

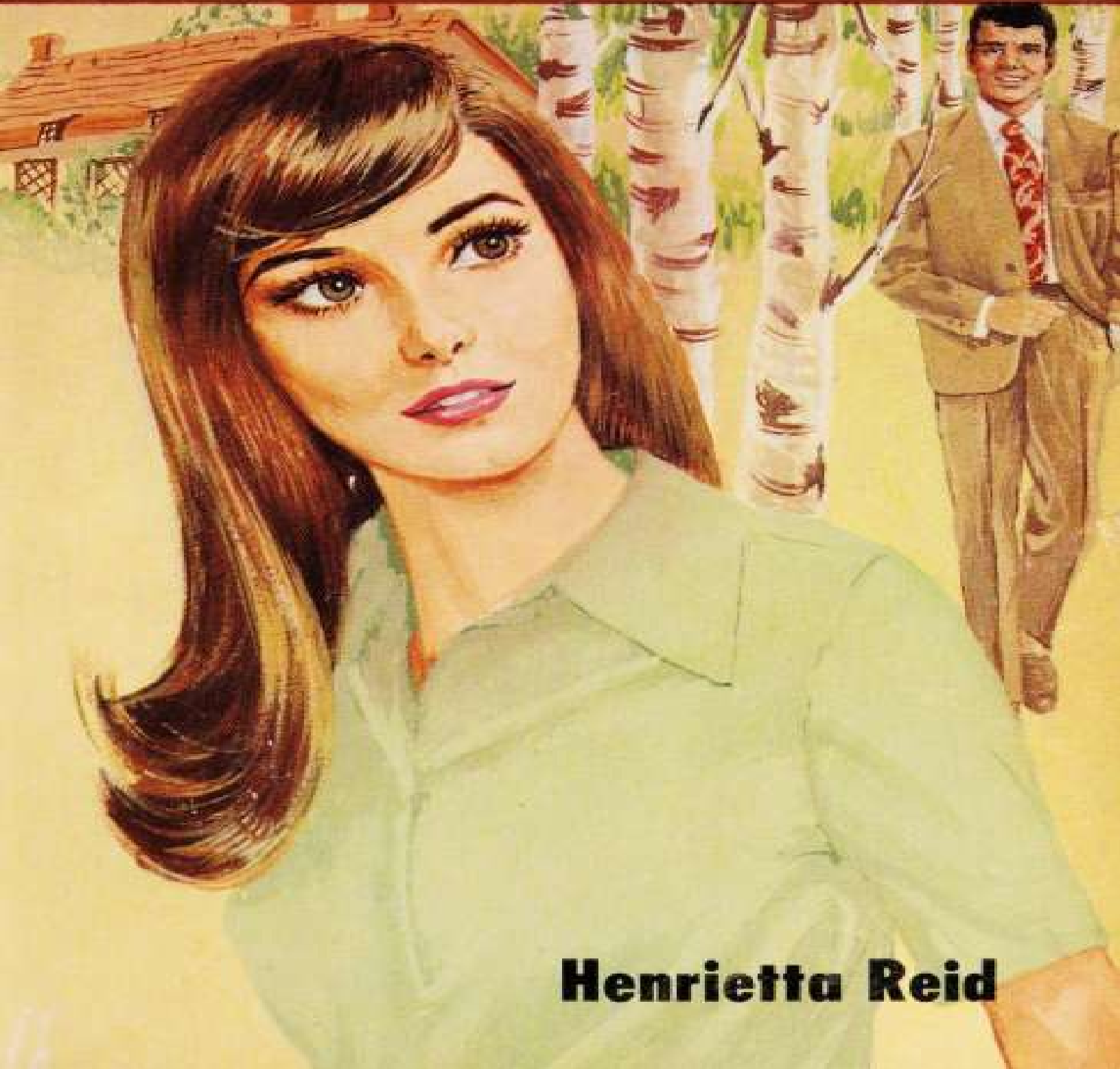


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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE


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SISTER OF THE BRIDE



Henrietta Reid

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SISTER OF THE BRIDE

by

HENRIETTA REID



HARLEQUIN BOOKS

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WINNIPEG

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CHAPTER ONE

I FELT my heart sink as I saw my mother lay down her cup with a little crash and peer frowningly at the morning paper. I knew then that she had seen that small notice in the 'Forthcoming Marriages' column. Not that I had really had any hope that she would overlook it! It was the part of the paper she always perused first,

'So Olive Pemberton is to marry Ross Overton,' she said sharply. 'To think that at one time you could have had him, Esther, if you had only exerted yourself!'

My heart sank as I realized she was beginning one of her tirades.

'It would have been such a brilliant match too! Ross could have given you everything a girl could desire out of life. And he was so attentive to you at Averil's wedding: everyone said it was obvious he was smitten.

To think that if you had played your cards properly you could have spent your honeymoon at the Overtons' villa in the south of France. It's right on the Mediterranean. What on earth possessed you to fling him into Olive's arms—and it's not as if she were a beauty. After all, it shouldn't have been difficult to be more attractive than Olive. I expect she's crowing over you too—'

I made a pretence of buttering a piece of toast. It wasn't true that Olive had cowered, for she was much too devious to show her feelings so obviously. But when she had displayed her star sapphire engagement ring

to the rest of us at the office I had felt in her manner a barely suppressed triumph. So you thought you'd hooked Ross Overton, she seemed to say. Well, there's many a ship—'

It was true, of course, as Mother had said, that Ross had been attracted to me on Averil's wedding day. Perhaps it had had something to do with the new confidence I had felt as I surveyed myself in the long dress of apricot silk organdy with a tiny petal cap of the same colour. Ross Overton had been groomsman, and I remembered how elated I had felt at the reception when he had fetched me a glass of champagne and from then on had completely monopolized me. Apart from being handsome in a rough-hewn sort of way, he was heir to the wealthy Overtons and an extremely important personage in local affairs.

The guests had cast amused and speculative glances in our direction. So the groomsman was interested in the bridesmaid, they seemed to say. A classic situation and the perfect ending to a day that had gone without a hitch from the moment that Averil, so beautiful in dreamy white, had walked assuredly down the aisle. Mother, of course, had cried. But then that was the privilege of the bride's mother. Apart from that, Averil had always been her favourite, and though she had been disappointed, she had given in when Averil had insisted on marrying Clive Etherton who was only an accountant with the Ashmore shipping company. It had dashed Mother's hopes that my sister, with her radiant beauty, would make a brilliant marriage, and

although she insisted that Averil was Throvdng herself away' she realized only too weU how stubborn and self-willed Averil could be when it came to leading her own life. We were not to know then that within

a few years Clive would be killed on a business trip to the Middle East and that Averil would be left a widow with a young son.

Strangely enough Ross Overton, who had the reputation of preferring sleek and sophisticated women, began to cultivate me: he would call for me after work at the stockbrokers' office where I was secretary to one of the partners and sweep me off in one of the enormous Overton limousines. Old Miss Palmer, who had been with the firm since she was a girl, would grow animated when his burly figure appeared in the doorway. He had that effect on all the girls in the office. That's why I hadn't noticed that with Olive Pemberton it was something more than admiration that made her eyes bright and her sallow skin glow when he appeared. Later I was to know how tenacious and cunning she had been in managing to draw herself to his attention. I never quite discovered what it was she said to Ross about me, but quite suddenly the car no longer rolled up to the office in the evenings and the phone calls and invitations ceased. Not that by this time I particularly cared! Once I had become used to the heady excitement of being singled out by the most eligible man in our small town I had gradually begun to realize that Ross, in spite of his broad shoulders and blunt good looks, was shallow and selfish and utterly spoiled. So it was almost with relief that I saw he had transferred his interest to Olive. At least it left me without the problem of explaining to Mother why I had no intention of considering him in the light of a future husband. Yet it had not been easy to ignore the covert pitying glances of sympathy the others had given me when Olive had sailed in one morning

flaunting her magnificent ring with all the confidence of a girl whose future is assured.

It had been enough to bear the humiliating badge of rejection without my mother continually harping on what she called my ^disappointment'. ^Olive is the third girl in your office to get married.

In fact, you must be the only one of your group left single—am I correct?’

‘Except Miss Palmer,’ I said quietly.

Mother gave a short contemptuous laugh. ‘Why, Miss Palmer must be about a hundred: she’s been with the firm since it was established. Surely you’re not comparing yourself to her?’

‘No, of course not,’ I said wearily.

‘How will you like, as time goes on, to be gradually bracketed with old Miss Palmer? Really, Esther, some-times I think you make yourself as drab and uninter-esting as possible. I had hopes that you’d show more sense than Averil. Do you realize that unless you buck up and exert yourself to be attractive you’ll end up on the shelf? But there, I know there’s no use in talking to you: you seem determined to grow into a cantankerous old spinster, like Miss Palmer,’

‘But Miss Palmer isn’t cantankerous: she’s one of the kindest people I know. And anyway. I’d rather be a spinster than marry someone I had no respect for.’

‘Fine words,’ my mother said bitterly, ‘but in a few years from, now you’ll be singing a different tune, believe me,’

Exasperated at what she took to be a further display of my unco-operativeness, she turned impatiently to a little pile of letters beside her place. She tore open an envelope bearing Averil’s flamboyant scrawl and was soon engrossed.

I fixed my eyes on a ray of sunlight that glittered and splintered off the glass marmalade dish. I mustn’t let Mother’s reproaches undermine my already wavering self-confidence, I told myself firmly. Yet it was impossible not to feel a familiar twinge of regret and vague longing. Through the open window I could see the clusters of pale wild daffodils that grew underneath the hedge, their heads nodding in the light exhilarating spring air. It was a time of youth and renewal, yet for

me there were no golden promises. In spite of my championship of old Miss Palmer I felt a cold chill as I contemplated the future. How many future springs would pass and see me still the victim of Mother's continual nagging? Would life quietly and inexorably slip away, leaving me nothing but vain regrets?

'This is for you: Averil enclosed it in her letter. ^ Without looking up. Mother passed me a folded sheet of paper.

I opened it curiously. It was not often Averil wrote to me. We had little in common and as children had quarrelled almost continually. Even then Averil had been a beauty; always the one to attract notice and admiration. In my own childish way I had resented the fact that she came first with my mother: I had withdrawn into a dream world of my own and, against Averil's gay and irrepressible character, had seemed sulky and bad-tempered. When she had grown up, too, it was Averil the boys had fluttered after, and as I was the younger sister I had become used to Averil's triumphs and in fact had felt a sort of reflected glory in running errands for her and generally playing gooseberry as she flirted with one boy after another.

It was different, of course, when she met Clive and fell head-over-heels in love. After her marriage they

had settled in London and we had seen very little of them, so I was surprised to see that the letter was headed 'Cherry Cottage, Warefield.' Warefield was a small market town, about fifty miles from us, rural and sleepy. Not at all the type of place that would appeal to my sophisticated sister!

'Dear Mouse,' Averil began. This was the name she always called me when she was bent on wheedling me into agreeing with one of her schemes, 'I expect the address surprises you, and I must say that it rather surprised me to find myself in one of those quaint ye olde worlde cottages, full of creaking beams and tiny rooms. In fact, Cherry Cottage is not my idea of "a most desirable residence." However, as you know, Clive, poor darling, didn't leave me particularly well off and when the head of Ashmore's offered me the tenancy of the cottage in

the grounds of their country home, I jumped at it. After all, beggars can't be choosers. In the old days it belonged to the wheelwright who worked in the Ashmore stables—that is when they had carriages—and is situated in a nook of the grounds of Ashmore House, which is very big and Victorian and rather ghastly in an imposing sort of way. Altogether we're rather feudal down here and I can barely restrain myself from bobbing a curtsey and addressing Vance Ashmore as Master. Actually it's a title that would suit him rather, as he's extremely grim and autocratic and altogether intriguing.

‘Anyway, Rodney simply loves it and spends his time chasing the animals and fighting with the local children, I can't say I'm particularly enamoured of our new home. Give me the bright lights every time, but on the other hand it has certain compensations which I shall not enumerate at this stage. And now, dear

Mouse, I have a favour to ask. Quite out of the blue Sheila Richardson has asked me to accompany her to the West Indies where she's joining her husband in Nassau. We would be going out in a cruise ship as Sheila simply has a thing about planes. It would be a terrific opportunity for me to get away from things for a bit and I'd simply love to take her up on the offer. But the snag is there's no one here at Warefield I know well enough to take charge of Rodney and, as you know, he can be a bit of a handful at times. I was wondering if you could possibly come down here and take over until I return.

‘Couldn't you ask that nice boss of yours if you could take your holidays now and let me join Sheila? I'll be simply desolated if I miss this opportunity and, after all, it would be like a holiday for you. Cherry Cottage is the type of quaint old place I know you'd love and it's frightfully rural here with everything in bud. So do please say you'll come. Mouse. There's nothing like a shipboard flirtation for keeping a girl's morale up, and in spirit I'm dancing on deck under the stars—’

I put her letter down. Averil called me Mouse only when she was bent on getting her own way. It was a half derisive, half condescending name she had evolved for me when we had been children, and it expressed my position in relation to her so accurately that I had always

hated it, although I had never given her the satisfaction of letting her know how much I resented it.

So Averil was, as usual, determined to get her own way! Did she imagine I could drop everything and rush off to Warefield, just because she wanted to go on a pleasure trip? I could imagine the expression on Miss Palmer's face were I to announce that I was

leaving the office to take over the management of an extremely spoilt eight-year-old boy, as my sister had an overwhelming urge to dance under the stars,

I must have smiled wryly at the fancy, for Mother said pettishly, 'Really, Esther, there's nothing to grin about. I assume Averil has told you of this cruise she has in mind. She asks me quite casually if I'll let you go off to take care of young Rodney. I must say it's most thoughtless of her. She must know how much I depend on you. If you go, who is to stay here with me? I'd be simply terrified at night alone in this house. But then Averil has no consideration.'

It was not often Mother found fault with her favourite and perhaps at that moment we came as near to seeing eye to eye as we ever did. 'You'll just have to write to her and tell her how impossible the whole idea is: if she wants to go off galivanting, let her get someone locally to take care of Rodney.'

'But she hasn't been long enough there to know anyone she could trust him with,' I pointed out, 'It seems that it's only recently that Vance Ashmore offered the tenancy of the cottage.'

Mother knitted her brows thoughtfully. 'It's only right that Vance Ashmore, as head of Clive's firm, should do something for Averil. After all, if Clive hadn't been sent out to the East just when there was trouble brewing Averil wouldn't have been left a widow. And she was always the type of girl who needed the steadying influence of a husband. But then every girl should have a husband. I've no time for this career-girl business. A home and family is what every girl needs, and if you had any sense—'

‘Couldn’t Rodney come and stay with us while

Averil is away?’ I suggested quickly, in an effort to head Mother off her now familiar tirade.

Mother stopped in mid-sentence. ‘Rodney come to us?’ she demanded, outraged. ‘You’re surely not suggesting that a child as undisciplined as he is should actually stay here? My poor nerves would never stand it. It was bad enough when he was younger and I went to stay with Averil in London. He did nothing but run about the house yelling at the top of his voice and openly defying his mother. “Averil,” I said, “if you don’t put your foot down you’ll live to regret not taking that child in hand,” But of course she laughed it off and said that she didn’t want him to grow up a namby-pamby. What he must be like by now, and with the open countryside to run wild in, I dread to think. Oh no, it’s out of the question he should come here, so put it out of your head.’

My mother drummed her fingers thoughtfully, then added, ‘Still it seems a pity that she can’t take up this opportunity: Averil is not the type of girl who should remain a widow, and I must say that I’d be happier if she found a good steady husband.’

She relapsed into a brooding silence and I could guess what was going on in her mind. A cruise would offer plenty of opportunity for a shipboard romance and Averil with her glowing good looks would be sure to attract a host of admirers.

‘Perhaps in a way,’ Mother pursued, ‘it might be as well if you did as Averil asks. After all, she won’t be away so very long and—’

‘I’ll have to rush or I’ll be late at the office,’ I said hurriedly. I didn’t add that I had not the slightest intention of travelling to Cherry Cottage so that Averil might go on a pleasure cruise.

Mother shrugged and returned to her paper. ‘Oh, very well! We’ll discuss it when you come home, but on the whole it might be a good idea. After all, it will give you a change from the office, and lately you’ve looked quite pale and washed from being indoors so much.®’

As I hurried along to the office I hoped that Mother would have changed her attitude by the time I returned. I certainly had no intention of giving in to Averil's demands, although I knew my sister well enough to be aware that in spite of the ingenuous tone of her letter she was fully determined to get her own way.

A sudden cold flurry of rain fell as I approached the office of Wentworth & Judd, Stockbrokers, and I ran the last few yards and gained the shelter of the small poky entrance that in the clear spring air seemed gloomy and dingy.

Miss Pahner looked up from her desk as I opened the door of the outer office and gave the bright mechanical smile that crinkled the corners of her faded blue eyes. 'You've just made it in time. Miss Carson,' she remarked cheerfully. 'It looks as if we're in for a regular downpour, doesn't it?'

The other girls on the staff were called by their Christian names. Miss Palmer and I were the only exceptions. Strange that I hadn't noticed the significance of it until now. So already I was 'Miss Carson', a senior member of the staff! I hung up my damp coat on the tall old-fashioned coatstand that stood by the fireplace.

'You haven't heard the good news yet,' she said cheerfully as she crossed to the filing cabinet.

'What news?' I asked mechanically.

'Diana's engaged: it happened last night. Imagine, they've been going steady only for about three months, it seems, I must say the ring is quite pretty: a very tiny ruby, surrounded by sparklers. But of course the ring Mr. Overton gave Olive rather spoiled us: it's only once in a lifetime one sees such superb gems.' Then, as though aware of tactlessness, she flushed and ruffled busily through the open drawer.

So Miss Palmer believed I harboured regrets concerning Ross, I thought wryly.

‘Of course they’re very much in love and after all that’s what counts, isn’t it?’ she pursued with an air of making the best of things. T said to her, Diana, you’re quite right to put your money into your future honxe rather than to spend it on the ring.” Don’t you agree. Miss Carson?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I replied. So Diana, one of our junior typists, was already engaged! In spite of the fuggy warmth of the office I gave a tiny shiver.

Miss Palmer looked at me anxiously. T do hope you’re not catching one of those horrid spring colds: they’re going the rounds at present.’ This was her con-stant concern, that the office should not be understaffed and cause her employers inconvenience. ‘We seem to have quite a spate of engagements,’ she continued. She bent her head over the open filing-drawer. ‘It means we’ll have to look out for more staff. It’s not that I’m complaining. Although Diana hasn’t been here very long. Goodness knows, I’d be the last to want the girls to remain single, but it does mean more work for poor old me. And Mr. Wentworth gets so impatient: he simply doesn’t seem to understand that it’s natural for a girl to want to settle down.’

I glanced over at her as she stood with her back to

me: she was wearing a cardigan of dun brown wool that she had knitted herself. Miss Palmer’s cardigans had always been rather a joke in the office, but now I felt only compassion for her as I saw how bony and stooped her shoulders were as they poked through the loosely knitted fabric. For the first time I wondered about Miss Palmer: her air of determined cheerfulness when she heard of another engagement in the office: did she secretly regret having remained single with nothing to return to but her bedsitting-room above the greengrocer’s and Shah, her beloved Persian cat?

The fact that Mr. Judd had gone to London for the day meant that with a certain amount of time on my hands, I noticed with searing clarity things that had so far escaped me. That day opened my eyes to a lot of things I had previously ignored: for instance, when I went into their

office there was a sudden cessation of talk and gossip amongst the junior typists. It was as though my presence dried up the laughter and chatter and the interchange of confidences, and I remembered with a little coldness at my heart how only a few years ago when I had newly arrived at Wentworth & Judd's we had treated Miss Palmer in a similar manner when she had come upon us unexpectedly when we had been chatting. So already seniority was debarring me from sharing the confidences and gossip of the younger girls! Then there was the way Diana held out her hand almost apologetically when it came my turn to see her ring. Diana had always been a thoughtful, kind-hearted girl. Did she pity me, I wondered, perhaps feel that her happiness would bring home to me how I had been let down by Ross Overton and that I was valiantly concealing a twinge of jealousy?

The afternoon seemed to drag on with leaden feet and it was still raining a depressing drizzle when it was time to go. The younger girls hurried out chattering like magpies, already discussing their plans for the evening. Miss Palmer packed the tartan holdall in which she carried various odds and ends, including a rather broken-down pair of shoes which she described as her 'office shoes', her raincoat and a paperback novel, and the cardigan that she was engaged in knitting—the current one was in a dull olive green that looked every bit as depressing as the dun brown.

'Well, I certainly envy those young girls their energy,' she said ruefully. 'AU I'm looking forward to now is getting back to Shah and putting my poor feet up.'

It was obvious that she was bracketing me with herself, and again I felt a little twinge of resentment.

Perhaps it showed in my expression, because she added hastily, 'Of course I'm speaking for myself. You'll have a date tonight, won't you? I keep forgetting what an old fogey I am compared to you.'

I put on my coat and rammed down my hat a little defiantly. 'No, I've no date, but I'll find plenty to do' at home, you may be sure,'

Miss Palmer regarded me frowningly for a moment, then said hesitantly, 'My dear, you mustn't get into the habit of isolating yourself. You're young yet. Don't let your chances pass as I did. Oh, I know at your age one is inclined to feel self-sufficient and to value one's independence, but sooner or later one longs for the satisfaction of a home of one's own, a husband and perhaps children. If you wait too long your life will be one of continual regret—as mine is. Many years ago I turned down a man who would have made me

a good husband. We quarrelled about some stupid little thing. I can't even remember what it was now, but I was proud of my independence and wanted to show him how unnecessary he was to my happiness. I've lived to regret it. When I go home tonight there'll be no one but Shah to welcome me. And now it's too late to hope for anything different.'

It was so uncharacteristic of the reserved Miss Palmer to speak so revealingly that I stared at her in astonishment.

'Oh, I know you probably think I'm an interfering old busybody,' she said hastily, 'but after all, you and I have always pulled along very well together and you've been here longer than the others. I'd simply hate to see you alone with nothing to go home to except a rather selfish old puss.' She laughed as though trying to regain the rather formal and detached relationship that had always existed between us. 'I'd better hurry off or Shah will be tearing the cushions to ribbons: he's inclined to get pettish if I don't turn up on time. I sometimes think the animal has a built-in clock, but then it's my own fault, I expect: I spoil him hopelessly.'

Later, when we had parted at the foot of Main Street, I watched Miss Palmer hurry away through the rain, her umbrella tilted against the breeze that had sprung up. I was on the point of turning homewards when on an impulse I crossed the road towards a small cafe with multi-coloured lights that glistened on the rain-washed pavement. I sat down at one of the small tables and ordered coffee. Not that I really wanted it, but I needed an excuse to sit quietly and consider my situation.

I realized how the afternoon at the office had

opened my eyes. Already I was being regarded by the younger girls as a failurej someone who had been ignominiously jilted and who should be humoured and tolerated, like Miss Palmer, I would definitely have to reconsider my way of life. Obviously if I remained at Wentworth & Judd^s Fd simply sink more and more into the deadly and futureless routine that would in tune kiU aU initiative—yet what possible excuse could I give my mother were I suddenly and, in her view, incomprehensibly to fling up my job merely to take another?

As I sipped at the tepid liquid that the waitress had indifferently slipped on to the table I realized that I was about the only customer who was seated alone in the cafe. Couples at the other tables either chattered gaily or sat side by side, their hands interlaced, intent and sHent, content to be in each other's company. Suddenly I remembered Averil's plea for help. What had been out of the question that morning now seemed more feasible. I had no illusions that being in charge of Rodney would be any picnic. Mother had been right when she had remarked that Averil had spoiled him hopelessly and that he bitterly resented even the smallest restraint. But at least it would be a change and the sort of move that my mother would approve. For already she was visualizing a shipboard romance and Averil returning from the cruise with an eminently eligible fiance trading in her wake.

Besides, I rather liked the sound of Cherry Cottage: it sounded attractively rural. I visualized it covered in summer with pink and whit^ roses, its garden fiUed with lupins, lavender, foxgloves and golden marigolds. A chocolate-box cottage with latticed windows and beamed rooms! Even at this time of the year it would

be beautiful, the woods filled with a fuzz of delicately graded greens. It would be a change from the deadly monotony, the hard pavements, the musty offices of Messrs Wentworth & Judd.

Apart from that it would give me a chance quietly to reconsider my position and to make up my mind what steps I should take to reorganize my life.

CHAPTER TWO

MOTHER came along to the station to see me off. It was a sign that for once I had her approval. Yet, as the train moved out of the platform and I saw her plump figure recede, I was conscious of a feeling of relief and it was with a sense of freedom that I turned to the magazines I had provided myself with. I was vaguely aware that a young woman with a laden shopping-bag and a child were seated at the other end of the carriage and that a pipe-smoking man, immersed in a paper, was sitting across from me. Gradually the rows of uniform suburban houses gave way to cultivated fields and grasslands and I laid down my magazine and gazed dreamily at the countryside, fresh and green, the hedges fuzzed with pale delicate foliage.

It was as if my old life with all its problems and doubts was gradually shipping away from me with every mile I travelled towards Warefield, It blotted out the guilty feeling I had had when I saw how disappointed and fussed Miss Palmer had been when I had asked for an early holiday. She had remarked a little coldly that although Mr. Judd had agreed to give me leave of absence he was extremely inconvenienced by my request. As for herself, she had continued, she was much too used to girls going off to get married to be surprised, although she had added significantly she would have imagined that in my case 'the circumstances were different,' It had been another

wry little reminder that were I to decide to return to my old job it would mean a gradual settling down into a frustrating and futureless rut. Even the fact that I would be in sole charge of Rodney was not sufficient to damp my new sense of optimism.

I was vaguely aware that an argument was going on between the young woman and her child at the opposite end of the carriage.

'No, Shirley,' her mother was saying, 'you mustn't touch it! Suppose you should cut your finger!'

But the child persisted in reaching for the knife her mother was using to peel an apple.

The mother glanced at me with an exasperated smile. 'Shirley just can't keep her hands off sharp things, though I've warned her a hundred times.'

It was at this point that the child gave a piercing scream and dropped the knife that she had managed to tug from her mother's grasp. Blood gushed from a cut on her finger.

'There, what did I tell you!' her mother said agitatedly.

I rummaged hastily in my handbag and produced a clean white handkerchief and rather clumsily tried to bandage the by now hysterical child's finger. However, the cut must have been quite deep, for my efforts were unnervingly ineffectual. Shirley, too, kept wriggling and twisting so that it was impossible to knot the handkerchief properly.

'Here, let me do that.' The man across had thrown aside his paper and was lowering a black case from the rack. He was a broad-shouldered young man with tow-coloured hair and a quietly dependable manner.

Shirley's mother looked relieved as she saw him take a roll of bandage from a compartment of his case.

'Now aren't you a lucky girl to have a doctor here to fix your finger?'

'I think you'd better sit down: you look a bit green/ he said dryly as he removed my fumbling attempt at first-aid. 'I've the feeling that you haven't the makings of a nurse.'

A little shamefacedly I returned to my seat.

Already Shirley's tears had dried up: it was clear that he was the type of man who instantly inspires confidence in children. By the time the cut was attended to and Shirley was proudly holding up her bandaged

finger the train was drawing into a station and the woman thanked him profusely as she hurriedly collected her possessions.

He gazed at her a little wryly as he felt in his pocket and took out his pipe again. 'Isn't it extraordinary how completely under the thumb of their offspring some parents are? It's obvious our little Shirley is used to getting her own way.'

I nodded thoughtfully as I remembered some of Rodney's exploits.

The grey eyes looked discerningly at me as he filled his pipe. 'You look as if you had had some unpleasant experiences of infantile ingenuity.'

I smiled. 'I'm on my way to Warefield to take charge of my sister's child, Rodney, while she goes on a cruise. In some ways he's a perfect little monster: on the other hand he can be very disarming too. But then children seem to have that ability.'

He nodded and puffed placidly at his pipe, but I had the feeling that very little would escape those steady grey eyes. 'Warefield, now isn't that a coincidence! I'm Bob Pritchard, local G.P. and dogsbody. As it happens. I'm on my way back from a consulta-

tion—and a good thing too, or you'd probably still be dithering with that child.'

'I'm afraid I'm not very brave when it comes to patching up people,' I admitted, then said hesitantly, 'I'm Esther Carson.'

'Esther,' he repeated slowly, as if testing the name on his tongue. 'What a beautiful name! I don't think I've ever met anyone before called Esther.'

I looked at him in surprise. 'Beautiful? I've always hated my name: it's so old-fashioned and staid.'

'Yes, it does sound dependable.'

'Dependable!' I echoed flatly. It was from the stamp of dependability I

was trying to escape 1 Esther, who filled up the gaps in other {>eople's lives: Esther, who always turned up at Wentworth & Judd's on time: trustworthy, responsible Esther who always missed out on the exciting and interesting things of life!

'So you don't hke to be considered dependable, is that it?'

I hesitated, wondering if the man across from me who was puffing at his pipe with an air of relaxed ease was quietly laughing at me. 'No, not particularly,' I said cautiously. 'Anyway, what difference does it make how I feel about it?' I turned and looked deliberately out of the window, letting him know that I had no intention of giving any further confidences. After all, he was a complete stranger to me and the fact that he was a doctor didn't necessarily mean that I should pour out my thoughts and feelings tO' him.

I felt him studying my averted face quizzically. 'It's clear you haven't realized how rural we are at Ware-field. You'll find it impossible to keep yourself to yourself : before you're there very long everyone wih know

just about everything about you. Why, we even have a lord of the manor—or so he would like to consider himself, for Vance Ashmore behaves with all the arrogance of a feudal baron.'

'Vance Ashmore?' I must have sounded startled.

'Yes, do you know him?'

'No, but I'm going to stay at Cherry Cottage which my sister tells me is in the grounds of his home.'

'You mean Mrs. Etherton is your sister?' It was his turn to sound surprised. 'I should never have guessed you're her sister.'

But then how could he? I thought ruefully. Averi] with her golden radiant looks, her zest for life! I was so completely different from her that it was not surprising he sounded incredulous. 'We're not at all

alike,' I agreed.

Thoughtfully he knocked out his pipe. 'There is no resemblance between you,' he said slowly, but momentarily the grey eyes had looked wary and I got the impression that the fact that we were sisters had in some way disturbed him.

For the moment I felt puzzled at his reaction. 'According to Averil Cherry Cottage is very ye olde worlde and attractive,' I said lightly. Somehow I wanted to get back to our previous footing. I had no way of knowing what exactly I had said that had subtly changed his attitude.

'Yes, it is quite a htde gem: sixteenth century and with the original oak beams and leaded windows. Actually it's much older than the Ashmore home : the original mansion was burned down during the last century and old Silas Ashmore, Vance's grandfather, built the present house on the foundations. Vance has

also inherited the Ashmore Shipping Line: he's the most important personage in the district/

I wondered if I had only imagined a slight dryness in his tones. 'And does he live there alone?' I asked curiously.

