dropped. She shook her head, slowly and sadly, but neither of them made any reference to what both were thinking—that night when Boris had told her of his love.

He drew himself up, and his chin set doggedly. Then—

"I will make all the necessary arrangements about the caravan," he said. "There is no need for you to bother at all. And if you need any other assistance, I shall always be at your service. Here is my address."

He gave it to her, then they shook hands and said good-bye.

Ruth had accepted Cynthia's invitation to stay on for a few weeks, until she felt equal to the task of putting her father's affairs in order, and making arrangements for the sale of their furniture, for her father's solicitor had written pointing out that there was very little capital for her.

AND yet, each day that she lingered on in Cynthia's house brought fresh pain.

Hugh, of course, had left long ago—he had only come, originally, for a week-end—but he came over frequently.

Ruth thought that he looked rather pale and harassed those days, and he had become more silent than of old. She avoided being left alone with him, because she feared that she might do something to betray her secret. She always managed it so that Cynthia or her companion, Mrs. Roach, were in the room with them, and at such times she somehow forced herself to behave quite normally, as though he meant nothing more to her than any other man.

It was a month now since her father's death, and although Cynthia pressed her to stay, and she herself loved the peaceful, wholesome life, she felt suddenly that she could stay no longer.

What was the use of tormenting herself with the constant sight of Hugh, when she knew that he belonged to Cynthia? It was plain to her watchful eyes, too, that Cynthia loved him, for although she was never demonstrative, her eyes lit up when he came into the room, and Ruth never forgot what she had said once—"You were my friends as soon as I heard what you had done for Hugh."

Cynthia protested vigorously when Ruth told her that she must go home that day; but the latter was quietly persistent, and so at last it was settled.

"But why the hurry?" Cynthia demanded. "Can't you wait until to-morrow? It's Saturday, and Hugh is certain to come over to lunch. He will be hurt if you go without saying good-bye to him."

That was just what Ruth wished to avoid—having to say good-bye to Hugh. She felt that she would never be able to do so without breaking down.

So she answered that she must go by the evening train. She had left her father's affairs unsettled too long already, and it was necessary to see his solicitors first thing in the morning. She would ask Cynthia to say good-bye to Hugh on her behalf, and to make her apologies.

When she had packed her clothes she went down to dinner with Cynthia for the last time, and when the meal was ended they sat in the drawing-room, saying little, till Cynthia was called away to see a visitor, who had come on some little matter of business.

Left alone, Ruth felt the house was suffocating; she took her book, and with it in her hand, went out into the gardens. She hated to leave this place, hated the thought of her journey. She would have given anything to have been able to remain amid this mellowed peace and beauty.

Reaching an old fountain in the grounds she seated herself on the coping, tried to read. But soon her book was neglected, instead she dabbed her fingers in the clear water and dreamed vague dreams, in which past and present mingled.

The sound of a quick firm step reached her ears—a step she knew too well.

Her heart gave a leap, and she sat still, with her hand pressed to her side. It was Hugh!

"It is you!" he said, in a low voice that had a strange new quality about it—a vibrating undercurrent of feeling.

There was something about the way he said those three words which seemed to give a brooding tenderness to them. Ruth's eyes were very wide and dark as they searched his face in the glimmering starlight, but she did not speak.

"Something must have told me that you were leaving to-night," he went on, quietly. "I decided on the spur of the moment, when I left the office this evening, that I would come to-day, instead of waiting until to-morrow. Cynthia tells me you are catching the ten o'clock train. Why cannot you wait until the morning?"

"I—I must see my father's solicitors early to-morrow," Ruth stammered, the pulse in her throat beating so violently that she could hardly speak. "I have left it as late as I could—I hate to go."

He said nothing for a moment, but she knew that his eyes were fixed intently on her face. With a little, stifled gasp, she rose and began half running towards the house, but she had not gone half-a-dozen steps before he had caught her up.

His face, white and tense, bent over hers.

"You are running away from me—I see it in your eyes," he whispered, hoarsely. "Oh, Ruth, Ruth, don't you know that I love you—that I cannot live without you? My dearest dear, I cannot let you go. You belong to me—I knew it, and you knew it, too, in that instant when our eyes first met. What else matters in the whole wide world?"

Every fibre of her body quivered at his nearness.

But by a superhuman effort she placed her hands against him and held him off while she looked up with frantic pleading into his face.

"Hugh—let me go. You don't know what you are doing. It is madness. Please—please—let me go!"

"Never! Why should I let you go, when I know that you love me? If you can look me in the eyes, and deny it, I will release you—but you cannot—you cannot!"

Ruth knew that it was true. She could not look into his loved face and deny her love.

She gave a little sound, between a gasp and a sob.

"Oh, you are cruel—cruel! You must know that it is impossible—that you and I are not free to talk of love! Hugh, have you forgotten Cynthia?"

He caught his breath sharply, and turned his head, and looked away through the trees to where the lights of the house glimmered faintly.

"Yes, I had forgotten Cynthia for the moment. For weeks past, ever since I met you, I have tried to remember her, to place the thought of her between us like a shield.

"But to-night, when I heard that you were going, something seemed to snap inside me. I forgot everything except that I love you—better than myself—better than life itself. Oh, my dear"—he turned and caught her hands in his—"let me go to Cynthia, and tell her everything. She will understand. Cynthia always understands."

"Yes—Cynthia always understands," Ruth said slowly. "That is why we cannot do this thing. Oh, Hugh—don't you see? Cynthia has been so wonderful to me. She loves you—how can I take you away from her?"

"But—we love one another," he pleaded desperately. "I do not love Cynthia. This engagement was fixed up before we were old enough to know our own minds. Our fathers wished it. We have always been good friends, and I dare say, if I had not met you, I should have married her and been happy, in a way. But I cannot do it now—now that I have known real love. I am fond of her, and she is miles too good for me in every way—and yet, how could I be happy with her, with your image constantly before me?"

"When I have gone away, you will forget!"

"Never!"

His arm was round her and he spoke

with his lips against hers.

"Ruth—you don't believe it! You know that I shall never forget you to the end of my life! Feel my heart beating with love for you"—Ruth could feel its heavy thud against her own, and a sudden weakness came over her as he went on, pleading—"I belong to you, body and soul, and to you only. Ruth—my darling!"

His lips closed on hers, and being only human, loving him as she did, she could hold out no longer against his stormy love-making. He felt her body relax against him, and the pressure of his arms grew tighter as he kissed her.

The world ceased to exist for these two. They were uplifted on the wings of love to a world of their own, where everything was forgotten save the need of the moment.

Ruth was the first to recover her self-control. White and trembling, she pressed her hands against his chest.

"Hugh—we are mad—let me go—let me go!"

