

SHADOW OVER THE PLAINS

Simon Dare

Hutchinson

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BRIDGE TO THE MOON
SHIVERING POOL
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THERE WALK MY DREAMS
QUARRY

SHADOW OVER THE PLAINS

SIMON DARE

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D E D I C A T E D T O

MRS. KATHLEEN WEBB
in gratitude for her friendship
and understanding

All the characters in this book
are entirely fictitious and have
no relation to any living person.

CHAPTER ONE

“**Y**OU haven’t met him yet, Eve dear. Just wait before you commit yourself beyond recall.”

Hester Lawrence looked anxious, her quiet grey eyes trying to flash a warning to her young employer, but Eve Jarvis was one of those girls who take a warning simply as an incentive to more reckless effort, a challenge to be accepted eagerly.

She laughed now, and showed her small, perfect teeth between reddened lips, her shapely head tossed back, fun and devilment gleaming in her dark-blue eyes. Young she might be in years, but she possessed an easy *insouciance* and sophistication that was almost arrogant, except in those moments when her hot temper lost control of itself and she flared out, just like a spoilt child denied something it wanted badly.

“*You* have met him though,” she laughed. “And you’ve fallen for his charms apparently, like all these other reprehensible young women!” She shook a mocking finger at Hester’s flushed, uncomfortable face. “I’m surprised at you, my child!”

Con Chator looked thoughtful. “He’s frightfully attractive, Eve; and he would lick you into shape in two minutes.”

Miss Jarvis’ eyes glowed deeply and her obstinate young chin took upon itself an unusually grim look.

“Oh, do you think so?” she drawled. “How too thrill-making! Only there isn’t the man born who could do anything like that to me. Good gosh, there aren’t any sheiks or such film heroes in reality, and who cares for the cave-man wallah anyway? Women and men are absolutely equal.”

“Quite,” smiled Con. “We all know that, my lamb, but none the less
_____”

“Yes,” prompted Eve, sharply, “‘but none the less——’?”

“Garnet Mallory loathes women, and he wouldn’t be an atom interested in you individually. If he were, you wouldn’t be able to help yourself.”

“He is much too good-looking to be allowed about unleashed,” put in Inez Latimer, smothering a yawn.

Eve ignored this; she had seized upon Con’s last words . . . “If he were, you wouldn’t be able to help yourself.”

“What do you mean exactly, Con?” she said, with a certain deadly calm.

“You would fall in love with him and it would be—the end of all things or the beginning; merely a point of view.” Con shrugged. “You talk so much about the freedom of the modern woman, my child, the absurdity and illogical stupidity of marriage and being tied for life to one man, Free Love and so on, all the hot air of the moment.”

“Well, don’t we all believe it?” snapped Eve.

“Oh yes, but you’ve never *proved* your principles!”

“Never had the chance. But have any of us?” laughed Miss Jarvis sardonically. “Personally I haven’t yet seen a man worth while making so much effort about; they are all such nit-wits.”

“Then wait till you meet Mallory.”

“Well, you have all certainly the advantage over me there, since he seems to have burst upon London, as it were, while I was staying up North with the Presses. Curious you should all three meet him, and not me.”

“That was because he came to Inez’s Picture Show and you weren’t here,” said Hester.

“I know, my child, and I was lucky to escape, wasn’t I? No, Inez,” with quick contrition, “that was only a joke, my dear, and a cheap one. But about this Mallory. His type of man would never appeal to me. Besides, there isn’t any kind of a man I couldn’t resist if I wanted to, or who could order me about. I should like to see him anyway!” She laughed scoffingly. “But why worry? I could take care of myself, so it wouldn’t be so thrilling, after all, perhaps.”

“All right,” Con took her up. “So can we all for that matter, but if you think you are so utterly and damnably immune so that no male creature in the world is attractive enough to sweep you off your feet, then I dare you to put yourself to the test. I bet you a hundred pounds to a half-guinea pair of stockings that you couldn’t help yourself!”

Eve’s eyes began to sparkle. She set her red lips in a straight line, for here she was invited to ride a line of country that appealed to her irresistibly. She knew her fences well and ran little risk (she thought) of ever taking an unexpected toss.

“Let’s get this just right,” she said, quietly. “You bet me a hundred pounds to a pair of stockings that I shan’t be able to resist this marvellous woman-hater, who is so amazingly attractive and charming that women fall for him like ninepins. That I shan’t be able to resist him if he happens to cast his lordly eye of desire upon me. I shan’t be able to hold my own with him or to give him successfully the snub direct that he seems to deserve. You bet

me that I don't teach him a lesson and put him in his place where women are concerned? Am I right?"

"Quite." Con began to laugh a trifle nervously. "You couldn't do it. Be your age, my child."

Hester, who knew Eve's impulsive nature, her wild and undisciplined spirit, trembled inwardly.

"Eve darling, don't be silly . . ."

Her words were as a match to dry timber.

Eve stood up, a slim small figure in her blue angora suit, the sun through the open windows of her sitting-room glinting in her pale gold hair, cut in a short bob and exquisitely waved. Her slender feet in brown-and-white kid shoes were set firmly upon the deep pile carpet, her hands thrust into the pockets of her jumper.

"Girls," she exclaimed, glancing from one to the other of the little group. "Have you heard every word? Have you listened closely and intently to every subtle detail? I call upon you both as witnesses to this wager between Con and myself, and I—accept the challenge!"

Each of the three listeners drew a deep breath. Melodramatic, of course, but really rather thrilling, especially when one remembered how terribly attractive, and yet so coldly aloof, was the man who was the centre and cause of this melodramatic announcement.

Con Chator, leaning forward in her chair, a pointed brown felt hat perched upon her brilliant auburn hair, her light-blue eyes interested and sparkling, a flush deepening the rouge on her flawless cheeks, clapped her hands enthusiastically.

"Good for you, Eve," she laughed.

"Well done!" Inez Latimer, dark, sallow, an interesting-looking woman, stood up slowly. "But I should be careful if I were you, Eve. Mallory is a dangerous man; I know him fairly well and a good deal about him, so I can speak with truth and knowledge. You are playing with fire, kid."

"I don't care if I am. I know how to keep myself from being burnt," and Eve stiffened her slight figure. "Now, girls, how long do you give me?"

"Seven days," said Con.

"That is simply absurd. I haven't even seen him yet."

"For heaven's sake, Eve——"

"Shut up, Hester. How long, Inez?"

Inez, artist and successful woman, the eldest of the little quartette, was invariably turned to for the casting vote. She gave it now.

“Three months, I should say, to make it at all worth while and to be fair on both sides.”

“Good heavens!” cried Con. “How too absolutely futile!”

“Not a bit.” Inez picked up her handbag and scarf and turned towards the door. “I will hold the stakes if you’ll both send them along to the studio.”

“Right. And we’ll meet at Inez’s place in three months’ time for the result.” Con heaved her Junoesque figure from the deep chair where she had been sitting, gathering her belongings together.

“That’s the end of December,” sighed Hester, pressing her small brown hands anxiously together. “Ye gods, how appalling!”

She rose to see the visitors depart, took them to the door of the luxurious flat which was Eve’s home, and presently she and her employer were left alone.

Eve threw herself on to the couch and lit a cigarette with a little inward thrill.

“Thank God, I’ve something to live for at last!” she exclaimed. “Life was getting too damn’ boring to be supported.”

Hester Lawrence looked with considering, frowning eyes at her friend. They had been at school together, and always friendly disposed towards each other in those days, each helping the other out of those difficulties which crop up in school life. Then they met little for a few years since fortune had favoured them differently, one being destined to a life of wealth and ease and luxury, the other the eldest of a large family, her father a struggling country doctor.

But they had kept in touch with each other after leaving school until finally Eve, with the usual kind-heartedness that she hid beneath a veil of casual indifference, had offered Hester a home and income as her companion-secretary. Eve was an orphan and a very wealthy one, and could afford to indulge her slightest whim. Yet she was a staunch and loyal friend and there was a bond existing between the two girls which made their lives together very pleasant. There were moments when Eve lost her temper and Hester had to exert all her tact and self-possession not to forget that she was, after all, only a paid employee. But for the most part, they shared a happy, easy existence between them.

For two years now they had lived together, either at Eve’s beautiful London flat, or at her ‘country cottage’ in Wildmore, a charming house, Five Gables.

Hester was a year senior to her employer, and at twenty-five, brown-haired, grey-eyed, rather quiet and yet a girl of very definite character. When

she took on her work with Eve at the age of twenty-three she had known what it was to be desperately poor, to have to go without things, sacrifice herself and her wants for the rest of the family, who were always ready to do the same for her; so that she rejoiced now in her good salary which enabled her to help at home and gave her such an amazingly different life from that which she had always expected for herself.

She stood now for a long moment looking at her friend, half afraid to offer any definite resistance to the amazing challenge which Eve had accepted, and yet faintly aware that it was her duty to try in some way or other to persuade the girl not to carry out the ridiculous adventure.

“I think I’m rather afraid for you, Eve,” she began, slowly. “Isn’t this wager a little bit—risky?”

Eve Jarvis narrowed her eyes and a faint flush crept up under her fair skin.

“Risky? How? You may be my companion, Hester,” she went on quietly, forcing her friend into her ‘place’ with a cruelty she very seldom showed, “but you aren’t my mentor.” She drew deeply at her cigarette and stared past Hester, out through the open windows, with a casualness that was almost insolent.

The rumble of traffic beyond the quiet square where the flat was situated came to the ears of both girls, the distant whirr and hoot of taxis, the drone of buses. And the early October sunshine fell softly across the thick grey carpet, nestling in a bowl of pale roses with deep pink hearts that stood on a low mirror-topped, wrought-iron table, glinting upon an opalescent statue holding a reading-lamp in a corner of the room.

“Sorry, Hester,” said Eve suddenly, “but you annoyed me, and you asked for that. You ought to know by now how I hate to be interfered with or have my intentions questioned.” She lit another cigarette from the stub of the first, only half smoked, and went on speaking in a low voice, as if thinking aloud.

“Can’t look after myself because the man’s so damnably good-looking! How too revolting! As if no woman could resist him, and how dreadful for him to think women are like that! ‘Lick me into shape’ will he?” Her voice shook with temper, and she sprang up, stamping her foot upon the ground. “Did you hear all that, Hester?”

Hester blinked, and then smiled.

“Yes, I did. But probably he isn’t half what they say.”

“But you’ve seen him yourself. Did you think he was like that?”

“I thought he was amazingly good-looking, and probably very fascinating,” said Hester, slowly, trying to keep out of her voice the

sensation which had overwhelmed her when, at Inez's studio, she had been introduced to Garnet Mallory. Fascinating, yes; almost irresistibly so. Nice too; at least he had been nice to her, and very courteous. But cruel? Undoubtedly. She had not forgotten the cruel lines of his mouth even when she remembered his charm.

“Of course you fell for him?” Eve taunted her.

“No, I didn't do that. I admit that I felt his fascination, but I think he has a cruel nature.”

Eve shrugged the words aside, and then remembered those others that had been tossed lightly towards her and which she resented so passionately.

“‘Lick me into shape!’ How dared they say such a thing as that!” she exclaimed, savagely. . . . “‘Lick me into shape,’ will he? My God, I'll show them all exactly how much of that he can do, my fine Mr. Garnet Mallory!”

CHAPTER TWO

GARNET MALLORY sprawled in a low armchair, a cigarette between his thin lips, his eyes on the green-smocked figure of Inez Latimer, busy with palette and brushes as she stood before a big easel at work. He yawned lazily, and wondered what he was going to do next. His interest in living hung for the moment suspended; his friends, occupations, hobbies, everything had assumed the texture of complete unimportance.

Having travelled to most of the far corners of the earth, and having experienced practically everything, he was at thirty-five a man with a past crammed with adventures, a present that bored him inexpressibly, and a future at which he shrugged his broad shoulders because it promised to be as dull as the existing moment.

A loyal friend to his own sex, where women were concerned he was almost obsessed with his dislike and contempt for them. Brought up since boyhood to distrust and despise them utterly, as a man he had been unfortunate in his acquaintances amongst the fair sex and had seen no reason to alter the opinions thrust upon him by his father years before.

When he was twelve his mother had run away with another man, and Michael Mallory, always a self-centred man, had taken the blow as a personal insult and had become an embittered woman-hater from thence onward throughout the remaining years of his life, and moreover had brought up his son in the same way. Get what you want from a woman, make use of her, never let her make use of you: that was his creed. Woman was a poor thing, untrustworthy, fickle, despicable, accessible. The prettier she was, then the more dangerous and yet the easier because of her vanity;—that was every woman's vulnerable point, said Michael Mallory, that and greed, particularly the greed for money.

He averred that you could do anything with a woman if you paid tribute to her good looks, or her charm, or something entirely personal; and another sort of tribute into her pocket. And Garnet, with the strong and sensitive nature that might have led him to great things, had imbibed his father's teaching to the detriment of a very powerful character. To him all women were, more or less, the same, at least when you got down to bedrock; only the veneer differed, the one from the other, and their weapons and mode of attack.

Inez glanced at his grimly expressionless face.

“Well?” she said, quietly.

Mallory shifted his position and laughed across the wide studio at the artist. She was actually the only woman he found tolerable for any length of time, and that was of course because she was so unlike women, he considered, so unlike *most* women; probably because she was masculine in many ways and in her essentially straightforward, honest outlook on life in general. She possessed few if any of what he looked upon as women’s usual whims and weaknesses, or so he thought. In fact, he almost liked Inez but he was ever ready to find in her the first suggestion of womanly vices, greed in some form or other, for she was too plain to presume to vanity although a striking-looking woman; neither was she the type to whom beauty and the care of it appealed as almost the most important thing in the world.

“I thought you were absorbed in your painting,” he said, tossing his cigarette-end into the empty grate.

“Don’t do that,” said Inez, sharply. “I know artists are always supposed to be untidy and careless and all that, but I’m not, yet I’m successful in spite of it.”

Mallory laughed and, stooping forward, retrieved the offending stub.

“Sorry,” he smiled, a slow smile that never reached his eyes. “I’m afraid I wasn’t thinking.”

He rose, stretched his lithe body, his long well-shaped limbs, shrugged his broad shoulders and sauntered across to the easel. Frowningly he regarded the blaze of colour smeared upon the canvas.

“Good!” he remarked, crisply. “By Jove, you’ve a gift for colour! It positively lives.”

Inez’s plain face lit up at his appreciation, but she only murmured “Thanks. Glad you like it,” in her cool, impersonal way.

“For a woman,” said Mallory, reluctantly, “you are extraordinarily clever.”

“Thanks,” said Inez, again. “I appreciate just how much a compliment that is.”

He shrugged and still stood, staring at the painting before him.

“You wait a bit and perhaps you won’t despise my sex one of these days so much as you do now,” Inez added.

He frowned, his lean face dark and forbidding, the cold grey eyes steely, the grim line of his jaw out-thrust and his thin mouth bitter and disdainful; indeed a cruel face.

“Not at all likely, my dear,” he scoffed.

A memory of the lesson that was presumably to be taught him presently flitted across Inez’s mind, of the challenge given and accepted the previous day.

She never doubted but that Eve would fail; the girl was so feminine in spite of her modernity, and Garnet so essentially male, that to bring the two together—she shrugged, the consequences seemed to her inevitable. Only she liked Eve, and she knew that the girl was not as shallow and careless and casual as she made herself out to be; there was a good deal of character hidden beneath the gay, laughing mask she wore. Inez wanted this man to let her down lightly, and so, looking at him a little thoughtfully she wondered, on the impulse of the moment, whether she might not tell him a very little about the wager, not enough to ‘put his back up’, as it were, only to show him that all girls would not fall for him at a glance even if he despised their admiration.

He ought to be warned so that he could appreciate the rather fine feeling that lay behind the challenge accepted. Some women had pride, and one girl at least would die rather than acknowledge his attraction as something utterly extraordinary, and he ought to see that it was a splendid if rather mad venture on her part to try to prove her point. Yet, tactful though she endeavoured to be, she did not realize that she gave away more than she guessed, or else perhaps the man was quicker at deduction and reading between her words than she expected him to be.