Hb shook his head. 'There's his mother, Mrs. Ashmore, who is in her own way as autocratic as her son, although it's said that he is the only person she can't get the better of.' He hesitated a moment, then added, 'Then there's Eric, his half-brother. He was crippled in a shooting accident. No one quite knows how it happened and the Ashmores aren't the kind to display their skeletons in the closet, but it's said that Eric and Vance had their eye on the same woman. It's all rumour, of course, but aU in all Vance is considered rather a dark horse. I expect it's because we see him so seldom: fds business interests keep him in London a lot. However, his mother keeps up the old hospitable habits and is given to throwing parties that are the highlight of Warefield social life.'

He snuled. 'Much as some of us may disapprove of the Ashmores, yet

the invitations are much sought after and you've no idea of the mortification we feel if we're left out. It's a slight that takes a good deal of living down.' His eyes twinkled good-humouredly. 'However, I needn't bore you with all this gossip. You won't be very long at Cherry Cottage before you'll be au fait with all our local scandals and eccentricities.'

'I don't expect I'll have much time for gossiping,' I said. 'From what I know of my nephew I'll be kept pretty busy, and when Averh leaves he'll be even more of a handful.'

'Your sister is leaving Cherry Cottage?' He sounded surprised.

'Yes, she's going on a cruise. An old friend has invited her and naturally she's keen to avail herself of the opportunity.'

'Is she?' He sounded astonished and incredulous.

'Yes, of course,' I said, puzzled. 'Who wouldn't be keen to see those lovely places?' I was curious. Why did his manner change so obviously when Aveil was under discussion? 'I can't imagine any girl not being delighted at the change,' I went on, 'especially Averil: she was always so gay and highhearted and ready to enjoy everything.'

'Not like you, of course. You're the serious type, aren't you?' he said mischievously.

He was teasing me, I knew, but still I felt vaguely resentful. 'Perhaps I never had the opportunity to be anything else,' I said, and immediately regretted the outburst. Of course, he would think now that I was jealous of my beautiful sister.

'But perhaps you didn't want the opportunity,' he said quietly, and I found myself staring at him in shocked surprise.

'What do you mean?' I demanded.

'Exactly what I say. Perhaps you really prefer a back seat. Frankly, I'm

that way myself. But then I recognize that I'm never going to cut a swathe through life and am quite content in my own particular niche.'

By this time I had gathered my self-possession. 'Indeed?' I returned flatly, and once again focused my gaze on the passing countryside. To my relief I saw that he had no intention of pursuing the conversation. He relapsed into a thoughtful silence, then picked up his newspaper and became immersed in it until we drew into Warefield.

Typically, Averil had forgotten to make arrange-

ments to have me met. I stood beside my luggage for a while, then as the platform began to dear wandered around and peered over the railings into the station yard, but there ivas no sign of the taxi she had promised to send for me,

I found that Bob Pritchard had materialized at my side. *May I drive you to Cherry Cottage? I see you're alone and palely loitering.'

'No, thanks,' I said stiffly. 'I can ring for a taxi.' I had no intention of letting Dr. Bob Pritchard any further into my confidence. I had no idea then, of course, how short a time it would be before I was desperately seeking his help.

'Now you're being ridiculous,' he said. 'My car is outside and Cherry Cottage is quite near my house. Why can't you and I be friends? After all, we're bound to knock into each other occasionally, and if I've seemed to be too analytical blame my profession and also the fact that I'm a bachelor and an orphan,' he added solemnly.

In spite of myself I laughed, 'You don't look like an orphan to me,' I told him.

'That goes to show how little you really know about Bob Pritchard,' he grinned good-naturedly and, catching my elbow, steered me towards his rather shabby car. 'By the way,' he continued as he got behind the wheel, 'I think I forgot to mention that I'm on the look-out for a kind and sympathetic female to confide

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‘Well, you’ve got the wrong female in me!’ I retorted.

We drove through a thriving market town with traces of olden days in occasional lath-and-plaster houses. An old coaching inn had obviously taken pride

in preserving the cobbled yard and pointed roof of the seventeenth century. Soon the town gave way to suburban villas of red brick and Bob pointed out his, identical with the others, except for a large brass plate on the gate, and Venetian blinds on the windows, “^That’s my domain,’ he announced. ‘Pretty dismal, isn’t it, though no doubt the dainty hand of a woman would work Tvonders.’

‘You’re not pretending you do your own housework, are you?’ I asked severely,

‘WeU, no,’ he conceded, ‘but my housekeeper’s rather a poor cook and I’ll return to cold viands in a deserted dining room followed by an evening attending the ailments of most of the population of Warefield. Now don’t you pity me?’

‘No, I don’t—and what’s more I expect you’re perfectly content with your life and would be like a fish out of water in any other job.’

‘You’re a hard and unfeeling female,’ Bob returned, ‘and for that I shan’t tell you any of the interesting scandals of the neighbourhood.’

He spoke lightly, and it was only afterwards I was to realize how sharply the interesting scandals he referred to were to impinge on my own life.

He had turned the car down a narrow rutted lane and now pointed to fields lying behind the bordering hedges, ‘All this is Ashmore property. The entrance to the house is further along the main road and you can

get only a glimpse of it from Cherry Cottage. In the old days the Ashmores believed in keeping their menials well cut of sight.'

'The present Ashmores, from what you tell me, are doing the same,' I returned.

He frowned, 'Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but Vance Ashmore is not one of my favourites.'

I was too busy scanning the hedgerows for my first glimpse of Cherry Cottage to take more than passing heed of the fact that he singled out Vance for his disapproval.

I gave an exclamation of pleasure as he drew up in front of a rustic gate. A path of crazy paving bordered with masses of golden forsythia and clumps of daffodils led up to a steep-roofed cottage with glittering diamond-paned windows and porch covered with starry white clematis: it looked as perfect as a gingerbread cottage in a fairy tale,

'I leave you here,' Bob said hastily when he had deposited me and my cases inside the gate. I was too entranced by the beauty of Cherry Cottage to notice the speed with which he made his departure.

When I reached the door I found it opened immediately into what was obviously the living-room of the cottage. It stood slightly ajar and inside I glimpsed Averil kneeling on the floor feverishly packing a cabin trunk.

As I came in she looked up briefly through a cloud of soft golden hair, but there was no welcoming smile in her azure blue eyes. 'Thank heavens you've arrived,' she said excitedly. 'I've just received a telegram from Sheila: she wants me to meet her tonight: it seems she's giving a big party before we sail and I'd simply hate to miss it.'

I let my cases drop and surveyed her in blank dismay. 'But I understood you weren't leaving for a few days. It will take time for you to brief me; there will be all sorts of things I'll have to know before you go.'

Impatiently Aveiil returned to her packing. 'I might

have known you'd raise objections. Do be reasonable:! After all, you can learn the ropes as you go along, and there's nothing mysterious about housekeeping in Warefield, I can assure you. We don't lead a particularly hectic life down here. That's one of the reasons I'm so terribly keen to get away: sometimes I feel I'll die of boredom: you've no idea how incredibly hideous life in the country can be. Sometimes I feel I'm being buried alive!'

'Then why didn't you refuse Vance Ashmore's offer in the first place?' I asked in bewilderment.

For a moment I saw her pause in her hectic packing and her back stiffen as though with shock at my words, then without answering my question she said in a slightly artificial voice, 'I'm sure you're dying for a cup of tea: the kettle's boiling in the kitchen: do be a dear and fix things up for yourself, won't you? I'd have had something ready for you to eat if I weren't in such a desperate hurry. I ordered a taxi to call for me here in about half an hour.'

I refrained from pointing out that while she had remembered to order a taxi for herself she had forgotten to arrange for one to meet me at the station. Anyway, I realized that a complaint wouldn't really make much impression on her.

Feeling bewildered and frustrated, I did as she asked. The kitchen was much bigger than the living-room with an inglenook fireplace that in olden days must have blazed merrily with log fires that roared up the wide chimneypiece, but now the hearth was filled with a range on which bubbled a gleaming aluminium kettle. In the oaken dresser that seemed to have grown into the walls I found sugar and tea, but in spite of a thorough search in the cupboards and in the small

pantry I found no traces of milk. However, I made tea in the ancient china pot I found on the top shelf of the dresser. I was too tired to bother searching further. With a sigh of relief I sat down in an old wooden-backed kitchen chair and sipped the bitter brew. Through an

open window I caught a glimpse of the delicate pink blossoms of flowering cherry outlined against a china blue sky. As Bob Pritchard had said, the cottage was a little gem, and I felt a rising happiness as I investigated the twisting and blackened staircase that led to the upper story.

If only Averil had given me time to settle in and feel my way around at my leisure instead of hurling me into the mysteries of country life without the smallest preparation!

It was not long before Averil wandered into the kitchen, looking as calm and unruffled as though she hadn't been quite recently in the throes of feverishly packing.

She lit a cigarette and filling a mug with tea perched herself on the edge of the table, then made a disgusted moue when she found there was no milk. 'I've sent Rodney to the Ashmore farm for milk. They have an enormous dairy and usually supply us, but I expect Rodney has dawdled: he should have been here ages ago.'

She glanced at me with idle curiosity. 'Sorry, in the excitement of getting Sheha's telegram I forgot to send a taxi for you. I suppose you managed to get one at the station.'

'No, I didn't,' I returned a little acidly. 'A Doctor Robert Pritchard drove me: we travelled down together.'

Averil gave a gurgle of laughter. 'Bob Pritchard'

How amusing—especially when he disapproves of me so thoroughly!

I gazed at her in astonishment. 'But why on earth should he disapprove of you?'

She shrugged and slid from the table. 'Perhaps I've wounded his pride. Who knows? Men are peculiar creatures. Anyway, who cares about Bob Pritchard's opinions!' she added contemptuously. 'If you come up to my room try to answer some of the questions I can see hovering

on your lips.'

I followed her up the narrow staircase to her room. The sloping beams were blackened with age and the tiny panes of glass in the window under the eaves sparkled in the sun, but I knew it was not Averil's doing that the valance about the dressing-table was crisp and white and that the old furniture had the rich glow of well-polished chestnuts.

Averil crossed to the dressing-table and began to rummage in a box of make-up. 'By the way, Mrs. McAlister from the town comes up every morning and sees to things generally. She does the shopping, which is handy as we've no car so far. She's really an angel, for you know how hopeless I am when it comes to, cooking and I simply loathe housework. She leaves everything in apple pie order, so at least you'll be saved that bother. Anyway, it will give you more time to take care of Rodney. He really is rather a little demon, but I expect he'll grow out of it in time. By the way,' she added casually, 'if I were you I wouldn't take anything Mrs. McAlister says too seriously: she's an inveterate gossip and rather prides herself on being a bit of a character: I find it's best to take her remarks with a pinch of salt.' She gave a short laugh, but her eyes met mine in the mirror and I noticed the sharp-

ness of her glance and for a moment I wondered vaguely why Averil of all people should bother to warn me against a loquacious household help.

Crisp muslin fluttered at the open window, and through it I could see the tops of trees hazed with the pale green of opening buds. Through a gap in the curtain of green I glimpsed tall chimneys and a jumble of roofs. 'Is that the Ashmore house I see through the trees?' I asked.

She swung round on the little petit-point stool before the dressing-table. 'Yes, but how did you guess?'

'Bob Pritchard was telling me about it.'

She shrugged and returned to her meticulous application of eye-shadow. 'I'll bet he wasn't too complimentary. He hates Vance like

poison.'

'But why?' I asked, puzzled. It seemed strange that Bob Pritchard with his placid equable ways should take a dislike to another person without a good reason.

'Oh, v/ho knows? Perhaps because Vance is rich and important and he isn't. And then,' she added slowly, 'there's probably another very good reason why there's no love lost between them—' She stopped abruptly as though she had been on the point of revealing more than she meant to and with a shrug returned to the mirror.

'From what I gathered Vance Ashmore doesn't appear to be a particularly attractive character,' I remarked.

'Oh, indeed!' Aveiil applied lipstick and examined the results critically in the niirror. 'And what gave you that impression?'

'Well, Bob Pritchard described him as arrogant and overbearing—'

'Really, must you take everything Bob says as in-

fallible? I've already told you he's envious of Vance. But in a way it's true of Vance: he has a certain arrogance. But then why not? He's master of all he surveys. I've no time for people like Bob, easygoing and unambitious: the woman who marries him will wind up in that ghastly red-brick house and be the wife of a struggling G.P. until the end of her life.'

The picture would be quite different for the woman who married Vance Ashmore, I thought, and wondered what exactly was the relationship between the master of Ashmore and his tenant.

'And don't put on that prissy, censorious air,' Averil said irritably. 'It was perfectly natural that Vance should offer me the cottage: after all, he owed it to Clive. He worked himself to the bone for Ashmore Shipping and if he hadn't been sent on that trip to the Persian Gulf I wouldn't have been in the position of having to accept charity from

Vance.'

'But you've always hated the country: couldn't you have taken a job and stayed in town?'

Averil got abruptly to her feet. 'Really, why this interest in my welfare?' she asked angrily. 'And anyway, suppose I am interested in Vance, what about it? You don't expect me to remain a sorrowing widow to the end of my days. It's the sort of role, I suppose, that you'd like to see me in: it would satisfy that sentiment heart of yours to imagine my heart was in the grave with Clive. Well, for your information, my marriage was a mistake in the first place. Oh, Clive was handsome and dashing-looking, but it was only a front. It was too late when I discovered that he was only another Bob Pritchard, content to slog along in the same old rut.'

'Then you find Vance Ashmore more your type of man?' I asked dryly.

'Let's say I've a feeling that absence might make the heart grow fonder: that's why I jumped at Sheila's offer in the first place. I've a feeling that by the time I return from the sunny Caribbean Vance will have come up to scratch. Not, of course, that I'd turn up my nose at a Little daUiance under the tropical moon, but what I feel for Vance is a different matter. Vance can offer me all the things I've ever wanted out of life. I'm sick of scrimping and saving. I'll send Rodney to a really decent school, not that seedy little preparatory school he goes to now. I'll have decent clothes and a place in London, In fact, Vance is the type of man I should have married in the first place.'

'What about Mrs. Ashmore? According to Bob Pritchard she's a bit of a dragon: she may have different ideas.'

She slipped into a light travelling coat before answering. 'Yes, the present mistress of Ashmore is rather a harridan: she dresses as though she were twenty years younger and loads herself down with masses of jewellery. She sees herself as the leading social figure in these parts and has her finger in all the local affairs. I'm not foolish enough to cross swords with her, for I know I wouldn't stand a chance. After

all. I'm only the tenant of Cherry Cottage and she's used to having the whole district fawning on her and cutting each other's throats to get an invitation to her ghastly parties. She sees herself as a swinging hostess and I play up to her: butter wouldn't melt in little Averil's mouth. I drink in every word she utters as though it were a pearl of wisdom. In fact, she's now quite prepared to consider me as a suitable daughter-

in-law. But just wait till Vance carries me over the threshold of Ashmore House as its new mistress and that old witch will be in for a surprise.' Averil's clear blue eyes narrowed coldly as she visualised her revenge. 'I'll make life as miserable for her as she would make it for me if I didn't toady to her. I don't see you getting on particularly well with her: you can be so frightfully forthright at times, Esther.'

I looked at her in surprise. 'But why on earth should I come in contact with Mrs. Ashmore in the first place? From what you say of her I imagine she'd hardly be aware of my existence.'

'Oh, but that's where you're wrong. Warefield is frightfully parochial in ways : everyone's bursting with curiosity about newcomers. As soon as I told her you were taking over while I was on the cruise, she as good as gave a royal command that you should call on her. I expect she wants to look you over and see if you're suitable material to add to her list of hangers-on.'

'Well, I've no intention of letting the redoubtable Mrs. Ashmore look me over,' I said firmly, 'and I can't understand how she could imagine I would agree to such an invitation.'

Averil packed her handbag with quick expert movements. 'Because, of course, she's an Ashmore and like her son Vance, lord of all she surveys, which, may I remind you, includes Cherry Cottage.'

'Well, he may own Cherry Cottage, but he certainly doesn't own me.' I felt angry and antagonistic towards this man who apparently had such high-handed manners towards his tenants.

For a moment Averil paused and considered me as though, for the first

time since my arrival, I had really impinged. ‘Do try to co-operate, Esther. If you stand

on your dignity you’ll only make things difficult for me. If you deliberately make yourself unpleasant she’ll complain to Vance. Not that he’s tied to her apron-strings, for I can’t imagine Vance being under any woman’s thumb, but I don’t want the wrong atmosphere created.’

‘You’re the one who’s keen on Vance, not me! I don’t intend to act the sycophant, just to keep Mrs. Ashmore happy,’ I replied obstinately.

Averil gave the slight dismissing shrug that was characteristic. ‘Oh, very well, if you’re going to be pig-headed about it! Anyway, I don’t imagine he’s your type—or you his, for that matter.’

Just then there was the sound of feet pounding up the stairs and Rodney burst into the room. He regarded his mother blankly for a moment, then his pale, rather pudgy face screwed up ominously and he gave a howl of rage and frustration. ‘You said you weren’t going toU tomorrow, and when I came m from the dairy I saw your cases packed downstairs.’

‘Hush, darling,’ Averil said soothingly, completely unperturbed. ‘Mummy has to leave sooner than she expected. But Aunt Esther has come to take care of you while I’m gone. After all, it won’t be for so very long—only three weeks. And I want you to promise you’ll be a good boy while I’m away, won’t you?’

Rodney’s pale rather protuberant eyes slowly swivelled in my direction and he set his jaw mulishly. ‘But I don’t want to stay with Aunt Esther,’ he said flatly and, reverting to his grievance, added, ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were going? Then I wouldn’t have gone to the farm for the milk.’

‘Oh, did you fetch the milk, dear?’ Averil said vaguely. ^

If it was an effort to distract Rodney, she succeeded only too well.

'Yes, I did,' he replied belligerently. 'But old Mrs. Clarke at the dairy said I was a young vamiint and a limb of Satan.'

'You weren't being mischievous, were you, darling?' Averil crossed to the window and scanned the lane, her mind obviously on the expected taxi.

'Not really,' Rodney returned reluctantly. 'I only put a little stick in the milk separator to see if it would grind it up.'

'Oh, Rodney, you didn't! When you know how cantankerous old Mrs. Clarke can be!' For the first time, Averil seemed really perturbed by her offspring's activities. 'Now she'll rush to tell Mrs. Ashmore, and she was quite sarcastic and unpleasant to me the time you pulled up one of her prize rose bushes: she kept bringing it up time and again until I thought I'd scream.'

'Well, Mrs. Clarke had no right to call me a limb of Satan,' Rodney reiterated.

'She certainly had not,' Averil agreed, 'and I shall report her insolence to Vance when I come back. It's time Mrs. Clarke learned her place!' Averil set her hips firmly and I could see that the luckless Mrs. Clarke would have cause to regret her remarks when Averil became Mrs. Ashmore.

For the first time Rodney looked faintly apprehensive. 'Oh no, don't bother. It doesn't make any difference what the old horror calls me, and anyway Vance will probably back her up and be cross. I think he hates me,' he added darkly.

Laughingly his mother ruffled his hair. 'Why, you

simply little goose, Vance doesn't take the smallest notice of you. But I shall certainly mention Mrs. Clarke's impertinence to him: it can't be allowed to continue.'

Averil then was very sure of her power over the enigmatic Vance

Ashmore, and I wondered for a moment if she fully understood him or was merely relying on her beauty and powers of attraction to get her way.

There was the sound of a car drawing up outside the gate.

Averil glanced out. 'I must rush, darling,' she said gaily. I could see her eyes sparkling with anticipation of the pleasures ahead. She gave him a gay little kiss on the top of his head. 'Now be good, as I said, and don't give Aunt Esther any trouble, and I'll bring you something nice when I come back.'

With a quick wave in my direction she ran downstairs and we watched from the window as she got into the taxi and was driven away.

CHAPTER THREE

RODNEY, his chin on the window-ledge, sat gazing sullenly after the taxi and refused to reply when I mildly suggested he come down and show me where the food supplies and kitchen utensils were stored.

As he showed no signs of co-operating I went down myself and rummaged around until I had a fairly good idea where everything was kept. It was evident that Mrs. McAlister, in spite of her propensity to gossip, was an excellent housekeeper: I dreaded to think of the chaos that would have met me if Averil had been in sole charge, for she had the ability to create the wildest disorder when it came to domestic matters. I stoked the fire with beech logs which I found in a basket beside the range and soon they were crackling cheerfully behind the bars. Then I began to prepare vegetable soup from the store of young spring vegetables I found in a small adjoining outhouse. Behind the cottage was an orchard and the carmine and snowy white blossoms vied with the more pink and more ornate blossoms of the flowering cherries that had evidently given the cottage its name.

I was standing at the table scraping slender juicy young carrots when Rodney wandered into the kitchen and eyed my activities sulkily. 'What are you doing?' he asked suspiciously.

‘Making vegetable soup,’ I replied calmly.

‘I don’t like vegetable soup,’ he vouchsafed belligerently, then immediately asked, ‘Did you bring a present?’

The abruptness of the transition didn’t surprise me. I was well accustomed to Rodney’s self-centredness. I shook my head. I could well imagine that Rodney was accustomed to his mother’s friends paying tribute in an effort to ensure his co-operation, but I had no intention of starting off on the wrong foot with my young nephew.

He frowned ominously at the information and scuffed the worn tiles with the toe of his shoe. ‘When we lived in London, Mummy’s friends always brought me presents.’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised,’ I said dryly. ‘But then I’m afraid I’m not rich.’

For a moment his face took on an expression of un-childish slyness. ‘We’ll be rich when Mummy marries Vance and then I’ll be able to buy anything I like.’

I wondered with a feeling of distaste how many conversations Rodney had overheard and how much he really understood of the conflicting information that must be confusing his young mind.

He climbed on to the old-fashioned horsehair sofa that stood underneath the window and surveyed my activities morosely. ‘I wish we hadn’t come here: I hate the country: there’s nothing to do.’

‘Nothing to do?’ I smiled. ‘With ithe whole of the grounds of Ashmore House to run about in? I think you’re a very lucky little boy.’

‘Vance doesn’t like me to go near the house,’ he replied, ‘not even to feed the ducks in the lake.’

‘From what I’ve heard of your exploits I’m not surprised,’ I told him.

For a moment his face took on a lost and bewildered

expression that, in spite of myself, I found touching. It was typical of all I had heard of Vance Ashmore, I thought angrily. Lord of all he surveyed, he would no doubt object to a grubby small boy invading his domain, no matter how innocent his reasons.

But almost immediately the sly expression returned to Rodney's face. 'When he marries Mummy I'll live at Ashmore House and he won't be able to stop me.'

Where had the child got these ideas? I wondered. Surely whatever lay between Averil and Vance Ashmore hadn't progressed to the stage where they were openly planning marriage! Besides, Clive had been dead barely six months. I finished the vegetables in thoughtful silence and placed the pot of soup at the back of the range.

As Rodney seemed satisfied to sprawl on the sofa scanning the coloured pictures of a comic, I decided to take another look at my new domain. I found that upstairs, apart from Averil's bedroom, which would now be mine, there were two other smaller rooms with the same steeply angled oaken beams and air of creaking antiquity. Part of the charm of the cottage lay in the fact that the rooms were not on the same level: two shallow steps led up to Rodney's room and the third bedroom lay at the end of a short twisting corridor. The only incongruous note was a modern bathroom in gleaming tiles of black and turquoise,

I carried my cases up to my room and began to unpack with a growing sense of happiness and satisfaction about my decision to come to Warefield: except for the cawing of crows in the trees and the sound of the grandfather clock that stood opposite my door all was silence. The offices of Wentworth & Judd seemed aeons away and even Miss Palmer's precise little figure fuss-

ing through the files seemed to be more a creature of fantasy than of fact. I had made the right decision. I thought happily.

As I placed a pile of handkerchiefs in the drawer of a walnut William-and-Mary tallboy there came a blood-curdling scream from the direction of the kitchen. It was Rodney, I realized, and my first reaction was that I should ignore him. I had had experience of his propensity to dramatics and no doubt he was already trying to test out just how indulgent I intended to be. Yet there was something about those screams that struck chin to my heart and pushing the drawer too roughly I rushed down the narrow twisting stairs.

I dashed into the kitchen and stood rooted to the floor at the scene that awaited me: the soup pot had been overturned on the range, its contents trickling on to the tiled floor; beside it Rodney stood, clutching his arm, his mouth open in a scream. It was only too obvious what had happened: typically taking advantage of my absence upstairs to investigate the contents of the pot, he had tipped it over himself.

Panic-stricken, I rushed back upstairs and dashed into the bathroom. While exploring the cottage I had noticed an enamelled medicine cabinet to one side of the bath and now I pulled it open and scabbled frantically inside. At that moment I was too upset to realize how incongruous the contents were, and it was only later I was to question how Averil had managed to acquire such luxuries: flagons of expensive perfumes, bath oils and cosmetics from the exclusive Paris houses. All I could think of at the time was the agony the child downstairs must be suffering, and it was with a sigh of relief that I discovered at the very back of the cabinet a small dust-covered tin of Vaseline. I dashed

downstairs again and applied it as best I could: Rodney certainly gave me no co-operation, but danced up and down, yelling.

How on earth had he managed to bum himself so badly? I wondered. I distinctly remembered placing the pot at the back of the range and in fact it hadn't been there so very long: the soup must have been only beginning to heat up while I was settling into Averil's room, yet Rodney's yells seemed to proclaim that he was in great pain.

To my dismay the Vaseline didn't seem to give him any relief, and as I desperately raked my mind as to what further steps I should take I

suddenly remembered Bob Pritchard and his jocose offer. Well, I thought a little wryly, he's going to find me taking him at his word sooner than he could have expected.

Telling Rodney, 'I'll be back shortly,' I raced down the path and out on to the lane. There was only one thing for it—distasteful as it might be, I'd have to stop a passing motorist on the main road and ask for his assistance. The idea was not particularly attractive, but, on the other hand, considering the pain Rodney was in, I had no alternative. It was obvious he needed medical help as soon as possible.

I reached the end of the lane panting and breathless, hoping that it wouldn't be too long before a car passed. To my relief almost immediately a powerful car approached around a curve in the road. Without thinking of the danger I ran out and frantically signalled it to stop. The car skidded to a halt: I ran after it as quickly as I could and found myself being surveyed with cold distaste by the lean saturnine features of the driver.

'If you're thinking of hitching a ride you're very

much mistaken. I don't take hikers,' he said gratingly.

Wordlessly I shook my head, too breathless to explain.

'What the devil do you think you're doing anyway? Are you trying to get yourself killed?' he demanded.

If I hadn't been in such a panic I might have resented the contemptuous, authoritative tones, but at the time all I could think of was Rodney and the guilt I felt at the fact that he had met with a serious accident almost immediately on my taking over at Cherry Cottage.

'It's Rodney: he's spilled a pot of soup over himself and I'm afraid he's terribly burned,' I babbled. In my agitation I had completely forgotten that this stranger would have no idea whom I was talking about.

He regarded me frowningly and I saw his strong fingers beat an impatient tattoo on the wheel. 'And what do you expect me to do about it?' he asked abruptly.

'It's Rodney Etherton,' I explained. 'He's my nephew. You see, my sister Averil has gone on a cruise to the West Indies and she's left me in charge, and somehow or other Rodney burned himself and—'

'Get in,' he broke in abruptly.

I suppose if I had had my wits about me I would have attached significance to the change in his attitude, but at the time I was in no state to observe such subtleties. He leaned over and opened the door. I slumped into the seat beside him, silenced by the unexpected change in his manner. I glanced inquiringly at him, but his dark, rather forbidding features had regained something of their former irritation. Without questioning me further he turned the car into the lane. We were stopping outside the cottage before it dawned on me to

wonder how he could have known exactly where to go«

As I tumbled out of the car there was no sound of Rodney's blood-curdling screams: an ominous calm seemed to hang over the cottage and I felt a stab of fear. Was Rodney then more badly injured than I had suspected and was he even now lying unconscious on the kitchen floor? I felt my breath come in little gasps as I hurried after the tall figure striding purposefully ahead.

As he pushed the door open Rodney's screams began again in redoubled volume.

'The patient seems to have revived/ the stranger said dryly.

Without answering I dashed ahead and found Rodney where I had left him and on the point of drawing breath to give another yell.

His mouth fell open when he saw whom I had returned with and the scream I had been bracing myself for failed to emerge. T didn't tease

the cows, Vance/ he said defensively. ‘Mrs. Clarke’s always blaming me, even when I don’t go near the stupid old things.’

So this was the formidable Vance Ashmore! For some reason or other the knowledge caused me embarrassment. If I had known beforehand who he was would I have stopped him so peremptorily? I wondered.

He examined Rodney’s arm closely, then said firmly, ‘There doesn’t seem to me to be very much wrong.’ He glanced at the spilled contents of the pot, then turned to me and said coldly, ‘If you’d kept your wits about you and not let him bamboozle you you’d have realized that aU he has suffered is a mild scorching,’

At .this cold appraisal Rodney began to sniff self-pityingly, ^

What Vance Ashmore said was true, I immediately realized: obviously Rodney had simply been trying to make himself the centre of notice : it explained too the facts that had puzzled me about the accident. But there was something in this man’s personality that aroused antagonism in me so that I couldn’t resist opposing him.

‘All the same, I think I’d hke him to see Dr. Pritchard,’ I said stubbornly.

He glanced at me sardonically. ‘Indeed, so you doubt my diagnosis! ’

I evaded his eyes, aware that I was being unreasonable. ‘I think it might be wiser to take no chances. After all. I’m in charge here ! ’ I was trying to let him know quite definitely that the decision didn’t rest with him.

‘Very well,’ he said coolly, ‘if you wish it, although, according to himself. Dr. Pritchard is hopelessly overworked and is unlikely to welcome having his time taken up by a spoiled and completely healthy child.’

‘If you don’t want to take us. I’ll send for a taxi,’ I said stiffly.

‘My dear girl, I haven’t the slightest objection to driving you : I’m simply pointing out the hazards, as it were.’

‘But Dr. Pritchard told me I could call on him at any time,’ I said with what I hoped was impressive dignity.

‘Oh, did he ?’ The black eyebrows arched sardonically. ‘So you’ve already made the acquaintance of our lovelorn medico!’

‘We met on the train, if it’s any of your business and, as far as I know, he isn’t lovelorn,’ I replied stiffly. I had the suspicion that he was defiberately trying to

rile me and I made up my mind not to give him the. satisfaction of showing anger.