She knew that he, too, was trembling, as he slowly released her. His face, in that dim light, was deathly pale, and his eyes fathomless deep shadows that searched her face.

"I am going to Cynthia," he stated slowly. "It is only fair to her—and to us."

"It isn't fair to her. Hugh, don't you understand? Cynthia loves you. Before you met me, you were quite happy in marrying her. You will be happy again when I have gone out of your life. She has been so wonderfully good to me—I could never be happy with you, knowing that I had taken you from her. I should never have a moment's peace of mind."

"And so you are ready to sacrifice my life as well?" Hugh's voice was bitter.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh, try to understand!" Ruth pleaded desperately, feeling that she could not bear much more of this terrible strain which the struggle was imposing on her. "Can't you see how utterly impossible it is for me, after all that Cynthia has done for me, to take my happiness at her expense?

"Do you think I am not suffering, too? I feel as though my heart is being torn ino small pieces in the struggle, but something tells me that I must be strong and resist. Try to help me. Try to rise above personal desires and let us do the right thing. Time heals all wounds. To us, now, it seems impossible that we can ever go on living without one another—but maybe the time will come when for you, at least, there will be compensations which will help you to forget."

"But what of you?" he cried. "What is there for you to look forward to, but loneliness and regret? Oh, my dear, how can I let you go back to your loneliness?"

Ruth winced, and her hands were clenched.

"I—shall be—all right. I have—friends—and my work. And, after all, what does it matter—what does anything matter—so long as we try to do the right thing according to our lights? My father used often to remind me of those lines of Adam Lindsay Gordon's—

*"Life is mostly froth and bubble,*
*Two things stand like stone,*
*Kindness in another's trouble,*
*Courage in your own.*

"Kindness and courage—those are the things that matter, the things that will count, in the long run. Cynthia has shown me wonderful kindness—I must repay her with courage, the courage to give up my own desires for the sake of her happiness. Oh, Hugh, don't you see?"

The tears were running unheeded down her cheeks. Hugh looked at her in silence for a few moments. Then he took her hands in his, and bending, kissed them gently.

"I see, my dearest," he said quietly. "I see how splendid you are. What a cad I am to make you fight like this for what I, as well as you, know to be right! It shall be as you say. I will do the right thing. But if it is good-bye, it must be for ever. We must never meet."

"No, we must never meet," Ruth echoed, the words sounding like a death knell. "We must try not to think of one another—try to live the rest of our lives as though we had never met. It will be so hard, but after a time, when we have accustomed ourselves to the fact, we shall be happier than if we had snatched our happiness at Cynthia's expense."

"And you forgive me?" he asked her.

"Forgive you? There is nothing to forgive. It is better that we should have had this talk, and come to understand one another. But now, Hugh, I must go, or I shall miss my train. This shall be our real good-bye—here. Good-bye, my dear, good-bye."

"Good-bye, beloved!"

Then they walked side by side across the grass, back to the house, where Cynthia was waiting for them.

All the time that Ruth was changing, Cynthia chatted to ease the strain of the parting, and divert Ruth's mind from the memory of the sorrow that had overtaken her in this house. But even she could not guess the full extent of it.

Ruth found that the ordeal was not yet over. The car stood at the door when they went down, and Hugh was waiting.

She turned desperately to Cynthia.

"Won't you come with me to the station? It will put off the parting a little longer."

"Why, of course I will, Ruth dear. Wait just a moment while I get my coat."

Ruth's last picture was that of Cynthia, tall and slim, waving her hand, and Hugh, rigid and deathly pale, standing bareheaded in the gloom of the little station.

Then she was alone, shut in by the darkness of the night—alone with her thoughts and her memories.

Could it be possible that she was the same girl as that laughing, care-free creature who had gone light-heartedly to join her father on his caravan holiday at the beginning of the summer?

So much had happened in those three months.

It was nearly midnight when the train drew in at Charing Cross. There were a few people standing about in evening dress, waiting for their last trains home after the theatres, and by a stroke of good luck, Ruth managed to secure a taxi to take her to her flat in Chelsea.

It was a terrible moment—one that she had dreaded during all those weeks since her father's death—this return to the flat of which every corner seemed to hold something of his personality.

Over the mantelpiece in the little sitting-room in which they had lived so much stood his pipe-rack, with several pipes hanging from it. In the corner by the fender were his old leather slippers, within easy reach of his own particular armchair.

Suddenly the numbing ice that encased her heart melted. She sat down in his chair, and burying her face in her arms, began to weep.

WHEN she awoke the next morning she was refreshed in body and spirit, and ready to face the problems that confronted her.

It was as though she had fought a battle over herself, and conquered. She was infinitely older and sadder than she had been when she left the flat, but to counterbalance that, she had acquired a poise and strength that surprised herself.

The solicitors noticed it when she had her interview with them about her father's affairs. They found that instead of a young girl, with no knowledge of the world, they had a woman to deal with—a woman with knowledge and experience in her steady eyes. They had feared an emotional scene, but instead of that, Ruth discussed everything quite calmly, accepting their advice on matters which they knew better than she.

She found, as she had expected, that there was very little for her beside the furniture of the flat, and it would be necessary for her to sell that in order to keep herself while she was looking for work.

Mr. Dawkins, the senior partner, felt sorry for her, and wished to help her, for her father's sake. He asked her what work she could do, and when she explained that she had been trained in art, he pursed his lips.

"Ordinary art is not a very paying profession, I am afraid. In your circumstances you cannot afford to wait while you are building up a reputation. The only thing for you to do is to try for a commercial position—as a fashion artist, for instance. Do you know anything about fashion drawing?"

"Yes—I took a course in it," she told him.

He thought for a moment. Then—

"I have an idea. Mr. Baldrick, the head of the Excell Advertising Agency, is a client of mine, and a personal friend. I will give you a letter of introduction to him, if you wish, and you can go and see him. He may have a vacancy in his studio."

Ruth thanked him warmly and waited while he wrote the letter. She was so eager to get to work that she went straight away to the offices with it, only to find that they had closed, it being Saturday, so she had to contain her impatience over the week-end.

Sunday seemed as though it would never pass, but at last came Monday morning, and Ruth went off to see Mr. Baldrick.

He was a big, burly man, with a keen, pleasant face, and when he had read the letter of introduction he fired one or two questions at her, looked at the specimens sketches she had brought, then informed her that he would give her a trial. She could start at once, at a small salary, until he had seen what she was worth.

### STRANGE MARRIAGE

RUTH liked her new work, and soon settled down to it. It was necessary for her to sell a great deal of her father's furniture, and move to two small rooms, and in a way it was a relief to her to get away from the flat which held so many memories.

Moving to a new place, and taking up such an entirely different life from that

which she had previously led, made things more bearable for her.