He said little, only shrugged slightly.

“Silly young fool!” he murmured, but there was a faint glimmer of interest in his eyes.

“I wish Eve could hear you!” answered Inez, then bit her lip and bent forward over her painting. Had he heard? What a fool she had been to let the name slip! Probably he had missed it entirely for he took no notice, and she hadn’t meant to give the girl away so completely. However, she was certain he hadn’t heard.

“Be gentler with the young ones, Garnet,” she said quickly, trying to cover her words. “After all, women are a great deal what men make them, you know. At least, let some of them down lightly.”

He laughed then, a short cold laugh that made Inez shiver. Why had he to make himself into this strange hard man when he might have been so lovable could he have only been more human?

“Do you think so?” was all he answered. “Well, Inez, I must go. Would you lunch with me tomorrow?”

He did not really want her to but sometimes she could be amusing and he was desperately bored. Time he had some work to do, but he was so rich that he didn't need to work in the ordinary sense and for the ordinary reasons. Now and then he disappeared from the world for several months at a time, and during that absence produced a novel, clever, cynical, full of the bitterness which was so much a part of his nature; full too of satire and a certain quaint humour with here and there unexpected pathos. These books made a comfortable sum of money for him yearly although he did not really need it.

"I can't tomorrow," said Inez. "I'm lunching with one or two important people."

"Thanks," smiled Mallory, at her unintentional irony. "Sorry you don't count me in the same category," and bowing in a half-mocking, half-foreign fashion over her hand, casually held out to him, he turned and sauntered out of the studio, stepped into the big, cream-coloured car waiting for him at the kerb, and streaked away along the narrow road.

CHAPTER THREE

IT was some two or three days after the challenge, given and accepted, an incredible challenge since the issue was so curiously unusual.

Hester Lawrence, seated at her desk on a cold October morning, shivered as she thought of it. Silly Eve! She was courting trouble to embark on such an adventure, for how could she, strong-minded and independent though she might be, hope to escape the fatal fascination of a character like that of Garnet Mallory? The dice was loaded against her from the first moment. For Eve was susceptible, for all her strength and in spite of her determination to be the opposite.

“She’s too desperately feminine,” sighed Hester, nibbling the end of her pencil. “And he is so particularly the type to attract her. What *can* happen?”

More conventionally minded than her friend and employer, Hester shared with the majority of the world a certain distrust for the unusual, since—as has been written—the unusual “casts a shadow over the plains”.

It was all so childish, too. Yet, because she had given her word, Eve would go through with the adventure, even if already she repented the impetuous and rash undertaking.

“Perhaps she will think better of it.” Hester laid aside her pencil and turned to the portable typewriter set out before her. “She hasn’t mentioned it since, so she may have changed her mind.”

But, in her heart of hearts, the girl knew that this was too much to hope for.

The sitting-room door opened and Eve came in.

She had been out since directly after breakfast and her secretary had not the remotest idea where she had been or what interest at the moment was paramount over the others.

“Hello!” Eve tossed her furs on to a chair and subsided into a corner of the deep couch, pulling off her hat. There was a look of smiling satisfaction on her lovely face, and her eyes were sparkling.

Hester studied her thoughtfully.

“You look exactly like a cat who has stolen the cream,” she remarked, wondering secretly what new mischief Eve had been engaged upon.

“My dear, I feel rather like it!” Eve laughed back. “Not *stealing* the cream exactly but finding out where the dairy is.”

“The *dairy*!”

“Yes, where the cream comes from more or less. In other words, I have been pursuing some suitable enquiries on the matter of one Garnet Mallory . . .”

“Oh!” Hester’s lips met in a disappointed grimace. “I hoped you had _____”

“Yes, I know,” interrupted Eve. “But you should know me better by now, my lass. Do I ever turn back from an undertaking to which I have allied myself?—Hester, that’s rather good, isn’t it?”

She laughed and, diving into her handbag, produced her gold cigarette-case and selected a cigarette.

“What have you discovered?” asked the older girl, soberly.

“His lordship’s country residence, which is only twenty miles or so from Wildmore. Did you ever *hear* of such luck? And Mr. Mallory takes up residence there on Saturday for an indefinite period of time. It is customary for him to do so at this season of the year, when it is possible that he may engage himself upon the production of a new novel. Unless otherwise occupied,” she added, flippantly.

“I see.” Hester rose and came across to the fireside. “And you propose to take up residence in *your* country house and provide the ‘other occupation’. I understand.”

“Don’t look so pensive about it. Isn’t it the cutest idea possible?”

“At least it is better than chasing him in London.”

Eve wrinkled her nose, blew a wraith of cigarette smoke ceilingwards, and then turned her brilliant eyes upon her companion.

“I don’t like the sound of that word ‘chasing’. Hester, you can be very tactless, can’t you, darling?”

“Perhaps,” said Hester, bluntly. “But it is nevertheless the truth.”

“So it may be. I suppose actually I *am* chasing the man, but only for the good of his soul. Wait until he falls desperately in love with me and finds that, for once, a woman does not respond to his charm. That will be checkmate.”

“I wonder. Supposing matters are reversed and *you* fall for him instead and he doesn’t for you. What then?”

Eve rose quickly and a frown of annoyance flitted across her face and was gone again.

“How extremely difficult and trying you can be, darling Hester! Must you suggest such impossible situations? Why suppose anything so—at least improbable?”

“But, Eve dear, *is* it so improbable as you think? It might not be.”

For a moment the two girls stared steadily at each other then Eve turned aside with a casual shrug of her shoulders.

“Perhaps I’m an optimist,” she said, lightly. “Or perhaps again I have too much faith in my own abilities. Can one have too much confidence in oneself, or can one?”

Hester knew that it would do more harm than good to try and dissuade Eve from the venture upon which she was determined to embark. Why *had* she to be so perverse and obstinate, and so blind to the possible consequences of her perverseness? Or was she so blind?

Apparently she was ready to risk being humiliated in her own egotistical eyes, insulted by Mallory and having to confess defeat to her friends. Yet there was always the other side. The man might be irresistibly attracted to Eve.

“She’s very lovely,” thought Hester, and without the shadow of envy colouring her honest admiration.

To be as lovely as Eve Jarvis entailed responsibilities, for all beauty must justify its existence if it is to endure, or the swift years will devour it and, there being no sound or lasting foundation beneath it, nothing remains.

“We go down to Five Gables tomorrow,” announced Eve, firmly. “Will you attend to everything, Hester?”

Her secretary drew a deep breath, gave the tall, lovely golden girl one long look, then turned away to the telephone.

“I had better ring up Mrs. Lang,” she said, in an expressionless voice, mentioning the cook-housekeeper who was always in residence at Eve’s country house. “I’ll do it now.”

“Good,” said Eve, and with a little nonchalant laugh, went out of the room, humming carelessly as she went.

“I double dare you to kiss me, and then
I double dare you to kiss me again . . .”

Hester dialled ‘Trunks’ and heaved a sigh of deep anxiety.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIVE GABLES was an ultra-modern house, built of gleaming shaded red bricks in the style of 'Ideal Home' illustrations. Its five gables had a certain cheeky impertinence about them—or so it seemed to Hester—which in her eyes detracted considerably from their charm.

Beautifully proportioned, mellow in spite of its extreme newness, it yet lacked some soulful, alive, home-like quality. Not so to Eve, who thought her purchase of the previous year all that could be desired.

Its sloping gardens, its wide loggia and glassed sun-parlour, the artistic green hard-court with its fringe of young birches; the Dutch garden with its severe hedges and demure paths; the rose-garden . . . it was all perfect in the eyes of its young owner. And the house appealed to her a great deal more than the garden.

She loved the big hall with its oak beams and light oak panelling, the parquet floor which she had strewn with Persian rugs. The lounge in red and white and silver; the dining-room all Jacobean and pewter; the library, which was Hester's own particular sanctum and the room she liked best, perhaps because Eve allowed her to choose most of the furnishings. It was brown and cream with a few touches of orange; with deep chairs, an open brick fireplace where logs and peat burned, dark curtains and carpet, and the walls lined with books.

Here Hester spent many happy hours, for the lounge was to her too scintillating for comfort and the dining-room too picturesque.

Eve's luxurious coupé carried the two girls down to the country the following day, suit-cases packed into the back, and Eve at the wheel, a scarf tied round her golden curls and the light of adventure in her eyes.

"I feel as if we were at the beginning of all sorts of thrilling do's," she announced, as they took the road. "This is marvellous!"

A prematurely wintry wind howled round the car, and scudding clouds chased the elusive sunshine.

Hester agreed, rather dubiously, that her employer was probably right, then she snuggled her chin into the fur collar of her coat (one of Eve's last winter coats, discarded and handed over to her secretary, partly from

generosity but more particularly because of her changeableness where clothes were concerned).

Whatever was meant to happen would no doubt come to pass, so what was the good of worrying? Hester let her anxieties slip from her on a sigh of contentment to feel the swift rush of air past the car, the deep quiet throb of its engine; to see the country streaking past them.

Already the trees were beginning to change colour, green merging into russet brown with here and there a flame of turning red.

“I love the autumn,” said Hester. “There is something magic and enchanted about it.”

“The spring for me,” answered Eve. “I like new things, youth and the green buds on the trees and the freshness in the air. There’s too much decay and brownness and melancholy about this time of the year.”

They had lunched at the flat, and then left London leisurely so that they arrived in the little village of Wildmore as the early dusk of mid-October filmed the world with grey like faint and drifting smoke.

“We’ll get some more petrol while we’re in the village,” said Eve. “I seem to be a bit short and we may not want to come this way tomorrow.”

Eve pulled in at the yard outside the new petrol-station that had set itself up, with its row of pumps, its blatant signs and glaring posters, right in the middle of the wide old street. On the opposite side of the road the staid dimensions of the village hotel, ‘The King’s Arms’, seemed to frown disapprovingly from its vantage of a couple of centuries of age upon this modern upstart that faced it unashamed.

A big grey Delage car occupied the foremost position in front of the pumps and two mechanics were engaged in conversing with the driver.

Eve, ever resentful of being kept waiting, only waited to light a cigarette then honked loudly and imperiously.

One of the mechanics glanced up but returned to the discussion as if time did not matter or else the customer in the Delage mattered a good deal.

“What damned cheek!” exclaimed Eve, her lips tightening on her cigarette. “To keep *me* waiting.”

“They are new people here and, for that matter, so are we,” said Hester, soothingly. “I expect there is some vital point at argument; men do love to discuss technical hitches.”

Eve snorted.

“Knowing so much about men?” she said, unkindly.

Hester flushed but kept her temper.

“Having three brothers,” she replied, quietly.

“Damn this man’s sauce!” Eve was fuming, and the hand that now rested on the electric horn was no gentle one.

The door of the Delage swung open and the driver stepped out, a tall man in tweeds, hatless. He turned slowly and regarded the cream and red car at the tail of his own with a cool, sardonic interest, then shrugged his big shoulders.

“A woman naturally,” he remarked, and the words carried to the occupants of the coupé.

Hester could not see the owner of the Delage from her position on the left of her employer, and Eve only viewed him as the object of her angry resentment.

“I happen to be in a hurry,” she said, icily. “Is it possible for me to have any attention?”

One of the mechanics moved forward.

“Wanting something, miss?”

The girl’s temper boiled over.

Having told the fellow exactly what she thought of him, ignoring the tweed figure standing near and listening with contemptuous amusement (of which Eve was perfectly aware), she then ordered six gallons of petrol, and waited in furious silence while this was put into the tank.

The stranger then re-entered his car, lifted a hand to the man with whom he had been talking, and drove away.

“Petrol hog!” spluttered Eve. “Damned insolence to hold us up like this and then coolly get out of his beastly car to inspect us and get in again. And not so much as a hint of apology.”

She ground in her gears and shot away from the garage and down the village street, Hester praying fervently that the offending motorist should have already disappeared.

She gave a sigh of relief to see the wide street empty, for in her present mood the girl beside her was quite capable of overtaking the cause of her annoyance, stopping her car in front of his and telling him just what her opinion was of a man who could not move his car out of *her* way, and kept the garage men from attending to her needs.

They drove out of the village, however, without seeing any sign of the troublesome motorist, came to the wrought-iron gates of Five Gables, set open for them, and roared up the gravel drive.

“Loathsome creature!” cried Eve, as the car came to a standstill. “I hope to God I never set eyes on him again.”

Hester, not having seen the man in question, ventured no remark on the matter, but tried tactfully to change the subject by exclaiming cheerfully on the comfortable prospect of tea and Mrs. Lang’s lovely hot buttered toast, and slowly Eve calmed down and the incident was, apparently, closed.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY dined in an atmosphere of mingled satisfaction and restlessness, each girl supplying these two main motifs of feeling: Hester, glad of the quiet of the country and the spacious luxury of the house, with the knowledge of its gardens enclosing them and the spread of fields and woods beyond the boundary walls. Eve was restive, keyed up over the adventure upon which she was planning to embark; given to long silences and sudden quick bursts of chatter.

“We will ring up the Rodneys,” she said, as they rose from the dinner-table and went back to the white and red and silver lounge. “Perhaps they’ll come over and dance.”

She took up the microphone of the red telephone, humming as she did so, for her swiftly moving brain must ever express itself in talk or rendering the modern music of the last moment, anything that was movement, unless she settled down to steady thought or read a book.

She sang ‘The Lambeth Walk’ more or less under her breath while she put her call through to the family who lived in the big, green-shuttered house on the hill above Five Gables.

It was an older house than Eve’s, more richly built, creeper-covered, with a tangled, inconsequent garden rambling round it for a couple of acres.

Actually Eve had heard of Five Gables through them for she had known them for some months in London—a year or two now, it must have been—and a matter of months was a long time in most of the girl’s so-called friendships.

She liked the Rodneys, for they were unconventional, adventurous, likeable people; very wealthy, kind-hearted, but treating life as something of a joke, existing mainly for their own enjoyment.

There was Mrs. Rodney—Freda, to all and sundry—a large, pleasant, placid woman in the early fifties, who had been widowed ten years previously but whose children, though grown-up and some of them married, still lived at home with her and made her the unobtrusive centre of their lives.

She was not in the least possessive, and there was no mother-complex in her relationship with her off-spring. It was just that they were all very good

friends, understanding each other's reactions, and respecting as well as loving each separate member of their little community.

Jasper, the eldest, at thirty had little or nothing to show for having lived, for he wrote plays that no one would act, and hoped wistfully that some day someone would come along who possessed the ability to appreciate him.

He lived chiefly at his club in Town, spending odd weeks and many week-ends at The House, which was the name of the Rodney residence in Wildmore. A mere dabbler, he had never had to work hard, and thought it was rather clever to call himself 'dilettante' and let it go at that.

It was he who answered the telephone.

"Why, Eve Jarvis, by all that's marvellous!" he exclaimed, loudly. "We'll come over. Of course we'll come over. Our cellar has run dry for we've been a house full this week, so we'll come over and drink your liquors. Is that on?"

Eve laughed back.

"Rather. That is, if *I* have anything in the way of drinks, Hester and I only just having arrived. Are you all in residence?"

"Half and half as usual; some here and others not. Drake has a new fancy so he is following his will o' the wisp in the far reaches of some obscure county in the West. We none of us know much about it but being Drake it won't last long, so we aren't worrying. Jingo is here and husband; I'll bring them with me. Cheers, Eve. I'll be seein' you," and he hung up.

The girl turned away from the chromium-plated telephone-table and moved restlessly about the room.

"That was Jasper, the fool!" she said, and repeated his words. "Poor Drake! What a terribly susceptible young man he is! Always falling for someone fresh, just like a butterfly or a moth round a flame."

"One of these days he will get his wings singed," said Hester, soberly.

Eve shrugged.

"There speaks our nice moral Hester."

The older girl flushed but laughed as well.

"The most obvious remark, Eve," she said. "I wonder who it is this time."

Eve yawned, already losing interest in the distant Drake, the second son of the house of Rodney and actually one of the most handsome and attractive young men of her acquaintance.