He shrugged. ‘Which goes to show how little you know of Bob Pritchard. However, I’m quite willing to drive you to his house. After all, as I’ve already been taken on a fool’s errand I may as well finish the job. But I’ve no intention of taking the child in once we’re there. As you seem so determined you can do that part of the business yourself.’

We drove off in silence: Rodney in the back seat unusually subdued and perhaps realizing for the first time that his histrionics might have consequences he had not anticipated. Tight-lipped, I gazed stiffly ahead and when we reached Bob’s house I got out of the car quickly. I was on the point of turning away and marching up the path when Vance put his head out of the car window and said, ‘I’ll wait and drive you back to the cottage.’

‘Don’t bother,’ I answered stiffly. ‘I’ll manage.’

‘Are you always so pig-headed ?’ He sounded amused. ‘May I assure you that I pass your lane on the way to Ashmore House so you won’t be under the slightest obligation to me—^^in case that’s what’s worrying you.’

I nodded grudgingly and taking Rodney’s hand moved away.

At close quarters Bob Pritchard's house was even more depressing: wilted-looking geraniums grew in moss-covered pots in the glass porch and the paint was scuffed and dingy. I pressed the bell, wishing uncomfortably that it was possible for me to make a dignified retreat. I glanced back at the car, to find myself being surveyed by Vance with a discouragingly sardonic smile. I waited, wondering if Bob would assume that

I had made Rodney's accident an excuse for another meeting.

However, when the door opened I was met by an elderly woman in a white linen coat who eyed me bleakly. 'You're top early,' she announced. 'Doctor's at his tea.'

'On the contrary. Doctor has just finished his tea,' Bob announced cheerfully, his good-natured features appearing over her shoulder. 'Tell Miss Carson to come right in.'

Grudgingly she stood aside and I advanced into the hall.

Bob looked questioningly at me, then down at Rodney. 'From the looks of him, I expect he's the patient.'

I nodded. 'He spilled a pot of soup over himself, but I've come to the conclusion that I've made a fuss over nothing.'

He grinned. 'Better to be sure than sorry. I'll have a look at the invalid and tell you the worst.'

I followed him into the consulting room and felt a growing embarrassment as Bob examined the arm, then glanced up at me in puzzlement. 'But there's nothing whatever the matter with the child,' he announced decisively. 'What on earth gave you the idea that there was something seriously wrong?'

'He was screaming,' I replied lamely. Even as I said it, I realized that no doubt Bob Pritchard knew as well as I did that Rodney's screams meant nothing.

‘Well, I can assure you he had no cause to scream,’ Bob told me,

I stood up, only too glad to escape from the ridiculous position Rodney and my own stubbornness had placed me in,

Rodney, seeing that the limelight was being with-

drawn from him, assumed the mulish expression I had grown to dread. ‘But it hurt like anything,’ he whined,

‘Oh, do stop, Rodney,’ I said, exasperated. ‘Don’t you think you’ve caused enough trouble already?’ I pulled him towards the door, muttering excuses to the still puzzled Bob,

Then Rodney, who was dragging his feet reluctantly, to my horror announced, clearly, as a parting shot, ‘Anyway, Mummy’s not going to marry you: she’s going to marry Vance: I heard her say so.’

There was a moment’s appalled silence while Bob and I gazed at each other. I saw his face grow stiff and white, then, without a word, he turned and strode from the room.

Sick with mortification, I almost ran back to the car, grateful that it was there and that I would quickly be borne away from the scene. Vance glanced at me swiftly as I bundled into the back seat with Rodney, then in silence started the car and drove swiftly to the cottage.

Before leaving he leaned out of the car window and said casually, ‘By the way, I wonder if Averil mentioned that my mother would like to meet you? Won’t you come over tomorrow? You can take the short cut behind the cottage and through the woods.’

So Averil had been right! Mrs. Ashmore was determined to look me over. I felt a resurgence of resentment : Vance’s mother was in for a disappointment, I told myself: I had no intention of being vetted by the local grande dame. ‘Thank you,’ I said coolly, ‘but I’m just settling in, and anyway, I’m supposed to be taking care of Rodney.’

‘But won’t the child be at school during the day?’

I had forgotten about that and was forced to search my mind for a plausible excuse.

‘However,’ he said dryly, before I could think of anything, ‘don’t bother racking your brains for a polite refusal. It’s -fairly obvious that, for once. Mother’s not going to have her curiosity satisfied.’

His eyebrows arched in the by now familiar sardonic manner. ‘You know, in lots of ways you’re quite un-Hke your sister.’

‘I’ve known that for quite some time,’ I said crossly. ‘For one thing, Averil’s beautiful and I’m not.’

He nodded with unflattering acquiescence. ‘At the risk of appearing ungaJlant, I agree: no, you’re not beautiful—at least, not in the way Averil is. But I’m not speaking of mere looks. You’re different in all sorts of ways.’

I looked at him coldly. Did he really think I gave two hoots for his opinion of me? Yet when he drove off without elaboration I felt vaguely annoyed as I followed Rodney who, his role of interesting invalid forgotten, was dancing along the path towards the house door.

Later that night as I lay under the slanting beams of my bedroom and listened to the tiny creaks and groans of the old house, I found myself speculating concerning the relationship between my sister and Vance Ashmore. It would not be surprising if he had fallen for Averil, for I knew that few men could resist her. For her, too, Vance would hold the attraction of wealth and magnetic good looks: it was the sort of combination that Averil would find irresistible. I was prepared to accept that no matter how romantic she found a shipboard friendship it would end with the cruise. For, in spite of her soft, almost kittenish good

looks, she had always had a hard and practical side to her nature that had become intensified since GHve’s death. No doubt when a suitable

time had elapsed since his death she would marry Vance Ashmore. Averii was much too level-headed to throw away her chances of becoming the future Mrs. Ashmore by taking any shipboard Romeo too seriously.

My thoughts were disturbed by the sound of footsteps creaking on the old boards outside my door. I sat up abruptly, my heart thudding. Rodney and I were alone in the cottage: our nearest neighbours were the Ashmores who were separated from us by the gardens and woods. I remembered that I had not closed the sitting-room window. Suppose someone had crept in and was now standing outside my door I gave a little scream of fear as I saw the knob slowly turn and the door being pushed open. Then the small figure of Rodney stood in the threshold. He looked young and comely in his pyjamas and his habitual sulky expression was missing.

But he had given me such a fright that I said crossly, 'Really, Rodney, what do you mean by prowling around at this time of night He twiddled the door knob uncertainly, then said in a subdued voice, 'I'm sorry if I gave you a fright, but I have a question to ask.'

'Well, what is it?' I asked resignedly.

'I was wondering if I'd better stay away from school tomorrow: I mean, because of the accident?'

If I had been more observant no doubt I'd have noticed the anxiety behind his request and have realized that this was not merely a small boy's excuse to get off school. As it was, I said irritably, 'You'll do no such thing I Go back to bed and don't make a

nuisance of yourself. Anyway you weren't really hurt and it was very naughty of you to make me go on a wild goose chase to Dr. Pritchard,'

'Well, I was hurt, so there! And Dr. Pritchard doesn't like me because he knows I don't want him as my new daddy,'

I gazed at him curiously and couldn't resist asking, 'What on earth

makes you think he might be your new daddy?’

Into his eyes crept the slightly cunning look that made him appear older and wiser than his years. ‘Because/ he announced triumphantly, ‘I heard him asking Mummy to marry him and Mummy said no, she wouldn’t.’ He wrinkled his forehead in an effort to recall the exact words. ‘She said she’d no intention of settling into the dreary round of a G.P.’s wife.’

It was so typical of the sort of remark that Averil would make that there was no doubting the truth of -it, yet the crudeness of her rejection was almost incredible,

Rodney seemed delighted with the effect of his words. ‘I bet you didn’t think I’d remember, did you?’

‘You certainly have a good memory,’ I admitted, and realized that his talents weren’t altogether an unmixed blessing. Very little could be done or said that wouldn’t be observed and recorded in his small inquisitive head. ‘Do go back to bed, Rodney. You’re most certainly going to school tomorrow, so you can make your mind up for that.’

He turned away resignedly, then said in a small plaintive voice, ‘Will you please tuck me up, Aunt Esther? Mummy sometimes promises me she will, but most times she forgets.’

It was impossible to refuse the appeal and I slipped

on my dressing-gown and took Rodney back to his bedroom. When I had tucked him up I crossed to the small window under the eaves. In the clear cloudless sky a full moon shone down on the orchard turning the blossoms on each charcoal-black branch to clusters of delicate silver filigree. Through tree tops I saw the lights of Ashmore House. Probably the socially prominent Mrs. Ashmore was entertaining. No doubt the wealthy and attractive Vance Ashmore would be the centre of interest. I turned away, irritated that my thoughts had so easily swung to Vance Ashmore, especially as he was the arrogant, didactic type of man I particularly disliked. Rodney was already half asleep and

muttered a drowsy goodnight as I closed the door gently behind me.

When I got back to Averil's room I noticed that the drawer of the tallboy which I had pushed to earlier that evening when I had heard Rodney scream was stni slightly open, and before getting into bed I crossed the room and tried to push it shut. However, something had become wedged at the back and was preventing me from closing it properly. I pulled the drawer out fuUy and discovered that a small buckled snapshot had become lodged behind it. As I straightened it, I was thinking that it was out of character for Averil to gather photos or mementoes of the past. Even when we were children she had not attempted to coUect any of the useless junk and knick-knacks that children treasure. With a sense of shock I saw Vance Ashmore glance out at me with the familiar saturnine expression. He had his arm about Averil's shoulders and she had her head thrown back in laughter. With one hand she was catching at the strands of hair that formed a windblown halo about her head. She looked

happy and very beautiful= Then, with a sense of shock, I saw the date that was scrawled along the foot in Averil's wide, almost childish, handwriting. It was a few months before sGlive had been killed in the Middle East. So already, even before his death, Averh had known and, from her expression, obviously loved Vance Ashmore.

Slowly I replaced the snapshot under the lining of the drawer. Ghve had not left Averil well off, and I remembered the vague surprise I had felt at the display of expensive cosmetics I had seen in the medicine cabinet that afternoon when I had frantically searched for a salve for Rodney's non-existent burn. Did Vance, as head of Ghve's firm, then deliberately contrive to get Ghve out of the way by sending him on a mission to the Gulf? His absence would mean that he and Averil would be free to meet as often as they liked. I glanced around the room with new eyes, noting the silver hairbrush and hand-mirror dehcatly enamelled, the tiny clock set in a block of rock crystal: discreet but obviously expensive, they were the kind of present a man hke Vance Ashmore would give to a woman, I thought contemptuously. How providential then Ghve's death must have been for them both. Averil

had never bothered to pretend that her marriage had been a success, and I remembered how my mother, a stickler for the conventions, had disapproved of Averil's refusal to adopt the role of sorrowing widow.

I lay awake for a long time feeling a growing sense of disappointment that I realized was connected solely with Vance Ashmore. It was stupid and irrational considering I didn't like the man. Suddenly my thoughts swung to my conversation with Bob Pritchard in the

train. He had said something about Vance's half-brother Eric being crippled in a shooting accident and about their having their eye on the same woman. He hadn't exactly stated it as a fact, but it had been clear that he believed the shot had been fired by Vance. Was it possible Averil was the woman the brothers had quarrelled about? I shivered. What a horrible situation—but one that, knowing Averil as I did, I realized she would relish. As to Vance Ashmore, it was obvious that he could be calculatedly ruthless when he was determined to get his own way.

CHAPTER FOUR

I AWOKE to the sound of the fire crackling cheerfully in the range downstairs and the strains of 'Annie Laurie' in a loud and very cracked voice accompanied by the sound of cups and saucers being rattled. So already Mrs. McAlister had arrived and was preparing breakfast. I lay back with a feeling of luxury. The translucent light of early morning flooded the room and through the open window a soft sweet-scented breeze puffed the lavender shirred valance of the dressing-table. I blinked lazily at the white clouds that floated past like mounds of stiffly beaten egg-white. It was wonderful to feel I needn't hurry down to break- ~ fast or keep an eye perpetually on the clock in case I should be late for work. I heard Rodney thump downstairs, his voice raised in shrill altercation, and the broad uncompromising Scottish tones that answered him.

As I was about to get up there was a knock on the door and a dumpy figure with a round apple-red face marched in bearing a laden tray. 'Ah, you're awake,' she announced breezily. 'I've brought up your

breakfast, so don't you stir. I thought as it was your first day here I'd gie you breakfast in bed.'

When I thanked her, her face glowed with pleasure. 'It's no trouble at all, dearie. Anyway, it'U gie you a rest from Rodney. I know I'm thankful to see the back of him when he goes off to school.'

There was a thunderous bang as the front door

slammed and Mrs. McAlister nodded significantly. 'There you are! Do you see what I mean? He's a terrible spoiled bairn, there's no doubt about it. I'm feared you've no idea what you've let yourself in for.'

'Oh, but I have,' I laughed. 'Rodney came to stay with my mother and me and he raised Cain.'

She nodded undeistandingly. 'But I expect his granny didnae mind.'

'I'm afraid she did,' I told her dryly. 'In her case absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

I had used the very words Averil had quoted when referring to Vance and for a passing moment I wondered vaguely if, in his case, the aphorism was true. Was Vance the type of man to wait patiently for her return, or would she have the mortification of dis^ covering that she had been supplanted?

'I'd never have taken you for Mrs. Etherton's sister,' Mrs. McAlister was saying as she stood, her fat arms akimbo, and surveyed me closely. 'You're no ways like.'

'No,' I agreed ruefully. So once again the difference between us was being remarked on, and I had no illusions that the comparisons were to my advantage.

'My, your sister wasn't half keen to be off on her travels,' she chuckled. 'Though to tell the truth I'd have thought she and Mr. Vance would have fixed things up before now. It was easy to see she was dead keen

on him—but then nearly all the lassies round and about would give their eye teeth to be Mrs. Ashmore: though I’U say this for her, there’s not one of them could hold a candle to her for looks—’ Here she paused slyly as though judging the wisdom of continuing.

I suppose at this stage I should have shown firmly

that I had no intention of discussing Averil’s affairs. But an almost overwhelming curiosity possessed me.

I buttered a sffce of toast and Mrs. McAlister went on happily, ‘All the lassies were buzzing about Mr. Vance like flies around a honey-pot until one fine day down he drives with Mrs. Etherton, and one look at them together was enough tO’ put the tin lid on all their fine plans, for truth was you could see right away they were mad about each other.’

So I had been correct in the interpretation I had put upon the snapshot!

Mrs. McAlister drew in her breath with an air of satisfaction. ‘Of course, everyone wondered who she was to catch Mr. Vance’s fancy, for he’s a braw laddie and has pots of money forbye, and some said that Mrs. Ashmore would never have her across the door of Ashmore House, for she’s the kind of lady who would have to know your seed and breed before she’d as much as give you the time of day. Anyway, Mrs. Etherton wasn’t long at Cherry Cottage before she was invited to a party at Ashmore House, and then everyone knew they’d marry, for it v/as easy to see that Mr. Vance was behind it, for though Mrs. Ashmore’s high and mighty she doesn’t get her own way with him, I can tell you. That’s why,’ she concluded, her bun-like face thoughtful, ‘I can’t understand Mrs. Etherton tearing off of a sudden, cruise or no cruise, for goodness knows, men are all alike and Mr. Vance along with them. I shouldn’t be at all surprised if some other lassie didn’t fancy her chances with him, now that she’s away.’

Her estimation of Vance Ashmore’s character coincided so closely with my own that in an effort to change the direction of the conversation I put in

quickly, 'Mr. Ashmore has a half-brother, hasn't he?'

She nodded. 'That he has, although the poor soul is only able to get around with a pair of sticks. They say he hates Mr. Vance like poison and doesn't care who knows it. Oh, he has a real wicked tongue in his head, I can tell you, and sometimes when I go up to oblige Mrs. Ashmore when she's giving one of her parties I take care to keep out of his way, for you'd not know from one minute to the next what he'd say to you if the mood was on him, and that's a fact. But then no doubt the poor soul has good cause for the way he feels about Mr. Vance—' She stopped abruptly as if aware that her garrulousness was leading her into an indiscretion.

When she spoke again it was merely to tell me what she was planning to cook for lunch, and when I nodded agreement she disappeared downstairs still exuding an air of ineffable good humour.

When I had finished a leisurely breakfast I slipped into a light cotton frock and sandals and wandered into the garden that lay to the back of the cottage. It was even prettier than I had imagined it: at the end of the orchard a tiny thread of water ran through a coppice of slender birches and wild hyacinth grew in clumps through the smooth turf. I wandered towards the woods and followed a narrow well-worn path. It must have been this path that Averil had used on her visits to the Ashmores, I was thinking, as I emerged from the woods and found myself on the verge of an expanse of lawn that extended as smooth as a roll of green felt towards the wide flight of shallow steps that led on to a terrace bordered by a stone balustrade. The house itself was an enormous sprawling affair with unexpected turrets, gables and stained-glass

windows. Architecturally, no doubt, it was a disaster, but it was certainly imposing and conveyed an air of comfortable security.

Banners of blue smoke emerged from the chimneys and I suddenly became aware that, although no one appeared to be about, I could easily be observed from the many windows. The very idea of being seen goggling inquisitively at the Ashmores' house made me scuttle

back into the woods.

I turned left and followed a path that skirted a large meadow that lay to the side of the house. The ground began to slope upwards and it was with a gasp of relief that I reached the top of a little hill and flung myself down on the smooth grass.

‘Quite a puU up, isn’t it?’ a drawling voice said, almost at my ear.

I jerked upright. One of the handsomest men I had ever seen was sitting in the shade of a dense green bush topiaried in the shape of an eagle.

I laughed ruefully. ‘I didn’t realize when I took this path that the climb would be quite so long.’

He nodded with an air of satisfaction. ‘Yes, I could see that you were undecided whether you should push on or return to the cottage.’

I gazed at him in astonishment. ‘But how on earth could you read my thoughts?’

He tapped the binoculars that hung about his neck. ‘These are extremely powerful, and physiognomy is easy when the subject thinks she is unobserved.’

‘Oh!’ I felt uneasy that, unaware, I had been imder his surveillance.

‘One gets a remarkably good view of the coimtry-side up here,’ he continued. ‘It’s one of my favourite spots.’

It was true. There was a magnificent sweeping view of Ashmore House, its outbuildings and its surrounding acres and an extremely comprehensive view of Cherry Cottage. Even as he spoke I saw in the distance Mrs. McAlister's substantial figure go into the orchard and hang out a brilliant blue garment on the washing line. ‘You’re bird-watching?’ I ventured.

He shook his head. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, but I can’t claim to be a

nature-lover. I'm simply nosey. I've no other reason for being here than the pure unadulterated pleasure of snooping on my neighbours.'

His answer left me speechless, but he appeared to be totally indifferent to the effect this extraordinary confession had on me.

'There's no necessity to look shocked,' he remarked coolly. 'What else were you doing but snooping on 'Ashmore House?'

I flushed with embarrassment, then said lamely, 'Well, it is rather a show-piece in this part of the country, isn't it?'

'And what conclusions have you come to? Goodness knows, you examined it keenly enough.'

I twiddled uncomfortably with a piece of grass. 'Well, it's very large and imposing, but it's a bit of a hotch-potch. Personally I prefer Cherry Cottage.'

He gave a little crow of malicious laughter. 'Wait until I tell Mother what you think of her precious palace! She thinks it's wonderful, you know, and that everyone's speechless with admiration.'

'Oh!' I drew in my breath with dismay. 'Why didn't you let me know who you were?'

He reached into the foliage at the foot of the bush and for the first time I saw the protruding crooks of two stout walking sticks. Slowly and painfully he

pulled himself to his feet. There was something shockingly incongruous about the pale classical features and the shattered and distorted legs.

His lips twisted into an angry sneer. 'It's easy to see you know who I am now. I can just hear that inveterate old gossip, Mrs. McAlister.' He gave a vicious parody of Mrs. McAlister's flat Scottish accents, 'Poor Mr. Ashmore—^to think he would have been master of Ashmore if it

hadn't been for the shocking accident.' Abruptly he dropped the mimicry. 'A remarkably convenient accident,' he went on bitterly. 'It got rid of me and made Vance master of Ashmore, and all that goes with it.'

'What do you mean?'

The handsome face was a mask of rage and frustration. 'Just what I say. I was heir to Ashmore until my father decided that, as a cripple, I was not a suitable subject to step into his shoes. It was providential for my beloved half-brother, wasn't it, though I suppose he regrets he didn't do the job properly.'

'How can you say such things to me about your brother, when you don't even know who I am?' I asked, appalled into speech.

'Aha! That's just where you're wrong! First of all may I point out that Vance is not my brother, merely my half-brother, which is quite a different thing, and far from your being a stranger to me, I know quite a lot about you already. You're Averil Etherton's sister and you flung up your job to take care of that rather unpleasant young nephew of yours while Averil trots off to foreign parts in an effort to bring Vance up to scratch.' He sounded bitter and I wished I had the courage to ask if his quarrel with Vance concerned Averil.

'And just in case you've been listening to' gossip, I should like to put it on record that, fascinating as your sister is, I have never been in love with her and my accident—as it is euphemistically called—was not due to a quarrel over the affections of the fair Averil. On the contrary, it was about which of us was to become master of Ashmore and its roUing acres. As you can see, Vance won.'

He relapsed into a brooding sHence and I wondered uncomfortably how I could take my departure without appearing boorish.

'If you're bored and wish to be off, don't let me stop you,' he said abruptly.

'I—I suppose I ought to be getting back. I've so much to do before lunch,' I found myself stammering.

He made no reply, merely waited for me to take my departure, his face averted so that only his perfect profile was visible, his fine long-fingered hands playing with the handles of his sticks,

I hesitated for a moment, then turned away. He would wait until I was out of sight before attempting the laborious descent from his post of observation, I knew. His ability to read one's thoughts was almost uncanny, I was thinking as I reached level ground once more and turned towards the cottage. Was it due, I wondered, to the many hours of introspection he must have spent as a result of the accident ?

Mrs. McAlister served a simple though delicious lunch and after washing up and generally tidying she pulled on a worn tam-o'-shanter and departed.

Left on my own, I felt restless and decided that a walk as far as Rodney's school would divert me. From Mrs. McAlister's chatter I had gathered that it was situated a little along the main road and I had very

little difficulty in finding it, for long before I reached it I could hear excited shouts from the playground.

As I drew nearer I could see that a group of children had gathered around two of the boys who were locked in a fierce struggle. Then, to my surprise, I saw that one of the children involved was Rodney and that his opponent was a much bigger and stronger-looking boy and that my nephew was getting very much the worst of the encounter. When I pushed open the gates the onlooking boys turned guiltily and began to drift away, leaving Rodney and his opponent rolling on the grass, the older boy pounding him fiercely.

As they realized I was watching them they broke away sheepishly, the older scuttling away, while Rodney glared at me defiantly, his face muddy and bruised. 'I didn't know you were coming,' he said belatedly. 'Mummy never does.'

‘Obviously!’ I replied dryly. ‘Now do try and tidy yourself up, Rodney, and then we’ll go home.’

‘I’m not a baby,’ he said sulkily.

‘I only came because I wanted the exercise,’ I replied. ‘Now do hurry up. I see a master coming and I’m sure he won’t be too pleased if he sees you’ve been fighting.’

He gave a startled glance at the approaching figure of the gowned master. ‘That’s Mr. Fletcher, the headmaster,’ he announced as he flew towards the shelter of the school building.

The tall, rather tired-looking man glanced curiously at me, then stopped and said, ‘My name is Fletcher. You’re not by any chance Miss Carson, Rodney Etherton’s aunt, are you, because if so you won’t have got a very good impression.’

I nodded. ‘Yes, I’m afraid he has been fighting.’

and somehow I had imagined Rodney was the type of boy who would avoid that sort of thing/

He looked surprised. ‘Oh, but you’re wrong. He’s nearly always in trouble of some sort or other/ He hesitated, then said, ‘I’m sure you won’t mind if I speak freely, because I do feel that if the child were to receive a little more understanding he’d probably settle down quite nicely.’

I smiled wryly. ‘I’d be glad of any hints on improving Rodney’s behaviour, but I’m afraid he has always been rather a handful. I expect it’s because he’s an only child and has been rather spoiled/

He shook his head. ‘On the contrary, in my opinion he hasn’t been spoiled enough,’ Again he hesitated and then said diffidently, ‘I realise of course that Mrs. Etherton leads a busy social life, but I do feel that if she took more interest in the boy it would give him confidence. He’s perpetually involved in brawls and quarrels, and I think, on the whole,

it's an effort to assert himself and to obtain notice. The other parents, for instance, who live in the district, attend our little plays and concerts, but Mrs. Etherton tells me she is too busy, or worse still promises to attend and then doesn't turn up. Rodney did quite well in our last end-of-term play and was bitterly disappointed that his mother wasn't amongst those in the audience.'

It was typical of Aveil's selfishness, I realized, but I said defensively, 'I expect she doesn't realize how he feels about it. Rodney can seem such a self-reliant little boy at times.'

'None of us are completely self-sufficient,' he said a little severely, then added apologetically, 'After all, what can you do about it—except that when I saw

you had called for him, I thought that perhaps ^ He Stopped, then changed the conversation and began to speak in polite generalities.

Later, as I walked home with Rodney, I saw him eye rather enviously two boys who raced ahead thumping each other playfully with their satchels, ^ Browne has asked Fenwick home to tea, ® he announced.

'And don't you ask your friends back to the cottage?' I inquired.

He shook his head. 'I did once, but Mummy said they weren't to come again as they weren't really nice boys.'

'Nice' had always been Aveil's word for socially acceptable: obviously Rodney's companions at what she had described as 'a seedy little prep school' did not belong to the rich and socially prominent families that she was bent on cultivating. Remembering Mr. Fletcher's words, I decided to take action at the risk of Averil's disapproval. 'Why don't you ask one or two of your friends back to the cottage some afternoon?' I inquired quietly.

He looked at me in pleased surprise, then said cautiously, 'You mean it doesn't matter who I ask?'

‘Of course not,’ I replied.

‘Then I’ll ask PhiUps,’ he said with satisfaction,

Wasn t that the boy you were fighting with ?’ I remembered that name being yelled by their enthusiastic audience.

He nodded. ‘Yes, but I like him all the same.’

When I laughed he glanced at me a little shyly. Perhaps Mrs. McAlister would make a nice cake and some jellies?’

‘I shouldn’t be at all surprised,’ I said cheerfully, ‘It’s just the sort of thing she’d like to do, I expect.’

We walked the next few yards in companionable silence, but I could see that Rodney was already reviewing the idea with pleasure. I pushed all thoughts of Averil’s disapproval firmly out of my mind.

We were approaching the cottage gate when a large gleaming chauffeur-driven car going in the opposite direction drew up in a cloud of dust and I felt Rodney tug apprehensively at my hand. ‘It’s Mis. Ashmore,’ he told me, then scuttled guiltily up the path and ‘disappeared into the cottage.

I turned my head to find myself being surveyed attentively by an elegantly dressed woman with lavender-tinted hair: her features were brittle and she had the perfect grooming of a woman who devotes time and money to her appearance, ‘You must be Averil’s sister,’ she said in a high clear voice, ‘and I’m not surprised you refused my invitation. No doubt jVance was his usual boorish self. But now that I’m asking you in person, perhaps you’ll do your best to come? I’ve been looking forward so much to meeting you. Averil talked of you so often.’

She smiled whimsically, with a little appealing motion of her hand.

I doubted very much if Averil had more than mentioned me in passing, for, since her marriage, we had gone in very different directions, Averil

mixing almost exclusively with her husband's friends. Yet, wary as I was of Mrs. Ashmore, she had a charm that I found hard to resist, even though a part of me realized that she was no doubt fully conscious of it and gave it full play when she was determined to get her own way,

I hesitated. It seemed churlish to leave a friend of

Averil's at the gate. 'I've just come back from meeting Rodney, but perhaps you'd care to come in and join

us for coffee,' I suggested.

'My dear. I'd be simply delighted,' she said affably. 'How charming the cottage looks at this time of the year,' she enthused as we walked together up the path. 'A perfect bower of blossom! I often wish I was cosily ensconced here instead of in that big old barracks we live in.'

I was taken by surprise. Her clothes and grooming hardly fitted into a rustic background and from what I had heard of her snobbery and pride of position the remark seemed obviously insincere.

She gazed at me with a blandly ingenuous air. 'Oh, I know what you're thinking,' she laughed ruefully. 'That I'm only saying polite nothings, but I assure you it's true. You've no idea what dreadful responsibilities possessions impose on one—and then there's always the servant problem. I've no sooner got a girl trained into my little ways than off she goes, though goodness knows I try to make things as pleasant and agreeable for them as possible. But then I suppose one must accept the fact that the world is full of ingratitude.' She sighed and shrugged resignedly.

Her expression, however, changed as we entered the cottage and she saw Rodney seated by the fire, ostensibly absorbed in a story-book. She regarded him sourly. 'I'm afraid Rodney's inclined to make rather a nuisance of himself,' she said, her lips tightening, 'and I do hope you'll be firm with the child, for darling Averil, in my opinion, is much too easy-going. But then, she's not the domestic type, is she?'

Rodney, under Mrs. Ashmore's acid gaze, laid down his book and sidled into the garden.

Mrs. Ashmore seated herself on the worn sofa and gazed about her with interest. 'I'm so glad the child has gone out: we can have a cosy chat over our coffee cups,' she remarked brightly.

Later, as she sipped from one of Averil's dainty bone-china cups, she eyed me speculatively and said sweetly, 'Let's be perfectly frank with each other, shall we? I'm going to admit that I want Averil to marry Vance: she's the type of daughter-in-law I've always wanted for my son, so gentle and sweet-mannered! I know we'll get on wonderfully well together: she's so completely unlike some of those brazen hussies who have set their caps at Vance ever since they knew he was to inherit.'

So Mrs. Ashmore found Averil gentle and sweet! I laid down my cup and glanced away, trying to disguise the surprise I felt at her description of my sister. So Averil had played her cards well enough to deceive even the astute and worldly Mrs. Ashmore

For the rest of the visit she chatted animatedly of local affairs with a brittle and sophisticated gaiety that made me feel more and more like a fish out of water. As she rose to go she patted my hand and said, 'You will promise to come to us tomorrow afternoon, won't you, my dear? There'll only be the family: Eric and Vance and myself, and you mustn't mind Eric too much. He can be disconcerting at times, but then he's rather bitter, I'm afraid, and it's inclined to make him unjust.'

'No, I shan't mind,' I said quietly. 'I've already met Eric and I realize how he resents his disability.'

'Oh, so you've met Eric!' For a moment she looked

nonplussed and I could see that my cool rejoinder had taken her by surprise and made her wary as though, for the first time, she suspected that I might not prove as accommodating as Averil. But

immediately she regained her poise. 'Then I can expect you/ she said pleasantly as she made her departure,

I watched as her fashionably thin figure in the perfectly fitting tweeds walked down the path to where her chauffeur was patiently waiting. She waved as she drove off and I wondered why I had been weak enough to accept her invitation. When Averil returned from her cruise, Mrs. Ashmore and her world would be quickly put behind me. I closed the door and called Rodney from the garden.