Sometimes she wondered what had happened to Boris Quentin, and thought of writing to him to tell him her new address, but it would be so much like re-opening the old wounds that she continually delayed doing so.

And then, one day, she met him again.

It was at Piccadilly Circus, one lunch time. Her office was quite close, and after her usual light lunch she had gone for a walk, to look at the shops.

As she was gazing in one of the big plate-glass windows, she felt a touch on her arm, and turned to find herself face to face with Boris, who was looking at her eagerly.

"Ruth! I caught sight of you as I was passing. Where have you been hiding yourself?"

She coloured under his searching eyes, and yet she felt a thrill of pleasure, as well as of pain, as she looked at his familiar face. Here, at least, was a friend from the past. She had not realised the full extent of her own loneliness, her own ache for someone to talk to about her father, and the other things that had been sealed up in her heart so long, until she heard Boris's familiar voice.

He looked older than he had done at the caravan—but that, probably, was due to the fact that he was wearing conventional Town clothes—a dark lounge suit and overcoat. Under his arm he carried a violin case.

"I haven't been hiding," she told him, with a smile, holding out her hand. "I had to move—that was all. I intended to write you, but somehow—well—the letter did not manage to get written. But it is nice to meet you again."

"Is it?" His voice was eager, and the light which sprang into his dark eyes told her that his feeling for her had not changed. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. I began to think I should never meet you again—and yet I have always had a feeling that fate intended otherwise. But, I say, I am keeping you standing here when we might be having some lunch together—that is, if you will honour me. Don't say 'No'—it seems such ages since we met, and I want to hear all your news, and to tell you mine."

"I should have loved to come," Ruth told him. "But I have just had my lunch. And it is getting late. I must hurry back to the office, I'm afraid."

"The office?"

"Yes—I have a job in the studio of an Advertising Agency—Baldrick's. I had to do something."

"As bad as that? Poor kid. I'm frightfully sorry."

"Thank you, but you needn't be," she told him, with a rather wistful smile. "I like it tremendously. It's 'commercialised art', of course, but in my spare time I am working at a water-colour, which I hope to submit to the Young Artists' Exhibition."

"Splendid! I hope it will win a good prize."

"But what about yourself?" she asked him. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, my foot is on the first rung, I think! I have a job in the Gorford Symphony Orchestra—and the director is very flattering. I have just come from rehearsal."

They chatted together for a few minutes longer, then Ruth, with a glance at her watch, said she must fly.

"Well, I don't intend to lose you again, now that I have found you," he said. "Won't you come out to dinner with me to-night? We will go to one of those jolly little Soho places. Do come."

Ruth accepted gladly, surprised at the pleasure it gave her to think of spending an evening with this friend from the past, and it was arranged that he should meet her outside her office.

All that afternoon, as she bent above her drawing-board, memories of the past, roused by the encounter with Boris, thronged her mind.

Her thoughts lingered about the pleasant old house in Kent, which had been the setting of so much drama in her life.

She thought of Cynthia, and of Hugh. No doubt they were married by this time, and living there together. She felt a sharp pain at her heart as she saw a picture of Hugh coming back from Town every evening, Cynthia meeting him on the steps with face upturned for his kiss.

She had written once to Cynthia—a long letter, expressing her gratitude for all that the other girl had done for her. With it she had sent a picture of her own—a delicate water-colour of the old house, painted from memory. It was the best work she had ever done, for her whole heart had been in it.

In the letter she had told Cynthia that she was going away, to take up fresh work. Since then she had never written again, for she knew that if she and Hugh were to be true to their resolution, there must be no communication between them, direct or indirect—nothing to remind them of one another's existence.

WHEN she came out from the office Boris was waiting for her, and he took her along Shaftesbury Avenue, turning off one of the side streets to a little restaurant.

Ruth liked the cosy gaiety of the place and the quaint dishes. It was the first time she had been out, in a social way, since her father's death.

She noticed that Boris's manner towards her was gentler, and that he seemed as though he could not do enough for her, and she appreciated it so much that once or twice it was all that she could do to force back the tears that sprang to her eyes. It was so long since anyone had troubled about her, or cared what she did!

Never once did he mention Hugh's name, and she had an idea that he guessed her secret, but she could not be sure.

They sat for a long time over their coffee, talking in a friendly fashion that would not have been possible in the past, before they had both learnt the lesson of life.

Then they had been full of youthful arrogance, with all the carelessness and intolerance of youth that has never suffered. But the boy had learned something of patience during the months when he thought that he had lost Ruth for ever, and Ruth, through her sufferings, had learnt a great deal about tolerance, and the ability to see through the eyes of others.

Boris took her home at the end of the evening, and it was arranged that the jaunt should be repeated in the near future.

And so it was that they gradually dropped into the habit of going about together a great deal.

Ruth used to go to Boris's concerts, and he told her once that when she was there he was able to play better than at any other time.

She tried to pretend that she did not see the implication in his words, for she did not want this new-found friendship of theirs to be shattered and spoilt.

But Boris had for long forced himself to a patience that was not natural to his impulsive temperament, and he could not stop the words that forced themselves from his lips.

They were in their favourite restaurant at the time, sitting at the table which was always reserved for them, in a little alcove.

Boris leant across the table, and his lean, dark hand closed over Ruth's.

"Ruth, I must speak, my dear. I have waited patiently for a long time now, though it has been torture to me, seeing you so frequently, to love you in silence. My feelings are the same as they were that night when I told you of my love. No, that is not quite true. They are a thousand times stronger. I worship you, my dear—and I am in a better position to speak now than I was then. Ruth—can't you—love me—yet?"

She paled and shook her head, and tried to draw her hand away.

"Boris—don't! You will spoil everything. I have so enjoyed our—our friendship. Perhaps it was thoughtless of me to go on seeing so much of you—for I think I realised, as soon as I met you again, that you still cared. But I was so lonely—you don't know what it meant to me to be able to talk to you about daddy—and—everything."

"But, Ruth," he pleaded desperately, "If you will only say the word, we can go on being friends for the rest of our lives. You need someone to take care of you. You cannot go on living alone, like this, with no one to know, or care, what becomes of you. I love you, my dear—I believe that I could teach you to love me. I, too, am lonely. We need each other—Ruth, my dear—don't you see how happy we could be together?"

"No, Boris. I don't love you, and I cannot make myself. It is no use. I am sorry—from the bottom of my heart, because if I loved you, life might be very different. But it is one of those things over which we have no control. They just happen—or they don't happen. And that's the end of it."

"Not quite the end," Boris said, quietly, his jaw set ominously. "I can be very tenacious. I still believe that one day you will change your mind."

Ruth looked at him helplessly

"Then you are going to make it impossible for us to go on being friends?"