Drake Rodney at twenty was devastating enough, she admitted, but had he been five years older then he might have held a more lasting interest for

her.

“I don’t like ’em too young,” Eve would say.

It was not long after that the roar of a car outside announced the arrival of her visitors, and Eve herself rushed out to receive them.

Jasper, tall, slight, dark and faintly Mephistophelian, carried a small tight bunch of little button chrysanthemums, tied together into a Victorian posy. He presented it with a sweeping bow and a long, entangled speech that was constantly interrupted by his companion, a small, dark girl with big blue eyes, a page-boy bob, and a sweet, laughing mouth.

This was Jennifer, known to her family and friends as Jingo, and the tall, quiet young man beside her, with the plain, nice face and big, angular body, was her husband, Jerry Darton.

They had their own suite of rooms at The House where they spent most of their time, for Jerry ‘wrote books’ though, as yet, only two had seen the daylight. Jingo was perfectly happy ‘pottering about’ while her husband spent his quota of hours each day in their own sitting-room, scribbling or typing or merely frowning at the wad of paper on his desk.

“The waste of a good life,” his father had snorted, angrily, but since Jerry had inherited a comfortable income from his mother when she died, old General Darton could do no more about it.

Eve ushered her guests into the lounge and Hester came forward to greet them.

“Good to see you, Hester,” cried Jasper, seizing her by both hands and using them as pump handles. “Lovely to see your nice, wholesome, pretty little face. Takes years off me.”

“Hello, Hester.” Jingo smiled with real pleasure for the two girls were by way of being pretty good friends. “Isn’t this unexpected dashing down here without notice?”

“It is rather.”

“Felt like it,” said Eve, glibly. “I wanted a breath of country air.”

Jerry Darton gave her a whimsical look.

“Country *air!*” he repeated, gently. “There is something more to it than that, or my psychology is desperately at fault.”

“Don’t be absurd!” Eve laughed, but her eyes flashed swiftly over Jerry’s plain, kindly face. “What do you suppose I bought Five Gables for but to visit it occasionally?”

“Quite,” agreed Jasper. “Let’s dance.”

They switched on the radio-gram and having first refreshed themselves from the cocktail-cabinet cleverly concealed inside an imitation chromium-plated baby grand, they divided into partners and danced, while the October wind whistled and romped round the house, and the night sky was dark with scurrying clouds.

CHAPTER SIX

“IT’s a marvellous day, Hester.”

Eve stood at the long windows of the dining-room and looked out upon the smooth lawn, scattered with the leaves which the autumn wind had wrenched from the surrounding trees and spread over the grass.

In the wide flower-beds Michaelmas daisies were a mauve riot of lovely colours, with the russet and bronze of early chrysanthemums mingling richly amongst them.

The sky was that pale clear blue of later October, filmed with lacy clouds like the fringes of woolly shawls; and the air was crisp and vitalizing and exuberant.

Eve stretched her slim young body and her eyes danced with excited interest.

“I shall take the car and hare round the countryside for an hour or two,” she said. “You will be happy enough here or in the garden, I expect, won’t you?” She cast a glance, vaguely apologetic, in the direction of her friend, as if her conscience suggested that Hester should accompany her, but her personal inclination did not agree.

“Yes, rather,” said Hester, warmly. “Shall I do the flowers?”

Eve laughed.

“One of your principal joys of living, ‘doing’ flowers,” she said. “Pick whatever you like, my dear. They are always your job for I hate arranging ’em, though I like to enjoy the results of your labour.”

Hester came and stood beside her.

“It’s all wonderful, isn’t it?” she sighed, rapturously, “Season of mellow fruitfulness or whatever it is somebody said about it, Browning or Shakespeare or some thoughtful man. I wish I could write poetry.”

“Perhaps one day you’ll write a book, darling, and make a name and a future for yourself. Anyway, I’m quite sure you could write a better one than Jerry Darton, only his money helps him.”

Hester only laughed.

“I couldn’t write anything interesting enough for anyone to read. Are you going anywhere special or merely going to drift?”

“Drift,” said Eve, and being busy lighting her inevitable cigarette, avoided looking at her companion. “I shall probably be back for lunch, but if the mood took me, I *might* stop at a pub somewhere and have bread and cheese and beer. Expect me when you see me, darling, which is such a *fool* remark, I always think. Bye, bye, and be good.”

As the door closed upon her, she gave a little skip of excitement and rushed across the hall and up the stairs to her room to collect a big coat to wear over the neat tweeds that encased her delightful figure.

Hester stood, for a long time, gazing out into the garden, her thoughts a jumble of her eager love for the autumn beauty that lay before her, the scent of which was in her nostrils, and a vague anxiety about Eve. Of course she often *did* rush off for a drive by herself, but there was something about the girl today . . .

“I’m just *imagining* things because of this hateful wager of hers!” she pulled herself up. “It colours everything. In any case *I* can’t do anything about it.”

She turned away and went in search of gardening scissors and outdoor shoes, and as she reached the garden was just in time to hear the roar of Eve’s car as she backed it out of the garage.

Eve took the road, singing as she drove, a vivid, vital, charming figure with a red scarf tied round her golden curls that matched her vermilion lips and finger-nails.

At *last* she was launched upon the first step of her adventure. She was out to meet Mr. Garnet Mallory and begin the lesson he was to learn at her hands.

“And won’t he hate me!” she laughed. “Won’t he hate to be attracted by me and unable to attract me in return. This is fun!”

Her foot pressed down on the accelerator and the hedges flashed past until presently she came to open moorland, ridged about with the dark shadow of scattered woods. She slowed instinctively and something of the magic of the sunlit morning crept into her blood.

In her powerful car it was not long before she had covered the twenty odd miles that lay between Wildmore and the village of Little Credleton, on the outskirts of which she had ascertained lay Mr. Mallory’s estate. An old house, she had been told, once a farm and now converted very successfully, and set down in a grassy park, flanked by coppices. Here, at Green Acres, lived the objective of her morning drive.

It was sufficiently far from the village to suit her purpose, with a short drive approaching the long, low house, and the spread of land stretching

behind the grey-stone building with its gracious mantle of crimson creeper, and the shadow of tall beeches bent upon it.

She drove in through the gate, took the drive slowly and pulled up in the wide gravel sweep that fronted the house.

Even as she switched off her engine and turned her eyes upon the creeper-covered porch, she saw a tall, masculine figure standing on the steps, regarding her steadily and almost (only of course she must be mistaken) with a certain sardonic amusement.

She leant towards him from the open coupé and allowed a coolly polite smile to curve her lips.

“So sorry to be a perfect nuisance,” she said, extremely offhand, “but I seem to be running short of petrol. I saw your gates and dared not risk going on over this moorland for fear of getting stranded. Can you help me at all?”

The man on the steps, a big, broad-shouldered figure in check hacking-coat and light breeches, the sun glinting in his shining brown boots, slowly came down to the gravel and stood, a yard away from the car, taking in the charming picture which Eve was quite conscious of presenting before him.

“Ah!” he said, then. “Petrol shortage!”

“Yes. Bad executive work on my part,” said the girl, lightly.

“I don’t think I quite agree,” said the stranger, cryptically. “I should call it exceedingly good executive work, especially on the principle that simplicity usually wins.”

Eve stared at him.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“No? Had you said your radiator lacked water, or something of that kind, it would perhaps have sounded much more feasible.”

A faint cold feeling crept through the girl’s limbs. Something in that quiet, sarcastic voice, in the vaguely scornful glance of his unwavering eyes that were so cold and blue-grey and impersonal, touched her with a vague feeling of discomfort that almost amounted to alarm.

How absurd of her! Why, it was the most likely—and most simple—explanation for her stopping at his house, with an uninhabited stretch of open country before her. He was not to know that she knew of the existence of Little Creddeleton nestling under the brow of the hill.

“I haven’t looked at the radiator,” she said, an edge to her voice. “Would you be good enough to tell me if I am safe to go on and shall find a garage within a mile or two?”

“Yes. There is a village about three miles away and an excellent garage. Or if you could manage twenty miles there is a better garage still at—Wildmore. I deal there myself.”

Eve did not bat an eyelid.

“I live near there, but I certainly haven’t enough juice to get me there . . .”

“You have been motoring for hours, I take it?”

Their eyes met, clashed, and the girl dropped her glance.

“Why do you suppose any such thing? You are extraordinarily rude, aren’t you?”

“Am I? Then I must apologize. But I was thinking that six gallons take some using and I should imagine you would get at least twenty-five to the gallon with that bus?”

“Six gallons!” echoed Eve, in a small voice.

The man laughed, and his face assumed a charm that was lacking when it was dark and serious.

“You accused me of rudeness—er—yesterday afternoon when my car obstructed your path. I seem to be living up to your estimation of me today too. Permit me to correct this impression and to offer you a drink.”

“Yesterday. Rudeness?” Colour swept Eve’s face, dyeing it richly. “Oh!”

So it had been Garnet Mallory himself whom she had rated and fumed against. What an introduction! Yet, perhaps, after all, it might not matter so much.

“So you have used six gallons already!” he repeated, softly. “An extravagant car, Miss—er—I don’t think I know you, do I?”

“Jarvis, Eve Jarvis.”

“‘Eve’? Ah!” Again that cryptic expression flitted across the man’s face. “I should, of course, introduce myself. Mallory is the name. Shall we have that drink?”

Should she? Would it be a wiser move to refuse? Yet, if she did that, how approach him again?

Hesitating, she accepted, with a faint shrug of her shoulders, allowing him to open the door of her car and help her out.

“I admit to being as thirsty as my car,” she said, glibly. “But at least I shall be able to cover three miles and so satisfy the engine. Thanks for the information.”

“Not at all.” His blue-grey eyes twinkled. So she would stick to the lie to the very end! “Let us refresh ourselves in the meantime.”

He led her to the steps but as they were about to mount, a car came slowly up the drive towards them, a small green sports car with a girl at the wheel.

“Jingo!” exclaimed Eve, in utter amazement.

“Mrs. Jerry Darton,” said Mallory, gently. “A very dear little friend of mine.”

Eve turned and stared at him, for the Rodneys had never mentioned this man as one of their acquaintances and she had no idea that he was known to any of the family.

“You know her?”

“Certainly I do, and a very charming woman.”

The car pulled up short and Jingo Darton waved a hand in greeting.

Garnet Mallory turned back and waved towards her and Eve, watching him from a step or two above him, felt her heart go cold within her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MRS. JERRY DARTON jumped out of her little car and stood, for an instant, gazing up at the two on the steps. Her small face was flushed and Eve sensed that she was nervous, that she would have retreated when she recognized Eve had there been time or if she could have done so without making the action look ridiculous.

“Hello, Eve. I didn’t know you knew Garnet.” Accepting the situation with a certain gallant nonchalance, she now moved forward and joined them.

Eve smiled.

“Nor I that any of you knew him.”

Mallory slipped a hand within the arm of each girl and, swinging them round, marched them into the house.

The shadowed depths of a big square hall received them, the sunshine from the open doorway and from a window on the shallow stairs throwing shafts of light across the heavy carpeted floor, gleaming in the pewter that stood on the shelves running round the walls and on the old Welsh dresser that filled a deep recess.

“Garnet nearly ran me down in his car once,” said Jingo. “Since then we’ve been friends, haven’t we, Garnet? Both having a good deal of time on our hands.”

“Fool!” thought Eve. “She’s nervous and trying to explain away her coming here. If she’d said nothing at all one wouldn’t think things. . . . What *does* one think exactly?”

“Mr. Mallory has just introduced himself to me,” she said, aloud, very casually, and explained her shortage of petrol until the realization pressed in on her that she too was explaining at much greater length than was necessary.

She happened to glance towards her host at that moment and surprised a gleam of amusement in his face. Evidently he thought the same thing and saw it as something ludicrous, even absurd; anyway, it made him smile.

Eve tautened in every muscle. She was not accustomed to being treated as a source of amusement.

He led them into a book-lined room that was unmistakably a masculine habitation, with a rack of guns over the fireplace, and deep leather chairs. Logs were stacked on the open hearth ready to be kindled.

The leaded casements stood wide to the sunny morning, and the air was fragrant with the smell of a bonfire burning in the garden outside.

Jingo sniffed rapturously.

"I adore the scents of autumn," she said. "It all smells so clear and crisp and *alive*."

"You are like Hester," Eve answered. "But give me the spring. There is too much decay and deadness about the autumn."

Mallory looked at her steadily.

"Autumn is rich and mellow and sympathetic, where the spring is hard and new and a little ruthless, like all young things."

"Autumn is much more ruthless," Eve answered, quickly.

"And who may Hester be?" said Mallory, suavely, as he opened an oak cupboard and brought out sherry and glasses.

"My secretary."

"Ah! You do a job of work then?"

"No, why should I? Is it necessary to work in order to employ a secretary?"

"Not always, but usually."

"She looks after Eve," said Jingo, lightly, accepting a glass from her host with a little upward glance through her long dark lashes, of which she was quite unconscious. Similarly she was not yet aware of this man's fascination for her. She liked him, admired him, they had many interests and views in common, and Jerry liked him too.

She had so much free time on her hands now that her husband was working on a new novel, and if she did not tell the household where she spent so many of her unoccupied hours, she did so without any definite desire to deceive them.

She often mentioned to Jerry that she and Mallory had played golf at Little Creddeleton, or he had taken her to Green Acres to see some new piece of pewter he had bought, since Jingo had made a study of pewter and was very knowledgeable on the subject.

Jerry did not mind, not that there was anything *anybody* could object to. But the sight of Eve Jarvis, standing on the steps of the house beside Mallory, had awakened a new feeling within Jingo's being, first of

annoyance, then a certain guilty discomfort and finally a very definite jealousy.

It was just *like* Eve to butt in. Why couldn't she content herself with the umpteen boy-friends she already owned, instead of . . . *instead of what?* went on her mind, and swerved away from the implication suggested by the thought.

"Let us drink a toast, ladies," said Mallory, reading her wandering thoughts. "To more merry meetings like this."

"And unexpected ones," smiled Eve, coolly, now on her guard. "Come and drink one with me sometime, *both* of you."

She set down her glass and rose from the arm of the chair where she had perched herself.

"I will leave you," she went on airily. "I'm so sorry I butted in and spoilt your pleasant morning."

Her smile at Jingo brought a faint deepening colour into the girl's cheeks, then she turned and gave Mallory a look of such cool, cynical amusement that even he was surprised.

"*Au revoir*. Come and drink sherry with me tomorrow morning at twelve, will you?" Her eyes turned to Jingo and back to the man again. "Both of you. Five Gables, Wildmore, and I shall be charmed to see you. It's my turn. Bye, bye, Jingo."

She was already walking towards the door and Mallory turned quickly and followed her.

"Thanks for the drink and the advice re garages," she said, stepping into the coupé. "Till tomorrow, Mr.—er—Mallory."

He smiled at her. She was certainly damned amusing, fascinating too, in fact—lovely. His eyes narrowed as he watched her, and he realized, with a faint inward shrug, that he had not refused her casually given invitation.

"Thanks," he said, in reply. "Till tomorrow."

Her car roared away down the drive, and he turned on his heel and went slowly back into the house.

She would probably be even more amusing on closer acquaintanceship, but he had always to remember the Clue he had picked up from Inez Latimer's vague hints. He had caught the name 'Eve', and he recognized in this girl just the character he would suppose likely to undertake such a wager. He was not quite sure what the wager was exactly but he had a pretty good idea of its general implication.

Here was a new game to his hand, or a different version of the same old playing. And it promised a certain amount of amusement. Good!

He went back into his sitting-room, having momentarily forgotten that little Jingo Darton was waiting for him, and when he saw her, standing near the open windows, he gave a quick, instinctive frown. Hell! He'd forgotten Jingo.

Nice, sweet little kid, but perhaps she came too often to see him.

"I had to come over directly I heard you were here," she said, tilting back her head—a habit of hers, probably because she was so small, and short in stature—and lifting her vital little face to him. "It *has* seemed ages since you were last at Green Acres, Garnet."

"Has it?" He smiled down at her and then, suddenly, bent his head and brushed her lips with his own.