He raced up eagerly, relieved that the coast was clear. 'You're not really going to visit that horrid Mrs. Ashmore tomorrow?' he asked incredulously.

'How do you know?' I said, surprised.

'I was listening outside the window.' He smiled smugly.

I said severely, 'You know perfectly well you shouldn't, don't you?'

He nodded agreement. 'But why are you going to Ashmore House? You haven't told me,' he persisted.

I gazed at him helplessly. It was impossible to tell him my reasons when I couldn't explain them to myself, though I had the unpleasant feeling that somehow or other they involved Vance Ashmore.

CHAPTER FIVE

I TOOK especial care as I dressed the following afternoon for my visit to Ashmore House. When I was ready I critically surveyed myself in the long mirror. I was looking my best, I decided. The sage green linen frock suited my colouring and as the day was hot and sunny I wore a wide-brimmed hat of burnt orange that flopped against my shoulders. Downstairs I could hear Mrs. McAlister rattling bushy at the kitchen stove. She had promised to stay on until I returned, I felt faintly annoyed with myself for caring how I looked, but then I assured myself firmly that it was simply a gesture of defiance.

It was Mrs. McAlister who punctured my self-confidence.

When I went downstairs she turned from the stove, her face scarlet where she had been frying kippers for what she called her 'high tea.' 'Well, dearie, you certainly look a fair picture,' she exclaimed with an air of unflattering astonishment. She chuckled insinuatingly. 'It's plain that Mr. Vance must have taken your fancy, but then it's not surprising, for all the lassies hereabouts are daft after him. Though goodness knows he's not what you'd call handsome. It's not surprising he has a fine notion of himself.'

'I certainly haven't taken a fancy, as you call it, to Vance Ashmore,' I said crossly.

Mrs. McAlister, however, was not squashed. She chattered on good-naturedly as she transferred the

kippers to a hot plate® *Now you run along, dearie, she said affably, 'and don't boffer your head about the wean, for we'll get on like a house afire.'

Rodney, who was regarding the kippers^ without enthusiasm, said loudly, 'I'm not "a wean", and I hate kippers/

Mrs. McAlister looked dismayed 'Hate kippers! Did you ever hear the likes!' she exclaimed disbelievingly. 'Now you Just sit down there like a good wee boy, and I'll give you a lovely big kipper all to yourself.'

As I went out I could hear Rodney reply, whiningly, 'I won't take your horrid old kipper, so there you are 1' Mrs. McAlister's voice was raised incredulously.

I crossed the orchard and went through the gap that led into the woods. It was a beautiful afternoon, the sunlight splintering through the soft green foliage of the tall trees. Pretty as Cherry Cottage was, I was glad to be free of Rodney and his continual demands on my time and attention. I felt a sense of excitement as I cleared the woods and came to the broad, sweeping gravel avenue.

As I drew near to Ashmore House I could make out three figures casually lounging on the terrace and I was aware that I was under close scrutiny. The hat that I had thought so becoming now seemed over-elaborate and unsuitable and I began to feel awkward and self-conscious. As I reached the foot of the terrace I was heartily wishing myself back at Cherry Cottage.

Vance got to his feet, glass in hand, 'Welcome to Ashmore,' he said with a familiar tinge of mockery.

'You sound quite feudal, Vance,' Eric said, irritably, from his wheelchair, 'but then why shouldn't you when you're master of all you survey?' His face looked

pale and bad-tempered and in spite of the warmth of the afternoon he had a plaid rug wrapped firmly around his legs,

'But how charming you look, my dear/ Mrs. Ashmore said brightly. 'I do adore those floppy hats.' She was reclining on an elaborate wickerwork lounging chair, her slim bony figure impeccably dressed in a trouser suit of lemon-yellow wild silk. Around one skinny wrist she wore a broad band of gold inset with plaques of pale carved jade. Even relaxed, she gave the impression of having given a lot of time and trouble to her appearance. 'Vance, tell Alice we'll have tea on the terrace, it's such a heavenly afternoon.'

When Vance had disappeared through the long French windows Mrs. Ashmore patted the gaily-coloured cushions piled beside her. 'Do sit down here, my dear, and we'll have a cosy gossip. I've all sorts of questions to ask you.'

'That means that Mother intends to pump you,' Eric said acidly.

'Now, Eric, you're in one of your tiresome moods,' his stepmother smiled tightly. 'If you can't be civil you should go about your own affairs and leave us frivolous females to gossip in peace.'

'And what exactly would my "affairs", as you call them, be?' Eric

enquired caustically. 'Since Father misguidedly left the Company to Vance it doesn't leave me very much to do, does it?'

'Your father knew best,' Mrs. Ashmore said in a low angry voice, 'and I do wish you'd stop airing our dirty linen in front of visitors.' An angry flush appeared on her cheekbones.

'Surely you don't consider Esther a stranger? After

all, is she not sister to Vance's probable future bride? Sooner or later she's bound to find out that Vance and I hate each other like poison, and on my side at least, with very good reason.'

At this point Vance returned and Eric lapsed into a brooding silence,

Mrs. Ashmore reached towards a small round table on whose marble surface stood a silver cigarette box and lighter. She offered the box to me, and when I refused, lit up and smoked in silence for a moment, her eyes narrowed in thought. '^How convenient that you were able to take on Rodney at such short notice!' she began casually. 'Averil didn't tell us quite what you did—some sort of social work, I gathered!'

I stared at her in astonishment. How typical of Averil that she should have put me in such a false position, I was aware of Vance standing behind me and I knew he was listening for my answer. As far as Mrs. Ashmore was concerned I felt the question was simply her first salvo. She was determined, I felt sure, to find out if I was as accommodating as Averil and as aspiring to play the sycophant. But then Averil had a very good reason for her deceptive docility. She was determined to win Mrs. Ashmore's approval and have her as a firm ally in her campaign to secure Vance as her husband. But I had no such intention, I told myself grimly. In fact, the man who was standing behind me, on his granite features a barely concealed air of mockery, was the last man on earth I would consider in such a role. 'I worked in a stockbrokers' office,' I said abruptly.

'An office!' Mrs. Ashmore repeated. For once her glossy poise seemed to desert her. 'Somehow I got the

impression from Averil that you more or less gave your time to some sort of charitable work! ’

I heard Vance give a bark of laughter, ‘Good heavens. Mother, you don’t think the modern girl gives her time to what you call charitable work, like a Victorian miss distributing flannel and port wine!’

Mrs. Ashmore laughed a little artificially. ‘No doubt I misunderstood dear Averil, but I distinctly got the impression—’ she stopped abruptly and seemed to welcome the diversion the elderly uniformed maid caused by appearing on the terrace pushing a tea-tray.

Her patrician features looked frowningly on as the servant arranged the tea-things on a silver tea-tray on the marble-topped table and I guessed my admission had come as an unpleasant revelation to her. It was easy to see what words had been on the tip of her tongue. She had got the impression, she had been about to say, that Averil had come of a wealthy and leisured family. Now that she knew I was a working girl she would have to reconstruct her attitude towards me.

But with the smoothness that years of practice had perfected, she chatted pleasantly as she poured from the big silver teapot. ‘We were so lucky to get Averil as a tenant for the cottage. I mean, some completely impossible person might have taken it, and after all. Cherry Cottage is so near us and so much a part of the estate that it would have been awkward if someone incompatible had moved in.’

I could guess what she meant by incompatible. By marrying Clive Etherton, Averil had entered a circle acceptable to the socially prominent Mrs. Ashmore. I realised not that her preliminary question was an

effort to find out details of our life, Averil, in spite of her vivacious and outspoken mannerj was: fundamentally too cautious to jeopardize her place in Mrs. Ashmore’s esteem by any embarrassing disclosures.

^But then Vance knew Averil would make an eminently suitable tenant/ Eric said, ^After aUj you knew her for a fairly long time, didn’t

you, Vance? You appeared such old friends when she came here first. It was obvious that you knew exactly what you were taking on when you gave the cottage to her.' Like most of his remarks it seemed to hold a suggestion of malice, I could almost feel the tension that Eric's words had created between the two men,

Vance was standing beside his mother and for a moment I glanced up at him as he took a teacup from his mother and handed it to me. What Eric had said only confirmed what I already suspected concerning the relationship between Vance and Averil. After all, it had appeared so clearly in the photograph that showed them in an unguarded moment.

He caught my glance and held it with a sardonic expression that made me look away in embarrassment, I wondered if those dark penetrating eyes had guessed my thoughts.,

df you mean I knew Averil was a charming and intelhgent girl, you're perfectly right. Even a misanthrope like yourself must have realised that!'

Tm anything but a misanthrope,' Eric snapped angrily, 'but I flatter myself I can spot a scheming little gold-digger a mile off even if she does happen to be devastatingly pretty! '

There was an appalled silence, then Eric swung his wheelchair around with a furious gesture and propelled hunself along the side of the terrace.

'You must forgive him, my dear,® Mrs. Ashmore said hurriedly. 'My stepson is inclined to show his jealousy too obviously. But then Fm afraid my menfolk are a trifle uncouth.®

It was an attempt to cover over Eric's outburst, but I knew by the softening of the glance she gave to Vance, the inheritor of the Ashmore fortune and what went with the position, that he held a very different place in her life from the crippled and ineffectual Eric. And at that moment I disliked Vance even more than I had previously.

‘Just to show you how wrong you are to describe me as uncouth, I propose to show Miss Carson over the garden. Isn’t that the correct procedure when a lady calls to tea?’

He was deliberately making fun of me, I realised. It was a suggestion that I was censorious and straight-laced.

‘I’ll show her the apple of your eye.’ He turned to me. ‘Mother was on a visit to Italy recently and she returned with a beautiful fountain. I’m sure she’d like to have your opinion on it.®

I was on the point of telling him I’d prefer to stay on the terrace and chat with his mother. It would let him see, I thought with satisfaction, that here at least was one girl who had no intention of jumping at the chance of a tete-a-tete with the wealthy Vance Ashmore.

His mother frowned. ‘But, Vance, it hasn’t been connected yet. Besides, I’ve aU sorts of things I want to talk to Esther about.®

I suspected these queries would include a close look at my family background.

‘Nevertheless, Miss Carson must get the opportunity

to consider your treasure and admire your taste in sculpture; Vance said pleasantly, but there was an inflexibility about his intention that his mother evidently recognized.

She shrugged resignedly. ‘Oh, very well, but you only bore her.’

‘Nonsense, anyone named Esther Carson must take an interest in artistic matters.’ Suddenly and without warning he reached down and, catching my hands, pulled me to my feet and before I could protest, he was marching me down the terrace steps.

‘You make me sound frumpish and blue-stocking-ish,’ I said resentfully.

‘But that’s exactly what I intend to do,’ he admitted cruelly.

I stared at him in amazement. ‘But why?’

‘Because I was interested to see how you react. You were sitting there carefully hiding your reactions to our displays of Ashmore temperament. Very cautious and reserved. I thought it might be interesting to see if I could make the sparks fly.’ So by my outburst I had fallen straight into a trap!

Tight-lipped, I walked by his side until we reached a formal garden enclosed by ilex trees. Severe paved walks bordered a rectangle of mirror-smooth water that caught and reflected in a gleaming pool the statue of translucent green marble. It depicted the crouched figure of a young girl, holding an ornately carved pitcher of the same clear marble and as though on the point of pouring its contents into the pond.

‘It’s not permanently in position, but when it is the water will pour from the pot in a sort of cascade.’

Yes; the sun sparkling on the gushing water and

making the marble figure iridescent certainly would be very beautiful, I decided.

‘Well, do you like it?’ he asked.

I nodded, then, without thinking, only wish I could see it when it’s in operation.’

He looked puzzled. ‘But why shouldn’t you?’

‘You forget I’m only here on a temporary basis. When Aveiil returns I’ll have to go back.’

‘To the job in the stockbrokers’ office that you speak of with such enthusiasm?’

Had I been so obvious, then, that he had guessed how glad I had been

to leave Wentworth and Judd? But I didn't trust him enough to make an admission. 'Well,' I replied cautiously, 'if I must work, I suppose Wentworth and Judd are as good as any.' But even the very mention of the name made my heart sink.

I had a quick vision of Miss Palmer's face pinched -with anxiety at some minor office crisis. The atmosphere in the old-fashioned room on a wet afternoon. The smell of damp coats and the whole grinding monotony of my life. It was a far cry from this beautiful garden with its classic beauty and the tall chimneys of Ashmore House against the soft blue sky. However, I had no intention of letting Vance see how I loathed the idea of leaving Cherry Cottage. And with a dry smile he listened to me make small talk about the beauty of the grounds.

It was as we were returning to the terrace that he said abruptly, 'By the way, if it's convenient. I'll call on you one of these days to discuss details of the annex I've promised Averil to build on to the cottage.'

'An annex on to the cottage!' I repeated. 'But Averil didn't mention it to me I'

'No doubt her mind was already on the cruise/ he remarked dryly.

Somehow the idea of the perfection of Cherry Cottage being marred by an annex dismayed me. But of course I was in no position to object.

'You don't approve of the idea, then, Miss Carson?'

'I didn't say that I disapproved,' I said hastily.

'Perhaps not, but you certainly gave that impression.'

'I can't imagine what difference my attitude makes,' I said stiffly. 'After all, it's your property to do as you like with it.'

'My dear good girl, I've no wish to destroy the Cottage. However, Averil is keen on one of those large rooms with picture windows and lots of light, modern furniture. She finds it too poky when it comes

to entertaining her friends.'

'But it will completely spoil the cottage,' I ex-claimed. It was typical of Averil that she was prepared to destroy serenity by the addition of a hideous gleaming glass structure. Suddenly I felt faintly protective towards the little jewel of a cottage, with its waim nut-coloured woodwork, its dreamy old-world charm and its high stepped roof. 'Oh, but you mustn't do it!' I exclaimed impulsively.

He looked amused. 'I'm afraid it's already been arranged.'

'But it's not,' I said heatedly. 'After all, the final decision rests with you. And if you put your foot down she can do nothing about it.'

'You sound very vehement. I didn't realize that the cottage had such a loyal champion.'

'You know how it is,' I said lamely. 'One suddenly falls in love with a house:—'

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'No, I do not, Miss Carson. I'm a business man. And I am not the least emotional about quaint old cottages. Averil needs more room. We shall take in part of the orchard and that's all there is to it. As I mentioned, I shall call down one of these days with the architect.'

He was summarily dismissing both me and the subject: my insistence had begun to irritate him. Besides, to a man in love, Aveiil's wishes would naturally come first. My opinions were of no interest to him: I was being brushed aside as he might any other troublesome and importunate stranger, and I was rather relieved to have Mrs. Ashmore claim my attention as we reached the terrace once more,

'I must show you the frock Averil was to wear at a pageant of famous women we're holding in aid of the Ashmore Youth Centre,' Mrs. Ashmore said animatedly as she led me into the house and we began to ascend the wide oak stairway. 'I was so disappointed when Averil

decided to go on the cruise, for it means of course that she'll miss wearing the wonderful gown Monsieur Lacroix designed especially for her.'

As she spoke she ushered me into a large room lined with cupboards and sliding back the doors displayed rows of elegant gowns complete with wigs and accessories. She fingered a stiff brocade, heavily encrusted with seed pearls and crystals. 'This is for the girl who is to model Elizabeth the First. You've heard of Andre Lacroix, I'm sure?' she added casually.

I smiled. 'I think most people have. Isn't he considered one of the leading designers for the stage?' It would have been hard not to have heard of him, for his eccentricities had kept him well in the forefront of the news!

The man is a perfect genius/ Mrs. Ashmore said effusively. 'As soon as he set eyes on Averil, he immediately suggested she model his Josephine gown. She took down a gown of diaphanous ice-blue chiffon over an underdress of a deeper blue silk, satin-bordered. The high-waisted bodice and tiny puffed sleeves of the period were outlined by braid encrusted by silver and gold beads. 'Such a pity she won't be able to wear it! However, I suppose I'll simply have to get someone else.'

She laughed deprecatingly as she slid the cupboard doors closed. 'Not of course that there is any dearth of candidates! There was great competition amongst our Warefield girls when the idea was mooted. The occasion will of course be one of our social highlights, she said complacently. 'And Ashmore House will make an excellent background. I may say I have made a few changes for the better since I came here as a young bride. It was so terribly dismal then and my husband simply wouldn't agree that we get rid of the furniture, however, I insisted that everything be re-upholstered. You have no idea how ghastly things looked then; pea-green velvet and hideous long maroon velvet curtains.'

As we went downstairs again and entered the drawing-room I could see that she was making polite small talk : her mind was obviously on something else. She stood in front of the chimneypiece, her thin figure outlined by the white marble, twisting the gold and jade bracelet restlessly on her wrist. 'And now, my dear,' she began with an air of casualness that was belied by the wariness about her eyes, 'I do hope that you did not let Eric upset you. He can be extremely trying and say the wildest things when he is in one of

his moods. He has been most indiscreet and spread the most outrageous stories concerning Vance, Poor Eric, I'm terribly fond of him, of course, but when the accident put an end to his prospects of inheriting, he became dreadfully bitter and unjust towards Vance, It's all so unfair, too, for his father left him well provided for, but the responsibility of running our affairs rests with Vance. Of course, it was a dreadful tragedy for poor Eric, especially when he was so confident of stepping into his father's shoes, but then life doesn't always turn out as one expects, does it?' In spite of her efforts to appear sympathetic to Eric's tragedy she could not help the note of satisfaction that crept into her voice.

'It was a shooting accident, wasn't it?' I ventured.

She nodded and her lips tightened warily. 'We won't go into it,' she said shortly. 'It happened some time ago and it's all too painful. Vance and Eric had gone out together and Eric stumbled while going through a gap and somehow or other the gun went off. I can assure you it was an accident. But people talk. In a small town like this I suppose it was inevitable. They resented Vance, and Eric, of course, kept the whole wretched business on the boil by his horrible insinuations.'

She paused for a moment and I wondered what exactly Mrs. Ashmore was so carefully leading up to.

'What I mean, dear, is that I feel sure that should you hear gossip of that kind you will firmly discourage it. After all, in loyalty to Averil it should be your duty to do that. I suppose you know that your sister and my son will probably marry fairly soon. Of course Vance has

always been fairly reticent about his affairs, however, it's easy to see that they're very much in

love. And I must admit that there is no one I'd like better than dear Averil as a daughter-in-law. However, there is a little matter that I think we should settle up. I feel sure you will agree it would be much more suitable if your sister was not married from your family home. I feel sure that if you spoke to your mother she would understand our point of view. I mean, under the circumstances it would be quite a big wedding.' She laughed disarmingly. 'What we call in these parts an important social event. From what I've gathered I really do feel that your background might not be quite suitable for such an occasion. Don't mis^ understand me, my dear,' she added quickly. 'I mean nothing offensive, of course, but one must be sensible about such matters. We have so many friends, Ashmore would be a much more suitable venue—' she tapered off as though reluctant to be more explicit. But at the same time there was no mistaking her meaning. Our background, she had concluded, would not be sufficiently splendid to entertain the Ashmores and their friends.

'I feel sure you will agree it would be by far the best plan,' she ended decisively.

It was obvious that she expected no opposition from me, and her face stiffened in shocked surprise when I said, 'I'm afraid I don't agree with you, Mrs. Ashmore, but of course Averil is entitled to make whatever arrangements she wants to. But personally I feel that a bride should be married from her own home even if it isn't particularly opulent.'

'Really,' she said with a short, amused laugh, 'don't you think you're being rather sentimental? Not, of course, that your views will make the slightest difference, for Averil and I have discussed things generally

and we see eye to eye on this matter. I can't imagine what objection you could have/ she added, her voice loud and hectoring. 'But then you're older than your sister, aren't you, and your life has been rather circumscribed, hasn't it?' she added acidly.

I could see that although my opinion would not make the slightest difference to Mrs. Ashmore's plans, yet she resented opposition from one whom she so obviously considered negligible.

'My dear, I'm going to say something personal and I do hope you will be sensible enough to take it in the manner in which it is intended. But are you really in a position to judge what is suitable in such circumstances?'

In spite of the fact that I was determined not to lose my temper, I felt anger grow at the open contempt in her voice. 'Perhaps not, but at least it has never taught me to despise my background.'

Mrs. Ashmore put her skinny hands in a gesture of disclaimer. 'Whoever suggested such a thing? Really, my dear, aren't you inclined to be rather hotheaded and take offence too readily?'

'Miss Carson hotheaded? What on earth gave you that impression? On the contrary. Mother, she strikes me as extremely self-possessed.'

I glanced around to see Vance standing in the window, the light from the terrace outlining his broad shoulders.

'Vance, you're being naughty and listening in,' his mother said rather uncomfortably. 'And do stop calling her Miss Carson: it's so ridiculously formal.'

Vance laughed. 'I don't need to listen in: you were making the welkin ring. What is it about, anyway?' He regarded me critically. 'I was wrong. You do seem

to have lost some of your ladylike calm. In fact I actually detect an angry glitter in those hazel eyes of yours. By the way, shall I take Mother's advice and call you Esther?' He was obviously mocking me and suddenly I felt an overwhelming wish to be out of this house with its atmosphere of dislike and suspicion.

I walked swiftly towards the window and as I reached it his hand

grasped my arm. 'And where are you going, without as much as a word of farewell?' he said softly.

I glanced up at him, hoping that he would not notice the tears that, in spite of my efforts, had begun to prick my eyes. 'I'm going back to the cottage,' I said haltingly. 'I should never have come.'

I pushed past him and ran down the terrace, only to find that he was following me with quick strides.

'You've forgotten something,' he said, his teeth gleaming as he swung my hat by its long ribbons.

I hesitated and was on the point of snatching it from his hand when he put it firmly behind his back.

'Ah, not so quick. You may have it only if you allow me walk back to the cottage with you.'

'There's nothing I can do to prevent you,' I said crossly. 'After all, it's your property, isn't it?'

'Actually I was simply being polite. I'd have gone back with you anyway even if you had rejected my generous offer.'

'But why? I'm quite capable of finding my own way back,' I replied dryly.

He nodded, then rammed the hat over my long hair, and considered the effect judiciously. 'You look like a rather cross Alice in Wonderland, and if you must insist on an explanation as to why I want to accompany you to the cottage it is because I wish to

eradicate, if possible, the rather unfortunate impression you seem to have concerning me.'

I turned and walked quickly towards the woods. 'I'm afraid that would be impossible, Mr, Ashmore,' I said coldly, and realized to my annoyance that I sounded starchy and prim.

‘Why don’t you call me Vance?’ he asked. ‘After all, we’re bound to see quite a lot of each other.’

His cool assurance infuriated me. ‘Not if I can help it,’ I said angrily, and almost ran the last few yards towards the orchard. But his long strides kept pace with me easily. And I had the annoying feeling that my effort to get rid of him was simply causing him amusement. ‘Now that I’ve arrived back safe and sound,’ I remarked acidly, ‘don’t you feel free to go?’

‘Why do you dislike me so much, Esther?’ he asked quietly. ‘After all, we were strangers until recently.’

I had a sudden clear memory of that snapshot of him with Averil, laughing and so obviously in love. Half-hidden in Averil’s drawer, it had so clearly not been intended for other eyes. And I remembered Clive, quiet and undemanding, adoring his beautiful and wayward wife, unconscious that Vance Ashmore was intent on removing him to the Middle East and leaving the path free for him to pursue his affair with Averil. For, negligible as Clive might appear to be to a man like Vance Ashmore, yet the Etherton family was socially prominent and might become a troublesome nuisance should they discover the truth concerning his employer,

I tried to bite the words back, then blurted out, ‘Why did you ask Averil to stay at Cherry Cottage?’

He raised his thick brows in quizzical surprise. ‘My dear good girl, why should I not give her the chance

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of taking up the tenancy of the cottage? It’s not the type of place that grows on trees and in its own way it is unique. As Averil was the widow of one of our most valued employees naturally when it became vacant she was the first I thought of.’

‘Naturally,’ I said bitterly, ‘except that Averil has always hated the country.’

‘And just what do you mean by that extraordinary remark?’

But I thought I saw his eyes darken angrily and I added recklessly, ‘You know perfectly well what I mean. There’s only one possible reason why she’s burying herself here, and that’s because you and she —’ I stopped, appalled at what I had been about to say.

‘Why stop?’ he said gratingly. ‘Just when you’ve come to the interesting part.’ Gone was the amused mockery that I had found so infuriating. It had been replaced by a dark fury that glittered in his eyes. He caught me by the shoulders and shook me roughly. ‘All right, why don’t you say your piece! Do you think you can go so far and no further? Who do you think you are, Miss Prim and Proper, that you dare so casually to drop such insinuations?’

‘Let me go!’ I gasped. This was the man who had so ruthlessly removed Clive from his path, I told myself.

With relief I heard the back door open and Mrs. McAlister’s stocky figure appeared. Immediately Vance’s hands dropped from my shoulders and his expression relapsed into its familiar inscrutability. It was hard to believe that I had not just imagined the dark rage that had suddenly transformed him and made him appear strangely frightening.

But I could see that Mrs. McAlister had observed

the sudden movement and drawn her own conclusions. ‘Ah, it’s Mr. Ashmore,’ she said affably, glancing from one to the other of us with a sly, knowing expression. It was obvious that she had interpreted my passage of arms with Vance as a romantic interlude

that she had inadvertently interrupted. 'I've just now taken an apple tart out of the oven. Why don't you ask Mr. Vance to come away in then and have a piece?'

'Well, are you going to take Mrs., McAlister up on the suggestion and ask me to come away in, then?' he asked mockingly,

I stood flushed and confused, uncertain what line to take; anxious that the garrulous Mrs. McAlister should have no reason for gossip. What I really wanted to do was to retreat into the fastness of Cherry Cottage and slam the door firmly in his face. But by this time I knew Mrs. McAlister well enough to know that if I should take such a course the story of my impulsive action could rapidly spread through Warefield.

Before I could summon up an answer, Vance said easily, 'Thank you, Mrs. McAlister, but even if Miss Carson had been disposed to take you up on such an excellent suggestion, I'm afraid that I simply wouldn't have time. I'm going back to London this evening, though I'll be sorry to miss your excellent apple tart.'

Mrs. McAlister preened herself, evidently unaware of the irony that underlaid the words.

Then, without even a glance in my direction, he strode back through the orchard.

I followed Mrs. McAlister into the house. Why had I let him dismiss me, as it were, instead of retaining control of the situation and retreating with dignity while I had the opportunity? I thought angrily.

Mrs. McAlister, a gleam of satisfaction on her moonlike face, crossed to the oven. 'Ah, he's no so bad as folks make him out,' she remarked complacently, as she removed a perfect golden-brown tart from the oven. 'Mind you, I wouldn't have thought of you asking him in, only you seemed so friendly like.' She cocked a knowing eye in my direction as she slid the tart on to a wire rack on the kitchen table.

I wondered uncomfortably how much she would embroider the

passage of arms between Vance Ashmore and myself. How much, for that matter, was she in Averil's confidence? Was she aware of the true relationship between the tenant of Cherry Cottage and her landlord? I pulled off my hat and tossed it on to the sofa and watched her absently as she folded a fresh batch of pastry. Her movements were deft and sure and I was not surprised that she had a reputation as being an excellent cook.

'Did you have a nice time at Mrs. Ashmore's?' she asked cosHy.

I carefully avoided the bait. 'Yes, thanks,' I said shortly.

But she was not to be suppressed. With a swing of her plump wrist she outlined a circle in the sheet of smooth dough and lifting it out, laid it in a tart dish. 'Was it only the family was there?' she ventured. 'Mrs. Ashmore, Mr. Eric and Mr. Vance?'

Exactly! ' I agreed, and in spite of my vexation at her persistence I had to smile at her irrepressible curiosity.

She nodded. I m not surprised that Mr. Vance is off wi± himself to London. Warefield is no place for a man like that. He was never one to stay at home for long, and anyway, now that Mrs. Etherton is gone,

what's to keep him? Hie'll be looking for a little consolation, no doubt, and a man as wealthy as Mr. Vance will have no difficulty in finding it, Fh be bound.' Then, flustered that she had let her tongue run away with her, she added, 'You mustn't take everything I say too seriously, but everyone knows that Vance Ashmore is a bit of a ladies' man.'

I wondered if she was obliquely warning me. She obviously misunderstood the scene she had glimpsed between Vance and myself in the orchard. As if I needed warning against Vance Ashmore! The idea was ridiculous. For a moment I remembered Eric and his bitter, coldly classical features. How did he feel, I wondered, as he watched his half-brother free to pursue his life while he, the former heir to the Ashmore wealth, was left behind?

It was my turn now to ask questions. ‘What was Eric like before the accident?’ I asked, feeling a little ashamed of my curiosity.

Mrs. McAlister sprinkled a few judicious cloves on the heaped apples. ‘Even before his accident, as they called it, he was never the smallest bit like Mr. Vance. Always secretive and sly, I thought him—’

‘Why do you say “as they called it” when you refer to the accident?’ I interrupted. ‘Do you mean that it wasn’t really an accident and that Vance deliberately shot Eric?’

Mrs. McAlister straightened and glanced at me consideringly as though doubtful as to how much she could safely say. ‘Well, it stands to reason, doesn’t it? Here was Mr. Vance and Mr. Eric out shooting together. Mr. Eric at that time was heir to the Ashmore fortune and both of them in love with the same woman—and it strikes me that there’s some-

thing fishy about it that Mr. Eric gets shot. Everyone knew that he was used to guns since he was a boy—’

‘Who was the woman?’ I asked sharply, my anxiety to find an answer overriding all sense of discretion.

Hastily she began to cut out petals from the odds and ends of dough and arrange them symmetrically on the piecrust. ‘Now how should I know, Miss Esther?’ she said with an air of unconvincing surprise. ‘You know what it’s like in a small town like Ware-field; some say one thing and some another. Anyway, the Ashmores always had lots of friends, you’d have no way of knowing who it was.’ But Mrs. McAlister knew, I felt sure, although I realised that she had no intention of saying anything further on the matter. She picked up the pie and crossed to the oven and after testing it with her hand, popped the dish in.

‘Rodney’s in the front garden,’ she said, changing the subject. ‘Poor wee soul, he looks real lonesome swinging there on the gate all by himself, but then, his mother is dead against him playing with his school mates. She says they’re a rough lot. It seems a pity, though, that he’ll have no friends to play with on his birthday!’