He burst out suddenly, leaning nearer to her—

"Ruth, what is the use of talking about 'friendship' to a man who loves you as I do? Good heavens, do you take me for a cold-blooded fish? I tell you—I love you, I love you. It is just torment to me to be with you and have to treat you just as I would any other girl, who meant nothing to me. The very sight of you—a glance from your eyes, the turn of your head, the sight of a stray ripple of hair against your cheek—my dear, don't you understand?—these things set my blood on fire—make me want to hold you in my arms, and kiss the breath out of you——"

"Don't—don't!" she cried, shutting her eyes against the picture his words called up—the picture of Hugh holding her like that—kissing the breath out of her.

The thought of any other man ever doing what he had done seemed like sacrilege. Hugh had set his seal upon her

lips. She would always feel that she "belonged" to him.

When she spoke again her face was very white as she looked steadily at Boris.

"We mustn't see each other any more," she said, quietly. "I never realised all this. I have been a little fool. I ought to have guessed, I suppose. But this finishes it. We cannot go on, pretending friendship, when all the time there is this between us. I shall miss you—but you must see that it is impossible for us to go on seeing each other after to-night."

Boris began to protest, seeing that she really meant it, and dreading the thought of never seeing her again. It was torment to see her, torment not to see her.

He pleaded wildly with her to let things be as they had been before his outburst, but this time Ruth was adamant. Her heart was heavy at the thought of going back to the loneliness of her life before she had met him again, but she was convinced there was no other course open to her.

And so at last they stood in Piccadilly Circus, saying good-bye for the last time.

Boris was very white, and looked so utterly miserable that it took all Ruth's strength of mind to remain firm, but she told herself it would be kinder to him in the long run to end it all now, swiftly and cleanly. He was young and virile. He would forget, perhaps, in time.

There was a painful silence between them, and Ruth longed for the scene to be over. She watched anxiously for her bus to appear, and saw it, presently coming across with several others, from Regent Street.

"Good night, Boris—and thank you for everything. You know I wish you the best of success in your career."

She had held out her hand abruptly, taking him by surprise, so that he had no opportunity of renewing his protests. Before he could say anything she had turned, and run across in front of a stationary bus to her own, which was slowing up beyond it.

At the same moment there was a shout and a grinding of brakes. Something seized her and flung her violently clear of the wheels that had been bearing down upon her. She heard a woman scream—and then, darkness.

When she opened her eyes a policeman was bending over her, and another was trying to keep at bay the curious crowd that pressed around.

"What-what happened?" she stammered, sitting up, with the policeman's assistance.

"Why, you nearly did for yourself, young woman, plunging across the road without looking what was coming. If it hadn't been for the young fellow, you'd have been dead now. And he's caught a pretty packet. Is he a friend of yours?"

"I don't know—there was a young man with me—slight, and dark, in a soft felt hat. Don't tell me he's—he's——" She could not bring herself to say the dread word, but the policeman understood.

"No, not dead, but pretty nearly, if you ask me. Here, steady on! Where are you off to?"

"I must see him—I must!" Ruth cried, frantically. "Boris—badly hurt—and through my fault. Oh, I shall never forgive myself! Never! Where is he? I must go to him."

The policeman looked at her with gruff kindliness.

"Now, don't upset yourself—that won't do him any good, nor you. You must keep calm if you're going to help him. Ah—here's the ambulance! As you're his friend, you'd better come to the hospital with us. You can give us all particulars on the way."

So Ruth stood beside the ambulance door, while they very gently lifted in the unconscious body of Boris Quentin. Ruth stifled a sob as she caught a glimpse of his face, so ominously white and still, then she got in beside the policeman.

RUTH never ceased to reproach herself during the weeks that followed, for her share in the catastrophe which had overtaken Boris.

And yet it was foolish, for she had done what she thought was for the best—and how could she guess that it would end in that sudden, swift tragedy? But at such times we always blame ourselves—and Ruth did so continually.

She felt that she could never do enough for him. She spent every hour that she could at his bedside, and it was quite pathetic to see how grateful he was as he became well enough to talk a little.

And then, one day when she went to visit him, the doctor took her aside and told her that Boris would never walk again.

Ruth stared at him, white-faced, for some seconds, unable to take in the full portent of his words.

"Never—walk—again?" she repeated, aghast.

No, he told her, Boris Quentin would have to spend the rest of his life on his back.

"Have you—have you—broken the news—to him?"

"Yes—half-an-hour ago. We want you to do what you can to make him look on the bright side. He's taken it rather badly."

"The bright side!" Was there a bright side to this tragedy of a young man, a genius, on the threshold of a brilliant career, who had just been told that he would never walk again?

Ruth sat for a little while in the anteroom, in order to give herself time to recover herself before facing the distracted man in the ward beyond.

Presently she rose, and walked into the ward to where Boris lay with a screen round his bed.

She touched his hand as he lay motionless, staring hopelessly at the ceiling, and he turned his head towards her.

"Have they told you?" he asked, dully.

"Yes. Oh, my dear—how can I ever tell you how sorry I am? It would have been better to let me die!"

"Don't say that." His fingers closed on hers. "Life would have ended for me, anyway, if you had died."

"Oh, Boris, do you care as much as that?"

"You know I do."

A great wave of tenderness and pity swept over her. Bending on an impulse, she kissed him, and instantly his face flushed darkly.

"Why did you do that?"

"My dear—my dear—I did it because—because I have changed my mind. Boris—we are going to be married—I am going to take care of you, dear."

"No!" he exclaimed violently. "You don't know what you are saying! To be tied to an utter wreck like me, all your life. And not because you love me, either—just out of pity. I don't want pity, I want love."

"But, Boris—listen——"

"I will not listen. You would not have me when I was well and strong and able to fight for you. Do you think I will marry you now, and be a burden to you—because you pity me?"

His voice was bitter, but beneath it lay such a flood of despair and hopelessness that Ruth was touched to the depths of her being.

She looked at him for a moment in silence, and as she looked she seemed to see her mission clear—to tend him, and care for him, lovingly, until the end of his days; to try to make up to him for all that he had so readily abandoned for her sake; to fill his life so full of sunshine that he would never regret the career which had promised too much.

But he had told her he did not want her pity—but her love. Pity alone would not do what she knew she must do—and her love was given elsewhere, for ever.

In that moment she knew that she must lie to this man who lay here so helplessly—lie splendidly, magnificently, convincingly. Surely she could do it, when he had done so much for her?

Reason reminded her that it was not a case of telling one lie. If he believed her, her life henceforth would be one long lie. It was not enough to tell him, here and now, that she loved him. She must, somehow, never let him guess the truth all through the years that lay ahead.