The action was quite involuntary, and to him ordinary enough since he considered it the natural thing to kiss an attractive girl if he wished to do so. Besides, her little face was one sheer invitation, the parted lips, the shining eyes.

"Oh!" She drew back, colour flooding her face. "Oh, Garnet!"

He saw the expression in her widening eyes, and stepped back, at the same moment patting her shoulder with a brotherly hand.

"Well, why not? Very inviting mouth, my dear, and a very charming girl that it belongs to."

Her hands went up to her face and he saw that she had taken the little incident at very much more than its actual value.

"Garnet, you—shouldn't have done that!"

"No? Perhaps not. But again, perhaps I should. Do you attribute any ethical importance to a mere kiss, Jingo? Of course you don't. I apologize to Jerry, but I'm quite sure he would have done the same thing in my place. Anyway," with supreme casualness, "it was delightful but quite unimportant. Wasn't it?"

Jingo had herself in hand again, and laughed lightly.

"Oh, of course. Now tell me your London news."

But though she listened to him talking desultorily about Town and the last few weeks he had spent there, the memory of his lips touching hers persisted and she knew that, to her at least, if only for the time being, that kiss *had* been important. It had raised a barrier between them and at the same time altered their relationship.

“I wish he hadn’t done it,” she told herself, as half an hour later her small green sports car carried her back to The House in time for lunch. “I *wish* he hadn’t done it.”

Yet she knew, in her heart of hearts, that she was not speaking the truth to herself. She was glad, *glad* that he had kissed her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RODNEY family were already gathered in the dining-room for lunch when Jingo unobtrusively slipped round the door and took her seat beside her husband.

Jasper was carving an immense joint of cold beef at the serving-table, the elderly parlourmaid standing beside him, a twinkle in her grey eyes belying her austerity, for this elder son of the Rodneys could be irresistibly amusing on occasions.

“Jingo, you’re late, dear,” said Mrs. Rodney, mildly. “Car all right?”

“Oh yes,” answered the girl, vaguely. “I don’t know . . . I just misjudged the time.”

Jerry’s hand came out and closed over hers on her knee, and he smiled down into her blue eyes.

“Darling,” he whispered.

Jingo drew a deep breath and was conscious of a strange, guilty feeling within her. For a moment she felt that she dared not look at her young husband, for fear lest he read something in her glance—— She pulled her thoughts up sharply. What *should* he read there? After all, Garnet had kissed *her*; it had been nothing to do with her, not of her free will, . . . yet she had not resented his action, nor disliked him because of it.

Realizing her own hesitations she squeezed the fingers enclosing hers and smiled back.

“Had a good morning?”

“Fine. The book went marvellously.”

Jingo’s eldest sister, Joyce, twenty-eight, tall, with Freda Rodney’s brown hair and quiet grey eyes, but with a mouth that expressed her own particular individuality, leant forward across the long table.

“Where do you go, Jingo, when you drift round the country in your little car? Just drifting all the time?”

Jingo laughed. How exactly that described what she *had* been doing lately!

“Yes, Joyce, just—drifting!”

Joyce nodded her head wisely.

“Damned bad for you, my child. Why don’t you do a job of work?”

“Work!” echoed Jingo. “What sort?”

“Well, there are masses of opportunity now, since the Crisis. Why not join me and take an active part in A.R.P. doings? We want lots more people.”

Jingo wrinkled her nose.

“I’d hate it. The whole thing is so loathsome that I would rather not even *think* about it.”

“More fool you. It doesn’t do to be an ostrich these days; you’ve *got* to face things.”

“Have I?”

“She isn’t like you, Joyce,” said Jerry Darton, gently. “You are so practical and sensible——”

“Thanks,” murmured Jingo, mischievously. “Thanks a lot.”

“You know what I mean,” her husband went on.

“I do,” interrupted Joyce, with a tolerant smile. “Jingo is little and sweet and—rather decorative, whereas I am sensible because I look like a ‘woman growed’, and take a normal outlook on the world in general, lacking the artistic temperament and the over-developed imagination of some of you young things. You are all very delightful to know and to look at,” leaning an elbow on the table and studying the young couple with a considering eye, “but you are very useless, aren’t you?”

“Is that kind, darling?” interposed Mrs. Rodney.

“Probably not, but it’s true.” Joyce Rodney returned to her cold beef and helped herself to salad. “Truth’s seldom kind,” she added.

Jerry turned to his wife and began telling her of the progress he had made that morning, and she listened with absorbed interest, while Joyce, with a faint shrug, smiled at her mother and concentrated upon her lunch.

Joyce lived at home, helping Mrs. Rodney to run The House, and occupying her spare time with innumerable social and useful interests. Welfare work was her hobby, and her knowledge of human nature gave her an ever-increasing breadth of outlook and understanding that brought countless people to treat her as confidante and beg her advice. She possessed a tolerant view of the world’s problems and added a personal kindness to this when applied to individual difficulties so that the helping hand she held out to many lame dogs was rarely extended in vain.

The family was somewhat amused at her social ventures but admired her courage and achievements, and found her a lovable member of their small

colony as well as an extremely useful one. Besides, she lacked the arrogance of Mavis, the 'middle girl', who at twenty-five thought she knew her world inside and out. A trained nurse, she now occupied the position of attendant to a noted specialist in London, and thought her work rather more important than that of anyone she knew.

"One would have thought Mavis would be broad-minded and open-hearted, with all her experience," Mrs. Rodney had once remarked to a friend. "But actually, she is the narrowest and most insular of us all, and at heart terribly spinsterish."

"She'll throw that off one day," the friend replied. "Remember she is a Rodney, and to say that is quite enough."

Freda had laughed.

"Perhaps so. I hope you are right; anyway I can't bear insular people with a distorted vision of their own importance and foreshortened views of others."

There were five of the Rodneys; a carefree, delightful, devoted family with all the charm of their Irish forbears and the practical common sense of their English inheritance. If, as a total, they contributed little constructively towards the good of the state, at least they were not completely negative in their existence but here and there were responsible for some active usefulness.

Freda Rodney pretended to despair of them at moments though in reality she adored them one and all, and even took to her large heart their boy- and girl-friends, and counted Jingo's husband and the other various fiancés as her own children. For Jasper had been engaged twice and broken it off both times, and the number of Drake's 'serious' affairs were legion.

They all brought their friends, of either sex, to The House and found there a warm and friendly welcome, and as a consequence there were no secret love-affairs or obscure friendships 'under the rose'; there was no need for subterfuge because each member of the family was ceded the right to have his and her own opinions about the individual worth of their friends. In which matter Freda was immeasurably wise.

"And how was Garnet Mallory this morning?" said Jasper, blandly, as he carried his own plate to his place at the foot of the table. "I saw your car just turning in at his gate as I came towards you. No mistaking your little green bus, Jingo darling."

For an instant his lazy dark eyes held his sister's glance. Was there some ulterior motive in these words and in the amused flash of Jasper's casual

eyes? Was he conveying a warning or a rebuke, or was she imagining things?

Jingo managed a cool and indifferent laugh.

“Oh, very fit. I met Eve Jarvis there.”

“Eve Jarvis!”

This small but unexpected bombshell of news successfully diverted the interest of the table and Jingo was saved the necessity of explaining why she had visited Mallory at Green Acres. Why had she? Only because he amused and interested her and she had wanted to see him. She had, almost unconsciously, missed him a lot during his last stay in London, but not until she saw him did she realize quite how much.

Of course he *was* fascinating, but not to her who loved dear old Jerry and was perfectly, *perfectly* happy with him, . . . only she *did* have to spend rather a lot of time alone, and it palled after a while; yes, palled badly.

“Eve Jarvis!” echoed the family. “Didn’t know she knew him!”

“She didn’t know any of us had ever met Mallory either, and seemed awfully surprised,” said Jingo.

“And piqued, I’d bet a button to a gooseberry,” said Jasper. “Quaint lady, our Eve.”

“A fast little thing but—rather nice,” said Joyce.

Jingo made a moue.

“I like Hester *much* better; she has character.”

Jasper nodded.

“Very definite character, the darling.”

Jingo turned sympathetically to her brother.

“Did she turn you down once then, poor pet?”

“No; actually I haven’t yet given her the opportunity of doing so. But I admire her, all the same.”

“Please pass the salad, Jerry,” said Freda Rodney, calmly. “And don’t discuss your amours at lunch, children. It’s much too early in the day.”

“Were we?” they all demanded, surprised. “Do Mallory and Eve and Hester come under that category?”

Jingo dropped her table-napkin and dived under the table to pick it up, which no doubt explained her increased colour, but nobody noticed so actually she need not have bothered.

The parlourmaid began removing the plates.

CHAPTER NINE

EVE drove home, rejoicing at the success of her morning's manœuvres, the first uncomfortable moments already forgotten. She had an amazing gift of being able to remember the pleasant part of an occurrence and to put aside the rest as of little importance.

She had won the first round, she decided, happily; most certainly she had won. Mallory had agreed to come and see her, therefore the battle was already half over, and she saw eventual success like a star, shining brilliantly from an almost clear sky. Really, it had been too easy!

She had expected the greatest difficulty to lie in her approach to the object of her wager, and to the establishing of friendly relations between the two of them. Now all that was accomplished.

She arrived back at Five Gables, half an hour late for lunch, but her face wreathed with smiles, and the inevitable song burbling from her lips, as she climbed out of her red-and-silver coupé and entered the house.

“‘Oh, you fool!’” she sang, “‘That was love, said my heart.’”

Hester came out of the dining-room to greet her.

“I am half-way through lunch,” she began, apologetically, when her friend waved her to silence.

“Of course. I told you not to wait, but I decided to come back after all.”

They went into the Jacobean room together, and Eve dropped into the carved armchair at the head of the table.

“Such fun, Hester!” Then she stopped short while the parlourmaid, who had arrived from London by train that morning, brought her plate and Mrs. Lang's inimitable cottage-pie.

When the door closed upon the maid, she burst out again.

“I've had a priceless morning. Who do you think I called on?” Her bright eyes challenged her secretary but Hester hesitated a moment before she replied.

“I might have suggested Garnet Mallory only he is not due to arrive till today.”

Obviously Hester did not quite believe her own words for she would have expected Eve to plan something more subtle than a direct attack.

“I’m afraid I misled you there, darling,” Eve answered, calmly. “Actually I knew he was to be in residence the day before yesterday, which is why we wasted no time in coming here ourselves.”

“Oh!” Hester stared at the younger girl with widening eyes. “Then you really went and called on him.”

Eve threw back her golden head and laughed loudly.

“Poor, darling Hester! Don’t look so horribly shocked, my pet. Yes, I *did* go and call on his royal highness, the Nabob of Green Acres, and very amusing it was too.” And she recounted faithfully every detail of her morning’s adventure.

“But, Eve, about the petrol! He must have *known* it was just an excuse.”

“What if he did? But I expect actually he was only being fatuous. And then Jingo arriving. *That* shocks you too, doesn’t it?”

Hester shrugged.

“Not really. I suppose they can be friends without it being shock-making, but all the same . . .”

“Exactly. So you *do* disapprove? I knew you would. . . . He’s rather a pet, you know, Hester.” Leaning an elbow on the table and chin upon upturned palm, Eve gazed dreamily into nothingness. “*Much* nicer than I should have expected, since people are never so nice as they are made out to be. And not at all the arrogantly conceited, self-satisfied male Inez led me to imagine him. Arrogant in a sense, yes; but not a bit smug or—or . . . what is the word I want?”

Hester looked at her quietly, her own mind a chaos of wonderment, doubt, anxiety, and a certain not very explainable disappointment.

“I know what you mean. Probably that is what makes him more dangerous.”

Eve’s blue eyes returned slowly to the other’s face.

“So you think he is dangerous?”

“He is to my peace of mind because his very existence is a challenge to you, my dear.”

The parlourmaid, entering just then with the sweet, put an end to their discussion, and it was not resumed until they were presently sitting in the sun-parlour, cigarettes in mouths, relaxed in the deep chairs set out there.

“He *is*—attractive,” said Eve, consideringly.

Hester moved restively.

“Do forget him for a moment. This Mallory man is becoming a positive obsession.”

“I believe he is.” Eve laughed deliciously. “And I may say that I am enjoying it.”

“Where do you want the spring bulbs planted, or haven’t you any plans?” demanded Hester, firmly. “Just give your mind to this vital question for a moment, there’s a dear.”

“I don’t care a damn,” answered Eve, airily. “I leave it entirely to you, darling, and I know I shall love whatever you arrange.”

“I was talking to Porter about it this morning, and we thought——”

Eve sat upright in her chair and brushed aside the subject of the gardener and his planting of the spring bulbs as something beneath her notice.

“Hester, supposing we *both* seriously fell for each other? How do I stand in regard to the wager?”

“You don’t stand,” answered Hester, crossly. “You fall completely, so would the sky. There’s Porter,” espying the old gardener as he appeared round the wall that shut away the kitchen regions. “I’ll leave you to your dreams,” and with an annoyed grimace at her employer, Hester went out into the garden and left Eve alone.

CHAPTER TEN

JINGO stood in the deep bay window of her sitting-room, looking out across the spread of gardens, the hard tennis-court, the glimpse of the kitchen garden beyond the red-brick wall, the vague hills grouped upon the horizon.

It was a misty, dull morning that threatened rain, with a warmth in the atmosphere that was disturbingly 'muggy' for October.

"I can't work this morning," announced Jerry Darton, banging a wad of scribbling paper down upon his desk with a thud that made the girl in the window jump and bite a nervous underlip. "Let's go out and tramp, Jingo sweet."

"It's so damp and—horrid," she answered, her back still turned towards him. "Eve said something about drinking sherry at her place about twelve-ish. Shall we?"

He shrugged and pursed his lips tentatively.

"Not keen. Are you?"

"It would be something to do."

"Darling, are you terribly bored? I thought you found this life satisfying and happy, and that you were content."

"So I am, Jerry dear."

She turned then, slowly, and smiled at him. He certainly *was* a darling! Of course she adored him and in his arms the world and all it contained was well lost; she remembered nobody else. At least . . . just lately the nebulous form of Garnet Mallory had drifted across her mind subconsciously, but she had pushed it aside, still unthinkingly. But yesterday he had kissed her; casually and without meaning, she knew, for kisses were nothing to a man of his type. To her they were precious since the only kisses she had ever known had been from Jerry's young and passionate lips.

She shivered involuntarily.

"What's the matter, Jingo?"

Her husband came and stood beside her, an arm slipped round her, pulling her back so that her small neat head with its page-boy bob of glistening dark hair rested against his shoulder.

"Nothing, darling."

“You’re wrong. *Something* is worrying you or disturbing you. D’you think I could love you as much as I do and not know when things weren’t quite right for you? Tell me, dearest.”

She shook her head.

“Honestly nothing, Jerry, only restlessness. A sort of spring urge in the autumn.”

“Sounds pretty sinister to me.”

He turned her round to face him, his quiet eyes searching for some explanation in her expression, but she tilted back her head and smiled at him, and he forgot everything else as his mouth found and held hers.

Presently when she had broken free from his embrace, he returned to their earlier discussion. *Wouldn’t* she come and walk with him across country somewhere, and perhaps lunch at an inn, as they had done so many times before?

“All right,” she agreed, at last. “I’ll come.”

“Thick shoes, darling,” he called, as she passed into their bedroom, leading out of the sitting-room. “And thick clothes. It will probably rain this afternoon and we *might* get caught.”

She stood, for a long moment, gazing at herself in the mirror of her dressing-table, her husband’s words re-echoing in her mind. . . . “We might get caught”. . . . Supposing he knew for a single instant how often she thought about Mallory? Supposing Mallory thought of *her* too in that way . . . only of course he didn’t, not being an impressionable man and hating women.

Yet it was possible that he might fall in love with her, and she with him, quite possible that both might be caught in a web of Fate’s weaving. That would be awful, and the consequences of it too hateful to imagine. . . . Though it would be marvellous to have a man like Mallory in love with one.