She cast me one of her knowing looks as she returned to the table and began to roll out the cover for another pie, and I felt faintly irritated as I went in search of Rodney. First she had obviously been warning me not to take a romantic interest in the philandering Vance Ashmore, and now she was obliquely pointing out that Rodney’s life was a lonely and unnatural one for a young boy. I wished she would stop her unintentioned interference in my life. As far as Vance Ashmore was concerned, her

warning was ludicrous. But Rodney was a different matter!

I went down the path and saw him perched disconsolately on top of the gate. His small figure looked forlorn and dejected.

He turned when he heard my footsteps and a look of faint interest animated his podgy features. ‘Did you have cake for tea at the Ashmores?’

I smiled. 'All sorts of cake.'

He frowned. 'Was Vance there?'

I nodded, wondering why he asked.

'I hope Mummy doesn't marry him. Mrs. Clarke says she wif and that as soon as we go to live at Ashmore House she's going to leave the farm.'

'But you tease the cows, don't you? I suppose she can hardly be looking forward to having you there all the time.'

He wriggled his foot between the wooden slats of the gate. 'Oh, I won't be there all the time. I heard Mummy say to Vance that she'll send me to boarding school.'

It didn't surprise me that Averil was hinting to Vance that their future fife would not be encumbered by the presence of such a troublesome and unattractive child as Rodney. 'Won't you like that?'

Rodney swung his leg. His shoe was scuffed and I made a mental note to darn the wide, jagged hole in his sock. 'I don't know,' he said listlessly. 'I expect they won't like me.' There was something pathetic about the admission.

'But why shouldn't they, Rodney?' I protested.

He frowned. 'They don't like me here at school.'

'That's because you deherberately make yourself unpleasant,' I said severely.

'No, I don't,' he retorted with sudden heat, and I wondered how much he really knew of Averil s attitude towards his school companions.

'Mrs. McAlister tells me your birthday will be in about a fortnight: why didn't you remind me?'

‘A birthday is no good if you can’t have people to a party.’

‘But you will have a party this time and you can invite some boys from school,’ I promised.

‘May I really?’ His eyes lit up. I saw hope gradually dawn and the heavy sulkiness leave his face. ‘And may I invite Phillips?’

‘Yes, of course, and any other boys you like to come.’

He slid off the gate, his face beaming. ‘Then I’ll go and tell Mrs. McAlister and she can get the cakes and jellies ready.’

‘Not SO’ fast!’ I laughed. ‘After all, it’s not for a fortnight yet.’

But he was already running back to the house excitedly calling Mrs. McAlister at the top of his voice.

As I followed him slowly a sudden depression fell on me. The cottage, pretty and cosy as it looked, starred with the white blossoms of clematis, had nothing really to do with me. I was an outsider, and when I left on Averil’s return. Cherry Cottage and the Ashmores would gradually become a part of the past. I shivered a little as a sudden cold wind sprang up and shook the deep purple lilacs and I wished I was seated beside the crackling fire, enclosed by the warm, narrow walls and ancient dark beams. Somehow it didn’t seem to matter now that the perfection of the old cottage was to be marred by a hideous glass addition. Anyway, I told myself, Vance Ashmore had gone back to London to pursue his own mysterious concerns. The less I saw of him the better I would like it. Yet, somehow, I felt vaguely uneasy. It was as though I already had a premonition of the stormy days ahead.

CHAPTER SIX

I LAID down Averil’s postcard. The message on the back was written in her usual wide, almost childish scrawl that was somehow so

expressive of her character. 'Have met the most fascinating man. But not a patch on Vance Ashmore, of course. Hope you are coping with Rodney.' But of course I knew that she didn't really care whether I was coping with Rodney or not. It was evident that, for the time being, her attentions were fully taken up with the 'fascinating' man.

I took up a trug and went into the garden. Every day now brought summer nearer and the borders that led down to the wicket gate were a riot of colour. I picked huge bunches of golden-brown wallflowers and purple and white lilacs.

When I returned to the cottage I arrayed the flowers in the windowsill and on the gleaming walnut table and in fact anywhere I could find a space. And when I was finished the sun-filled room was full of the scent of beeswax and blossoms and the faint indefinable perfume of old, long-seasoned woods. 'It's a fair treat,' Mrs. McAlister remarked, with an air of flattering conviction, 'It does my heart good to see them lilacs. Mrs. Etherton never paid any mind to the garden, that's why the vases and bowls are so dusty. They were stuck there in the cupboard out of the way and I never took any notice of them,'

I smiled. This was her oblique way of expressing

apology for the grimy condition of the vases. 'But the garden's so well taken care of!' I remarked. 'Someone must have kept it in such good order.'

Mrs. McAlister nodded. 'Mr. Vance had one of his gardeners call once a week and keep things in order. Come to think of it, never once did I see Mrs. Etherton as much as pick a daisy.'

No. But then Averil had never at any time bothered about adorning anything but herself. I remembered how at home, she would spend hours in her room, in front of her dressing-table, experimenting with makeup and apparently oblivious to the fact that the furniture needed dusting and that her clothes were untidily piled on a chair.

'Well, I'd better be running along,' Mrs. McAlister remarked at last,

pulling on her tam-o'-shanter over her springing grey hair and collecting her shopping-bag. 'If you ask me I'd say you're going to have a visitor before the day is through.'

She uttered the words with such an air of grim foreboding that I glanced at her in surprise. 'Don't tell me, Mrs. McAlister, that you've the Scottish gift of second sight?'

She snorted indignantly at the idea. 'For goodness' sakes, no. I'll leave all that stuff to the Highlanders. I'm a Lowlander myself, not that I believe in that second sight stuff anyhow. It's all a lot of nonsense, if you ask my opinion.'

I smiled, 'Then how did you know I'd have a visitor?'

'For the simple reason that yesterday afternoon I obliged at Mrs. Wilson's and I heard Mr. Wilson say he was paying a visit to Cherry Cottage this afternoon.'

'But who is Mr. Wilson?' I asked, bewildered.

'He's the architect that planned all them lovely villas outside town.*'

'Oh,' I said dismally. So already Vance Ashmore was carrying his plans concerning the addition to the cottage into action! I felt my heart sink. The designer of those hideous red houses would obviously be a disastrous choice for the delicate beauty of Cherry Cottage.

'No doubt it's to arrange about the rumpus room Mrs. Etherton is so keen on. Mind you the extra space will make all the difference. Rodney can play there and watch the telly and it will keep him from getting under foot,' Mrs. McAlister said with an air of bestowing consolation. 'And it will be no trouble keeping it tidy. Floor-to-ceiling windows and the furniture in vinyl and laminated plastic. I must say it will be a nice change from polishing the carving on this old furniture. Dust-traps is what I call them,' she added, as she bustled out.

Whatever hopes I had that Mrs. McAlister had been mistaken were

banished by the appearance that afternoon of Vance accompanied by a stout, fussy-looking man who, after Vance had introduced us, prowled round the orchard scanning the exterior of the cottage and making notes on a clipboard.

I saw Vance's eyes stray to Averil's postcard, then glance away. Averil's handwriting, even from a distance, was unmistakable and I wondered if he'd recognize it. 'I had a postcard from Averil: she seems to be having a wonderful time.' For a moment I maliciously wondered what his reactions would be if I told him of the 'fascinating man' that Averil had acquired.

He nodded and gave the sudden grin that revealed the whiteness of his teeth and completely transformed his usual rather grim features. 'I received one too, so you needn't look so guilty, I also have heard of a charming acquisition. According to Averil he's half Spanish, half Italian. Quite a lethal mixture, I should imagine.' It was typical, of course, that Averil would inform Vance of her latest infatuation, yet if her intention had been to arouse him to jealousy she had failed dismally, I concluded. For if anything, Vance Ashmore, instead of showing resentment, seemed merely amused, and I thought too that his amusement was heightened by my simple-minded belief that the information would arouse his anger.

'Did you imagine I'd act the jealous lover and throw a dramatic scene?' he asked critically. 'You're a romantic creature, aren't you, Esther?'

So the sophisticated Vance Ashmore was patronising me! In his circles one did not commit the naivete of showing jealousy. I'd revealed myself as provincial and priggish. 'It was stupid of me, of course,' I said bitterly. 'I should have known that it wouldn't make any difference to a man like you whether Averil was loyal or not.'

For a moment he regarded me thoughtfully, 'Loyal, Esther! And just how would you define the word?'

But I was on my guard against this man and had no intention of

displaying my inmost feelings for his amusement. 'My attitude can't be of the slightest interest to you,' I began with dignity.

'Oh, but you're wrong there! Your attitude interests me very much,'

'I can't imagine why,' I replied lamely, feeling the ground gradually being cut from beneath my feet.

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^Because you're so completely unlike the girls I've come across so far. Not many would have wanted to spare me the knowledge that Averil is letting her eye wander. In fact, I can think of a few who would have taken great pleasure in informing me.

'Perhaps, but then they'd probably have reasons that would hardly apply to me.'

He raised his brows. 'Such as?'

I hesitated. I could hardly inform him that it was not my intention to attempt to oust Averil from her position in life, but that, on the contrary, I disliked and distrusted him.

It was at this point that, much to my relief, Mr. Wilson reappeared. But as I watched them walk off together and saw the architect, his head bent in earnest conversation, I felt my heart sink. He was the type of man, I suspected, who would be all for utilitarian and coldly practical buildings like -the horrible villas he had erected in Warefield.

Soon afterwards Rodney arrived back from school. He had seen Vance with Mr. Wilson and was all excitement at the prospect of the new addition. 'When will it be finished, do you think?' he asked excitedly. 'Will it be ready for my birthday party?' The promised party loomed large in all his arrangements and the prospect of entertaining his friends in a new rumpus room appealed to his imagination.

‘Noi, of course not: it will take some time. I’U be gone long before it’s built.’ I felt a strange hollow feeling as I realized the implication of my words. Why on earth had I been so concerned about the despoiling of Cherry Cottage, when I wouldn’t even be here to witness its desecration?

‘You won’t be here?’ Rodney’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

‘No, of course not! I’ll have to go home when your mother returns from her trip.’

‘I didn’t think of that,’ he replied flatly, then added hopefully, ‘But you’ll be here for my party, won’t you?’

‘Of course.’

‘Because you know,’ he added earnestly, ‘Mummy wouldn’t let me have one if she were here.’

From what I’d heard of Averil’s attitude towards Rodney’s schoolfellows it was obvious that she would strongly object to the proposed party, and I began to feel faintly uneasy. However, it was too late now to back out, for all plans had been made and Rodney had even made out a guest list which was headed by the bellicose Phillips, and from what I’d seen of the child I suspected he was the type that Aveil would consider entirely unsuitable as a companion for her son.

Soon afterwards I went upstairs to fetch some mending, vaguely aware that Rodney had gone into the garden. I was collecting the sewing-box and preparing to go downstairs again when I heard a plaintive voice call ‘Aunt Esther!’

I crossed to the window and to my surprise saw Rodney perched on top of an old, gnarled pear tree whose branches almost touched the windowpane. ‘What on earth are you doing up there, Rodney?’ I said irritably. ‘Come down immediately!’

‘I tried to fetch down the kitten,’ he replied in a quavering voice, ‘and

now I can't get back.'

'What kitten?'

'It's one of Mrs. Clarke's from the Ashmore dairy.'

I looked doubtfully at the unprepossessing object that he held clutched to his pullover. Marmalade and off-white tufts of hair surrounded a pink nose. It was one of the ugliest kittens I had ever seen, I decided. 'Now how do you expect me to get you down?' I asked in exasperation.

'You could fetch the ladder from the outhouse,' he suggested hopefully. 'And do you think Mrs. Clarke will let me keep the kitten?' He edged along the branch in excitement at the idea and I heard it squeak ominously.

Immediately my irritation gave way to anxiety. I flung down the sewing-box and bundle of clothes. 'Don't move until I fetch the ladder,' I called, before dashing down the stairs and heading for the outhouse.

I tugged and pulled the long, heavy ladder until I manoeuvred it against the pear tree. To my relief there was no sign of Vance or Mr. Wilson. To be found at the top of a ladder in the midst of a pear tree rescuing a small boy with a kitten was not at all the sort of situation I would care to be found in.

By the time I had clambered up the ladder, Rodney had begun to realize just how far he was from the ground and was emitting ear-piercing yells of terror. 'Oh, do shut up, Rodney,' I exclaimed in exasperation, 'you're perfectly safe now,'

I reached out my arms to lift him from the branch and he said in a quavering voice, 'I think the branch is breaking. Aunt Esther.' Then, to my dismay, there was a sound of splintering and rending wood and Rodney, with the kitten safely tucked inside his pullover, was propelled violently into my arms. For a moment I almost overbalanced, then clutching at an

adjacent branch I managed to prevent Rodney, myself and the kitten being hurled to the ground.

‘You seem to be in trouble up there,’ a cool voice said from terra firma.

I glanced down to see Vance’s face staring up at me. ‘I thought you were gone,’ I said dourly.

‘I was on the way home when I heard some bloodcurdling screams from this direction. I could hardly pursue my way in cold blood, could I? It wasn’t you by any chance who was emitting those extraordinary sounds, was it?’

‘No,’ I snapped, ‘it wasn’t.’

‘I thought not. It didn’t sound like you. It wasn’t Estherish to lose control of the situation.’

He reached up and lifted Rodney to the ground. ‘And just what is this exercise in aid of?’ he asked, surveying the branch which had crashed to the ground and now lay half-buried in the grass.

Speechlessly I surveyed him from the top of the ladder.

‘Mrs. Clarke’s kitten got caught at the top of the tree, and I tried to rescue it. Then Aunt Esther tried to rescue me. And may I keep the kitten?’ Rodney added in a rush.

‘And now it’s time I tried to rescue Aunt Esther,’ Vance said determinedly.

He reached up his hands to me but, ignoring them, I began to back down the ladder with as much dignity as I could manage. Unfortunately I had forgotten that one of the rungs had been roughly repaired with a wire. My foot slipped on it and I found myself being propelled into Vance’s outstretched arms. For a moment I was held close to him: tight in his encircling arms I felt confused and breathless

^ Sorry, I forgot about that gammy rung.'

'But why be sorry?' His dark eyes stared into mine, intense and enigmatic as fathomless tarn pools so that for a moment I felt mesmerized.

Then, recovering myself, I pulled free. Dishevelled and confused by the strange new emotion that his closeness had caused, I tossed back my hair and ran my fingers through it, feeling at an acute disadvantage.

Luckily at that moment Rodney caused a diversion. The kitten, released from his pullover, darted away and was instantly hidden in the long soft grass under the apple-trees, and Rodney, with a cry of distress, ran off in pursuit.

'Can you believe it? The child actually wants to keep that awful kitten!'
'I began to break a silence that threatened to become too lengthy.

He ignored this and continued to regard me with a look of attention that I found disconcerting.

Well, what is it?' I asked sharply.

'Do you know, Esther,' he remarked thoughtfully, not at all taken aback by the note of hostility in my voice, it occurs to me that you're just the type Mother's looking for. She's holding one of those charity modelling do's. I suppose she's told you all about it. Dresses by Lacroix, lashings of champagne and everyone who's anyone present. Beautiful girls parading down the staircase with lots of lush photographs in the glossy magazines. You, for instance, would be perfect in Averil's part as Josephine. I can see you in one of those high-waisted Empire gowns. You're slim enough, goodness knows, to carry it off.'

'But hardly beautiful enough,' I said shortly. The suddenness and unexpectedness of the proposition made me wonder if it were a subtle form of mockery.

‘Why do you look at me so suspiciously, Esther?’ he said gently. ‘Surely you don’t imagine that I’m deliberately trying to lead you up the garden path?’

‘But why should you suddenly decide on me for such an affair?’ I said warily. ‘There must be lots of beautiful girls in Warefield gasping for the position.’

He grinned. ‘There probably are, but not many of them have your extraordinarily small bones. And as for your denigration of your looks! Yours are the type of features that make up fantastically well— besides, you’ll be wearing a wig, dressed high, with ringlets falling on the shoulders in the Empire style.’

‘You sound very knowledgeable regarding the affair,’ I said a little sourly, but feeling a rising interest and excitement that I was careful to conceal. ‘How on earth do you know so many details concerning the costumes?’ Somehow it was out of character, I felt, for a man like Vance Ashmore to be so well informed about an affair that he must secretly regard with tolerant indulgence.

‘My dear girl, how could I help but be knowledgeable? Mother has done nothing but talk of it for months and is forever on the phone to Lacroix who has designed the clothes. Actually she’d Averil in mind for Josephine.’

‘Yes, I know,’ I said, feeling suddenly deflated.

‘But since Averil has set off on her travels and won’t be back in time, of course it’s out of the question. However, if you won’t do it I suppose Mother will have to look around for one of our budding Warefield debutantes.’

‘Well, if you think your mother would agree—’ I began.

‘But of course she’ll agree. Otherwise I’d hardly have suggested it/

Did he not then realize that Mrs. Ashmore, although she was careful to hide it, did not approve of what she considered my unbecoming lack of deference to her elevated social position, or was it simply that when Vance set his heart on anything he invariably got his own way and would not let his mother's opposition

deflect him in the slightest?'

'Very well then,' he said briskly, 'I shall tell Mother you'll model the Josephine dress.' In his usual arbitrary way he was sweeping aside all objections and forcing me into a position that I was not quite certain yet it would be wise to accept.

'I shall tell Mother and she'll immediately get in touch with Lacroix, He's quite mad, of course, and incredibly temperamental, but, according to my mother, a genius.'

It was just then that I noticed a flash of light above the woods as though the sun had glanced off a mirror. It was sudden and startling and I gave a little gasp of surprise.

Vance, however, merely looked grim. 'It looks like Eric's up to his old tricks,' he said dryly. 'That light that you see is the sun reflecting off the lenses of a pair of extremely powerful binoculars scanning the countryside for something of interest.'

And Eric had seen something of interest, I thought uncomfortably, remembering how I'd been propelled into Vance's arms. From a distance, and to someone of Eric's salacious turn of mind, how would the incident appear?

For somehow I was certain he had seen us,

'You mustn't let Eric's peculiar pastimes bother

you/ he said quietly, 'After all, he has very little else to do with his life.'

The callousness of the remark made me feel cold. This was the man who had stepped into Eric's shoes, and rumour had it that he had actually contrived i^he accident in the woods that had ruined his half-brother's life.

As I turned away in revulsion he caught my arm. *Oh, don't go. There are all sorts of questions to be discussed yet,'

'Such as?' I said coldly.

He was still holding my arm and I saw his expression change. The indolent amusement faded from his eyes and he regarded me intently. 'Esther, surely you can't believe—'

But whatever he had been about to say was drowned in the clamo'ur of Rodney's shrill voice as he demanded, 'I may keep the kitten, mayn't I, Aunt Esther?' His round face was flushed and he was panting slightly from his recent exertions, but he had found the kitten and stood holding it awkwardly in both hands while it sniffed indignantly and made little hissing spits like a miniature tiger.

Vance released my arm. He stepped back a little and when he spoke again it was with his usual casual indifference. Tor instance, the pressing question of whether Rodney may keep this hideous little cat.'

'It's not hideous,' Rodney protested, pressing his face close to the kitten's pink nose, 'and I'm going to call it Marmalade.'

'But your aunt hasn't said whether you may keep it or not,' Vance pointed out.

'It's hardly my place to decide such a matter,' I returned icily. 'According to Rodney it must have

strayed from Mrs. Clarke's dairy and as you own the dairy it's obviously your kitten.'

'Dear me, what an extraordinarily lucid breakdown of the situation!

I'm not surprised you work in a stockbroker's office. You don't think I own Mrs. Clarke too?' he asked quizzically. 'You know, Esther, you make me sound quite feudal.'

'So I've heard ybu described,' I agreed.

'By whom ?'

I hesitated, remembering it had been Bob Pritchard and the obvious dislike he had shown for Vance Ashmore—^but then he had also been in the runmng for Averil.

'It sounds remarkably like one of Bob Pritchard's observations! But in spite of what he says I wouldn't go as far as claiming to own Mrs. Clarke.'

But I could see he felt no resentment. Bob Pritchard would, in his view, be so completely negligible as to be not worth dignifying with dislike.

'And is that how you feel about me too, Esther, that I'm arrogant and dictatorial?'

'I don't think anything about you,' I replied. But I knew, even as I said it, that it was untrue. I remembered so clearly the extraordinary mixture of feelings I had experienced when I had gazed at the photcn graph of him with Averil and remembered how ruthlessly he had disposed of Clive. He had adjusted life to suit himself even if it meant destroying those who got in his way.

'All right! But what of the fate of this unfortunate kitten ? Even though your attitude is one of complete indifference to me, surely you're not hard-hearted enough to condemn it to the fate that Mrs. Clarke has in store for it!'

no

'What fate?^ I asked cautiously,

‘Do you realize, my dear girl, that this kitten is one of a large family of similar monstrosities?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Rodney put in solemnly. ‘There’s lots more up at the farm.’

‘Exactly. And do you know that Mrs. Clarke hates kittens, especially marmalade ones? If you return this animal its fate is definitely sealed,’

At this dire information Rodney burst into loud sobs and clutched the kitten closer so that it squawked indignantly.

‘Surely, Esther, you’re not so utterly heartless as to condemn this helpless creature?’

He was at his usual occupation of mocking me, I realized, and my first reaction was to insist that Rodney return the kitten immediately and show him that I was not to be so easily bamboozled,

‘Oh, Aunt Esther, do let me keep him!’ Rodney’s pudgy face gazed at me anxiously.

‘But what will your mother say when she returns and finds that we have an addition to the household?’ I protested weakly.

‘Oh, she won’t even notice it,’ Rodney put in eagerly, with childish perspicacity. It was true, of course. Unless the kitten actually got in her way and caused her inconvenience, Averil probably would not mind.

‘All right, then! But you’ll have to take care of it yourself,’ I added severely to save face.

Radiant, Rodney was about to go into the house when, turning, he said magnanimously to Vance, ‘You must come to my birthday party. Mrs. McAlister is making a cake with my name on top and we’re having jellies and ices,’ Then, continuing his

headlong dash towards the house, he left me alone with Vance.

‘Whafs this about a party? Don’t teU me you’re actually going to have a hooley?’

‘It’s for Rodney’s birthday. He’s going to ask a few of his friends from, school to it.*

‘Indeed? Then, no doubt, should I accept his gracious invitation, not being quite in the same age group, I should feel rather out of things.’

‘I should imagine so,’ I said dryly,

‘All the same perhaps I could contribute something towards the general joUification. We have some Chinese lanterns at the bouse. They were strung amongst the bushes at one of Mother’s do’s and by all accounts it was a smashing success.’

‘If you hke,’ I said doubtfully. ‘But where exactly do you intend to string them here?’

‘Through the orchard, of course. I imagine they’ll look pretty effective shining through the blossoms, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Rodney’d hke that,’ I agreed grudgingly.

‘Good. Then I’ll make arrangements for the great day if you’ll let me know in advance.’

He turned and left me with the quick, lithe steps that were somehow typical of the man.

Feeling rather let down at the swiftness of his departure, I walked slowly back to the cottage, conscious of a strange imease that I found difficult to fling off, or even, for that matter, to pinpoint. It had something vaguely to do with the sudden flash of light in the woods and the knowledge that we had been spied on. Eric, curious and malign, had been sitting up there, his sticks placed beside him, sweeping his powerful binoculars over the surrounding country-

side, intent on feeding his frustration by witnessing something that

might give him the opportunity to exert a subtle blackmail on his victims. The fact that he had seen me in Vance's arms was of no importance. After all, I had simply stumbled: it had been an accident. I had nothing whatever to worry about, as far as he was concerned, I told myself. >

It was as well for my peace of mind that I didn't realize the capital Eric was to make out of the meaningless incident and that he was already planning to bring a swift end to my idyllic days at Cherry Cottage.

Shortly before Rodney's birthday I received a letter from my mother and, to my surprise, instead of querulously complaining how difficult life was without me and all the insurmountable problems that my absence caused, she seemed actually to be in good spirits,

'You will be surprised to hear that your cousin George has gone abroad and that Aunt Mavis is joining me until she makes plans for the future. I must say that we get on splendidly together and I do hope she will stay on indefinitely, for she understands all my hideous foibles and is so agreeable in all sorts of ways. There is no reason why we shouldn't settle down comfortably together,

I am quite reconciled now to your staying on at Cherry Cottage until Averil's return, I must say it was providential under the circumstances that your cousin George decided to take a position abroad and has left his mother free to come to me, for, as you know, I rather dreaded being here on my own. But then young people now have so very little consideration for their elders, so that it's hardly likely my point of

view would have made any difference. As long as Averil was enjoying herself she wouldn't give a thought to the inconvenience she was causing me by selfishly rushing off on a cruise. However, as I said, perhaps good may come out of it in the end, for she definitely needs the steadying influence of a husband and, who knows, she may meet someone suitable abroad, for it's hardly likely she will in a small provincial town like Warefield—'

I folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope, thinking how ironic it

was that it was here in despised, provincial Warefield that Averil had selected her husband. When my mother spoke of a prudent husband what she actually meant was an eligible one, and from her point of view, Vance Ashmore of the Ashmore Shipping Line would be an eminently suitable husband for Averil. Any transitory romances that Averil might indulge in abroad would be strictly limited by the termination of the cruise. She was fundamentally much too canny and hard-headed to make again the mistake of falling in love with a man like Clive, without ambition or initiative. In spite of the romantic tropic moon and the half-Spanish, half-Italian boy-friend, it would be Vance Ashmore and a future as mistress of the Ashmore mansion that would be in the forefront of her mind.

Well, at least until Averil's return I would be spared being bombarded by my mother's self-pitying letters,

I thought with relief.

I had scarcely finished the rest of the letter which ' dealt mainly with my mother's feud with her next-door neighbour when Mrs. McAlister bustled into the sitting-room.

'It's about time we were thinking of getting things

ready for the party/ she announced. 'And I won't half be glad when it's over and done with, for the bairn does nothing but plague me about it!'

Mrs. McAlister sounded severe, but I realized she was goodnatureedly bent on making it a success and had already planned the sort of menu small boys delight in.

'Yes, I expect we'd better do our shopping,' I agreed. 'After all, it will be the day after tomorrow, won't it?'

'Well, the cake's aU ready, but for the icing,' she said with satisfaction. 'And then there's jellies and biscuits and lemonade and—' here she produced from her pocket a long list that she had laboriously made out —'paper hats and balloons and such like.'

Rodney interrupted, bursting into the room his face aglow. 'And you will write "Happy Birthday Rodney" on the cake, won't you, Mrs. McAlister?' he asked earnestly.

Mrs. McAlister chuckled, 'That I will, son, in pink icing. Now you'd better help Miss Esther to get the stuff up from the town, for I won't have time, I can tell you that much.'

'All right,' I said in mock resignation as I went upstairs to fetch my coat. 'We'll set off now and see about supplies.'

It was a beautiful day and I revelled in the clear warm air as Rodney and I, carrying enormous baskets, walked leisurely down the lane. Primroses nestled in the budding hedgerows, their petals moon-yellow against their rough dimpled green leaves. There was at least another week before AverU was due to return and I determined to enjoy these halcyon days to the

full without looking beyond them and my return to Wentworth and Judd's.

Our purchases included a mauve satin ribbon and bell to tie about Marmalade's neck, as Rodney was determined he should take a prominent part in the birthday celebrations—^just how prominent I was later to find out to my cost. However, at that time I had no inkling of what lay in store.

Our baskets laden, we went into a tea-shop for refreshments and had barely seated ourselves when Bob Pritchard drove up. He caught sight of us immediately as the tea-rooms had only a scattering of customers, and came up to our table. 'May I join you? I'm in between cases and just shot in for some light refreshments—besides, it saves me having to go back to that dragon of a housekeeper of mine. She takes a dim view of snacks between meals.'

'Of course,' I said automatically, wondering curiously why he had endured that 'dragon of a housekeeper' so long, instead of marrying.

Had Rodney been childishly mistaken in the conversation he had overheard between Averil J. and Bob ? Somehow Bob Pritchard appeared to me to be an eminently practical young man, unlikely to suffer long from unrequited love. Surely in the whole of Ware^ field he could find a suitable wife!

He surveyed the bulging baskets stacked on the window-ledge. 'Well, what's all this in aid of? You look as if you've been buying up the whole of Ware-field.'

'It's for my birthday: I'm going to have a party,' Rodney announced proudly.

'Oh, you are, are you! Well, don't, on any account, call me during the night if you get a tummy-ache,

young man, for I should imagine there's a large amount of indigestible comestibles in these baskets,' ^ Rodney grinned, 'Oh, I shan't eat it myself : I'm inviting some boys from school,'

Bob looked at me inquiringly. 'I should have imagined Averil would have vetoed such a plan had she been on the spot.'

Was he quietly pointing out to me that I was deliberately ignoring Averil's wishes? I wondered.

'You seem to know a great deal about Averil,' I said resentfully.

He nodded without rancour, then said quietly, 'Yes, Averil and I were pretty friendly at one time.'

'Then perhaps you feel that the party is a mistake on my part,' I said challengingly.

He shook his head and regarded me levelly. 'On the contrary, I think it an excellent idea, I could never see Averil's point of view when it came to the local famines. But then,' he added without bitterness, 'she could never see mine. She thought it extraordinary that I should see my

future life set in Ware-field, turning into “Old Doc Pritchard.” It used to amaze her that I could contemplate such a fate with equanimity. But strangely enough the prospect doesn’t fill me with horror. In fact, I rather look forward to spending my life here, I’ve never been a particularly brainy sort of chap and I realized early on that there was no brilliant future for me in medicine. I’d simply be following in my father’s footsteps. His practice was established here before I was born and I’m a bit old-fashioned, I expect, but I like the idea of continuing where he left off, as it were.’

If what Rodney had overheard had been interpreted correctly it was not surprising Averil had turned Bob

down, I thought. Had he really imagined that beautiful, wilful Averil would settle down and turn into a staid and sober G.P.’s wife? But then when a man is in love it is natural for him to indulge in wishful thinking. But just how much had he been in love? And how much was his judgment of Vance Ashmore biased by his jealousy of the man who had won the girl he had naively thought would be willing to be his wife?

Afterwards the conversation turned to generalities and soon Bob hurried off. When he had consumed three cream cakes Rodney reluctantly agreed that it was time to return with the supplies to Mrs. McAlister.

To my relief Rodney’s birthday dawned bright and clear, without a hint of a cloud or suggestion of rain. I had planned to keep the boys outdoors as much as possible and later on, when it was dusk, to switch on the lanterns which workmen from the Ashmore estate had already set up. The prospect of six sturdy schoolboys in the small sitting-room should it rain made me quail.

While Rodney was at school I slipped down to town and bought him the roller-skates that he had set his heart on. Then Mrs. McAlister and I set to and prepared the room. When it was ready we stood back and surveyed our handiwork with satisfaction. From the dark rafters hung clusters of crimson, mauve and yellow balloons and gaily-coloured

crackers were piled around an epergne on which was fruit, the whole topped with a spray of golden daffodils. Apart from the highly-coloured and indigestible fare that small boys delight in, there was Mrs. McAlister's cake, a magnificent tiered confection in pink and white icing with 'Happy Birthday, Rodney' elegantly inscribed on the top.