She had a momentary glimpse into the future—saw weary day succeeding weary day, while she worked and struggled at the overwhelming task which she had set herself, watched, all the time, by the far-seeing eyes of an invalid.

For a moment she quailed before the prospect. It seemed to her more than mortal woman could do. It would be sufficiently difficult to persuade any man that she loved him when she did not—but a sick man, with nothing to do but watch her for the first sign of flagging in her tenderness! No—she could never do it!

And yet she knew that she must do it, or for evermore despise herself utterly. She knew that there would never be any rest for her while she thought of that broken man lying helpless and alone, dependent upon charity—and all for her.

All these thoughts flashed through her mind in a second or two.

"Boris," she whispered, bending close to him, "suppose I tell you that I have been a fool—that I never understood myself before? Suppose I tell you—that I do—love you?"

He turned swiftly, and a great light leapt into his eyes.

"Ruth—it isn't true! Oh, my dearest dear—it can't be true! And yet—you wouldn't lie to me at such a time as this. You wouldn't torture me with false hopes."

"No," she said deliberately. "I wouldn't torture you with false hopes. Don't you understand, my dear! I want to take care of you—because I love you."

With a glad cry he put out his arms and caught her to him. She closed her eyes as his lips touched hers, and tried to shut the door of her heart on the memory of other kisses—other lips.

Oh, it was going to be difficult, this

task to which she had set her hand—difficult beyond belief! Inwardly she prayed—

"Oh, God—help me to go through with it—so that he may never guess! Help me to make up to him for everything!"

It seemed an irony, almost a blasphemy, to pray for help to tell a lie. And yet, somehow, she felt that God understood. He saw into the darkest places of the heart, and 'new the motive of every action. He would understand.

"Oh, my dear," Boris said, softly, "I can't tell you how happy you have made me! Nothing matters now! To think that I shall have you always with me—till the end of my days! And yet, I ought not to let you make this sacrifice. It is a terrible burden to put upon you—but I am too weak to resist. I haven't the moral or the physical strength to turn aside from this one hope of happiness—the only thing that could make life worth living for me ever again."

"It is all settled," Ruth said with a smile. "I have made up my mind to marry you." But she became serious again at once, and taking his hands, looked into his eyes. "Oh, Boris—I hope—I pray—that I shall be able to make you happy—to make up to you—for everything!"

He smiled up into her eyes—the first time she had seen him smile since the accident.

BACK in the two rooms she sat for a long time, staring into the fire, thinking of the future and the past, and pondering on the strange problems which life sets us.

She was under no illusions regarding the magnitude of the task which she had set herself. She knew that it was going to take every ounce of stamina, moral and physical, that she possessed. She knew, too, that somehow she would have to find the money to keep the home together—for Boris's earning days were at an end.

Her fashion work at the agency was approved. She had lately had an increase of salary. But it would not be enough to support two, adequately, however cheaply they lived. Somehow, she would have to make more money.

"I can do it," she told herself. "I know I can do it. There is money to be made in doing fashion sketches for the papers. I must work up a freelance connection in my spare time."

And so, bravely, she faced the future, to be spent working day and night to repay the debt which she owed Boris Quentin—a debt which she felt nothing could ever really repay. His career had meant so much to him. And now, at one stroke, it had been taken from him.

Was it so very much that was asked of her, in the circumstances—to make his shattered life bearable? Had he stopped to count the cost before he rushed into the jaws of death to save her?

### RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

ABOUT a month later, Ruth and Boris were married, and Ruth's two rooms became their little "home".

Boris spent his days lying in the window, reading and watching for her return from work. Sometimes he played his violin for a little while, but the effort tired him quickly, and he would then let it lie beside him on the bed, his long fingers caressing it tenderly.

Ruth always knew when he had been doing this, and she came to dread the occasions, for they threw him into a mood of melancholy which it took her much time and effort to dispel.

And yet, on the whole, it continually amazed her that he could be so happy and cheerful under the circumstances. She acquired a new respect for him during that time. Once he had seemed to her nothing but an impetuous, self-willed boy. He was still all those things, but they were mellowed by his courage and cheerfulness in face of the great catastrophe that had overtaken him.

Her task, though still immensely difficult—it would have exacted the utmost patience and self-control from her, even if it had been Hugh, instead of Boris who lay there so helpless—was made easier by the fact that a very real understanding and friendship sprang up between them.

She began to look forward, almost as much as Boris did, to their cosy "high-tea" when she returned from the office at night.

Afterwards, when she had cleared the table and washed up, she would light her "daylight" lamp, set it beside her easel, and begin to work, and all the time she worked they talked—of happenings at the office, items in the newspapers, books that Boris had been reading and of music he had heard on the Third Programme.

Ruth found it a hard struggle to make ends meet, and often she lay awake in the night, worrying about money matters. For like most people she was concerned by the rising cost of living.

As the spring slipped by into summer, and summer into autumn, she gradually began to sell some of her fashion sketches and to get commissions for more. She made it a rule to save every penny that she made in this way, over and above her salary, and presently she was making as much as she earned at the office.

Then Baldrick's discovered that she was doing freelance work, and Mr. Baldrick himself sent for her, told her that it was against their rules, and that she must choose between staying on in their employ and giving up her other work for rival firms.

It was a blow to her, just as things had begun to improve, but she only hesitated for a moment.

"I am sorry I have broken a rule of the firm," she said, quietly. "I didn't know about it. But since you make me choose—I am afraid I must resign my post."

She felt depressed as she went home that night, and wondered whether she had been wise to give up her post. After all it was a regular salary, and so much depended on her nowadays. Freelance work was precarious. Supposing she failed to make good?

"But I won't fail," she told herself, setting her chin firmly, though in her secret heart she was worried.

Boris was delighted, because it meant that she would be with him all day, save when she was out, selling her work.

"Why, of course you will make good," he told her, in so confident a tone that she took new heart.

So, slowly, gradually, painfully, she began the uphill task of building up sufficient freelance connection to keep them both, and leave a margin to be put by for a rainy day.

It was a difficult struggle, but almost imperceptibly it became easier. The greatest satisfaction she had was one day when the editress of a famous fashion paper sent for her and gave her a regular commission to be executed. Others followed, and the sketches of "Mariette," as she signed herself, began to have quite a vogue.

Presently, she and Boris moved to a little house in Surrey which they had been lucky to find. It was an old house, with a delightful, shady garden, and practically all of the following summer—two years since the death of Ruth's father—Boris spent lying in the garden, watching Ruth at work in the shade of the trees.

He had changed almost beyond recognition from the virile youth of two years ago. He was thinner, and paler, and he had little to say nowadays. He seemed content to lie perfectly still, with his eyes following Ruth's every movement.