“Jingo!” she apostrophized herself, horrified, both at the definiteness of the thought and at the speed with which her emotion had progressed since the previous morning. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself! With a darling husband like Jerry and only married to him these few months, you ought to be kicked for even *thinking* of another man even in a friendly way. Whereas . . . you’re a pig and a beast!”

She changed her shoes for her stout brogues, pulled a beret over her sleek hair and took up her tweed coat, then she rejoined her husband. She went straight to him and laid her face against his sleeve.

“Darling, I do love you,” she said, low and intensely, almost as if she would convince herself rather than tell him what he knew so well already. “I *do* love you, Jerry.”

“My sweet.” He bent over her and kissed her lingeringly. “Little darling thing.”

She clung to him with something vaguely despairing in her clinging.

“We *are* happy, aren’t we, Jerry?”

“By Jove, I should think we were. You’ve got the jitters, my sweet, so let’s go out and walk ’em off. Ready?”

He held her away from him and considered her suitable tweeds, then stooped his tall head to peer into her face.

“Jingo, those are tears on your eye-lashes!” he said, instantly serious. “Is anything *really* wrong?”

“No, darling Jerry; only what you said—the jitters. And because I love you, you know.”

He kissed her lightly and said no more, but as they set out for their walk, and though he laughed and chatted as he was always wont to do, in the privacy of his own mind he thought and wondered and was suddenly and unaccountably afraid.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JASPER RODNEY watched his sister and her husband passing down the drive, as he stood at the window of the big family sitting-room.

It was a cheerful, delightful room with dark-brown carpet and curtains against a creamy wall, and deep chairs covered with cream folkweave. A new red-brick 'Claygate' fireplace replaced the old-fashioned atrocity that had previously dominated the room with an overwhelming early-Victorian ugliness, and this damp autumn morning, in spite of the humid warmth of the atmosphere, a cheerful log fire burned upon the sheer hearth.

Jasper frowned as he watched the two young figures disappear round a curve of the drive, and thrust his hands almost savagely into the pockets of his old grey flannel slacks.

"Jingo's going to the devil," he muttered. "She doesn't know it herself and Jerry's as blind as a ruddy bat. I saw it coming on in the summer but when Mallory went off and stayed away a couple of months I just hoped for the best. Not that *he'd* be serious, and in spite of what the world says about the fellow, *I* don't reckon this would be the sort of game to amuse him. People talk such damned rot!"

He swung away from the window as his mother entered the room, trailing the morning newspaper in her hand.

"Jasper darling," she said, rather worried. "Is there anything we ought to do about things? I mean the outlook is pretty serious, isn't it?"

"Damnably serious, sweet mother. But at the exact moment I don't see what we can do except keep level heads, refuse to be war-minded and scaremongering and try to carry on a normal existence. I think that is the most important thing one can do."

"Joyce with all her A.R.P. work makes me a little uneasy."

"If they would take more precautions about the incendiary and high explosive bombs instead of worrying so much about gas, I imagine it would be of more use to the nation in general."

Mrs. Rodney shuddered.

"It's too awful to contemplate. You young things who were merely children in the last war can't visualize the horror of it. I suppose it is only natural that it must seem just like an adventure to you all."

“I don’t know.” Jasper stared thoughtfully into the fire. “Not so much of an adventure to me. I’m thirty and perhaps I look at things a little differently from the modern twenty-year-olds. Anyway I don’t see much adventure in it; I think it’s all a bloody business.”

“Yes, it is,” said his mother, heavily. “It is every bit that.”

The cook came to the door to speak to her mistress, and Freda Rodney drifted away out of the room, leaving her elder son still gazing into the fire, lost in his thoughts, visualizing with a sense of sickening horror the glimpse of hell which their few words together had revealed.

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Eve and her secretary had come as near to ‘words’ that morning as they had ever done in the years they had been together.

After breakfast, at which Miss Jarvis had been very late but apparently in the highest of spirits, Hester had announced her intention of spending the morning ‘turning out’ her desk.

“Why this morning?” asked Eve, ominously. “I suppose you really mean you are going to shut yourself up in the library and not emerge till lunch-time.”

“Isn’t that what you would wish?” answered Hester, outwardly mild and inwardly furious. “I am sure you must want to entertain this man alone.”

“Don’t refer to him as ‘this man’,” snapped Eve. “Sounds as if he were selling vacuum-cleaners or a new kind of toothpaste. Besides, I suppose I may entertain whom I like, when, how and where I like?”

Hester flushed.

“I’m sorry, Eve. I am only thinking of you.”

“Odd way of doing it. Remember, my dear, that I am perfectly capable of thinking for and looking after my own self, thanks all the same. Now, about this morning: I don’t wish to receive His Imperialness ‘alone and palely loitering’, as the poem has it. That would be a fatal mistake at the moment. He’d think I was running after him.”

Hester sighed. Probably the wretched man thought that already.

“When you hear his car please come into the sun-parlour, then we will all drink sherry together and make light conversation.” She laughed. “It’s queer how much I have achieved already, Hester, isn’t it? Only a few days ago I hadn’t met him and hadn’t an idea how it was to be done. Must be fate.”

She sat on at the breakfast-table, dreaming aloud, and Hester perforce must sit and listen. She hoped Eve wasn't going to make too much of a fool of herself over Garnet Mallory. What a name for a man! Nice, perhaps, but much too . . . well, 'fanciful' was perhaps the word.

At last Eve rose, and Hester was free to 'do' the flowers and those other duties which she had undertaken as her own. Later she retired to the library and engaged in tidying out the drawers of her desk, a not at all onerous task but one in which she indulged when she wished to escape from her employer and be alone.

This morning she forgot her worries as she sorted the little heaps of paper, files of receipts, and other matters, until—her work accomplished in unusually quick time—she sat down to answer a pile of begging letters and her thoughts flocked back upon her like homing birds.

She had received a letter from her mother that morning, a worried letter. Her doctor father was not at all well; he had caught a chill and, refusing to give up work, had found it very difficult to shake off the after effects.

He has lost weight too [wrote Mrs. Lawrence], and you know how wonderfully sweet-tempered he always is. Now the smallest thing seems to upset and irritate him. So the atmosphere at the moment is not very happy, my dear.

Also, Betty is rather a worry. She seems terribly discontented and hating her job as receptionist to Mr. Travers, and it is such a good job, since she is only nineteen and not qualified for anything. The pay isn't bad either, but she says the people who come to a dentist are so dull! As if they would have the spirits to be lively, poor dears! It is very difficult and trying of Betty since finances are low and every little helps. I think it is a great deal to do with the set of Young People she has got into, and I wish she would choose steadier friends. Of course she is young. . . .

Hester frowned as she re-read this paragraph. Poor Mums! Struggling on with very little money, with a family who adored her but could not help much. Peter was in a bank, and did what he could, and she herself sent money home every month regularly.

Then there was Henry, training to be a solicitor, who wouldn't be earning anything for another two years at the least, and Dick, a medical student, who couldn't *hope* to stand on his own feet for a long and tedious time, though he seemed to have been studying medicine for an indefinite period. Well, he was only twenty-two now, so it wasn't fair to expect too much.

Poor old Peter, the eldest of the six of them! At twenty-seven he was earning less than she was, and had the dullest job of all of them, only he said he liked it and was quite content.

There were Bill's school-fees to be found three terms a year in addition to the other family expenses, and being only fifteen, the lad couldn't be taken away yet.

Hester sighed heavily, then her worried thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car approaching the house.

Setting her mouth grimly she rose, straightened her frock and automatically smoothed her hair, then went out into the hall, just as Jasper Rodney was being ushered into the house by the parlourmaid.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“HELLO, HESTER.” HE came forward eagerly and caught both her hands in his. “Well met, my dear.”

“I thought——” began the girl, and broke off. “Come and see Eve.”

She led the way to the sun-parlour where Eve Jarvis, anticipating the arrival of Garnet Mallory, was nonchalantly stretched upon a wicker lounge, cigarette in mouth and book in hand, making a very charming picture, of which she was perfectly well aware.

She tossed the book aside when she saw who was accompanying her secretary, and grimaced inwardly. What a waste of a good pose!

“Nice of you to come over, Jasper,” she said, coolly. “Have a drink? Cocktail or sherry?”

“Cocktail, thanks. Thought I’d welcome you home, having learned from Jingo that you had duly returned to the ancestral harbourage.”

“You fool! Didn’t you count the first time when you came complete with bouquet and whatnot, saying it with flowers, I fondly imagined?” Eve studied him covertly. Had he meant anything subtle by that reference to his sister? “I ran into her at Mallory’s place yesterday.”

“So I gathered. No, I never count first efforts, and what is worth doing is worth doing twice, you know. . . . Thanks so much,” as he accepted the cocktail Hester had mixed for him at the inlaid cocktail-cabinet in an alcove of the sun-room. “Sweet of you, Hester.”

He lifted his glass and toasted her, with a smile in his eyes, and she smiled back, for she liked Jasper Rodney.

“Mr. Mallory,” said the maid at the door, and Garnet Mallory, in riding-clothes, entered the room.

Eve had been watching the other two with a discontented frown on her pretty face, resenting what she chose to look upon as Jasper’s neglect of herself. He had no right to pay her secretary so much attention.

It was this expression that Mallory surprised by his unexpected appearance, the disapproving, drooping mouth and arrogant chin; this contrasting with the smiling charm of Hester’s plain little face.

No one had heard him riding up the drive, since subconsciously they were listening for the engine of a car, and he had entered upon this little

scene which he was not expected to witness.

“Oh . . . you!” exclaimed Eve, and her bad temper vanished magically. “How nice of you to come!”

She offered him a firm, friendly hand which surprised him for he had expected a limp handshake. So Eve had her ‘good’ side! He judged people a good deal by their handgrips, more particularly men, but a woman’s character could be read, if only in part, by the same means.

“It was charming of you to invite me,” he answered, dutifully.

“Do you know my secretary, Hester Lawrence? But of course you wouldn’t.”

Hester inclined her head but, perhaps because she was busy with bottles and glasses, did not offer her hand.

“No, I am afraid I haven’t had that—er—pleasure,” Mallory said, suavely.

(“Naturally, he wouldn’t remember me in that crowd at Inez’s studio,” thought Hester, and sighed unconsciously. It must be wonderful to be so beautiful or so noticeable that once met, never forgotten!)

Jasper Rodney nodded offhandedly, and the two men eyed each other with obvious although polite distaste.

They had only met once or twice but neither liked much what he heard or knew about the other, though Jasper Rodney, in truth, was harmless enough.

“Cocktail or sherry?” asked Eve. “Sit here, won’t you?” indicating the seat beside her on the couch.

“Sherry, thanks. Please don’t wait on me.” He turned to Hester as she approached him, glass in hand. “Can I get something for you?”

“Thank you, I have a sherry here,” raising the half-filled glass in her other hand.

Mallory turned back and took the offered seat beside Eve.

“Well, Miss Jarvis, and how’s the car? Still consuming an unwarrantable quantity of petrol?”

At the twinkle in his eyes Eve laughed, but refused to admit to the stratagem she had employed in order to meet him.

“I think I must have the tank vetted,” she said, demurely.

“Very advisable, I should imagine.”

They talked on about cars, about the Motor Show, and the Donington Grand Prix, then the ’phone bell rang and Hester went away to answer it.

“I had better push off,” said Jasper, rising and setting aside his empty glass. “Thanks for the drinks, Eve, and I’ll be seeing you. No, don’t see me out. I can find my own way. So long, Mallory.”

He wandered away into the house, much to Eve’s pleasure and relief, and she turned a smile upon her companion.

“Your turn, Mr. Mallory,” she said, crisply. “I have made the last three initial remarks. You begin now.”

He laughed.

“I’m sorry. Have I been so morose?”

“Not exactly. But perhaps you never *do* talk much.”

He turned his head and his amazing eyes, with their fascinating crinkle at the corners, looked deeply into hers. She could feel her pulse quickening, and knew now what Inez meant about his dangerous attraction, felt that attraction gripping her as if with invisible hands, and was acutely, vitally aware of him as she had never before been aware of a man.

She moved suddenly, as if she sought to break the spell which his look has cast upon her, and he laughed, a low, amused laugh that changed her throbbing feelings to anger.

“Well?” She tossed the word at him like a challenge.

He leant a little nearer to her.

“Well, Eve Jarvis?”

She was drawn back as far from him as the couch would allow, yet he had but to stretch out his arms to pull her to him.

He did not move, and she let her quickly drawn breath go on a sigh, . . . of relief? Of disappointment? She did not know which.

He rose suddenly, stood for an instant, glancing down at her with a half-whimsical, half-sardonic smile, then shrugged his broad shoulders.

He had expected her to be amusing, but suddenly he was bored with her. All women were alike. She had wanted him to kiss her, therefore he no longer wanted what was all too easy to take. Little fool!

She did not make the mistake of asking him to stay for fear of risking a refusal, but rose too and faced him, summoning her usual cool self-possession to her aid.

“Come in again some time,” she said, offhandedly. “Hester and I will be here for a few days.”

“Thank you very much.”

The swing-door into the hall opened and the little secretary emerged.

“Nothing very exciting on the ’phone, Eve,” she said. “Only Miss Chator to know if she could lunch hereon Sunday as she will be motoring near, on her way to her brother’s. I said it would be all right.”

“Splendid. I shall love a yarn with Con. Mr. Mallory is just going.” An inspiration moved her. He should not imagine her *too* interested in him, and perhaps she had unwittingly showed this interest during the past few minutes. “See him off, will you, Hester? Bye, bye,” casually to her visitor, and she turned to the box of cigarettes on the table near her.

Mallory, seeing himself dismissed, smiled inwardly, and followed Hester into the hall.

Queer creature, Eve Jarvis, even if she *were* like all other females!

Hester murmured platitudinous remarks as she escorted him to the front door. As they reached it a shaft of golden light fell upon her slight figure, catching unexpectedly vivid lights from her brown hair, and her little oval face, raised towards him as she talked, was illumined with a warmth and radiance that made the man look at her again. Rather lovely, this quiet, demure girl! Or not so demure, that was the wrong word. ‘Serene’, expressed her better. And she had character too; he could read it in the determined set of her chin. And generosity and kindness. Nothing discontented or bad-tempered or “spoilt” about that mouth. Actually it was rather a beautiful mouth.

“Good-bye, Mr. Mallory.”

He realized that he was staring at her and that she had already made her farewell remark twice. A faint surprise showed in her slightly raised brows.

“Good-bye, Miss Lawrence,” he answered, and held out his hand.

He wanted to know what sort of a handshake she would give, and it suited his sudden impression of her, being firm and cool and impersonal.

He stepped out onto the drive, unhitched his horse from the tree to which he had fastened it, swung himself into the saddle then turned his glance back towards the house.

She was standing waiting, obviously out of sheer politeness, and just raised a hand as he smiled and waved his crop.

Garnet Mallory rode thoughtfully homeward on the long cross-country trek, and Hester went back to the sun-parlour and *wished*, for Eve’s sake, that he was not quite so ‘devastating’.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHE allowed twenty-four hours or so to pass before she prepared to launch her next effort.

She spent the rest of the day after Mallory's visit in lazing on a couch by the fire in the red, white and silver lounge, with a new novel and a box of cigarettes, while Hester sat in a low chair near by and worked at the tapestry she loved doing.

The sunshine of the morning had passed to a gloomy afternoon, with a threatening grey sky and a chill wind that spoke of winter. The fireside was eminently desirable compared with the bleak out-of-doors, and if neither spoke very much, there was yet an atmosphere of friendly companionship between them.

At times Eve would lower her book onto her lap and stare dreamily into nothingness, but on these occasions Hester devoted herself to her work, because she was afraid of those dreams of Eve's.

The following morning was another clear and lovely autumn day, and Eve announced her intention of driving over to the nearby riding-stables and hiring a hack.

Hester thought it was a very good scheme unless the horse were meant to carry Eve towards Green Acres, but surely the girl would have enough wisdom not to rush her fences where Garnet Mallory was concerned.