'It looks a fair treat, doesn't it?' Mrs. McAlister said with pride. 'And nothing indigestible either, so they won't be able to blame me if they feel poorly afterwards/

'If they don't feel poorly after some of these I'll be surprised I' I pointed to the quivering jellies and trifles that dotted the table,

'He they come, Mrs. McAlister announced, glancing through the window, then added in an astounded voice, 'And if he hasn't that youn' scamp Phillips, with him!'

'Yes,' I laughed. 'I was under the impression when I first saw them locked in combat that Phillips was his worst enemy, but he insisted on inviting him. So you can never tell with small boys, can you?'

Mrs. McAlister pursed her lips as she went towards the door looking extremely disapproving. 'All the same, he's a right little demon and not at all the type that should be playing with Rodney. His mother's a widow, a real gadabout, and lets the boy run wild. You mark my words, there'll be trouble before the day's out.'

I laughed, 'Oh, don't be such a pessimist, Mrs. McAlister, Surely he can't be such a little monster. Anyway, I'll keep them busy after the party. I'll arrange games in the orchard: that should work off their energy and keep them out of trouble.'

But Mrs. McAlister shook her head and muttering dire warnings of trouble to come, opened the door.

Rodney marched in proudly followed by six sheepish, freshly-scrubbed boys and soon afterwards Mrs. McAlister departed.

To my relief Phillips looked comparatively mild. I discounted Mrs, McAlister's grim warnings: no doubt his snub nose and pugilistic expression had given her

a bad impressicm. The meal passed without incident and when they had pulled the last cracker and demolished the last jelly, the boys eagerly trooped after me into the orchard where I kept them occupied in a series of energetic games. However, after a while, to my dismay, the sky began to darken and some drops heralded an approaching rain storm. As I hustled them indoors, I was thinking that six small boys, still full of unexpended energy, were far too many for the small sitting-room to contain comfortably.

Marmalade, complete with mauve ribbon and bell, had been dozing comfortably in front of the fire after partaking of a dish of custard in honour of Rodney's birthday and he now sprang to his feet nervously as the boys clattered in.

Almost immediately I noticed a change come over Rodney and his guests. Phillips, a paper pirate hat atop his red hair, commandeered Rodney's birthday skates and began to career around the table. It was obvious that he was a bom leader, for soon the others became infected by his recklessness and dashed about in a wild game of tag, scattering the chairs and making the glass and china in the delicately carved display cabinet tinkle ominously.

I made an attempt to control them, but I had underestimated the power Phillips seemed to have over his companions and with a feeling of despair I saw Rodney's party disintegrate into a wild orgy of destruction that I was powerless to halt. I looked on with mounting horror as Phillips with a whoop sped across the floor. No' doubt he intended to swoop past the china cabinet, but at that moment Marmalade, with a squawk, his bell tinkling wildly, scuttled across the floor and Phillips, in an effort toi avoid him.

careered headlong into the cabinet. There was the appalling sound of rending wood and crashing china and glass as the fragile piece of furniture disintegrated.

A silence fell on the room as the children, frightened and sobered by the disaster, gazed wide-eyed on the resulting chaos. Slowly Phillips got to his feet, his usually ruddy face pale with shock, his pirate crown askew, and I could see he was on the verge of tears. For once he was at a loss for words, and I was on the point of opening my mouth to tell him exactly what I thought of him when the door opened and Averil stood on the threshold.

I

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR a moment she gazed at the pajama-hatted boys, the untidy table still bearing the debris of the meal; the half-eaten trifles, the broken straws and the general chaos that results from a children's party. Then her gaze moved to the floor, its glossy patina rowled with the marks of roller-skates, and finally to the delicate cabinet and its shattered contents. Gradually, as realization dawned, I saw her face darken with rage.

'So this is what goes on as soon as my back is turned! Get these children out of here immediately!'

Miserably I began to organize their departure. The children themselves seemed anxious to escape as quickly as possible from this angry adult with the blazing eyes.

She glanced over her shoulder. 'Vance, would you like to see the havoc my dear sister has made of your quaint old-world cottage while I was away?'

To add to my dismay I saw Vance's tall figure come into view behind her shoulder. He surveyed the scene impassively as I hurried out the subdued children. Rodney, sobbing despairingly at the fiasco of his birthday party, scuttled upstairs.

When the last child had departed, Averil flung off her coat and swung on me angrily. 'You invited these wretched children behind my back,

although you know how I object to them as playmates for Rodney. They're not at all the type I want him to mix with, especially that ghastly Phillips boy.'

'Oh, come now, Averil, the child isn't so bad! A bit wild, perhaps, but it will do Rodney good to learn how to a good mixer,' Vance said. 'I agree,' he added ruefully, 'that they've caused a great deal of damage, but after aU, Esther is hardly to blame. How could she know how things would turn out?'

'She should have known,' Averil snapped, throwing herself into a chair and reaching for a cigarette. 'Anyone with the smallest scrap of common sense could have told that Phillips for one is a common, underbred child. And, according to Mrs. McAlister, his mother is never at home. In fact, by all accounts, she has quite a bad reputation in Warefield.'

I saw a smile gradually crease Vance's face. 'It's not like you to take the moral tone.'

'Oh, don't be so annoying, Vance,' Averil replied crossly. 'You know perfectly well what I mean.'

'Yes, I think I do. You're not so concerned about Mrs. Phillips's morals as you are about the fact that the Phillips come from the wrong side of the tracks. Esther, I suppose, was less interested in the social implications, Perhaps she felt it was time Rodney had some fun out of life.'

'So you're backing up Esther, is that it?' Averil's eyes narrowed.

'Come, come, Averil,' Vance protested, his dark eyes sardonic, 'you're not suggesting that anyone as correct and precise in her ways as Esther would let a common and underbred child set foot across your threshold 1 I've always found her a perfect model of sense and discretion. In fact, if anything. I've found her to be—'

'That wiU do,' I said quietly. How like him mischievously to make

things more difficult for me in this

awkward moment when Averil had just walked in and I was regretting my folly in thinking that I would be able to make a happy party for Rodney and control a group of unruly little boys.

®On the other hand,' Vance went on, ignoring me, 'I have never found Esther to be a snob.'

Impatiently Averil wandered about the small room. 'If you're implying that I'm a snob, you're darned well right,' she said impatiently. 'I'm choosy about my company, just as I'm particular about my clothes or my food. Just any old thing doesn't do little Averil. And by the way, by any chance are those Chinese lanterns I see strung up amongst the trees? Just how long did you expect this party to last, Esther? Or did you invite these young hooligans to stay the weekend?'

'If you hadn't turned up to act the spoilsport, we should have been able to admire them in all their glory, including that horrid, common Phillips boy you so much object to.' There was an edge to- Vance's voice that I had never heard before. Usually, even his most stringent remarks were delivered with a lazy indolence and good nature that took away much of the sting.

Averil regarded him sharply. Apparently she had just become aware of the change in his mood, although I had been acutely conscious of it. 'For goodness' sake, Vance, don't teU me that you intended to be present at Rodney's birthday party?' she demanded.

'Well, yes, now that you ask,' he replied. 'Actually I'm sorry I didn't turn up earlier. My presence might have acted as a squelcher on those rowdy children and saved Esther from the sharp edge of your tongue. But don't look so surprised,' he went on as Averil's eyes

widened. 'I admit that the company of a group of grubby little boys wasn't the only attraction. There was a much more interesting lure.' As he spoke he turned and looked fully at me and I felt myself flush indignantly.

So he was angry with Averil and was using me as a stick to beat her with. He was deliberately hinting at an intimacy between us that didn't exist, using me as a tool to punish Averil for flaunting her shipboard romances. It was a bitter blow and made me feel small in my self-esteem, and suddenly I realized that Averil's unexpected return would probably mean the end of the slight acquaintance that had been building up between me and Vance. Bitterly I was aware that Averil was not the only one who was feeling the pangs of jealousy where he was concerned.

Impulsively I burst out, 'How is it that you're back so soon? Your boat's not due for another week,'

'I flew home,' Averil said shortly. 'And just as weU, considering what's been going on behind my back. However, we'U go into that later.' As she spoke her eyes passed between me and Vance.

'Nov/ just what do you mean by that remark?' Vance asked softly. He wandered towards the table on which were strewn trifles, jellies and a solitary piece of cake with the letters 'Hap' on top, all that remained of Mrs. McAlister's inscription, 'Happy Birthday, Rodney.'

'I—' Avail began, then stopped. 'I mean considering what's been going on here. I mean, Esther inviting in the riff-raff and letting them break up my beautiful home.'

Vance took up a cake knife and cut off a sliver of cake. He popped it into his mouth. 'It tastes exactly

like the cake I had for my eighth birthday party. In fact, it's depressingly similar: even the icing is the same colour, pink and inscribed, "Happy Birthday." But come to think of it, the lettering was in chocolate instead of pink icing, if I remember correctly. ^

Averil laughed shortly. ^You have an amazingly long memory, Vance. Somehow you never struck me as the sort of man who would have sentimental memories of boyhood birthdays.'

Vance considered a piece of icing closely before popping it into his mouth, ^But then you don't really know very much about me, do you, Averil?'

For a long moment she looked at him and I had the feeling that she was disconcerted and unsure of herself. Then, recovering quickly, she gave the slow seductive smile that I knew she always considered irresistible, 'Let's say, Vance darling, that I know all that's really necessary,' she murmured huskily.

They exchanged a lingering glance and I was surprised to see how his expression changed and darkened as he gazed into her beautiful face. Her recent anger had only heightened her loveliness, touching her cheekbones with faint carmine and making her eyes a vivid and sparkling blue.

'I think it's time I was pushing along,' Vance said at last.

'Oh, must you?' Averil sounded disappointed. 'I've lots and lots of things to talk about. You've no idea what a fabulous time I've had,'

'Then why did you return so soon?' he asked.

Averil's lips tightened and she shot an ominous glance in my direction. 'Oh, we'll go into that later. Let's say I'd very good reasons for cutting my holiday short,'

^ But I could see that whatever her reasons for returning so precipitously she had no intention of revealing them until Vance had gone. She had made it clear by her angry glance that in some way I was implicated in her change of plans, and I wondered uneasily how I could possibly be involved.

She changed the subject by adding brightly, 'Anyway, I'll be in time now for the pageant. I'm just dying to wear that dreamy Lacroix gown.' She glanced briefly in the mirror above the sideboard as though visualizing her radiant looks in the shimmering early nineteenth-century gown.

‘I’m afraid you’re not included, Averil, in the plans now.’

‘What?’ Her face paled with shock and she turned slowly to face Vance. ‘What on earth do you mean by saying I’m not included in the plans now?’

‘Exactly what I say. When you left on this cruise you knew perfectly well it would mean chucking it aU up, didn’t you?’

‘But I’m back now. What difference does it make?’ she insisted.

‘The simple difference is that I’ve found someone else to take your place. Did you expect my mother to scrap the idea and sit twiddling her thumbs because you backed out? There’s too much involved. She has been planning this show in aid of the new Centre for ages—and for that matter, so have I.’

‘But of course I know she has. And I was to model the Josephiue gown!’ Averil retorted shrilly.

‘But as I told you, there has been a change of plans. Someone else is taking your place.’

There was a short appalled silence and I could see

that the full significance of his words was only now penetrating.

‘Not by any chance that lumpy Sybil Wilson with the pudding face and those ghastly specs?’ she said ironically, ‘She’s soi mad about you she doesn’t care what sort of fool she makes of herself. Always on tap is little Sybil, tripping over herself to be of service and seizing every chance she gets of walking those basset-hounds of hers in the grounds, just so she can hang around Ashmore and get palpitations whenever you as much as glance in her direction. I can just see her trying to squeeze intoi my gown. Why, the idea is ludicrous.! ’

‘Sybil has too much commonsense to see herself in that role, but she is helping out and making herself generally useful.’ Vance seemed faintly

amused at Averil's vehemence, but the lightness of his tone added fuel to her anger.

'Then who is it? And do stop standing there smirk-ing at me, Vance, or—or—I'll fling something at you!' She glanced around wildly as though bent on selecting an object with which to carry out her threat.

'Don't you think there's been enough destruction for one evening?' Vance said coolly, 'Anyway, I shouldn't advise you to do anything so foolish! Being no gentleman, I might fire it right back at you.'

'You mean, then, you're not going to tell me,' she said sultrily, 'But I'll find out sooner or later, you may be sure,'

'But I've every intention of telling you,' he replied with maddening deliberation, 'if you'll stop jumping to conclusions.'

'Then just whom have you chosen to take my place, may I ask?'

'Esther,' he replied flatly.

Esther! Her face flamed with sudden colour. 'But you can't mean that!' she shouted shrilly.

'And why not?'

Because ^because Oh, she's just not the type. Can you really see her as Josephine? Why, the idea is perfectly ridiculous. But don't think I don't see through you, Vance. You've done this just to get even with me. You're jealous of the men I met when I was away from you and this is your mean, rotten way of getting your own back!'

My dear girl, astounding as it may appear to you, I selected Esther because it occurred to me that she has the perfect figure for Empire gowns: for one thing, she is unusually small-boned and slim and—'

'And I am not, I suppose,' she snapped.

The hint of a smile touched his lips. 'Let's say you've been over-

indulging in shipboard cuisine.'

She swung around and regarded her figure carefully in the mirror. It was true, I decided, that Aveil had put on a little weight, but somehow it had simply added to her attractiveness, making even more definite the narrowness of her waist and the smooth undulating lines of her hips.

'Liar,' she pronounced finally. 'It's as I said, you're green with jealousy. Why, Lacroix designed that gown specially for me! I shall go and see your mother tomorrow and fix things up.'

Vance wandered towards the door. 'Don't waste your time, Averil,' he said quietly. 'I've already arranged matters.'

So I had been right, I was thinking. Mrs. Ashmore's opinion didn't count for much when Vance had made up his mind.

Averil bent down and picked up one of the skates which had caused so much havoc in the small room. I caught the glitter of tears as she carefully placed it on a shelf with an air of sad resignation. I knew her well enough to know it was a carefully designed piece of play-acting and that secretly she was filled with a fierce determination to get her own way,

Vance, apparently unmoved by the display, stood in the doorway for a moment before departing and said pointedly, 'Remember, Esther, you promised to do this. You're not on any account to let yourself be talked out of it.'

I nodded, wishing he hadn't brought up the wretched subject again. Apart from that, Averil's contemptuous suggestion that Vance had selected me as a means of paying her out sounded only too feasible and I heartily wished I could get out of the whole miserable business, yet a hard, stubborn core of pride kept me from refusing on the spot. Vance would assume that I had weakly capitulated to placate Averil and I also realized that if I were to back out it would be an admission of failure. After all, it was in the hope of escaping this dreary lack of

self-confidence that I had made this shout break with the life at Wentworth & Judd's. To model the Josephine gown for that terrible Monsieur Lacrohc would be for me a milestone, a symbol that I was putting the dismal, monotonous past behind me, and taking my first adventurous steps in a new way of life.

When Vance had gone AverU turned to me with slow deliberation. 'So Eric was right! Only I didn't dream just how far things had gone!'

'What on earth do you mean, Averil?'

Her hands trembling with rage, she rummaged in

her handbag and waved a scrap of paper in front of my eyes. 'Read that/ she grated, 'and then don't be surprised I came back so quickly!'

Dazedly I took the paper and read the short laconic message. Esther and Vance having wonderful time. Don't hurry back. Eric.'

'But what on earth does it mean?' Then I felt my heart sink as I remembered the flash of Eric's binoculars on the day I had rescued Rodney and his kitten from the pear-tree. So he had seen me fall into Vance's arms and had drawn his own conclusions and out of a malicious pleasure in causing trouble had exaggerated the whole stupid incident.

'Well?' she demanded, snatching the cable back. 'Don't stand there doing the bewildered act. You've the nerve to ask me what does it mean! You didn't waste much time, did you, as soon as my back was turned.'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous, Averil,' I said wearily. 'You must know how malicious Eric is by now. He'd seize any opportunity to make trouble.'

'Perhaps,' she snapped, 'but the fact that Vance wants you to model the Josephine gown at the charity aflFair proves that there's more in it than simple mischief-making on Eric's part.' Angrily she stuffed the slip of paper back into her purse. 'I might have expected something

like this. It's natural you should be keen to acquire a husband, I suppose. But aren't you rather hitching your wagon to a star when it comes to Vance?' Her eyes travelled over me consideringly. 'I'm not saying this to be unkind, Esther, but surely you must realize that someone from that office of yours would be much more your style. I mean, do you really see yourself as standing a chance with

a man like Vance, or running a home like Ashmore?' She laughed shortly.

'Look, Averil,' I said patiently, 'strange as it may seem to you, I haven't the slightest desire to acquire Vance. I haven't the remotest interest in him. In fact, if anything, I dislike him intensely.'

'I've heard that one before,' Averil scoffed. 'It's the way girls talk when they're falling head-over-heels in love with a man.'

'But I'm not,' I insisted, although feeling an uncomfortable twinge at her words. Was I really sincere in insisting that I had no interest in Vance Ashmore?

'Anyway,' Averil pursued, 'this whole business can very easily be settled. Tell Vance that you don't feel up to taking it on. He'll believe you. I mean, it won't be easy for someone like you to face crowds and cameras and general excitement. I mean, after all, you were only going to be a stand-in anyway.'

'This is going to be the classic example of the stand-in getting the star's part,' I replied calmly.

Averil's eyes opened wide. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'That I've no intention of telling Vance something that is completely untrue. I'm going to model the Josephine dress whether you like it or not. Lacroix is a marvellous designer: never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd wear one of his creations. It will be something wonderful in my life; something to remember all my life, even if,' I ended dryly, 'I end up marrying someone from the office, as you so

depressingly put it. No, Averil, you'll not deprive me of this: I'm just not stepping down this time. All my life I've given you the limelight, retiring discreetly into the background if there was even the smallest

chance that I might deflect notice from you. Well, this time things are going to be 'different. For once the limelight is going to be firmly fixed on me and nothing you can do or say will make me change my mind.'

I saw her mouth fall open a little at the shock of my words. 'What on earth has come over you, Esther?' she asked with a hint of unease, 'it's not at all like you to talk in that wild way.'

'It's simply that the old days are over. When we were at home it was always you who got first place because you were younger and better-looking than I was.'

'You mean you're jealous of me,' Averil said contemptuously. 'Don't try to disguise it under all these vapourings about it being a wonderful occasion in your life. Why, you're not even right for it. How do you think you'll look with your features and colouring in one of those early nineteenth-century gowns: you simply won't be able to do it justice, only you're too pigheaded to see it for yourself.'

'Perhaps, but you forget Josephine was plain too,' I said quietly. 'I should prove quite suitable on that score at any rate.'

'So you refuse to give up the idea, Esther?' Averil blazed. 'I thought, goodness knows, I'd made myself clear enough, but evidently you're too thick-skinned to take a hint. Very well then, I'll try to make it perfectly plain. I want you to leave Cherry Cottage. Now that I'm back there's no need for you to stay on any longer and Mother will need you anyway.'

Shock at her words made me murmur mechanically, 'But Aunt Mavis has come to live with Mother. Our cousin George has gone abroad to take up some sort of job,'

‘Apart from the fact that I don’t care two hoots what Cousin George had decided to do may I point out that Aunt Mavis is for ever bewailing the fact that he has never held down a job for more than a few months at a time. I guarantee he’ll be back on her doorstep in a few weeks, and of course she’ll drop Mother like a hot potato when her beloved George is in question.’

What Averil said was true, I realized, and it must have been only wishful thinking that had made me think that there could be anything permanent in Mother’s new arrangement.

‘Anyway, that’s all beside the point,’ she continued irritably. ‘You intended to return to work as ^on as I came home again, didn’t you? Well, I’m not preventing you. In fact, as far as I’m concerned, the sooner you go the better.’

I took a tray and began to clear off the remnants of the party in an effort to conceal the agitation I felt. Why did I feel such a devastating reaction at the news? I wondered. After all, it had been accepted that as soon as she returned from the cruise I should take up my old life again, but now that it had come to the point where I must leave I found that the knowledge had shaken me badly.

‘When do you want me to go?’ I asked, trying to keep the revealing tremble out of my voice as I turned and walked towards the kitchen with a tray laden with the debris of the party.

‘How about tomorrow?’ Averil replied coolly. ‘There’s a train in the morning: you should be able to catch it quite easily. I’ll go up to Ashmore House fairly early and when I come back I’U expect you to

be gone. It’s really the most sensible scheme and will save us both embarrassment: don’t you agree?’

Stunned, I laid down the tray and turned to her. ‘But’ you can’t really mean you want me to leave tomorrow.’

‘I mean every word I say: I don’t want you here any more, Esther, so

let's face it.'

There was the sound of a furtive movement at the top of the stairs and a little half-stifled gasp of dismay.

'Is that you, Rodney?' Averil called sharply. 'What are you doing, sneaking about up there? You have no right to be listening in to what doesn't concern you.'

Rodney's pale face appeared around the bend in the stairs. 'What do you mean about Aunt Esther being gone when you get back from the Ashmores?'' he asked apprehensively. 'Do you mean she's going to leave us?'

'I mean Aunt Esther and I have talked things over and have decided it would be best if she went home. You didn't expect she'd stay on for ever, now did you, dear?' she asked with an air of reasonableness.

Rodney didn't answer, evidently aware that it would be useless for him to argue with his mother, and I heard the sound of his footsteps retreating on the creaking old boards as he returned to his room.

Averil yawned elaborately. 'By the way, Esther, for the night you can take the room next to Rodney's. I feel frightfully tired, so the sooner you get your things moved out the better.'

It was her way of letting me know that the subject was now closed. Tomorrow I would leave Cherry Cottage, and that was that: there could be no appeal, even if my pride would have allowed me to make one.

I cleared the table and stacked the dishes for Mrs. McAlister to wash in the morning; I swept up the broken glass and china and as much as was possible restored the room to order, but all traces of the debacle could not be hidden. At any rate, I thought a little wryly, Mrs. McAlister would derive a certain satisfaction in discovering that her prognostications had proved correct.

Afterwards it didn't take me long to collect my few possessions from Averil's room and take over the bedroom with the dormer window that overlooked the front garden. In its own minute way this room was even prettier than Averil's with its steeply sloping roof and dainty muslin curtains and time-worn oak furniture. However, this would be my last night at Cherry Cottage and I found it impossible to take any pleasure in my new domain.

Later, when Averil had retired to her room and silence had fallen on the cottage, I lay awake. At the open dormer window the muslin curtains billowed: in the silver light of the crescent moon they looked like iridescent butterflies' wings and I caught the scent of the sweet-smelling borders of velvety wallflowers that lined each side of the patch. Why did I feel so stricken at the knowledge that tomorrow I would be leaving Warefield? Surely it wasn't simply the idea of returning to the office: from the beginning I had known that sooner or later I would have to go back to some sort of work—even if it were not to return to Wentworth & Judd's. Nor was it even disappointment at the thought that now I would not be able to take part in Mrs. Ashmore's charity show.

I lay in bed and watched the clouds pass over the moon and suddenly I realized it was because—whether

I liked it or not I had fallen in love with Vance. It accounted for the painful stricken feeling I had had at my heart when I realized we would not meet again. But should I not be glad that that mocking glance would never again rake me with silent ridicule? For an instant the brilliant silver moonlight blurred as tears welled into my eyes and slid on to the pillow.

It was then I heard the sound of the wicket gate creak open and I felt a stupid wild elation at the notion that Vance might have returned. It as quickly subsided as I realized how improbable the idea was. Even if by some magic he could have become aware of my peremptory dismissal, did I imagine he was going to ride up to rescue me like a knight of old? No, the only reason why Vance might return at this hour would be for a clandestine meeting with Averil. I felt a sudden revulsion as I

remembered the photograph. Were these the sort of stolen meetings they had indulged in while Clive was alive, before Vance had, so conveniently, dispatched him to the Middle East and his death ? How could I possibly love such a man ?

I asked myself, knowing, at the same time, that it was impossible for me not to love him, for it was as though a tide too strong to be conquered was sweeping me into a maelstrom of strange sweet emotions that I both loved and dreaded.

I crept quickly out of bed and crossed to the window. But it was not Vance's tall form I caught sight of. Instead, I saw the figure of a small boy close the gate carefully and dart furtively along the lane in the direction of the village. There could be no mistaking Rodney's podgy outlines and for a moment I stared in stupefaction at the spot where he had disappeared. Then, snatching up a dressing-gown and pushing my

feet into slippers, I hurried from the room. I had been too wrapped up in my own woes to hear the tell-tale groaning of the boards as Rodney slunk from his room and now I took care as I tiptoed past Averil's bedroom; I dreaded any more histrionics from that quarter.

As soon as I was clear of the house I darted down the path and wrenched open the gate, but already Rodney was out of sight around the bend in the lane. What on earth was he doing, wandering about the countryside at this hour of the night? I wondered, as I broke into a run. One thing was clear, the sooner I got him back the better. To be found tearing along a muddy lane in Warefield, dressed in nothing more than a kmg blue dressing-gown and feathered slippers, would certainly cause unfavourable comment in the village.

As I raced around a curve in the lane and came in view of the main road, I was in time to see Rodney stepping into a car that had drawn up. Panting, I ran the last few steps and was on the point of yanking him out abruptly when I heard Bob Pritchard's voice say in amazed tones, 'And what are you two doing, running about the countryside at this time of night?'

As he eyed me I became conscious that I was panting and dishevelled, the hem of my dressiug-gown mud-spattered where I had slipped and stumbled in some rain-filled pools. I found myself giggling helplessly at the almost shocked expression that had replaced Bob's initial surprise.

It was Rodney who clarified the situation. Perched on the back seat, he said dismally, 'Aunt Esther's going home tomorrow and I thought if I ran away she might stay on to look for me and then perhaps not go at all

in the end. But I didn't mean to go far/ he assured us eamesdy. 'I was going to hide in the barn up at the farm until she'd missed her train.'

Bob Pritchard, however, didn't seem particularly interested in the latter part of Rodney's extraordinary statement. 'What's this about your leaving tomorrow, Esther?' he asked abruptly.

As I hesitated wondering how I should reply he said quickly, 'Hop in and I'll drive you back to the cottage. Can't have you two haring about the countryside at this time of night.' But it was plain that he was only making conversation.

He turned into the lane and in the driving mirror I caught a glimpse of his eyes, frowningly intent, as he asked again, 'Why are you leaving tomorrow, Esther?'

This time I was prepared and answered lightly, 'Oh, I was to return anyway when Averh returned from abroad.'

'But isn't she here sooner than expected ? According to my calculations she had another week yet to revel in the tropical sun and romantic moonlight.'

'She decided to cut her holiday short,' I said briefly.

He drew the car up in front of the cottage gate and, turning, leaned his arms on the wheel and surveyed me with his penetrating glance.

‘Methinks I scent dirty work at the crossroads. Averil was wildly keen on this cruise: she wouldn’t have cut it short unless something pretty cataclysmic had occurred from her point of view—’

‘Rodney, you’d better go in now,’ I said quickly, ‘Slip upstairs quietly without waking your mother.’

His eyelids were drooping with fatigue and wordlessly he did as he was told.

‘There is only one consideration that would cause

Averil to tear back in such a hurry,’ Boli went on, his eyes on Rodney’s departing back, *and that would be the possibility that Vance might be slipping from between her fingers. Well, have I been correct in my diagnosis of the case?’

I glanced away uncomfortably as I remembered Averil’s accusation that I was deliberately trying to acquire Vance Ashmore.

‘We can be frank with one another, Esther,’ he said quietly. ‘You see, I know quite a lot about Averil. It’s not as if I were a nosey, interfering stranger.’ He drummed his fingers on the wheel as though considering what he was/ about to say, then went on abruptly. ‘At one time I thought that Averil might marry me. Looking back now I realize that it was ridiculously naive of me to imagine that someone like your sister might settle down contentedly in what she considers a one-horse town like Warefield, but when a man’s in love he won’t accept the obvious. I expect it amused her when she came here first to think how easily she could make me fall under her spell. It passed the time, but afterwards it became a bore for her—you see, I was serious, and when it struck her that I would make a nuisance of myself by hanging around when she had her sights set on Vance she didn’t waste time in letting me know exactly where I stood as far as she was concerned.’

His face looked grim and he laughed bitterly. ‘Let’s say that when it came to my dismissal she didn’t mince her words. But then why should she? In her estimation I was a futureless, unambitious G.P. with

nothing to offer her but a hideous red villa. For the rest of my life I would be occupied in nothing more interesting than coping with the local aches and pains.'

Why was he telling me this? I wondered, for instinctively I knew that he was not the type of man who would wear his heart on his sleeve. He had a reason for making these revelations, and I became suddenly conscious of the close intimacy of the car: it was as if we were isolated in a little self-sufficient world surrounded by darkness and moonlight while through the open window came the sweet smells of the country at night time.

As though aware of my reaction, he said, 'I suppose you've been wondering why I'm telling you all this. It's because although it's clear you've no intention of divulging why you're leaving, I think I can guess the reason. I'd say that Averil has been tipped off that Vance might be taking more than a passing interest in you and characteristically has picked a flaming row with you and is now chucking you out into the cold snow.'

When I didn't answer, he went on, 'Anyway, the reason for your leaving doesn't really matter: all that counts is that you've made up your mind to go. You intend to leave Warefield tomorrow, isn't that so?'

I nodded.

'Look, Esther, I've a proposition to make. I've needed a receptionist for ages. That old gargoyle of a housekeeper of mine has been acting as a sort of makeshift one, but it's all rather too much for her. Would you consider taking on the job? I could get lodgings for you quite easily in Warefield and later on, perhaps, if you got to like me a little, or as they say in the old-fashioned books, if you should ever feel for me something stronger than mere friendship, perhaps.' He stopped. 'I know it sounds a bit crude, but fundamentally I think you and I are similar sort of people.'

We're both sensible, down-to-earth types and even though we

mightn't be madly in love still we could pull along together and make a good life.'

Confused and taken by surprise as I w[^], yet I couldn't but feel a little stab to my heart at his words. Sensible Esther who might some day turn into sensible, competent Mrs. Pritchard, adroit at dealing with hysterical mothers and their children, patiently waiting the meals until my husband returned from an emergency case, always on tap in times of crisis! It was somehow mortifying that Bob Pritchard with his keen doctor's eye had immediately recognized the category I would fall into.

'Thanks, Bob,' I said a little drearily. 'Thanks, that is, for the first part of your proposition. But somehow I've a feeling the second part wouldn't work out.'