She gave her husband a steady, quiet affection, and sometimes it seemed to her pathetic that he should appear to be completely satisfied with it—he who once had been so full of burning ardour.

On the whole, too, she forced herself to be satisfied with it, though sometimes when she lay staring with sleepless eyes into the darkness of her bedroom, something within her surged up and reminded her that she was young.

At such times the force of her longing for Hugh shook her to the depths of her being, and her soul went out against the fate that had robbed her of her birthright—the birthright of every woman—the love of her natural mate and the clinging hands of little ones.

But, before dawn, she had always fought and won her secret battle, rising ready to resume the self-imposed routine of the daily round with outward composure and cheerfulness.

At such times she reminded herself that Hugh was for ever beyond her reach, as the husband of Cynthia, even if she herself had not strengthened the barrier between them by her marriage.

And then something happened which, for a time, seemed to bring her world clattering about her ears.

She had been up to Fleet Street with some sketches, and having disposed of them, was walking slowly along the Strand, with a vague idea of having lunch somewhere or other.

At one time she had been afraid to do this, for fear of meeting Hugh—for it has been said that one meets everyone in London, at one time or another, in the Strand.

But with the lapse of time, she had grown more confident, and she found it stimulating to mingle with the strangely mixed crowd that throngs the pavements of the Strand.

Then, coming towards her, she saw a familiar face that for a moment vaguely puzzled her. But recognition followed swiftly, and she felt herself grow pale as she found herself facing Cynthia—a Cynthia difficult to recognise at first glance, for she wore the uniform of a hospital nurse.

"Why, Ruth, is it really you after all this time?"

"Cynthia!"

The two girls looked at each other in silence for a moment, both too deeply moved to find appropriate words. Cynthia was smiling delightedly, but Ruth's smile was tremulous.

"Where on earth have you been hiding all this time?" Cynthia asked her. "I have

often longed to meet you again, but you seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Have you been abroad?"

"No—but we have so much to say to each other, Cynthia, we can't say it here. Will you come to lunch with me?"

"Why, of course. This is simply splendid, my dear!"

Cynthia linked her arm in Ruth's and they entered the first resturant that presented itself, for both were eager to find a place where they could talk.

They sat down at a small table against the wall, and Ruth began peeling off her gloves. Instantly Cynthia had leaned across the table, and with a smile, had taken her left hand.

"Why—my dear—you are married then?"

Ruth felt the colour rush into her face. Her eyes flew to Cynthia's left hand, and saw that it was ringless. For a moment everything went black, so great was the shock.

"Yes—I am married," she heard herself saying, as though from a great distance. "To Boris Quentin, you know. But what of you? I thought—I thought——"

Cynthia looked at her with a shade of sadness in her eyes, though she was smiling.

"You thought I was going to marry Hugh? Well, I suppose I was, once. At least, our respective families had wished it, and we had come to look upon it as an accepted fact. I will tell you what I would tell no one else. I was very fond of Hugh—but almost at the last moment I seemed to realise what I had never realised before—that Hugh didn't care for me—in that way. It wasn't his fault. He did his best to make me think he cared—I suppose he guessed how things were with me—but although I had been blind for a long time, I suddenly had my eyes opened. Woman's instinct, I suppose—call it what you like—but, of course, I couldn't go on with it, after that. I had my pride—even if I had not been too fond of Hugh to want to make a mess of his life. We parted very good friends, and shortly afterwards Hugh threw up his job and went to South Africa—mining engineering. So that's that!"

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry!"

Ruth spoke sincerely, impulsively. She was still staggering under the shock of knowing that Hugh was free—had been free all the time, even when she had bound herself to Boris; but out of the depths of her love for him she felt a deep pity for Cynthia, who had lost him.

"Thank you, it's nice of you to say that," the other girl told her. "But on the whole, I'm quite happy. Sometimes I wonder whether I have not found a more suitable vocation than even marriage with Hugh could have been. You see, I sold the old house. Oh, yes it was a fearful wrench, but I'm glad, now, and took up nursing, and I love the work. Nursing the sick has always appealed to me, instinctively—it just happened to be my vocation, I suppose. But tell me about yourself, my dear."

So while they made a pretence of eating some lunch, Ruth told her the history of her own marriage.

She said nothing that would lead Cynthia to believe that she had not loved Boris, and yet, when she had finished, and raised her eyes to the other girl's, she had a feeling that Cynthia guessed. She was looking at her with such sympathy, such comprehension, that Ruth felt that, inadvertently, she had laid her soul bare to the other's eyes.

"My dear—my dear—how you must have suffered! What splendid courage you had! The thought of what it must have been like, fighting and striving and contriving, all this time, appals me! If only you had written to me—let me help you——"

"I couldn't do that—not even to you. I managed somehow. And now, you see, everything is justified. I have achieved some sort of success, and we live in comfort and content. You must come and see us."

She smiled bravely, and Cynthia, taking her cue from her, began talking in a lighter vein.

Presently, it transpired that this was Cynthia's free afternoon, and Ruth instantly pressed her to come back with her to tea, an invitation which Cynthia gladly accepted.

So they went down together to the house, with which Cynthia fell in love at first sight.

Boris was, as usual, lying in the garden, basking in the mellow September sunshine. As Cynthia followed Ruth across the lawn, he turned his head.

Ruth bent and kissed him, and he gave her a loving, welcoming smile.

"Someone has come to see you, Boris," Ruth told him, and stood aside, with a smile, as Cynthia came forward and took his hand.

Cynthia's face showed nothing of the shock she felt at the change in Boris. She shook hands as naturally as though everything was perfectly normal, for she had the natural tact of a kind heart.

"I'm an awful crock nowadays," Boris told her, with a wry smile. "If it hadn't been for Ruth, it wouldn't have been worth while going on living. You don't know how marvellous she has been——"

"Nonsense," Ruth chimed in, hurriedly. "You do your best to make me thoroughly conceited. I only did what any woman would have done for the man—the man—she—loved."

Cynthia flashed a quick look at her, sensing intuitively the effort behind those last words. It came over her in an overwhelming flood what the other girl's life must have been—one long brave, splendid lie. No wonder she had changed!

They all had tea in the garden, and while they talked and chatted, Cynthia's keen, professional eyes watched the sick man.

Afterwards, in Ruth's bedroom, she found a way to broach the subject that was uppermost in her mind.

Ruth had been talking of Boris's wonderful courage and cheerfulness, and Cynthia asked her—

"Does he ever complain of pain nowadays?"

Ruth hesitated.

"Well—yes, he has done so, occasionally, lately. And sometimes I have fancied that he was suffering, and have asked him about it, but he had denied it. I have wondered, sometimes, whether the pain has increased."

"What does the doctor say?"