Hester spent the morning in the garden, loving to wander amongst the autumn flowers, to gather the leaves which were just beginning to change colour, to cut the autumn roses which in many ways were so much lovelier than those of summer-time. Perhaps because they were more unexpected; perhaps because June roses mean so definitely a part of June, but in October they are like one last lingering lovely memory of sunny days that have passed.

In a far corner of the garden Hester could see Porter, the gardener, bending over his broom, and the leaves which the wind of the previous day had tossed from their trees were swept before his besom just as Fate hurrys us through life.

She stood, with the length of the garden before her, her eyes slowly wandering over its changing colours, the slow retreat of summer's rich

coverings; the branches appearing from the secret density of summer trees, laid bare by the falling leaves which carpeted the earth beneath in dying russet, yellow, brown. The autumn sunshine shone from an ice-blue sky and lay in shafts of light and shadow upon the drift of leaves in the damp grass, scattered there like vagrant thoughts.

The age-old mystery of the seasons gripped her, the magic of changing colours, the thought of bracken turning brown and golden on hillsides, and the blood-red trails of berries tangling the hedgerows, . . . the enchanted autumn.

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Eve returned from her ride unusually early for her, since time was of very little importance in her vision of existence. She had kept away from the direction of Little Creddeleton, vowing to herself that not until the afternoon would she embark upon another move in this interesting, absorbing game of human chess.

As she swung through the hall, her riding-crop in her hand, humming a tune under her breath, the shrill of the telephone bell made her stop short. She turned and picked UP the microphone from the carved oak table upon which it stood, and bent her golden head as she listened to the voice at the other end.

“Is that Five Gables?”

“Yes. Who is it speaking?”

“It’s Betty Lawrence here, speaking from London. Could I possibly have a word with my sister?”

“Oh, rather. I’ll fetch her, if you’ll wait a moment.”

The young voice at the other end hurried on before Eve could put down the receiver.

“I hoped to have found her still in London,” said Betty Lawrence, agitatedly. “I went to your flat—for that *is* Miss Jarvis speaking, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m rather in a difficulty. You see—I may confess to you, mayn’t I?—I’ve run away from home. I’ve given up my job and come to London, but I hoped so much to find a friend here, and she’s gone away. Then I went to your flat but it was shut up, and they told me you and Hester had gone down to Five Gables. So I didn’t know quite what to do and rang you up. You don’t mind, do you?”

Eve frowned. The child was alone in London, for Eve vaguely remembered Betty as a much younger sister of her secretary's. On the impulse of the moment, she made exactly the suggestion for which Betty had been eagerly angling.

"If you are alone in Town, you'd better come down here. Then you can see Hester and make plans. Rather foolish of you to run away from home, isn't it? And give up a perfectly good job?"

"I suppose it is. But I had—rather desperate need. I'd love to see Hester and hear what she thinks about things, but I'm afraid she'll be rather cross with me."

"If you had a perfectly good reason for what you're doing, I don't see why Hester should be cross," answered Eve, crisply. "She is the most sensible and practical-minded woman I've ever met. And terribly kind. She is bound to understand your reason."

"I don't think she will, because really I suppose it was only that I got so terribly bored . . ."

Eve cut her short by suggesting that if she waited a moment she would fetch Hester.

"If I may come down then please don't bother. I'll catch a train at once, if you really mean it."

"Of course I mean it. Just send a wire when you've decided on your train, and come right along. I don't see any sign of Hester about so I'll leave it if you like. We'll expect you some time this afternoon. Good-bye," and she rang off.

Eve went on up the stairs to her room, bathed, changed, and came down just as the lunch bell was ringing. She forgot all about the telephone message and not until they had risen from the lunch-table and had gone into the red-and-white lounge did she remember.

"Oh, Hester, by the way, your sister Betty rang up just now."

"Betty! Whatever did she ring up for?"

Eve briefly explained, finishing with a yawn, as she lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old one.

"She seemed rather in a pother, I thought, so it seemed to me the wisest thing would be for her to come down here. If she's only about seventeen you don't want her roaming about London alone, or so I presume, even in these enlightened, terribly independent days. I remember you saying your people were a bit old-fashioned."

“That was frightfully nice of you, Eve.” But Hester frowned worriedly. “Mother said that Betty was giving a spot of bother at home because she was so bored with her job. So stupid, when she’s so lucky to have a good one with money and everything, just when matters are awfully difficult at home.”

Eve did not answer immediately, for actually she was not very interested in Hester’s family. She never could understand people who hadn’t much money, or hadn’t the initiative to succeed. Generous and kind-hearted to a degree, she was also amazingly shrewd in many of her views, and more than a little hard. Hester had found this on several occasions, but taken by and large, Eve was the kindest and most thoughtful of employers.

In her heart of hearts Hester guessed what had been Betty’s reason for ringing up, yet Fate had been kind to her in letting Eve answer the ’phone. Hester herself would never have asked Eve to invite her, or would she? After all, she didn’t like the thought of Betty alone in London, although she was not as young as Eve imagined. At nineteen Betty had a very hard head, she knew her way about, as the saying is, and Hester would have had no personal fears for her, only for the mischief she might get up to.

“I expect we shall have a wire presently to say when she is arriving,” she said thoughtfully.

“Obviously,” said Eve, and firmly banished the subject from the conversation.

Her mind was already actively engrossed upon a plan which was slowly evolving.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her and she shot a quick glance across at her companion.

“What’s your sister like?” she asked, abruptly.

“She’s rather lovely, really,” said Hester, consideringly. “She’s very small and fair, ash-blonde I suppose one might say; and graceful. She dances beautifully. I think she ought to have gone on the stage really, and there she would have been a success. Yet I don’t know. It’s very difficult to decide. And father would never have agreed to it. If she’d had any outstanding genius I think she would have run away and tried for it months ago, but she’s not brilliant enough, just charming and attractive and clever.”

“Humph! I see.”

Eve frowned to herself. She wasn’t going to let this little girl, however attractive and charming she might be, interfere in her plans. Supposing Mallory saw her and fell for her charms? That is to say ‘fell’ as much as he

could fall for anybody. He might think it amusing, something fresh and new; often men like very young girls.

Her conjectures were interrupted by the arrival of the telegram they had been expecting. Betty would reach the station of Wildmore, which was half a mile outside the village, about four o'clock that afternoon.

Hester glanced enquiringly across at her employer.

“Do you mind if I go and meet her?”

Eve gave a sigh and then made a gallant gesture.

“We'll both go together,” she said, graciously. “We'll go over in the little bus.”

“That's awfully nice of you, Eve.”

So it was that an hour or so later they set out in Eve's coupé, which was so infinitely preferable to the village omnibus, and Hester, with some vague sense of premonition, feeling that her sister's advent was going to alter things very definitely in the future, sat back beside the driver and relinquished herself to the pleasure of the moment as they swept through the country lanes and came at last to the station.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GARNET MALLORY played an astonishingly bad game of golf on the day that Betty Lawrence came to Wildmore. Having failed to beat his partner, a retired General to whom he had never lost before, he decided that instead of going straight back to Green Acres he would drop in at the Rodneys' house.

How much of this was just the boredom of the moment suggesting the family circle at teatime as infinitely preferable to his own solitude at Green Acres, and how much to a contradictory wish to see Jingo again, he was not at all sure.

Actually the girl did not interest him at all except that she was a nice child, interesting, played good golf, was natural and unlike so many others of her age, the hard-boiled if charming products of the century. But the knowledge which had been conveyed to him during their last brief meeting that, although he had taken no steps to attract her, she was none the less definitely attracted, piqued his interest.

And if she could amuse him for a few moments, was not that what women were for? His rule of living and his very beliefs were based upon this creed, and Jingo was not going to be the one to show him not only the error of his ways, but the narrow, stupid vision of an egotistical fanatic. That was destined for another woman to do.

He found most of the Rodney family gathered round a roaring fire in the big, comfortable lounge.

Mrs. Rodney was behind the tea-table, the firelight sparkling in the old silver amongst which her fingers moved with definite and charming grace.

"Why, Mr. Mallory, this is very nice of you!" she said, smiling delightedly upon him, for he was by no means a close friend of the family. "Come and sit down. Jingo, make room for him beside you."

Jingo was occupying, with her husband, a big couch on one side of the fire, and obediently she moved up to make room for the visitor at her side.

He glanced down at her with a little whimsical smile and an expression in his eyes that brought the colour quickly to her cheeks.

"Room for a black sheep, Jingo?" he asked, with a twisted smile.

"Oh, do you know that everybody calls you a black sheep?" exclaimed Joyce, looking at him very directly. "After all, why should one not know

what the world thinks?"

"Joyce dear, is that very tactful?" murmured her mother, with a little laugh that easily smoothed over what might have been an uncomfortable moment.

Mallory laughed too.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Rodney," he said. "Nothing that the world could say about me would ever hurt or affect me in the slightest. It's something to have a hard skin, you know."

"Or a dead conscience," suggested Jerry Darton.

Mallory glanced at him quickly. Did the fellow mean anything by that rather cryptic remark?

But Jerry was amiably eating hot toast and did not appear to have noticed that his words had in any way affected his mother-in-law's guest.

Jingo began hurriedly to talk about golf, and Mallory told them briefly of his own appallingly bad play that afternoon.

"Jingo says you play an extraordinarily good game as a rule," said Jasper, blandly.

"Well, his handicap's four," as if in extenuation of her praise. "I thought I was pretty good at fourteen, but there you are!" with a shrug of her shoulders, and sending a quick, amused glance at Mallory. "You would never admit that a woman could do better than you, would you? Even if my handicap were the same as yours."

"I might, in games. But it would be doubtful, very."

"What about this dance that's being given in your village in aid of Winter Coal Funds or something of the kind?" suggested Mrs. Rodney. "Couldn't you children all get up a party together?"

"Marvellous idea," said Jasper. "Will you join us, Mallory?"

For a moment the man hesitated, then Joyce thrusting in her oar by suggesting that Hester Lawrence and Eve Jarvis should be invited to join them too, he rather unexpectedly agreed to be numbered amongst those going in their party.

"Wonders will never cease," said Joyce, smiling, her glance at him contradicting the apparent tactlessness of her words. "I'm awfully glad though, Mr. Mallory."

"Thanks. It should be an amusing evening, for I don't suppose the floor of the village hall is much use."

"On the contrary, it can be made to function extremely well," said Jasper. "Last winter there was a charity dance given there, and the hall was

decorated *ad lib.* and really looked extraordinarily nice. With a good band and suitable refreshments, there's no reason why 'a pleasant evening should not be had by all'."

"Well, here's to it," said Jerry, raising his teacup.

Jingo gave a squeal as he narrowly escaped slopping its contents over her ankles, and amidst laughter the further plans for the dance were made.

Consequently it was soon after tea that Jasper rang up Five Gables, Mallory having gone home, and the Rodney family scattering to their various interests and occupations.

Jingo and her husband were left alone in the big lounge, sitting together on the couch as they had been doing during the meal.

"I don't think I like this Mallory fellow overmuch," said Jerry, slowly, as he rammed tobacco into his pipe.

Jingo was instantly on the alert, and on the defensive.

"He's frightfully nice," she said, quickly. "I don't suppose half the horrid things said about him are in the very least bit true."

"I'm not so sure. Anyway, darling, need you be quite so ratty about it?"

"Am I? Well, I hate to hear people run down behind their backs." She tried to cool down her hot little voice, and only succeeded in sounding irritable.

"He doesn't mind what is said to his face," said Jerry, not so mildly as he had at first spoken. "And does he need *you* for a champion?"

"Why not? Everybody seems to be horrid about him. Jasper says he's a danger to the female public, and Joyce says he has no reputation at all; he's lost it."

"But then Joyce says she likes people with no reputations, because you know where you are with them. She hates hypocrites."

"So do I. You needn't be so smug and beastly and all superior."

Jerry turned slowly and looked at his wife, at her flaming eyes and flushed face.

"Are we quarrelling, Jingo?" he asked her, frowning. "Dearest, do we need to quarrel about anyone so damned futile as Mallory?"

"He's anything but 'damned futile!'" cried Jingo, fiercely.

"Oh, is he?" Jerry's mouth tightened. "I think you are getting too interested in that quarter, my dear."

"Good God!" exclaimed the girl, furiously. "Just because I am married to you must I never look at, speak to or be interested in any other man?"

“Certainly not. I’m all for freedom of the individual, as you know, in marriage as in everything else. But there are limits, you know, Jingo, and Mallory is damned well the limit here. I haven’t objected to your friendship with him . . .”

“Objected!” cried Jingo, starting to her feet, almost speechless with rage that had a queer, hot fear mixed up in it. “I should think not. Didn’t we agree to choose our own friends and not to interfere . . . ?”

“In reason, yes.” He rose too and faced her, keeping a firm grip on his rising temper. “If I took Eve Jarvis out, played golf with her, went to her house, how would you like it?”

That pulled her up short for a moment then driven, half by her husband’s challenge, and half by fear of her own conscience, she broke into furious words.

“Beast! Casting hateful aspersions on my friendship with Garnet——”

“So it’s Christian names?”

“Of course, you fool. Who calls anybody by anything else these days? Jerry, you are being hateful as well as imbecile . . .”

“That’s as may be, Jingo. But all the same, I’m dead serious.”

“What do you mean?” She held her breath as she looked at him, her eyes like two big coals, glowing in her pale face.

“I mean that I forbid you to play golf with him any more, or to go to his house and see his pewter or his bloody antiques or whatever it is you go there for.”

“*You* forbid me?” Her voice was very low, and tense as a stretched wire.

“Yes,” said Jerry, equally grim. “I forbid you because you are my wife.”

“And I refuse to be treated like a woman in the Stone Age. You can forbid what you like but I shall do exactly as I please,” and turning she rushed from the room, surprisingly near to tears in spite of the angry flying of her flag of independence.

Jerry knocked out his pipe, forgetting he had never lit it, and his young face was white and lined.

“Damn that Mallory!” he thought. “Damn the *blank blank* scoundrel! . . .”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BETTY LAWRENCE stepped out upon the almost deserted platform of Wildmore's countryside station.

The little flower-beds, that in summer were a riot of coloured blossoms, now carried only the vague mauve of Michaelmas daisies, and the russet of little button chrysanthemums.

White palings behind the flower-beds gave an almost toylike appearance to the station, and the buildings upon it had the same doll's house look, only Betty was too busy and absorbed with the business of the moment to notice them. Had she done so she would only have shrugged intolerant shoulders and thought how terribly behind the times they were.

She was smiling sweetly upon the solid young man who had lifted out her suit-case for her, and upon whom she had, in the hour's journey from London, cast the spell of her appealing, childish smile and large but calculating brown eyes,—a curious and arresting contrast to her ash-blond hair.

He was only rather a second-rate young commercial traveller but that did not deter Betty from the irresistible 'fun' of enslaving him even for a brief hour. He was a man and therefore worthy of her attention.

She thanked him very charmingly, for his help, nodded "good-bye", and moved away up the platform towards the white-painted gate where a bored-looking official waited to take her ticket. The young man was instantly forgotten but the comfortable knowledge of having attracted somebody remained with her, a warm and friendly feeling.

So Hester had not come to meet her! How mean! That meant a taxi, or a horrible bus drive in the local omnibus than which she could imagine few more unpleasant occurrences, for she hated buses. The one at home gave her the jitters, she would declare, for it was as old as the hills and infinitely more uncomfortable.

Betty wrinkled her fastidious but wholly delightful nose, grasped her suit-case more firmly, and though inwardly cross and irritable, appeared outwardly as serene and sweet as ever.

Just as she was making enquiries as to how and where she could obtain a conveyance that would bear her towards Five Gables, Eve Jarvis' stream-

lined coupé swept up the station incline and stopped a yard from her.

Betty stared with wide, surprised eyes as her sister climbed out of the car and turned towards her.

“Hello, Betty. We got held up in the village,” said Hester. “Eve, this is my sister. Betty, you haven’t met Miss Jarvis, have you?”

“This is most frightfully kind of you,” gushed Betty, speaking in italics. “I was just asking about a bus, but how I hate the things!”

“How do?” nodded Eve, briefly. “Hop in.”