He patted my hand. 'WeU, let's take things as they come,' he gave a sudden disarming grin. 'You will think over this receptionist business, won't you? I'll admit that I have an ulterior motive in offering it to you, but the fact is that I'm badly in need of someone to take things in hand and as you've had office experience you shouldn't find it too difficult. At any rate I promise to be an easy-going boss.'

As I got out of the car I thanked him as warmly as I could, but the elation I had felt at first at the idea of being able to stay on at Warefield had evaporated. I would never marry Bob Pritchard, I knew deep in my heart, and wondered a little wryly what my mother would say were she to know that once again I had turned down what she would consider an excellent opportunity of settling myself in life. Not a brilliant marriage, of course, but vastly superior to being left on the shelf, she would consider it.

ⓂThink it over/ Bob called as I moved away, Ⓜand let me know tomorrow so that I can make arrangements for you. By far the best arrangement, of course, would be for you to stay at the house, but Mrs. Purvis is a frightful old puritan and would probably throw a fit if you stayed under my roof even for a night.'

He waved and drove off and I stood at the gate for a moment feeling

the soft night air about my face. So Bob Pritchard had offered me a job with a view to marriage, as it were, yet on neither side was there any elation at the idea. Had it been Averil how different his attitude would have been—^but then I was only second-best. Were Bob and I ever to marry it would be second-best for both of us, for there was no longer any use in deceiving myself, I was deeply in love with Vance Ashmore, whether I wanted to be or not.

Slowly I walked up the path, dreading the coming day. As I opened the door and tiptoed upstairs I was hoping that Averil, tired out by her travels, might have slept through all the excitement.

I peeped into Rodney's room and found that he was already asleep with Marmalade cosily curled up on the foot of his bed. I turned away and went along the corridor to my room and as I did so Averil's door opened and she appeared, pulling about her shoulders a chiffon negligee in pale mauve. Her hair tumbled about her shoulders in disorder, she looked exceedingly beautiful and the thought struck me —^Bob Pritchard disapproved of Averil, but would it be possible for him to cease loving her?

She opened her azure eyes wide, ^What on earth is going on? Was that a car I heard drive away?'

I hesitated. If possible, I wanted to keep her in

ignorance of Rodney's escapade. The fact that he had attempted to run away because I was leaving would hardly ingratiate him with his mother, I knew. It was Bob Pritchard,' I said carefully. 'He was on his way back from an emergency call.*

Averil, now fully awake, fastened the sash of her negligee about her waist with a decisive little tug. *And drew up at Cherry Cottage for tea and crumpets, I presume! Really, Esther, what kind of a fool do you take me for! All in all you seem to have been leading a fairly hectic sort of life since I left. Perhaps it's as well I came back when I did—^before you have the whole male population of Warefield dropping in at all hours of the night. And I do wish you had conducted your affairs a

little more discreetly. Mrs. McAlister is an inveterate gossip, so it*s as well you're clearing out tomorrow or you wouldn't have a scrap of reputation left.*

I turned away wearily. It was impossible to argue with Averil and I was too tired myself by this time to attempt to get her to see reason.

'You are going tomorrow, aren't you?*' she asked sharply, with a note of apprehension in her voice. 'I mean, Bob Pritchard didn't call to suggest—'

'Suggest what?'

She shrugged. 'Oh, some alternative arrangement, perhaps.'

Her attitude aroused my curiosity. 'And if he had, what difference would it make?'

For a moment she looked taken aback. 'No difference, of course. You're at perfect liberty to do what you want—as long as you leave here. But for your own sake perhaps it would be as well if you made a clean

break. For one thing, it's stupid to linger when a situation is no longer feasible and you might be only storing up—' she paused, 'unhappiness for yourself.'

I nodded. 'Exactly what I feel too, Averil. No, don't worry. I'm going tomorrow. I'm leaving Warefield for good.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

NEXT morning, Averil left for Ashmore House soon after breakfast. During the meal she chatted brightly about the cruise and I could see she was already rehearsing the more innocuous incidents for Mrs. Ashmore's entertainment. She had a gift for mimicry and exercised it to the full in describing her more eccentric shipboard acquaintances. In fact, from her manner, it was hard to believe that the scene on the

previous night had really taken place. At the same time I was under no illusion that she had deviated from her original intention that I should be clear of Cherry Cottage by the time she returned from visiting Mrs. Ashmore.

*By the way,' she said casually, when breakfast was over and Mrs. McAlister had cleared the table, 'when I get up to the Ashmores' I'll phone for a taxi to collect you. rU make your excuses to Vance—I mean, about your not staying on for the pagtant of famous women. I'll simply say something vague—^something about your being needed at home, perhaps. After all, it's simply a matter of time before Mother will be screaming for you to come back and you wouldn't have been staying on much longer anyway. So, except for missing the charity affair, things would have worked out pretty much this way in the long run.'

I got the impression that she was reassuring herself and that, thinking things over, had become a little apprehensive about how Vance would receive the

news. I felt that she was belatedly assuring herself that her explanations for my absence would be accepted.

When she had gone I went into the kitchen to find Mrs. McAlister washing up in uncharacteristic silence, and I wondered how much she had overheard. After all, the cottage was so very tiny and Averil's ringing tones must have carried quite clearly.

Before going upstairs to pack I stood at the latticed window for a moment. A clear blue sky outlined the apple trees and I saw bursts of pale pink blossom flutter to the ground.

Mrs. McAlister, following my gaze, sighed as she reached for a drying-towel. 'One doesn't notice the days passing: the blossom will be gone in no time, and if you ask me, this is the very nicest time of the year. When the fruit comes the orchard wHl be full of small boys—young Phillips now, I can't count how many times I've chased him out, but back he comes, as bold as brass—as soon as the green apples are out.'

She hesitated, then said carefully, 'It's a pity Mrs. Etherton turned up when she did and saw the mess those boys made of the living-room, for no doubt if she had stayed away a bit longer Mr. Vance would have got the cabinet repaired and things shipshape again before she came back. Then perhaps she wouldn't have been so upset.' She coughed discreetly and eyed me slyly as she polished a cup.

So she knew that it had been arranged that I was to depart!

'I'm going home, Mrs. McAlister,' I said flatly.

She nodded, tight-lipped. 'So I gathered from something I overheard Mrs. Etherton say. Her voice was that loud I couldn't help hearing,' she added defensively. 'Well, all I can say. Miss Esther, is that it's a

crying shame that you should have to go. Not, mind you, that I didn't warn you about young Phillips,' she put in virtuously, 'but all the same it is a bit hard that you're leaving—just when we were all getting on fine too. Even young Rodney has improved a lot since you've come, I notice. But I'll be plain with you, I never got on so well with Mrs. Etherton, she's a bit moody for my taste, although I will say this for her, she never interferes with the running of the house, but then, to be quite candid, she doesn't take much interest in domestic things. But then why should she, when she's going to marry Mr. Ashmore? He has a staff to run Ashmore House and she won't have to wet her fingers.'

Again I caught her glance at me covertly. How much had she guessed concerning the situation between Averil and myself? I wondered. I had no intention, however, of giving her an excuse for gossip and said as brightly as I could, 'I'd better get my things packed: my train leaves in about an hour.'

'How are you getting to the station?'

'Oh, my sister's phoning for a taxi when she gets to the Ashmores.'

'No doubt she will,' Mrs. McAlister answered sardonically. 'All the same, many a time I've said to Mrs. Etherton that she should have a

phone put in here. It's a lonesome wee place at night, and if anything hap[^]

pened,' she said ominously, 'there'd be no way of getting help.'

'That will hardly concern me now,' I said ruefully. 'And when my sister marries she'll get all the protection she needs, I should imagine, at Ashmore House.'

Mis. McAlister sniffed. 'That is' as may be. Well, everyone to his own taste, but if it was me I wouldn't

live under the same roof with Mr. Eric for anything. You wouldn't know what he'd be up to from one minute to the next. He fair gives me the creeps, so he does. But then Mrs. Etherton's able for him, for I've often heard them at it hammer and tongs. But there. I'm holding you up with my gossip,' she said, bustling into the sitting-room and beginning to dust energetically.

There was no longer any excuse for putting off my departure and slowly I climbed the narrow stairs and began to pack.

I was glad Rodney was at school, for with a child's elasticity he would soon forget the previous night's adventures. Soon I would revert to my original status in his mind—Aunt Esther whO' stayed with Grandma and to whom from time to time he went on rather tiresome duty visits.

When I had packed Mrs. McAlister called me down for tea and apple tart. As she sagely remarked, a person always needed something in their stomach before travelling. The hands of the old grandfather clock seemed to spin around with increasing speed until I was seated in the taxi with Mrs. McAlister waving laclirymosely from the doorstep. I had a last glimpse of her roly-poly figure before the taxi rounded the bend in the land and Cherry Cottage with its Hansel and Gretel gables and roofs and air of having been transported directly from a German fairy-tale, was out of sight,

"When I arrived at the station it was to find that I needn't have urged

the taxi-driver to hurry. I was in plenty of time and when I had purchased my ticket I strolled along the platform and seated myself on one of the grimy-looking benches. There were only a few

people in the station and I soon became aware that a figure with his back to me at the luggage counter was vaguely familiar. When he turned I was not surprised to see that it was Bob. As he caught sight of me he came along the platform with a quick stride carrying a large box. ^Esther! YouVe not leaving, are you?^ His tone of concern warmed my heart. It was good to know that one peison at least regretted my departure, I thought bitterly, as he sat down on the bench putting the box on the seat beside him.

My first glow of warmth in seeing a familiar face gave way to regret that I hadn't been able to slip away quietly without meeting him. It was clear that explanations would be expected, and something of the irritation I felt must have shown in my face, for he regarded me closely for a moment or two. ®Deceitful girl I So you were going to sneak off without giving poor old Bob Pritchard an answer to his proposition I Do you think that's fair?'

Well, no, I suppose it isn't. Bob,' I admitted guiltily, hut I really didn't think there would be much point in discussing it. I know how persuasive you can be and in spite of my better judgement I might be tempted to take you up on the offer,'

He raised his hands in mock despair. ^How typically feminine! Why on earth, my good girl, sho'uldn't you allow yourself to be persuaded, or have you simply taken an overwhelming dislike to both Warefield and myself?'

Wo, of course notd

®Then why won't you take the job? I won't fly off the handle if you forget an appointment or if your typing isn't up to scratch. Mis, Purvis has me well

trained: I'll be a most docile and amenable employer, I can assure you

of that.'

Impulsively I laid a hand on his arm. 'Dear Bob, I know you will.' And then I added with an attempt to match his lightness of tone, 'Also, may I say my memory is very good and my typing very much up to scratch.'

Before I could withdraw my hand he caught it tightly between his. 'Then why are you in such a hurry to leave?'

I hesitated. The platform was almost deserted and as I turned my head the gleaming lines stretched into the distance looking as bleak and depressing as my own future. My train would be arriving soon along these unwavering austere lines that were so symbolic of the gloom that lay awaiting me and I gave a little shiver as though an icy hand had touched my heart,

'You're in love with Vance Ashmore, isn't that it? But of course you don't see yourself as standing an earthly chance with him—not while Aveil has him on the hook. So you're running out. Yes?'

I kept my head turned away without answering.

'But surely, Esther, you must know what a dreadful mistake you're making in allowing yourself to fall for a man like Vance. There are too many unexplained incidents in his life and he's not the type of man who believes in explaining his actions, so naturally all sorts of rumours have sprung up around him.'

'What sort of rumours?'

He shrugged. 'Oh, the usual old ones. That he had his eye on Eric's inheritance and caused a convenient accident when they were out shooting one day. Of course I know Eric isn't trustworthy. Still, as they say, there's no smoke without fire. As well, apart from that.

the circumstances of his friendship with Averil have caused an awful lot of talk. As I say, he has never been a man given to explaining his actions, and one thing has led to another and gradually a sort of

mystery has grown up about Averil's husband. A woman in the firm who was down on business spoke indiscreetly in a local pub and before you knew what had happened whispering was going on that Vance had dis^ posed of competition. Apart from that, he's just not the type of man that a girl like you should fall for.'

ⓂA girl like me,' I repeated a little bitterly. 'Perhaps you don't really know an awful lot about me.'

'Enough to know that it's not in character for you to act the coward.'

I swung round on him, 'What do you mean?'

'Simply that you're running away. Why haven't you the guts to stay on and start afresh here? You admit that you're competent and have plenty of office experience. There are lots of things you could do here —'

'I don't want to turn into another Sybil Wilson,' I said shortly.

He smiled. 'So you've heard of poor Sybil?'

'Yes, I have,' I answered quickly. 'I've heard of her doghke devotion and that she doesn't care what she does as long as she's somewhere in the vicinity of Vance Ashmore and that she wears glasses and— and—' I was on the verge of tears,

'And has a face like a full moon,' he concluded solemnly.

I laughed shakily, 'All right, I know I'm not being sensible, but when one falls in love it's difficult to take a detached view of things.'

'But you will in time, Esther, Don't run away now

or you'll always be looking back and thinking of what might have been, whereas if you stay on you will, in time, be able to watch Averil and Vance march up to the altar without turning a hair.'

'I told you you were persuasive,' I said ruefully,

‘You mean you’ll give up this idea of leaving Ware-* field?’ he said eagerly.

‘You paint such a gloomy picture of the future that I think I’d better give your plan a trial at least.’

‘Good. Then it’s time you and I stopped sitting here on this hard old bench philosophising.’ He jumped to his feet and catching me by the hand hustled me out of the station. ‘You’ll never guess what’s in the parcel,’ he said as he slung it into the back seat.

I shook my head.

He regarded me with an air of mock solemnity. ‘All right, now give you three guesses,*

‘Bandages, perhaps.’

‘Just because I’m a doctor must you show so little imagination! Ridiculous creature! If this box were full of bandages I’d have enough dressings to mummify the whole countryside. Actually it’s an electric blanket for Mrs. Purvis’s birthday. Accidentally-on-purpose she let the news drop a few days ago—although to be quite frank I didn’t think that people as monstrous as my housekeeper had birthdays. However, I took the hint and decided to splurge. The problem was finding a suitable present. Somehow perfume and negligees didn’t seem to suit her. And then I had a brainwave: I remembered that she’s always wailing and moaning about the cold, although I’m not surprised, as I’d say she has ice-water in her veins. Anyway, I sent to London for a super-duper blanket and

it’s arrived today, which is very convenient, considering—’ ^ .

‘^Considering you’ll have to placate her. She’ll object to me. Isn’t that what you’re thinking of?’

He looked at me a little ruefully. ‘Well, I don’t think she’ll exactly

welcome you with open arms. She's used to ruling the roost and a young girl will put rather a spoke in her wheel. I suppose she may have a heart of gold,' he said dryly as he started the car, 'but I haven't detected it so far. However, I'll take you back now to the house and announce you and show you the ropes. I know it won't take you long to get into things. After that we'll find you somewhere to live nearby. Don't look so apprehensive,' he said quickly. 'I'm merely exaggerating. I'll bet you anything that once you get to know each other you'll get on like a house on fire,'

His words did nothing to reassure me. I could imagine Mrs. Purvis's reactions when she was introduced to me in my guise as the new secretary. I began to wish heartily that I'd taken that train. Perhaps at any other time the thought of his housekeeper's attitude wouldn't have affected me so much, but I was shattered and confused by the events of the previous night and my departure that morning. Everything had happened so quickly that it had been impossible for me to find any equilibrium.

Mrs. Purvis's reception proved to be every bit as disastrous as I had expected. When Bob had introduced us—an introduction which, considering what I knew of his attitude towards his housekeeper, showed surprising composure—she nodded stiffly and said, 'Well, I'm sure, Dr. Bob, you'd be the best judge as to whether you need a secretary or not, but I always

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understood that you were satisfied with the way I ran the place. I was always one for taking messages no matter what time of the day or night it was, and goodness knows I put up with a great deal considering I never know when you'll be in for meals. But, as I say, who am I to speak? It's not my place to criticize anything you may do or think.'

She turned and surveyed me, her eyes boring me with gimlet-like intensity, and I saw in them not the smallest hint of possible friendship. 'I'm sure,' she said stiffly, 'if you're willing to pull with me

I'll pull with you. I was never one to make trouble and don't intend to do so now, although, as I say, I wasn't consulted about this. But then Dr. Bob has never been in the habit of bringing young ladies back with him—not until now,' she added with significant emphasis.

It was plain along what lines her mind was travelling and I glanced at Bob beseechingly.

'Oh, Miss Carson is staying in Warefield,' he said hastily, 'and I'm very lucky to get her. She's used to office work and I believe is an excellent typist.' I could see he was trying to put it on a purely businesslike basis to reassure Mrs. Purvis's already heated imagination concerning our probable relationship.

She clasped her hands firmly in front of her apron and sniffed disbelievingly. 'Well, that's as may be, but if you ask me, the young lady doesn't look like a secretary.'

I saw Bob glance over at me with a merry twinkle in his eye and I had to turn away to hide a smile. Little as Mrs. Purvis guessed it I found her diagnosis extremely flattering. It was a change for me to be considered a dark horse and not at all unpleasant to be looked on as a femme fatale.

'I'll show Miss Carson the office and brief her on her duties,' Bob said very seriously.

Still bearing a look of strong disapproval, Mrs. Purvis nodded coldly and departed for the back of the house.

Bob's office proved to be a tiny room adjoining his surgery and I found myself looking with dismay at the heaps of papers and general chaos that he seemed to have accumulated around him.

'Now you can see how badly I need a Girl Friday,' he said ruefully.

'You certainly do,' I said severely. 'And now if you'll disappear. I'll try and get some law and order established here. If Miss Palmer saw your

filing system she'd throw a fit! '

'In that case I'm glad it's not Miss Palmer—^whoever she is—who's taking on the job of reorganizing my life.'

I had taken off my coat and was preparing to set to work, and glanced up at the tender tone of his voice. 'Now, Bob,' I said, warningly, 'don't you remember this was to be a completely platonic arrangement,' but before I could prevent him he came over and kissed me lightly on the forehead and said ruefully, 'You're a hard-hearted, unfeeling female. After all, isn't a man entitled to his softer moments?'

'Not during business hours,' I said briskly, and with a sigh of mock resignation he departed, shutting the surgery door after him.

For the next hour I was engrossed in trying to create some sort of law and order out of the bundles of papers, but I realized to^ my dismay that his affairs were in an even more chaotic condition than they had appeared at first and several times I had to call him

to elucidate some peculiarly puzzling entries. ^After all, I'm a doctor, not a computer,' he said grumblingly when I had for about the fourth time roused him out of his lair where he appeared to be engaged in reading a medical journal.

It was just then the phone rang.

'Put on your best phone voice and announce that this is Dr. Pritchard's residence,' Bob whispered teasingly as I picked up the receiver.

Ignoring him, I listened as an agitated voice asked if Dr. Pritchard was there and if so would he come immediately to Ashmore House as there had been an accident. The speaker identified herself as Mrs. Ashmore.

I glanced up in alarm and clasped my hand over the receiver. 'Bob, there's been an accident at Ashmore House and it seems to be something fairly serious.'

Bob crossed the room swiftly and took the phone from, my hand and I heard him snap some questions into the phone before laying it down.

His face looked grim. 'I'm afraid I've bad news for you, Esther,' he said quietly. 'It seems Aveil has met with an accident, but I can't make head or tail of what that silly Mis. Ashmore was saying. She sounded all garbled and confused, so I don't know exactly how serious it is. We'll go up there at once,'

He strode quickly into his. surgery and grabbed a bag, and I marvelled at his air of competence when he was engaged on what was his true vocation in comparison to the state of helpless chaos in which he kept his office.

'Don't look so worried,' he said when he came out. 'It's probably nothing serious. It's impossible to get

sense from that woman. It's a pity she didn't let Sybil come to the phone if she's no chocolate-box beauty, but she's immensely capable in an off-beat sort of way,' he said as he slung the case into the car and we drove

swiftly towards Ashmore House.

'According to Averil, Miss Ashmore uses Sybil as rather a dogsbody,' I said, 'and she doesn't mind because—'

'Because it means she can be near her beloved Vance. By the way,' he said with a rueful smile, 'we always seem to be getting back to Vance, don't we? I think in future we should eradicate him from all our conversations. Anyway, he's not my favourite subject.'

In spite of all he could say to reassure me I found myself more and more apprehensive as we drove up the avenue. Suppose Averil was badly hurt? Perhaps crippled for life? Somehow it was impossible to imagine her without that joyous vitality and beautiful, perfect figure. How would Averil, who loved life so much and all that it held, reconcile herself to perhaps permanent invalidism?

When we reached the house the door stood open and a short lumpish girl with rimless spectacles and pale blonde hair in a fraulein-like coronet that served to emphasise the round, almost spherical lines of her colourless face advanced hurriedly.

‘What happened?’ Bob asked impatiently.

The girl blinked her pale eyes behind the rimless spectacles. ‘She tripped, I suppose. At any rate we found her lying at the foot of the stairs—As she spoke she was leading the way indoors and across the hall towards the wide oak staircase when Mrs. Ashmore appeared on the scene. She looked wide-eyed and anxious and for once her elegantly coiffured hair

had escaped from its perfection of line and was puffed up unbecomingly on one side giving her face a lopsided look. ‘Oh, Dr. Pritchard I’m so glad you’re here,’ she began. ‘We’ve been quite distracted—’

‘What happened?’ he demanded.

‘It was Averil, She fell on the stairs. I don’t know how it happened. You see, her dress has a train—you may have heard that we’re holding a pageant of famous women through the ages—dresses by Lacroix — ^here at Ashmore, the proceeds to go to the Ashmore Youth Centre—’

‘Where is she?’ he asked, obviously irritated at Mrs. Ashmore’s involved explanation.

‘Vance carried her up to my room. It’s the nearest,’ As she spoke she pointed upwards to a door which could be seen from the hallway.

Bob turned away and was about to mount the stairs when she again detained him. ‘You see, she v/as lying just here, quite stiU and pale as death, and none of us knew quite what to do. Then luckily Vance came in and—’

.But I felt I could wait no longer in suspense. I ran up the stairs and

was hurrying across the wide landing towards the door which stood ajar when I was halted by the trill of Aveil's unmistakable laughter. Not amused laughter, however. It was the brittle tinkle she used when she was really angry. Whatever happened it was obvious she was not badly hurt, and suddenly it struck me that if I burst in on her looking apprehensive, she would be more annoyed than gratified by my attention—especially when as far as she knew I was at that time well on my journey home, T paused to smooth my hair and generally tidy up, and as I did so Averil's clear high voice said distinctly.

'But you arranged to put Clive out of my life, didn't you, Vance?'

'Under the circumstances what else could I do?' Vance's deep voice replied. 'A scandal was about the last thing you wanted. It would have been quite disastrous if things had been made public. It was essential that Clive should clear out. Well, was it not satisfactorily accomplished?' His voice sounded brutally direct. 'What more do you want?'

'You needn't try to back out now, Vance,' Averil said, her voice raised shrilly. 'You arranged that Clive should go. You can't drop me now: I won't let you. Do you think I'm so naive as not to know your reasons for—' At this point she lowered her voice, in belated discretion, and I could only hear her words in an undertone.

I backed away from the door until I stood pressed against the carved oak screen at the top of the stairs, staring at the door, confused and horrified. I don't know how long I stood there, my hand pressed to my mouth, feeling numb and shocked. So all I had suspected had been true: Clive had been disposed of. Suddenly the door was thrown open and Vance came out. Our eyes met in a long stare and I saw an expression of slight puzzlement come into his face and was aware that I was pale and shattered-looking. Then he came forward quickly. 'Don't look like that, Esther. She's not badly hurt—of that I'm sure—although of course we can't tell until Bob has seen her. And by the way, my mother rang him ages ago. He should have been here by now.'

'I am here.' Bob's voice held a wealth of suppressed fury, 'And would

have seen the patient more quickly

had Mrs. Ashmore not insisted in describing the accident to me with all details relevant and irrelevant.'

'WeU, you can check up now,' Vance said with a slight smile. He turned away and went downstairs as Bob went into the room: I followed on his heels.

The sound of AverH's laughter, her conversation with Vance and Vance's assurance that he believed she was not badly hurt had left me unprepared for the sight that met me as we entered the room. My heart began to thump with agitation as I saw the ominous stillness of the figure on the canopied bed under the beautiful satin and lace coverlet. Aveil lay motionless, with her eyes closed.

I could hear my own gasp of alarm quite distinctly in the silence of the room.

Bob crossed to the bed and after regarding her closely said, '*And now you can cut out the Lady of the Camellias deathbed scene, AverH.' His voice was sharp, but I was aware that it was relief that made him irritable.

Averil opened her beautiful azure eyes wide and said distinctly and without the slightest trace of illness, 'I certainly idn't mean to give that impression, Bob darling. It's simply that all this doctoring has given you a morbid mind.'

'Morbid nothing! You're just play-acting as usual,' Bob said shortly.

'Now you're being horrid,' Averh said with maddening condescension. 'And to show you how sensible I'm being I can teU you right away that I'm not badly hurt. In fact I think I've only sprained my ankle.'

As he looked at her ankle one part of my mind was noticing the beauty of the room with its pearly grey and pink striped paper, the thick black rugs strewn

on the shining parquet floor and the sapphire blue of the bedcover overlaid by gossamer black lace. This was the room Averil would occupy when she became Mrs. Vance Ashmore.

‘Urn, yes/ Bob straightened slowly. ‘You’ve hurt your ankle all right.’

‘Yes, but with compresses and things you’ll be able to get it in shape again for the pageant, won’t you. Bob?’ she asked. But it was a rhetorical question, I could see, for Averil hadn’t the smallest doubt as to the correctness of her own diagnosis. With an anticipatory smug smile on her full lips she waited for his reassurance.

But Bob kept silent and when the expected words were not forthcoming she glanced up at him with sudden apprehension. ‘Well, aren’t I right?’ she asked frowningly. ‘Why are you standing there looking as if you were on the point of announcing I was at death’s door, or something equally melodramatic?’

‘Without being in the least melodramatic,’ he answered quietly, ‘I’m afraid things aren’t as simple as you imagine them to be. After all, by all accounts, you got rather a bad fall.’

Averil stirred impatiently, then winced and gave a little exclamation of pain. ‘All right, all right, let’s have it, Bob. Don’t stand there looking so glum. As long as I’m all right for this show I don’t mind.’

‘I’m afraid there’s not the smallest possibility of your being all right for some time to come,’ he said quietly. ‘Without going into technical details, Averil, you’ve broken a small bone in your foot and I’m afraid it will definitely incapacitate you for quite a while.’

‘You can’t mean that!’ Averil said frantically.

‘But I most certainly do,’ Bob returned, ‘and you can consider yourself very lucky that you got off so easily—’

But Averil was in no mood for condolences. She flung herself back on

the pillow and glanced angrily at Bob. 'If I didn't know you better, I'd say you're deliberately exaggerating so as to keep me out of the way, Bob Pritchard, and don't think I don't know you've a score to settle with me!'

'I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about,' he replied calmly. 'You seem to forget that this charity business which seems so mightily important to you appears to me to be no more than an opportunity for the local bigwigs to show themselves off and get their names in the paper, and whether you appear in it or not is a matter of indifference to me. I've more important things to do in Warefield than to sit holding your hand and dispensing sympathy.'

Averil laughed sourly. 'There was a time. Bob, when you'd have hked nothing better than to sit holding my hand.'

For a moment before departing he stood regarding her. 'Yes, perhaps that is true, Averil,' he said measuredly, 'but time doesn't stand stih, and perhaps at last I've matured enough to get my priorities straight,'

It was so evident that they had both forgotten my presence that it was with a feeling of relief I saw Sybil bustle in, bearing a small tray with a dainty lace cloth on which was a bowl of soup. Fler round face glowed with an air of dedicated service as she approached Averil,

Bob said quietly that he would wait for me in the car before quickly slipping from the room.

Already Averil was ready to vent her bad temper and frustration on her eager handmaid, 'Whatever is

this you've brought me, Sybil?' she regarded the bowl of soup with disgust.

'Cream of chicken/ Sybil beamed aappily. It s really tip-top. Do try and sip a little.'

Aveil turned her head as though the sight of the thick, creamy mixture

revolted her. 'Oh, do take the ghastly stuff away, Sybil. What do you take me for? I'm not at death's door, you know.'

Sybil's mouth dropped open with disappointment. 'Well, what would you like, Averil?' she asked placatingly. 'I'll tell Cook to prepare anything you'd like. Meanwhile you really have to keep your strength up, won't you!'

'Oh, do clear off, Sybil,' Averil said irritably, 'and stop fussing and making a nuisance of yourself. I don't want anything now. I'm not quite helpless, you know. I'll ring later if I want you.'

'Yes, do, Averil,' Sybil said eagerly, 'but I'd better run down and help poor Mrs. Ashmore. She was frightfully upset. It was really providential I was on the spot, for I can make myself useful in lots of ways.'

'How that girl gets on my nerves!' Averil said petulantly as Sybil bustled from the room, her short, inelegant figure bulging through a too-tight frock. 'Pretending to be all concern about me when actually all the poor deluded creature wants to hang around in the hope that Vance will some day happen to glance in her direction. Really I don't know how Mrs. Ashmore puts up with her.'

Probably for the same reason that she approved of herself, I thought: because Sybil was giving the Ashmore family the uncynical worship that Mrs. Ashmore felt was her due.

When she had gone Averil gazed thoughtfully

through the window, for a long moment, then said with surprising mildness, 'So after all, you'll be staying on.'

I shook my head. 'No, I shan't,' I said decisively.

Averil looked surprised. 'But you'll have to stay on now. My accident has changed everything. All the circumstances are different. Rodney can't stay on at the cottage alone. Mrs. Ashmore wants me to stay on

here until I'm able to get about again, and anyway it would only complicate things if I went back now to the cottage. I need someone to take care of me and there's a staff here, apart from the devoted Sybil, of course,' she ended acidly. 'Surely you're not going to walk out cold-bloodedly at a time like this?'

It was completely typical of Averil conveniently to have forgotten the fact that it was she herself who had peremptorily ordered me to leave.

'I've taken a job here at Warefield,' I told her.

She looked astounded. 'A job! Well, I must say that's quick work. You didn't mention it to me this morning. I understood you were going to catch the train home.'

'I met Bob Pritchard and he offered me a position as his secretary.'

'I see.' She fingered thoughtfully the delicate lace on the coverlet, 'So that's the way the wind blows and I turned down Bob and this is his idea of getting his own back by taking you on as his secretary.'

Her vanity was so ludicrous that I had difficulty in suppressing a smile. 'You think Bob asked me to straighten out his affairs simply to show you he was not mortally stricken by your refusal to marry him?'

'Look, Mouse, don't let's quarrel,' she said. Her voice had taken on the wheedling tones she had always

used when bent on getting her own way. 'It will only mean your staying on at the cottage until I am up and about. I'm perfectly sure Bob will understand if you explain it to him. Then you can really enjoy yourself straightening out his affairs.'