"Oh, he won't have a doctor near him—it is the one thing that makes him irritable, the mere suggestion of it! He says he can't bear being pulled about, and that doctors can do nothing for him."

Cynthia adjusted her cloak with an air of absorption. Then—

"All the same, I think, under the circumstances, you would be wise to persuade him to see a doctor occasionally. In a case like that he ought to be under continual observation."

Ruth looked at her in alarm.

"Cynthia—why do you say that? Have you any special reason?"

"N-no. Well, he seemed to be rather too pale and listless, and he is very thin. Still, that may be the effect of the hot weather."

"I will insist upon his having a doctor," Ruth said, resolutely. "I can tell from your manner that you do not think all is well."

"Oh, nothing to worry about. But as I say, it is always safer. Well, now, my dear, I must fly, or I shall be late back at the hospital, and that will never do. I hope we are going to see lots of one another, now that we have met again. I shall write and tell Hugh—he will be glad, I know."

Ruth turned aside, so that her face was hidden from the other, and fumbled with the clasp of her bracelet.

"You write to him, then—still?"

"Oh, yes. Hugh and I are still very good friends. He is getting on splendidly in South Africa."

Ruth walked with Cynthia to the bus, and it was arranged that Cynthia should repeat the visit whenever she could manage it.

As Ruth walked slowly homewards again, her feet rustling through the leaves that were beginning to fall, her heart was a maelstrom of emotions.

Hugh free—all the time she had been living in London alone with her memories and her regret.

Had he come to look for her after Cynthia had sent him away?

Of course, he would not have been able to trace her, she had left no address with her old flat, so that she might be the more completely cut off from him and Cynthia. It had never occurred to her that their marriage might fall through.

The irony of it all! In cutting herself off from temptation she had destroyed her chances of happiness! Sometimes it seemed as though fate had set out to mock her deliberately.

How often, she wondered, in the great desert of London, had she missed Hugh by a hair's breadth? How many times, in avoiding the places where she was afraid of meeting him, had she unknowingly fled from happiness?

She pulled up her thoughts sharply at that—for she felt that they were disloyal to Boris, her husband. She had set her hand to the plough. It was up to her to go on ploughing her lonely furrow, however difficult—and it had become ten times more difficult now that she knew what she had missed.

Her sacrifice, in sending Hugh back to Cynthia had been in vain. Why did life play such cruel tricks? Why had Cynthia found out, too late, that Hugh did not love her?

She stood still for a moment, watching the falling leaves upon the grass of the Common. A sigh that was almost a sob shook her, and she had a sudden vision of her life, futile, frustrated.

And yet, had it been entirely futile? Had she done nothing in making Boris's life worth living, in tending his broken

body and bruised spirit? If all had gone well with her from the beginning, and she had never known sorrow or sacrifice, might she not have developed into one of those women, complacent and self-satisfied as cattle feeding in a field, who had never understood the real meaning of life?

She turned, and across the road saw the sunset flaming in the windows of her home. How peaceful it all looked—seeming to beckon her back to her placid life. There it sat, the little old house, dreaming in its quiet garden—a harbour to which she had won after much storm and strife—and to which she had brought another soul in still greater need of rest than she herself.

If, sometimes, her young blood was fired with the strange unrest of spring, and her spirit chafed at its chains—well, she had learnt how to fight back to contentment again. She was mistress of herself—and that, surely, was something to have won.

She thought of Hugh, under the South African sky. Had he, too, conquered or was he filled with the restless, unsatisfied longing of love denied?

Perhaps he had sought his panacea in hard work, that tired the body so that the mind had no time to think. Perhaps, like her, he had found some sort of comfort by immersing himself in commonplace, everyday things? Work was the great healer of the soul's wounds—and to have to work and think for another, as she did, was an opiate to pain.

Pain! What was her pain to that of the man lying cut off from youth, from hope, from ambition—from all the things which he, even more than most men, had possessed in such full measure?

A wave of tenderness swept over her for the man who had loved her so well, and who had considered the world and all that the world had to offer, well lost for love.

She must go back to him, burying her dreams deep down in her heart. Her place was by his side, and he must never guess that her heart belonged to another man whom she would never see again.

So she went back to her husband, and found that he had been wheeled into the sitting-room and lay staring at the flickering flames of the newly-lighted fire. As she bent over him to smooth his pillow, she thought that he looked very, very tired, and she resolved that on the morrow she would arrange for a specialist to see him.

He put up his hands and framed her face with them, holding it close to his own, and smiling tenderly, but sadly.

"You ought to have had babies of your own, my dearest," he said gently. "You are the true mother-woman. Why should so much love and tenderness be lavished on me?"

She caught her breath sharply.

"Don't—Boris, dear. I am content—quite content—so long as you are happy."

The next day she managed to persuade him to see a doctor, and two days later an eminent specialist came and examined him.

Afterwards, he took Ruth apart, and she saw that his face was grave.

"I am afraid there is little I can do," he told her gently. "It is just that the flame of life is flickering lower and lower. With love and care he may linger on for a considerable time. You are the only one who can do anything for him. My science is concerned ony with the body—and it is the spirit, in his case, that keeps the flame burning."

IT was spring again, and the trees and hedges around Cynthia's old home were clothed in the delicate green of bursting buds.

As Ruth stood in the little churchyard, beside the smooth green mound where all that was earthly of her father lay, her heart was filled with the glad message of the Resurrection.

She turned away at last, and went through the little wicket-gate on to the path that led to the grounds of the Manor House—for coming along, she had seen a board announcing that it was for sale, and she thought that there would be no one to object if she returned, just for a few minutes, to the spot hallowed by so many memories.

Here, too, the crocuses dotted the turf like stars, and there was a busy twittering of birds, who were building their new nests.

She sat down on a fallen log, where she had sat one summer evening in the long ago. The weight of her thoughts and the poignancy of her memories tugged at her heart, and she sat with downcast eyes, recalling all that had happened to her since that hot afternoon when she and her father and Boris had brought their caravan to rest here.

She seemed to hear Hugh's voice, low and strained, pleading for her love—heard him say, half sadly, half playfully—

"I should hate to come here and find nothing but a withered heap of flowers, such as the gipsies leave when they take the road again."

Withered flowers! She looked about, and saw the fresh blossoms springing up where dead leaves had been, as though nature herself had touched the spot with gentle, life-giving fingers.

"*Where my caravan has rested,*
*Flowers I leave you on the grass—*
*All the flowers of love and memory,*
*You will find them when you pass.*"

Her memories were as fresh and vivid as the spring flowers that had taken the place of the withered ones. So vivid that she could almost hear Hugh's voice as she had heard it on her last night here, when she came upon him unexpectedly.

"Ruth! It is you!"