Betty obediently “hopped”, and Hester got in beside her, the three of them in the front seat together, and the car shot forward down the incline.

Betty instantly broke into eager chatter, ruefully explaining how she had run away from home leaving the usual note of fiction stuck up in a conspicuous place on her dressing-table; had reached London and gone to a friend’s flat only to find it closed and the girl away. Then she had sought out her sister.

“But you knew——” began Hester, and stopped short. She could not give her sister away, for obviously Betty had known Hester and her employer were in the country. Perhaps that had been her plan from the very first, that she should appear to be stranded in Town so that they felt bound to ask her to join them.

Considering Betty had not met Eve Jarvis it was amazing how cleverly she had planned and how well she had got away with it.

A vicious pinch from her sharp fingers showed Hester that Betty certainly did not mean to be given away, and her elder sister sadly nursed a tender arm while the younger girl prattled on.

“You had better stay here for a day or two,” Eve cut in, at last. “Then you can make plans and discuss things with Hester.”

An outburst of grateful thanks was again interrupted.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Eve. “I’ll take all that for granted. Ah, thank God, here we are at home.”

She gave a sigh of relief as she turned the car in through the open gate and pulled up before the front door.

“O-oh!” thought Betty. “I certainly did the right thing in coming here.”

Eve got out from the driver’s seat and walked ahead into the house, leaving the sisters to follow together.

“I say, Hester,” whispered Betty. “This is *too* marvellous. You don’t mind—much, do you?”

“Mind what? You coming here?” Hester shrugged resigned shoulders. “It’s no good to, is it? Of course I’m glad to have you, Betty dear, but I’m awfully worried about the whole thing. We mustn’t forget to ring up Mother after tea and tell her that you’re here.”

“Don’t be absurd, worrying about nothing at all. I’ve fallen on my feet, and really have you ever known me to do anything else? I mean to make a *lasting* landing this send off, too.”

They were alone in the hall for Eve had disappeared, and Hester faced her sister questioningly.

“What do you mean exactly?”

“I’ll tell you presently.”

“Come up to your room, and I’ll show you round.”

When the door of the single spare-room had closed upon them, Betty broke into a chuckle.

“You meet such masses of men gadding around with Eve Jarvis,” she said. “So I thought I’d step in and pinch one.”

The older girl stared at her, amazed, and just a little disgusted.

“Don’t be vulgar, Betty.”

“I’m not; I’m honest. I mean to select one with lots of money, then little Betty will be fixed for life. A life sentence,” she laughed. “Or merely a temporary one. Anyway, I’m sick of earning my own living and I mean to find someone else to do it for me. You can’t surely mind sparing me one of the many males that drift round this place.”

Hester gasped.

“How too beastly of you! Talking about marriage as if it were a business arrangement.”

“Well, isn’t it, more or less? It’s that way for me, anyhow. I mean to get launched, safely on my feet, and the family ought to be thankful because then I shan’t be a burden to them any longer.”

“You wouldn’t be a burden to them if you’d keep your job.”

“Yes, but what a job! Hateful and horrid, the whole place reeking with disinfectants and people with miserable faces suffering pain and all the rest of it. *Horrible!*”

“That’s rotten of you, Betty.”

“It isn’t at all. Actually I’m frightfully human about all this, so don’t come over all elder-sisterly and smug and conscience-stricken, or whatever it is that’s attacking you. *I* can look after myself, but I think you’re a fool. You must have had lashings of chances and just thrown them all away.”

“Chances!” echoed Hester, blankly, her breath taken away by her sister’s fierce outburst.

“Yes, matrimonial chances, stupid!”

“I don’t think I’ve had any.”

“More fool you, then. You just watch little Betty skim the cream off the milk.”

Hester turned away with a sigh. Somehow her young sister seemed to have changed completely in the months since they had last met. All her gentleness had gone from her; she was just a hard-hearted, hard-headed little gold-digger, out for her own interests, and anybody else’s that interfered must go by the board.

In some ways she and Eve were alike, but Hester was forced to admit that, of the two, it was not her own sister who possessed a generosity and sweetness that, though hidden, could yet obliterate the less charming virtues.

“Tea will be ready at once,” she said, changing the subject. “Shall we go down?”

Betty passed a comb through her wavy hair which she wore in a page-boy bob.

“But you should see the curls I can achieve for evenings,” she said. “Absolutely the very latest Edwardian coiffure, my dear. My hair is marvellous to deal with, and terribly obedient fortunately. Now I’m ready for tea, and I’m just famished for it.”

The sisters went down to the exotic lounge where Eve had drawn up a chair to the fire and was smoking a cigarette and making mental plans for the evening.

She glanced up with an absent smile as they joined her.

“What a *heavenly* room!” gushed Betty. “Oh, isn’t it *sweet*?”

“Is it? Rather more earthly than celestial, I should imagine,” Eve replied, bluntly. “Pour out, Hester, will you?”

Tea was set out on a low table, and Betty’s eyes sparkled at the display of delicious cakes, hot scones and wafery bread-and-butter. This was decidedly the sort of life that appealed to her above all others, and which she had only previously read about but never experienced.

Lucky Hester, to have years of it, but she had never said much about it. Probably it didn’t appeal to her, perhaps she didn’t care for the flesh-pots. But they spelt the absolute and essential part of life itself to Betty, who had determined that nothing less than the best should do for her.

Her sister's job would really suit her very well, only there would be the annoying part of being tied to somebody else's apron strings, as it were, and having to do what she was told and to play second fiddle.

No, on second thoughts, it would be better to be a guest here, and if she, Betty Lawrence, couldn't make hay while the sun shone in the two or three days (or perhaps a week) that she could wangle at Five Gables, then Betty Lawrence wasn't her name. If she failed to lay some important foundation stones for her future, then she deserved to go back to the humdrum, work-for-your-living existence that she had just left.

"Hot scones, please," said Eve, for the second time.

Betty seized the dish with such alacrity that she shot half the contents into her hostess' lap.

"I'm *terribly* sorry," she cried, natural for the first time, and a rush of colour flamed in her face. "How awfully careless of me!"

Eve laughed, for she liked that one little glimpse of Betty as she might be if she didn't spoil herself.

"Never mind," said Eve. "Have one yourself. And do tell me what it's like to be receptionist to a dentist; behind the scenes, I mean."

Completely at her ease again, Betty held the conversation for the rest of the meal.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE telephone bell rang at Five Gables and Hester went out into the hall to answer it.

Betty, left alone with her hostess, strove to improve the moment. She asked tactless, envious questions about driving the coupé, and remarked how foolish her sister was not to be able to drive.

Eve eyed her coolly.

“You don’t know very much about that sister of yours, young lady, do you?” she said. “Hester drives extraordinarily well and has had her licence for months. I like to drive so she doesn’t get much chance, but I wanted her to be able to in case of need.”

Betty opened her eyes wide and felt she had not been very tactful and changed her tone.

“I had no idea,” she murmured. “I don’t remember Mother saying anything about it from Hester’s letters, but then I never take *very* much interest in the family doings as the others do. We’re supposed to be such a united family but I think that can go too far, don’t you? It’s so dull, and our life, of course, is terribly prosaic. I would like to have a gay life or at least a bit gayer than it has been, and *that* wouldn’t be difficult.”

She looked so wistful and pretty that Eve’s heart was touched. It *must* be ghastly having to do a job of work you hated and detested, and to have no fun to help things along. And to be poor and have no money to buy all those little extras which girls always want. She, herself, was amazingly lucky being able to choose exactly her own road through life, to do just precisely what she wanted and to have enough money to buy whatever took her fancy.

She could see a hundred plausible excuses for Betty’s boredom, for her eager reaching out after adventure, change, *fun*.

It wouldn’t cost her anything to let the girl stay on at Five Gables for a few days, or a week or two, and get what amusement she could out of the visit.

Hester came in to say that Jasper Rodney was ringing up to ask if they would join a party for the Charity Dance at the village hall of Little Creddeleton.

“Not very long notice,” she said. “It’s on Friday.”

“Little Creddleton!” echoed Eve. “Ah! That might lead to something. Yes, we’ll go, Hester. And we’ll take your sister and show her a spot of country social life.”

Betty clasped her hands together.

“A dance! What glorious sport!”

“Don’t expect too much, my dear,” said Eve, wisely. “It’s only a sort of village do, only not for villagers. The tickets are usually fairly expensive as it’s for charity.”

“Half a guinea each,” said Hester. “It’s very nice of you to say that Betty can come too.”

“Tell Jasper we’ll have three tickets, and I think they’re extraordinarily cheap.”

Hester went back to the telephone and left the other two girls, each silently occupied with her own thoughts.

Betty remembered everything she had ever read about dances given for the County in aid of local charities and held at village halls. They were always thrilling affairs—in novels—the drabness and the draughts being forgotten.

Eve was saying to herself: “Little Creddleton. Then Garnet Mallory *might* be there. Shall I hold up on my next step in case he is? I mustn’t rush him because he’s not being attracted as quickly or as easily as I expected. I can’t do more than put in this preliminary spade-work, and that’s got to be done. But I really should have thought that a man of his calibre would have wanted taking by surprise. And I thought I took him when I bearded him in his den. Perhaps I ought to have followed that up with another quick move. Yet I *did*. He came here for a drink and that was unexpected.”

Hester came back, looking a little grave. She was wondering what frock her sister could wear on the Friday, and Betty had just arrived at the same thought herself.

“Oh dear,” she sighed. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to come with you to that dance after all.”

Eve glanced up from her novel which she was supposed to be reading but upon which instead she had merely fixed her eyes while her mind travelled on a journey of its own. She eyed the woebegone face and the changed attitude.

“Why ever not?” she demanded.

“I haven’t a frock to wear. The only one I had was so shabby and—*silly*, that I didn’t bring it with me. I’d heard about the Guinea Shops in Town and

I thought, if I needed one badly at my friend's, I could get one there."

"Of course you couldn't buy a frock worth wearing for a guinea!" exclaimed Eve.

"Some of them are quite good," put in Hester. "I've often looked in the windows."

"I'll give you a frock," said Miss Jarvis, generously. "There's that blue georgette that doesn't suit me. I've only worn it once and that was at a house-party in the north, so no one will recognize it on you."

"Oh! How perfectly *marvellous* of you!" gushed Betty. "Blue georgette! How *heavenly*!"

Her own words of a moment ago started Eve on a different train of thought.

"Remember that house-party, Hester? While I was there Inez had her Picture Show and I missed meeting Garnet Mallory."

"Yes," said Hester slowly, "so you did."

"And the wager ensued."

"The wager!" echoed Betty. "That sounds frightfully exciting."

"Nothing that would interest you," said Eve, coldly, angry with herself for having momentarily forgotten Betty's presence.

She went back to her book but Betty did not forget, and later that evening tackled her sister about it. Hester however refused to say anything.

"My dear Betty," she said, firmly. "You can't expect to step into the middle of Eve's life here and know all the whys and wherefores of everything. It's no business of yours, and if she likes to make a hundred wagers with different people, it's no business of mine either."

Betty nodded. "O.K. Well, I suppose it's a very dull bet anyhow."

Hester sighed, wishing it were, and the subject was no longer pursued between them.

The vicar and his wife were due for dinner at Five Gables that evening, Eve possessing a curious and rather contradictory interest in the local church, and accepting it as a duty that the vicar should dine with her periodically.

They were an elderly, charming couple and even the worldly, impatient little Betty kept herself quietly in the background before the wide knowledge of men and affairs that these two possessed.

When they were gone and the girls were drinking tea before retiring to bed, Eve announced that she definitely liked them both.

“They make you feel there *must* be some good force in the world that is strong enough to overcome evil,” she said, thoughtfully. “And I can’t say anybody else ever gave me that impression.” Her eyes rested on her secretary. “Unless it might be you, Hester.”

“Me!” Hester looked at her employer with astonished eyes. “Good heavens, what a thing to say!”

“It’s true though. You give one the sort of impression of a lasting goodness, a kind of serenity, although I know you are often worried.” Her eyes twinkled but her smile was affectionate. “I worry you often, I know, me and my affairs. But I think it must be a species of innate goodness in you that one senses instinctively.”

Hester flushed and then laughed, a low gurgling laugh that was young and infectious.

“Darling Eve, how sweet of you! But I’m not a bit good really.”

Betty had not been listening much to this queer conversation, so now she interrupted to ask who was this Mr. Mallory whom the vicar and his wife had spoken so guardedly about. She did not mention that she remembered Eve saying his name earlier in the evening; she kept that to herself.

“She liked him,” said Betty. “But the padre was a bit doubtful, didn’t you think?”

“He lives in another village miles away,” said Eve, offhandedly. “He is a bachelor with a not too good reputation.”

“How frightfully thrilling! I *love* people with bad reputations.”

Hester interrupted quite crossly.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Betty. At home you’ve never met men like—Mallory.”

“No, I’m dead sure I haven’t.”

Eve regarded her calculatingly, and then she had a brain-wave. She would invite Mallory to meet this pretty, empty-headed, vain child, who would obviously throw herself at his head. Then, by being aloof, she—Eve Jarvis—would show him the contrast between members of her sex such as she could never hope to do with such a foil, for example, as dear, good Hester.

It was a marvellous scheme.

“You shall meet him and form your own opinion,” she said, briskly. “We’ll all go over and call on him tomorrow at Green Acres.”

“Oh!” Betty clasped excited hands together. “And beard the lion in his very own den. How lovely!”

“Con Chator comes to lunch tomorrow,” said Hester, with a vague hope of frustrating her employer’s scheme.

“Well, what of it? We’ll call early at Green Acres, and say we’ve come to see the dogs or something.”

“Does he keep dogs?” queried Betty, innocently.

“Not that I know of,” answered Eve, and poured herself another cup of tea. “But it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Betty ate a chocolate biscuit and thought Miss Jarvis was very queer; very charming of course, and lovely to look at, but . . . odd. Perhaps lots of money, independence and her kind of character produced oddness. Betty wondered.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BETTY awoke to a typical autumn morning, a haze like grey-blue smoke hanging low over the garden, dimming the nickering colourfulness of the trees. Then a pale shaft of sunlight pierced the mist, and within a quarter of an hour had dispersed it so that the garden lay smiling beneath the touch of the October sun, shining from a cool pale sky.

“Sunday!” thought Betty. “How different at home! Thank heavens, I’ve escaped.”

She gave a careless shrug at the memory of her mother’s voice the evening before when Hester had rung her up and had insisted on her young sister taking her part in the conversation.

Mrs. Lawrence was very relieved that Betty was at Five Gables, and though she upbraided her daughter for her casual treatment in throwing up a perfectly good post, and her unkindness to her parents in stealing out of the house as she had done, the mother in her was secretly delighted at the way things had developed.

With Hester Betty might sober down a little, and she might also find a better post than the one she had left. After all, there was a fate guiding our ends, wasn’t there, so perhaps she need not worry, for there were troubles enough in the home itself just now.

The doctor was far from well and his wife dreaded each night call that fetched him out of his bed, and waited anxiously each day for him to return from his long round.

Money was short too, and there was a slowly accumulating mass of bills. She dare not tell him about them for fear she only added to his worries, for an outbreak of a virulent type of influenza had greatly increased his labours.

If only doctors could take a few days off every month! Some were able to manage it, working it between two or three of them, but not Dr. Lawrence. His practice was a country one and stretched for miles, and his solid old car was a familiar sight on the roads for a radius of fifty odd miles.

“Perhaps Betty will hear of something else to do,” said Mrs. Lawrence, hopefully, on the telephone. “It would be a great help, Hester.”

“I’ll see what we can find for her. Don’t worry, Mums darling, and give my love to Daddy.”

“I will, dear. What a *comfort* you are, Hester. I don’t know what we should all do without you.”

Hester hung up the receiver with a smile and a sigh. It was nice to be thought indispensable but it had its drawbacks as well.

She began to wonder whether she ought not to exert herself to find some way out of the difficulties in which her mother seemed to be involved, the worries that pressed in upon her. She did not know about the accumulated bills, but thought it was just the ‘tightness’ of momentary finances.