'But I don't want to stay on now at the cottage/ I said. 'I've made other arrangements, Averil.'

'You don't mean you'll let poor Rodney return today and find nobody there? Why, the poor kid's so desperately fond of you that it will come

as a dreadful shock,' she said pathetically.

I hesitated and she immediately added, 'I know I've been beastly in lots of ways. Mouse, but life hasn't been a bed of roses for me since Clive's death. For one thing I've had to play up to that silly old harridan, Mrs. Ashmore. Apart from everything else, she has loits of influence. She's on all sorts of committees and things and in a quiet, subtle way and without Vance knowing she could have made things simply intolerable for me.' Tears filled her eyes. 'If you insist on bearing a grudge against me poor little Rodney will suffer. When he comes back from school today he'll find the cottage empty. Gan you imagine how he'll feel, and I simply can't have liim up here for already he's in Mrs. Ashmore's black books. The dairywoman, Mrs. Clarke, is forever complaining about him.'

'Well, you've no one to blame but yourself,' I said unsympathetically. 'For you deliberately let him make a nuisance of himself.' But even as I spoke I knew I would not be able to resist her plea, for Rodney and I had, during her absence, struck up a rapport that could not be easily broken. I hesitated and immediately she said eagerly, 'I knew you'd a.gree. You are an angel, Esther, You'll teU Bob of the change of

plans and go back to the cottage before Rodney gets home, won't you?'

I felt a sudden weariness. Averil, as usual, had manipulated things to suit herself and she had used my affection for Rodney as a lever. Without answering I left the room feeling nothing but an empty wretchedness. I hurried downstairs. Through the open door I could see Bob waiting for me in the car and it was with a feeling of relief that I saw that the hall appeared to be empty. There was nothing I wanted less than to meet any of the Ashmores at that moment, but just as I crossed the hall the door of a room opened and Vance appeared. He stood in the threshold silently watching me and I paused as though transfixed and for a long moment we regarded each other in silence. Then he said, 'Well, what is it, Esther? You're smdy not looking at me like this because Averil has sustained a fairly minor injury, are you?'

I didn't reply but turned and continued almost blindly towards the

door. 'Bob's waiting for me,' I muttered.

But with a few quick strides he had caught up with me and had blocked my escape. 'Look, Esther, it simply isn't good enough. Why on earth should you be taking this attitude towards me?' Then he added sardonically, 'I'm beginning to believe that as far as you are concerned I've developed into a sort of Jekyll and Hyde person. At present my Hyde personality seems to be uppermost.'

I hadn't intended to give any explanation, but in spite of myself, I burst out wretchedly, 'I overheard what you said to Averil. So it's true. Clive was in your way, wasn't he? You had to get him out of the running. As his employer you would have no difficulty

in arranging his transfer to the Middle East to leave the coast clear for Averil and yourself.'

I saw the muscles in his face grow taut and his hands bit into my shoulders. 'I see, so that's it! No doubt in your estimation I also arranged that he should be conveniently disposed of. His death would simplify things for Averil and myself—is that what you think? And while you're at it, why don't you admit that you believe Eric's story: he also was an obstruction to my plans for taking over the company!'

When I remained silent, he shook me roughly. 'All right then, why don't you say it?' he said gratingly.

With a sudden movement I tore free and raced down the steps.

Bob glanced at me briefly as I got into the car beside him. He didn't speak until we were speeding through the gates and heading back towards the cottage, when he said, 'You don't have to tell me. Averil has won out, as usual, and you're returning to take over at the cottage again. So our arrangements are off, is that it?'

I said a little shamefacedly, 'I'm sorry, Bob, but I simply couldn't leave Rodney on his own—^but it's only until Averil's able to take over again.'

'She jumped at the chance of settling herself in at the Ashmores'.'

'But it will be only for a little while,' I said placatingly.

He laughed shortly. 'I wouldn't bet on that, if I were you. She'll draw out her convalescence as long as possible until she gets Vance's engagement ring on her third finger. But at least it gives me a sort of vindictive satisfaction to know that she's been done out of this modelling affair, she's so keen on. Apart from

that you've really got this Vance fellow under your skin.'

'Oh no,' I said fiercely. 'You're wrong there. That's all over. It's just as I say, as soon as Averil's on her feet again I'll fulfil my part of the bargain.'

Again I saw Bob steal a glance at me and whatever he saw in my face seemed to satisfy him. He smiled, 'You know, somehow or other I believe you. All right then, I'm prepared to play it your way, and who knows, by the time you come to me you may come not in the guise of a Girl Friday, but perhaps in a more satisfying and lasting relationship. Perhaps then I won't have to placate Mrs. Purvis with electric blankets,' he ended lightly.

'What do you mean by that ambiguous remark?' I answered, adopting his air of light banter.

He drew up outside the cottage, shut off the engine and turned to me. 'Look, Esther, if you're being really genuine about Vance Ashmore not counting any more in your life, why shouldn't you and I make a go of things? Oh, I admit I won't be able to offer you any of the wild romantic dreams a girl longs for, and as the wife of a G.P. you won't find life particularly exciting and glamorous. In fact, if anything the contrary! I've no illusions about some day offering you a brilliant future, for I'm a pretty ordinary fellow, as you probably know by this time, but I'll do my very best to make you happy.'

His words seemed to fill me with a new sense of humility. He was

offering me something not to be despised and I remembered with a sort of wonder Averil's words when she had said I had been hitching my wagon to a star when I had loved Vance. Bob Pritchard was offering me a life of permanency. What

more could a girl in my position hope for? I turned to him and felt his arms around me, close and comfort-

When Bob had driven off I slowly went along the short path to the cottage, feeling a sense of emptiness. It was as though all I had admired about the cottage had been reduced to a vacuous emptiness. It was now no more than an empty shell, holding no sense of permanency. All feeling of belonging had evaporated. I had already that morning taken farewell of it and I was filled with a longing to be rid of the bondage Averil had imposed on me. Restlessly I went into the kitchen and prepared a meal for Rodney's return, then took Up a book and went into the garden, but I found it impossible to concentrate on the words before me.

CHAPTER NINE

A FEW days later I was sitting in the garden knitting a pullover for Rodney. It was in his favourite colour of a rather violent green and I was working furiously in the hope that it would be ready by the time he returned from school. Marmalade was prancing and pulling at the ball of wool that had fallen in the long grass and I was busy trying to disentangle it from his claws and needle-sharp teeth when I heard the gate open and, looking up, saw Vance's tall figure walk swifdy up the path.

'What's wrong?' I asked apprehensively as I saw the grim set of his jaw. 'Has anything happened to Rodney?'

'Nothing whatsoever, except that I've collected him from school and driven him up to the farm and dumped him with Mrs. Clarke, with instructions that he's to be permitted to make as much of a nuisance of himself as he likes, as long as he stays well away from Ashmore this afternoon.'

‘But—^but why?’ I began, confused and angry. ‘What right have you to do such a thing?’

‘Because, dear girl, you’re coming with me now. You’ll be just in time for a short audience with the maestro before getting into the gown you’re supposed to be modelling.’

‘Things have changed,’ I said abruptly. ‘I don’t want to now. Anyway, AverH’s back for one thing, and—•’

‘She can hardly model a gown on crutches, he said sardonically. ^ , a j

‘Perhaps not, but it has notliing to do with me. And

for another thing,’ I went on, “^if it hadn t been for the accident I’d be working for Bob Pritchard. I had agreed to be his receptionist. Actually I was in his office when I heard what had happened.

‘I see.’ His face was impassive. ‘So Bob has fallen for you, is that it?’

‘No, of course not. You know yourself how keen he was on Averil and it’s quite obvious that he needed someone to settle his affairs and, with my traming, I was a suitable choice —^ I stopped and bit my lip. After all, I didn’t owe this man any explanation as to my plans.

‘There are several doczen women in Warefield with your qualifications,’ he said coolly, ‘They’re not unique, you know. Why this sudden yen for efficiency on his part anyway, I wonder? He was always a slapdash sort of feUow.’

‘Oh, what does it matter?’ I said wearily. ‘What possible difference can it make to you?’

‘Quite a lot! Yes, strange as it may sound to you, it does make quite a considerable difference to me. You’re much too rare a person, Esther,

to allow a man like Bob Pritchard to take you up on the rebound. You should have more pride than to let yourself be persuaded into such a position. Bob couldn't get Aveil, so he turns to you. Probably partly to pay her out and show her he can do without her and probably because he sees in you the makings of a meek amenable wife; someone who will be waiting with warmed slippers when he comes home from an emergency.'

'How dare you, of all people, take this line with

me!' I blazed, furious at the accuracy with which he had assessed the situation. 'When Averil married Clive, you didn't encourage her to pursue the domestic virtues, did you?'

I saw his face darken. He reached down and snatch[^]-ing the knitting from my hand tossed it into the long grass, then pulling me to my feet, drew me close. 'Is it not then possible for a man to love you, Esther,' he said, 'simply for your own sake?'

His lips were dose to mine and for a moment I felt overwhelmed by his nearness. Then remembering that hideous conversation that I had overheard outside Averil's bedroom door, I stiffened resentfully. He had managed to make Bob sound calculating and cynical —and it wasn't true, I told myself. Vance Ashmore wa[^] a sophisticated and highly experienced man •. he v/as trying to transform Bob's proposal into nothing more than a sordid business arrangement. Was it simply a cruel game he was playing with me, a deliberately calculated plan to see if he could entrap me into the mawkish and uncritical devotion that he had inspired in Sybil Wilson? But then, I told myself fiercely, I knew a great deal more about Vance Ashmore than poor dduded Sybil did 1

He regarded me frowningly, then said tightly, 'Very well, I see I'll have to explain things to you: you've obviously let your imagination run away with you. All right, so you overheard the conversation between Averil and myself and drew your own peculiar conclusions. Well, to a certain extent you were right. I did arrange for Clive Etherton to be transferred to the Middle East.'

I felt my face whiten with shock. I had known all along, of course, but somehow the putting of it into

words gave it a truth and immediacy that filled me with revulsion. I tried to pull back, but he held me inexorably. You must listen, Esther. It is not quite as simple as you imagine.*

'To me it all seems quite simple,* I answered huskily, 'You wanted another man's wife, with no strings attached, or the possibility that an open scandal might damage the image of the respectable Ashmore Company with its background of a youth centre, and other charitable works. You're nothing but a hypocrite, Vance Ashmore!* I cried passionately, 'It would have been more honest to have conducted your affair with Averil in the open. But no, you had to dispose of Clive to keep the Ashmore image unsullied. Oh, I know his death was an accident: you could hardly have foreseen it, but your motive was to get him out of the way. You can't deny it—and the consequences didn't concern you particularly,*

'Again you're right,' he said harshly. 'I did want him out of the way—but for a completely different reason. Clive had been systematically defrauding the Ashmore Company for a number of years and, when it was discovered, he appealed to us for the sake of his wife and child to save him from imprisonment. We dropped the charge and discreetly transferred him to the Middle East, where his activities would be more restricted. When he died Averil of course was left penniless, and I offered her the cottage until she would be able to get her affairs into some sort of order.'

I listened to him with the growing conviction that what he was saying was more than probably true. And of course it would be typical of Averil to think that the best way of establishing her future and solving her financial problems would be by ensnaring the wealthy

and influential Vance Ashmore; it all sounded so plausible! Yet a part of me still distrusted him and resisted the obvious explanation. No doubt he would be able as easily to explain Eric's convenient accident and the fact that he himself became the head of the Ashmore firm.

He regarded me whimsically for a moment, then said laconically, 'All right, keep your reservations, Esther, but is that any reason why you should let Mother down? After all, will it compromise your principles so terribly if you should model the gown? There's no one available who can even squeeze into it. Do come, Esther,' he said cajolingly. 'After all, it won't prevent you hating me. Afterwards you can go on loathing me as much as you like.'

But then I didn't hate him, I thought helplessly. Things would have been so much simpler if I did. The idea of accompanying him back to Ashmore to appear before his exquisitely dressed guests was a pleasure that was more than I could resist. 'Very well,' I said, with a show of reluctance, 'but only if you think your mother won't mind.'

'But of course she won't,' he said briskly. 'Why on earth should she, anyway?'

Because, I thought, for the very good reason she had selected Averil as a suitable wife for her son and would fight tooth and nail to see that her plans materialized. She would not brook even the smallest competition, I knew, and I wondered what my reception would be when I reached Ashmore House and she heard the news that, after all, I was to take Averil's place.

When we reached the house the wide drive was jam-packed with cars: people were wandering in and out

of the drawing-room on to the terrace and when we went into the drawing-room it was crammed to suffocation with fashionably dressed people gathered in small groups laughing and talking while Sybil and two uniformed maids, bearing trays, hustled and pushed their way through the maze of furniture, dispensing brimming glasses. In a small oasis in the centre of the room, stretched out on a yellow velvet chaise-longue, was an emaciated Mephistophelean-looking man, a crimson, patterned kerchief knotted to one side of his scraggy throat, his suit a symphony in cerise crushed velvet. Huge intense eyes surveyed the seething crowd with a look of unutterable contempt.

Mrs. Ashmore, elegant in pleated dove-grey chiffon, fluttered about him paying assiduous court, which he studiously ignored. It was not hard to guess by the too loud voices and high trilling laughter of some of the more elegant young girls that they were anxious to catch his attention; they were to model his creations and they obviously hoped to win his approbation. However, all their efforts seemed to be in vain, for Monsieur Lacroix seemed to be sinking deeper into a gloomy reverie.

‘That, in case you don’t already know it, is the famous Andne Lacroix,’ Vance told me with mock solemnity. ‘Should you by any chance catch his eye, you can consider yourself signally honored.’

It was just then that Sybil, her face flushed with exertion, glanced up and caught sight of him. Her plump features lit up with an eager smile and laying down her tray on a low table she eased her way towards us.

‘I’d better slip up and see how Averil’s getting on,’ Vance said hurriedly, as he saw her advance, ‘Sybil

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will show you the ropes. I’d only be in the way anyhow at one of these affairs. Somehow they’re not quite my cup of tea.’ He turned and quietly slipped from the room.

Sybil’s eyes followed him as he ran upstairs; I guessed she was bitterly disappointed at his sudden departure. However, a smile remained stiffly on her face. ‘I must take you up to the room where the models will change,’ she said gushingly, ‘but first you must meet Monsieur Lacroix. Mrs. Ashmore’s still terribly upset about Averil’s accident. However, I’m sure he’s dying to know who’s going to take her place.’

I felt little confidence that Monsieur Lacroix would have any interest in meeting me and I felt apprehensive as Sybil’s small, burly figure edged a path out of the seething crowd.

‘Ah,’ Mrs. Ashmore trilled as we approached, ‘Monsieur Lacroix, may I

present Esther? She's taking poor darling Averil's place. It was all too disappointing for the poor girl, but I'm sure Esther will do your wonderful gown justice. She is rather thin, compared to Averil, of course—' her voice trailed off as Monsieur Lacroix swivelled his hypnotic eyes in my direction and I tried not to look too flustered as he regarded me in a petrifying silence, scanning me from head to' foot.

'She's thin, yes,' he said abruptly, 'but I should not say altogether skinny, by any means. Of course she's not as beautiful as Madame Etherton, but the bones are definitely interesting. Yes, there are great possibilities—'

I could hear Sybil in the background twittering nervously at this devastatingly frank appraisal.

'I'm so glad you approve, Monsieur Lacroix/ Mrs. Ashmore said with an air of faint surprise.

Monsieur Lacroix now turned his eyes on Sybil, who giggled nervously at his devastating glance, and said quickly, 'Fd better ran along, Mrs. Ashmore. I've a hundred and one things to see to.' I could see she was trying to grasp any excuse to escape from the bale[^]-ful glare being directed on her.

'What do you mean, a hundred and one things?' Monsieur Lacroix's French accent became more pro[^] nounced. It was obvious that for some reason or other Sybil was enraging him beyond endurance. 'Do the young ladies not already know what is expected of them? I cannot stay here all day. All should have been organized before I arrived.'

'Oh, but it is, dear Monsieur Lacroix,' Mrs. Ashmore put in eagerly, 'Sybil is really a wonderful organizer: in fact, I call her my little P.R. girl. I really don't know what I'd do without her,'

Sybil beamed happily at this accolade and turning, trotted off on her short, stumpy legs.

Monsieur Lacroix gazed after' her with a look of loathing, 'Deplorable,

deplorable,' he muttered. 'The face so like an over-ripe Gamembert, the figure—^how shall I say it—^like a bed of feathers, and the legs—' He waved his hands helplessly. 'I demand you do not let her approach me again. She is utterly lamentable. I am desolated!' He: shuddered elaborately.

But she's most devoted and breeds basset-hounds,' Mrs. Ashmore said soothingly.

Monsieur Lacroix swirng upright at the words, as though electrified, and yelled triumphantly, 'Basset-hound ! Basset-hound! Aji, there you have it, madame. That is exactly how I shoould have described her legs,

so like those of a basset-hound.' Then, flinging himself back on the chaise-longue, he added moodily, 'But then I do not design for basset-hounds.'

I moved away trying to hide a smile, and seeing Sybil was at the other side of the room with Eric, I crossed over. Already it was obvious that my existence had been wiped from Monsieur Lacroix's consciousness.

Eric's usually pale face was animated: he seemed pleased with himself and was evidently enjoying the bustle and excitement of the crowds who swarmed around his chair, exchanging jokes and small-talk. But the old malice was in his eyes as he said, 'Well, I've been watching you with Lacroix. Does he approve of you, Esther? He has the reputation of having exotic tastes.'

I smiled. 'With certain reservations, perhaps.'

'But I bet he said you'd good bones: he says that to all the medium good-looking girls and is downright insulting to the ugly ones.'

I felt a wave of relief that at least good-natured Sybil had escaped before Monsieur Lacroix exercised his cruelly caustic tongue at her expense.

'Oh, but he's a genius,' Sybil enthused. 'I only wish it was possible to

model one of his gowns.' Then she added humbly, 'But of course that for me is out of the question.'

An uncomfortable silence followed her self-revealing remark. Then Eric said with uncharacteristic gentleness, 'What about taking Esther up and showing her the ropes, Sybil? She hasn't prepared her entrance, but at least Averil has practised hers once too often,' he added with a return of his old malice.

I noticed that rows of gilt chains were being

arranged in the wide hall by a number of men. As I followed Sybil up the broad oak stairs she explained that the models would descend the sweeping stairs backed by the amber and crimson leaded glass windows. We would descend in historical order, she explained, starting with the Tudors. 'The last model will represent Queen Victoria as a young bride.' She took me into a large room in which enormous cavernous wardrobes held the costumes enshrouded in tissue paper. Long cheval mirrors lined the walls and Sybil with her flair for organization had arranged a table with every type of make-up.

'You may as well slip on the dress/ she said. 'It will give you a chance to rehearse a little. When they all come in it will be pandemonium.'

She took the dress from its enfolding tissue and laid it on an enormous double bed which filled the centre of the room. 'Beautiful material, isn't it?' she said, stroking it lovingly with her fingertips. 'How lucky you are, Esther, that you're able to wear such lovely clothes.' She said it wistfully and without envy and I found myself shamed that I had been unconsciously adopting the general attitude towards her. Her own good nature and the fact that she wore her heart on her sleeve as far as Vance was concerned had turned her into a figure of fun.

While I slipped into the dress she took down the wig that was part of the costume. It was beautifully coiffured: caught up in a fillet of brilliants, the ringlets fell down in the Grecian style of the period. She chatted away as she helped me dress, but I could see that in spite of her efforts to keep the conversation general it was continually

reverting to Vance and I

felt a growing pity that she was unable to rid herself of this obsessive love she had for him.

Suddenly I became alert, no longer only half-conscious of Sybil chattering in the background as she tidied up the dressing-table, 'Of course, people were only too keen to talk scandal about the Ashmores especially about Vance,' she was saying. 'I mean, the shooting accident was a wonderful opportunity for them to gossip. It's no use telling them the truth of the matter, for they simply don't want to listen. They'd rather wallow in their rotten, beastly gossip. The fact that I was an eye-witness to the accident simply doesn't cut any ice with them.'

I swung around with such suddenness that Sybil blinked with surprise. 'You mean, Sybil,' I said tersely, 'that you were with them when it happened? I mean when Eric was shot?'

'Well—er—er—no, not exactly,' Sybil said hesitantly, giving a great deal of unnecessary concentration to mopping up some spilled powder, 'What I mean is that I happened to be walking the dogs in the woods that day. I had heard Vance say he was going shooting. But I'd have walked the dogs anyway. I mean, they need lots of exercise and of course I kept well out of their way—' Her voice trailed off.

Yes, I could well imagine Sybil convincing herself that the place where her hero was shooting would be an ideal spot for exercising her dogs. She would keep at a discreet distance, of course, but to be even in the same vicinity as Vance Ashmore would be balm to her infatuated heart.

'Well, suddenly I heard a shot and someone screaming. Nature's I tore through the woods, making for where I thought the sound came from, and

after a while I came on Eric. He was lying across a tree-trunk which was half-hidden in ferns and briars and I suppose he didn't really see it and tripped over it. His gun had gone off and he was terribly hurt. He

was so dreadfully injured that he didn't even think of lying at the time and told me his gun had gone off accidentally when he'd fallen. It was after I had found Vance who was at the other end of the woods and we had got him back to the house that he began to change his story. Actually, I think he almost half believes it himself now. I mean about Vance deliberately shooting him. You know, Esther,' she added after a pause, 'this may sound strange to you, but I think Eric and I are alike in lots of ways.'

'That's nonsense, Sybil,' I said briskly. The knowledge she had imparted had suddenly made me feel light-hearted. 'What possible resemblance could there be? You're utterly different. You've always given yourself unsparingly while Eric is wrapped up in a sort of bitter cocoon, taking a delight in spreading lies and dissention.'

Her owlsh eyes behind the thick lenses of her glasses looked suddenly infinitely wise and understanding. 'Perhaps not superficially, but we are both handicapped. Only our reactions are different. Eric's injuries have ruined his life and prospects: as a man, he had been cut off from all the achievements that make a man's life worth while. Well, as a woman I've been deprived of all that makes for happiness. Do you think I don't know what that dreadful Monsieur Lacroix said of me when I left you?'

She smiled wanly as she saw me look uncomfortable. 'Oh, don't be upset, Esther. Other people aren't as brutal, of course, but I see it in their eyes. "Poor Sybil,"

they seem to say, "she'll never get a husband with that face and figure And the worst of it is, Esther, that's exactly what I do want—children, security—and I've been robbed of all that makes life worth while,' she added morbidly, 'Of course, I know there's no chance for me with Vance, and actually the most painful thing is that he puts himself out of his way to be kind to me.'

'But you mustn't let yourself feel like that, Sybil,' I said quickly. 'If you weren't so frightfully engrossed in Vance you'd see that Eric's rather fond of you,'

She looked startled, 'What do you mean?'

'You see, you're throwing your life away in vain dreams. You could make him a good wife; perhaps in time eradicate the bitterness and malice he feels towards life in general!'

'What on earth makes you think he cares for me?' she asked almost shyly,

I smiled. 'It's the onlooker who sees these things. For one thing anyone could tell by the way he looks at you. Apart from that,' I added teasingly, 'perhaps you've noticed that he manages to control that caustic tongue of his when you're present.'

'Perhaps, but he has never said anything—she began,

'Hasn't it occurred to you that a man with Eric's disability would find it difficult to think of proposing unless you were to give him encouragement?'

She turned and thoughtfully began to arrange the folds of a lace fichu, but I could see her mind was busily engaged on my suggestion and that a faint pinkness touched her round cheeks.

'Don't let your life slip past in useless regrets. You're such a tremendously vital person and a talented

organizer. If you were Eric's wife you would have an object and purpose in life. Oh, I know it would be impossible for you to feel about him the way you do about Vance, but I feel sure he cares for you and in time I think you'll find yourself returning his love.'

'You sound very old and wise.' She smiled wanly. 'And I suppose I'd like to believe you. In a way talking things over has clarified things for me. I mean, making an excuse for walking the dogs in the woods that day, just because Vance was in the vicinity, has brought home to me that I was behaving like a silly infatuated schoolgirl. I wasn't really being grown-up about things and it's not as if I'd really have been

happy married to him, even if that had been remotely possible, because you see I don't really understand him: he's a sort of enigma to me and always would be. Let's say I hero-worshipped him.' She sighed. 'It all sounds so perfectly stupid now when I put it into words, but I'm glad we spoke it over, Esther.' She glanced at me a little shyly. 'You see, you're about the only girl I'd be able to confide in. If I told anyone else they'd probably pretend to be terribly sympathetic but would have been tittering behind my back. Now I'm being morbid and suspicious again," she added with a shaky little laugh.

Gradually the dressing-room became crowded with chattering, laughing girls, transforming themselves into glamorous women of the past. I watched fascinated as a tall elegant girl donned the dress of Elizabeth the First, with its high jewel-encrusted collar. Another wore the white buckskins and buckled beaver hat of George Sand and I was fascinated to see Marie Antoinette slowly revolve in her gold-embroidered panniers and high wig topped by a ship in full sail.

Meanwhile, Sybil, obviously in her element, sped around bringing order into chaos. She had everything at her fingertips, I could see, and was obviously revelling in her role as organizer. She bustled up to me as I stood fully dressed and feeling rather out of things. 'Why don't you go along to Averil's room and let her see how you look in the costume? I'm sure she'll love to see it.'

I hesitated. Somehow I couldn't imagine Averil being particularly happy to see me appearing in the frock that she should have modelled.

But Sybil evidently had no such doubts. 'It will buck her up tremendously to feel that everything's going on just as if the accident had never happened,' she said earnestly, 'for I know she'd hate to let Mrs. Ashmore down.'

Her owlish eyes behind the spectacles had a pellucid innocence that made me feel guilty at my own reservations. Sybil evidently had no idea how bitterly Averil resented my taking her place in the pageant. Fussily she pushed me towards the door,

I found Averil seated in an armchair, her foot, encased in plaster, propped up in front of her. She appeared to be gazing morosely at the bustle and activity on the terrace beneath as cars drew up and laughing and chattering crowds disgorged and groups moved towards the house.

She turned her head towards me as I stood in the doorway and as I saw the look of bitter resentment in her face I wished heartily that I had not listened to Sybil. Completely devoid of jealousy or envy herself, she evidently found it hard to believe that others were more fallible.

'Do come in and stop standing there if I can't see

you properly/' Averil said pettishly, and as I walked into the centre of the room she surveyed me critically. 'What on earth made you decide to present yourself in all your finery? You didn't think I'd get up and

cheer, did you? Well, you've got your own way at last. You ought to be satisfied,' she said moodily.

'I'm sorry, Averil. I know how much it meant to you,' I said, 'although I won't deny that it's wonderful to have the opportunity to wear one of Lacroix's designs.' I added with a little shy laugh, in an attempt to placate her, 'It's the sort of thing that doesn't occur to people like me as a rule. I'd be able to boast about it when I'm an old lady.'

'Oh, don't give me that stuff,' Averil replied contemptuously. 'You know perfectly well what I mean. You're thrilled because Vance will be down there watching you when you make your appearance. Well, take my advice and don't waste your time on wishful thinking.' Her eyes narrowed and she regarded me thoughtfully. 'There's not the remotest possibility of your standing a chance as far as he's concerned. You see, Esther, our relationship is a little more involved than you may imagine.'

I crossed the room quickly and stood beside her chair. 'What do you mean?'

'Ah, I thought that might interest you,' she crowed elatedly. 'It would be too bad, wouldn't it, if there was a flaw in your hero. Well, you love him quite so much, I wonder, when I've told you a few things about him, about the methods he adopts when he has his heart set on something he wants to acquire? In this particular case it happened to be me. If it had been something else—say something as prosaic as get-

ting the better of a business rival—his methods would probably have been equally ruthless.®

She tapped the arm of her chair and frowned as though her thoughts were anything but pleasant. 'It all began soon after Clive joined Vance's firm. I gave a dinner party. I did my very best to make things a success for Clive's sake. I remember/ she added a slow tentative smile touching her lips, 'I wore a stunning frock. It was in silk georgette the colour of Parma violets and with it I wore a simple knotted gold chain.'

I remember the way Vance looked at me when we met for the first time. Naturally I was flattered, but I didn't intend to let things get out of hand. But remember, as I told you, Vance isn't the type of man who takes no for an answer. He bombarded me with invitations to exclusive clubs and parties, the sort of places that poor Clive couldn't afford on his salary. Naturally I refused. Then one day Clive came home and told me that the firm was transferring him to the Middle East,* She frowned. 'He seemed pleased, poor darling. I think he was delighted at the idea of being put in a position of trust. Then it turned out that I wasn't included in the plans. Vance had seen to that. And Clive too felt that the climate wouldn't agree with me. Well, you know what happened. Poor Clive was killed in some local fracas. So you see, Esther, your knight in shining armour as good as murdered Clive. He knew I'd never marry him as long as my husband was alive,' she added virtuously, 'so it was the only way he could get me,' Her lips trembled and her large blue eyes filled with the facile tears that she could always conjure up at appropriate moments, j

In that case,' a voice said sardonically from the doorway, 'isn't it rather peculiar that I haven't yet

put the gold ring on your third finger, Averil? After all, if I was so keen to make you Mrs. Ashmore that I'd dispose of Clive, don't you consider that I have been a little dilatory in marching you to the altar?'

Averil's head snapped round and I could see that the fact that he had overheard what she had said had filled her with alarm,

*May I congratulate you on the facility with which you've dished up that fairy-tale? If it was with the idea of putting between Esther and myself, you've been wasting your time, because I've already told her about Clive and the fact that he escaped prison by the skin of his teeth. I had a pretty good idea that you were determined to put between us and I thought she might as well know the truth before you got to work.'

'All right—but what of it?' Averil said shrilly. 'You invited me down to this cottage and your mother has made no secret of the fact that she wants us to marry.'

'As to asking you to Cherry Cottage,' he said flatly, 'up to the time that Clive went off the rails he had been a fairly reliable employee and it's not Ashmore policy to leave employees' widows and children destitute, As to your other remark concerning my mother, she's often inclined to get ideas that I don't share. However, I find it leads to more harmony if I don't argue about it, but to make my own decisions.'

He turned to me and my heart leaped in wild elation at the warm love that I saw in his dark eyes. Averil must have seen it too, for she slumped back in her chair, silent and defeated.

At that moment Sybil bustled in and to her delighted surprise was warmly hugged by Vance. 'You couldn't have come at a more opportune moment, Sybil,' he said gaily.

Laughingly Sybil patted her hair. 'I've come to tell Esther that she's on next. She's to follow Marie Antoinette/

She bustled off again and Vance and I left the room. Gently he shut the door and in the shadows of the corridor took me in his arms. 'So you're to follow Marie Antoinette,' he said gently. 'Would you mind much, Esther darling, if I followed you to the end of my life?'



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