Oh, why could she not forget? Why should she be tortured by the mockery of a voice—a deep, beloved voice that seemed to ring in her ears, instead of in her memory?

She raised her eyes to assure herself that she was alone—and her heart gave a great leap.

She was not alone.

Hugh was standing before her—Hugh, in the flesh, staring at her as though she was a ghost.

"Ruth!" he said again, and this time she knew that the cry was real.

Trembling in every limb, she stood up and held out her arms.

"Oh, Hugh—at last!"

It was a long time before they spoke again. They sat down on the old tree trunk, Hugh's arms holding her close, Ruth's head on his shoulder, and utter contentment in both their hearts.

"I came home only last week," Hugh told her. "I did well in South Africa, but I grew homesick. I had to come home, and the first spot to which I turned was this, where I had known you. I am making arrangements to buy the house—and, meantime, I live at the village inn, and come up here every day. When I had bought the house I intended to seek you out. Cynthia has told me all about you in her letters—about your marriage, and how splendidly and selflessly you nursed your husband, right up to the last."

"He died—nearly a year ago," Ruth said gently.

"I know, my dear. Oh, my darling, what you have suffered! I wonder if I shall ever be able to make it up to you?"

She turned her head, and looked up into his eyes. Her lips smiled tremulously, though tears stood in her eyes.

"You have done that already," she said, softly. "Oh, Hugh, now that I have found you again, nothing else matters. I can look back down the years and thank God for everything hat has happened to me. We have both learnt life's lessons, and come at last to happiness. Cynthia, too, has come through sacrifice to content. And Boris—I am sure that Boris knows everything, and understands."

Hugh gathered her closer, and smoothing her hair back from her forehead, kissed her tenderly there, then upon her lips.

Her arms stole up round his neck, and as she gave him kiss for kiss, the sun stole slowly along the greensward, and bathed them in golden promise.

THE END.

## THE VANISHING TRICK.

The music-hall conjuror had not had an engagement for months, and he and his wife were having a very lean time. A friend called to see them, and was astonished to find them both sitting down to a large and tasty dinner. "That's fine!" exclaimed the visitor. "If you can afford such a splendid meal as this it can only mean that you've got an engagement at last!" "You're wrong, Joe," grunted the poor conjuror, "but if I ever do get a job again I'll not be able to perform my great 'rabbits and pigeons' trick!"

* * *

## TWO EARLY BIRDS.

An English landowner, out unusually early one morning for a walk on his estate, in turning a corner came suddenly upon an Irishman, whom he knew a inveterate poacher. This is the conversation that took place between them—"Good morning, Pat!' "Good marnin', yer haner! An' phwat brings yer haner out so airly this marnin'?" "I'm just walking round, Pat, to see if I can get an appetite for my breakfast. And what brings you out so early, Pat?" "Och, bej abbers, O'im jest a-walkin' around to see if Oi can't git a breakfast fer me appetite!"

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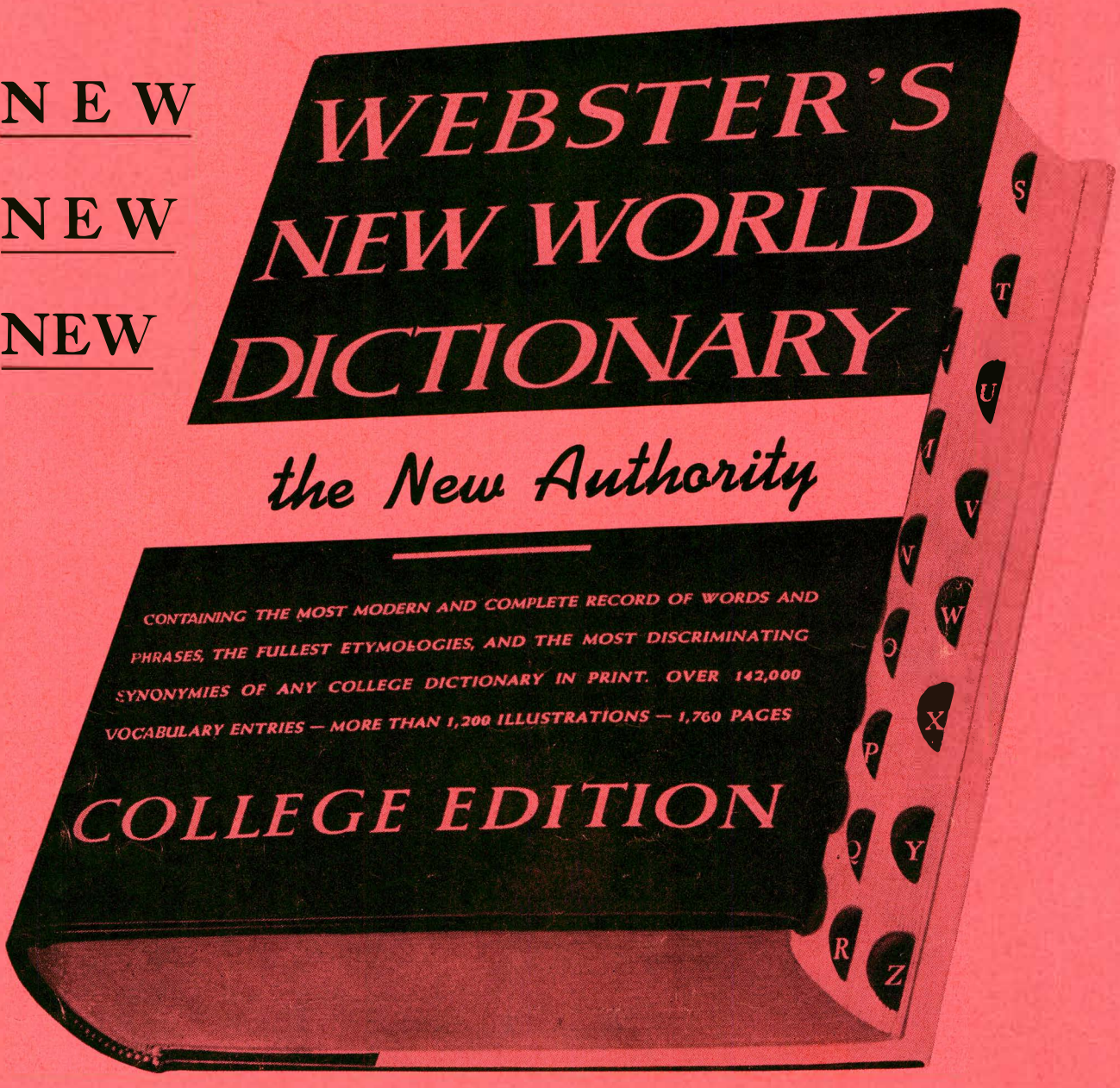


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