Nobody ever went out of their way to make matters easy for her, she thought; it seemed to be her appointed lot in life to smooth the way for others. A very wonderful thing, but it would have been nice to be looked after for a change.

“I’ll certainly try for a job,” chuckled Betty, “but that will be a permanent engagement.”

“Choose somebody nice while you’re about it,” replied Hester, in the same light strain.

“I think I shall rather fall for this man we’re going to meet tomorrow,” Betty had said, pensively. “This Mallory creature.”

Hester did not immediately reply. She was wondering how Eve would deal with the matter if Betty *were* attracted by Garnet Mallory, and if in return he cast his sardonic glance upon Betty.

“I believe he could be nice if he had the chance,” she thought. “At heart he’s rather a fine character, though I should no doubt be thoroughly laughed at for saying so. Inez says he does lots of good by stealth, but nobody would dream about it and he would hate them to know. . . . It was nice of her to tell me, but I think she thought if he had a kind heart for some things and could help people who needed help, then he might be gentle if Eve got up against him. . . . I wish we were back in London and that he had gone to the world’s end or some such place.”

Yet, in spite of her fears, Hester was only humanly interested in the outcome of the wager, and wondered intensely what Eve’s next move would be.

She could not quite understand her thrusting another female into her own particular limelight.

“Such *lots* of us women about!” thought Hester. “I like women, but they do complicate things so when there’s a crowd of them.”

“Little Creddeleton is a long way from here, isn’t it?” said Betty looking across the ten o’clock breakfast-table at her hostess, with innocent eyes and a mind full of shrewd plans. “I suppose you don’t see much of Mr. Mallory, do you?”

Eve considered the girl thoughtfully for an instant before replying. Certainly the unexpected advent of her secretary’s sister was complicating things quite a lot. Perhaps she had been a fool to invite her to stay, or perhaps she had been even wiser than she imagined. Betty would be so exactly the obvious sort of feminine creature that Mallory hated. . . . Eve was sure she would be, and because of that certainty, built her plans accordingly.

“You seem very interested in him,” she remarked, evading a direct reply to Betty’s question.

“Oh no,” airily. “Only because of what you said about him. He *sounds* intriguing.”

Hester tactfully began to talk of Miss Chator who was coming to lunch, and Mallory’s name was not mentioned again.

As they rose from the breakfast-table, Eve remarked that they would have to go at once if they were going at all since Green Acres was such a long distance away.

“Probably he’ll be playing golf or out riding on such a perfect morning,” thought Hester, hopefully.

“We should ring up really only I wanted to take him by surprise,” said Eve, following her secretary into the library. “I think we will though, on second thoughts. Get through, Hester, will you?”

Obediently Hester sat down at the little table near the fireplace that held an extension of the ’phone in the hall, and gave the number of Green Acres to the reproachful voice of the exchange.

A moment’s pause and a slow deep voice at the other end of the line answered her.

“Yes? Who is that speaking?”

“This is Miss Jarvis’ secretary. She would like to speak to you.”

“So you know my voice though I didn’t know yours? That was because you were expecting me to speak and I wasn’t expecting to hear you.”

Hester blinked. “She would like to speak to you,” she repeated, rather inanely.

“Do you mean Miss Jarvis’ secretary wishes to speak to me? Well, go ahead.”

“No, Miss Jarvis does.”

“What is all this?” interrupted Eve’s voice imperiously from the background. “For heaven’s sake, Hester, hand it over to me. You really do rather presume sometimes with my friends, don’t you?”

Without a word the older girl held out the instrument and then got up and went away, both girls completely unaware that Eve’s sharp words had been overheard.

“Good morning, Miss Jarvis,” said Mallory’s suave voice. “A perfect autumn morning.”

“Marvellous, isn’t it? In fact, it’s so lovely that I want to take a nice girl who is staying with me for a drive and I thought we’d call on you, if that’s all right with you. She’s very pretty and very—er——”

“Quite,” answered that cool voice that might have been bored or amused, so expressionless was it. “I will accept your verdict about that. Unfortunately,—for you are very charming yourself, you know!—I am lunching at General Staverley’s. However I have almost to pass your gate, so I will drop in, if I may, for ten minutes.”

“Good. I’ll expect you then, and you can take the General a loving message from me. I haven’t seen him for an age and he and my father were very great friends years ago.”

“You shall tell me exactly what to say,” came the politely curt interruption, for Mallory loathed long ’phone conversations with ‘chattering women’ as he expressed it. “I’ll see you later. *Au revoir.*”

“Most satisfactory,” thought Eve, and went in search of Hester who had joined her sister in the sun-room while they awaited the result of Eve’s telephone call.

“Excellent,” Eve announced. “He’s coming here instead,” and she dropped into a chair, with a happy sigh, and lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MALLORY, glancing from one to the other of the three girlish faces, found himself unavoidably making comparisons. They represented such absolutely different types, possessed such opposite characteristics, and he found the study of them unexpectedly interesting.

Always on the look out for something amusing he decided that to make an intensive study of these three members of the opposite sex might provide him with quite a lot of interesting speculation. He began to think that women might prove more interesting as a means of amusement in retrospect than in actual contact, since he had had enough experience with them individually.

Sitting back in a low chair, toying with a glass of sherry, he secretly watched the changes of expression in each face.

“Hard as nails, that young one; pretty as paint, unusual to look at, very easy on the eye but too boringly obvious. . . . Eve Jarvis has twice as much attraction as the other two put together, masses of glamour, good looks, and a pretty fair strength of character, I should say. But, when you get down to brass tacks, the little secretary, who is much plainer than either of the other two though much pleasanter to look at, has twice as much character, and would never let you down. She’d be a real friend in a tight jam, but I wouldn’t like to bank on the other two; Eve might come up trumps. But Hester . . . queer little name!”

Disjointed thoughts ran through his mind, the while he talked cleverly about nothing at all, and Betty, using the complete battery of her charm, flickered her eye-lashes and thought how devastatingly attractive he was.

She made even more of a dead set at him than Eve had dared to hope, and the latter sat back, rather aloof and cold and offhand, and inwardly thoroughly enjoying herself. Mallory *must* see a difference between them; must feel that she, Eve, belonged to that type of woman who, quite as delightful as her sisters, could yet keep a man in his right place. He would realize that he did not count with her, that he was of very little importance. Or so she hoped.

Actually, Mallory had summed up each of the three girls pretty accurately and to his own inner satisfaction, and when he rose presently to say “good-bye”, it was with the determination to see them again and continue this absorbing study of character.

“I wonder if you three ladies would care to dine with me one evening?” he suggested, very casually.

Eve’s heart missed a beat but she gave no sign of her inner exultation.

“That’s very nice of you. Let me see, we might be able to spare an evening this week.”

His eyes twinkled rather disconcertingly at her but she maintained her cool aloofness.

“Tuesday?” he suggested. “Dinner at eight. Would that suit you all?”

They thought it would and so he took his departure, and Eve, as hostess, accompanied him to his car, Betty for once having the tact to stay away. Tact, that is to say, which was also prompted by Hester’s quick whisper: “Stay here, Betty.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Betty, when the sisters were alone. “I think he’s just marvellous. I am going to see what I can do with him.”

“I’ll tell you one or two things about him,” said Hester. “At least, I can only tell you what is *said* about him.”

“Lead on, Macduff,” laughed Betty. “Nothing you can say will put me off my determination in this quarter. He’s like a hero out of a book.”

Hester made a grimace.

“The villain, probably,” she said, with a little chuckle, and proceeded to put Betty wise as to the reputation that Mallory enjoyed.

As he left Five Gables Mallory frowned thoughtfully over the wheel of his Mercedes Benz, driving slower than usual along the twisting roads.

He came to a strip of open country to see a small car approaching which he recognized immediately as Jingo’s, and pulled up short.

She saw him and stopped too, waiting with her hands resting across the wheel while he climbed out and came towards her.

“Hello, Jingo. Haven’t seen you the last day or two.”

She looked at him with two dark, glowing eyes that seemed unnaturally large in her small, pale face.

“Jerry has come over all prehistoric,” she answered, her jaw set grimly. “He says I’m not to see you or play golf with you any more.”

Her mutinous mouth was adorable, thought Mallory. Why had women to hold that allure for him when he despised and hated them utterly? Or did he as much as he used to? Were there not perhaps excuses to be made for them sometimes, because men spoiled them, made fools of ’em . . . he banished

such thoughts, as treachery to his deepest convictions, and found that Jingo was staring at him, rather surprised at his silence, and still waiting for a reply to her words.

“Has he?” Mallory replied, mildly. “Well, one can understand that.”

“I can’t. I think he’s behaving like a—a boor and a devil.”

“I think he is behaving like a very average male,” answered Mallory, with a disarming smile. “But I suppose we *have* met rather often, playing golf and so on. All so innocent too, Jingo. Otherwise we might have had guilty consciences, mightn’t we?”

The girl’s colour flamed and died again.

Of course she had *known* that it meant nothing to him, nothing at all, only perhaps she had hoped—just a little—because it was such an anti-climax otherwise, and it had been *fun* . . . or had it, so very much?

She and Jerry had not spoken to each other since the ‘row’, and the family had dutifully respected the ‘difference’ between them, and taken no notice at all. In the seclusion of their own rooms they were even more aloof.

Jerry had made two overtures but Jingo had repulsed them both, though deeply within herself she knew she was a fool, and that she loved Jerry and had only been amusing herself with Garnet Mallory, an amusement that held an inviting taste of danger.

If she had to choose between the two men, she knew perfectly well with whom she alone could be happy, but she had played with fire and burnt her fingers a little and because she was proud and Jerry had been rather dictatorial, she hated to give in and admit that she had been wrong.

Not that Jerry was the kind to be smug about it, or to say ‘I told you so’ or anything like that; she just hated to give the impression that she was ready to surrender her independence and to accept his dictating to her friends, her men friends. It was all a matter of vanity and pride, nothing else.

“Poor little Jingo,” he said, so gently that she felt unaccountably near tears. All part of her anger, no doubt, since tears and rage were closely akin.

“Well, I must push off,” she said, tremendously businesslike. “Cheer-oh, Garnet.”

She switched on her engine, waved a careless hand in his direction, and shot away along the road.

With a shrug of his shoulders he went back to his car and climbed in behind the wheel.

“Poor little Jingo,” he repeated, and then, as he drove along the road, he forgot her.

“I like that girl, Hester Lawrence,” he said to himself. She looks at me, for all her politeness, as if she hates the very sight of me. And not the sort of hate that women assume because “they want a man to accept it as a challenge. I believe she genuinely and honestly dislikes me.”

He pressed his foot down on the accelerator and as the car gathered speed, he laughed aloud, and wondered what it would be like to change her opinion of him so that instead of hating him, she—liked him rather a lot. It would be different from the likings of other women, but . . . and he would only admit this to his most secret self, . . . he was just a little afraid of her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE luncheon with Con Chator passed off successfully, for Con was full of witticisms and cheery stories, her rich laughter being so inevitably a part of her Junoesque proportions, and Eve found herself unaccountably glad to see her friend.

After lunch Hester tactfully removed her sister and left the two together in the sun-room, and Con took the opportunity then of sending Eve a half-laughing, half-cynical glance.

“Well, and how does the wager go? Have you started doing anything about it?”

“Yes, in a small way,” admitted Eve, guardedly.

“Of course I’m not entitled to ask any questions, but I’m so frightfully intrigued as to how you’re going to manage it.”

“Ah, that’s my secret.”

“So I admit. But the whole doings seem to me so thrill-making, and you will tell us about it when we meet at the end of the three months, won’t you, Eve? We should be allowed to know details then, shouldn’t we?”

“No, I don’t think you’re entitled to know anything like that, only the bare facts as to whether I’ve succeeded or failed.”

Con shook the ash off her cigarette thoughtfully into a mirrored ash-tray.

“It occurs to me, as time goes by, that it’s going to be very difficult to decide whether you’ve won or failed. I mean—there are so many gradations of failure—and success. It’s all a bit involved, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I suppose it is. But if I wrenched a proposal from him, or not even quite that but—well, and then turned him down I suppose that would be succeeding, wouldn’t it?”

“We shall have to have a Board Meeting about it,” laughed Con. “Tell me, how do you like him? Does he strike you as just the type we depicted?”

“Yes, absolutely. In fact, terribly and obviously so. I suppose he may have a character as well, but to me he’s just a pawn in the game.”

She knew this was not quite true, but she was not going to admit her innermost feelings to Con Chator.

She now changed the subject and would not permit her friend to allude to Mallory again.

Miss Chator did not seem to have been any time at Five Gables before she said she must move on again as she had a thirty mile drive before she reached her destination, so the three girls went out to see her off and when she had gone re-entered the house with a certain feeling of anti-climax. The lunch had followed quickly upon Mallory's visit, and now there was nothing else to look forward to during the day.

Betty was disappointed. She had hoped that lots of people would be dropping in for drinks or a chat, but Hester had said that no, there would very likely be nobody at all for the rest of the day. That did not suit Betty's book at all. She felt she was wasting time, and time was very vital.

Of course, there was Tuesday evening to look forward to and she gave a little inward skip of excitement.

Nothing very much happened on the Monday except that Eve took her over to the Rodneys in the morning while Hester was coping with a number of business letters, and in the afternoon they read or worked, and after tea went into the nearest town about six miles away to the cinema.

So Tuesday dawned, a gloomy dull day, but each of the three girls reacted differently in her mind to the thought of the evening.

After lunch, Hester announced that she was sure she was starting a violent cold, and would she be frightfully rude if she dropped out of the evening's plans?

"I'm sure it can't make any difference to Mr. Mallory, and you won't mind if I go to bed and take aspirin and things, will you, Eve? Because I'd hate to miss the dance on Friday."

It all sounded very plausible, and actually Eve began to think that it might suit her even better than if Hester had come too. She hated to be surrounded by too many women, and as Hester had laughingly remarked to her only the day before, they seemed to be inundated with them lately.

"I'm so sorry, Hester dear. Have you got plenty of aspirin and so forth? You must have hot whisky tonight and then you'll wake up with the cold quite gone tomorrow."

"Yes, I'm sure I shall," said Hester, with conviction, then she hesitated. "Do you think we ought to ring up Green Acres?"

"Yes, definitely I think we should. You do it."

"I can't very well, can I? I suppose you wouldn't, Eve?"

"No, I'd rather not. We'll let Betty do the needful."

Betty was not at all loth and went eagerly to the telephone and got through to Green Acres.

She was very profuse with her sister's apologies, and very chatty about herself. Mallory, at the other end of the line, gave no impression as to how he received her news, listening to her chatterings and finally, curtly but politely, said "*au revoir*" and rang off.

Betty felt just a little as if she'd been snubbed, but her amazing egoism changed such feeling into satisfaction since she had had the opportunity of a little talk with him. It all helped, she felt sure.

Meanwhile Hester retired to her room, thankful that she had got out of what she felt would have been a most uncomfortable evening, though she was just a little sorry not to see Mallory again in some ways, she had to admit to herself. It wasn't that she liked him or that he attracted her as he attracted most other women (she said); it was just that there was something about him which she felt that she recognized and nobody else did. It wasn't his good looks, it wasn't his charm of manner, it wasn't the 'glamour' that Eve said she felt about him; it was something vague and intangible and upon which she could confer no name.

She wondered, with a very little wistfulness, whether he minded her not coming tonight and then upbraided herself for being utterly ridiculous. It wouldn't make the slightest difference to him whether she came or not, except that he had to ask her just as he had to ask Betty so as to have Eve, and Eve so as to have Betty. Was it Betty he wanted for dinner that night? she wondered.

Then she forgot about them all as she began to think about her mother's worries and troubles, for she had had a letter that morning giving her a little more detail of the worried state of Mrs. Lawrence's mind. But even then, the doctor's wife had not told her of the masses of bills which were rapidly collecting in her desk. Only that morning two more of uncomfortable proportions were added to the lot, and Mrs. Lawrence shut the desk shudderingly, afraid to tell anyone.

So it was that Hester saw the other two girls off for the evening, and retired to the library fire with a book, comfortably aware that she need not pretend to sniff any more or show the outward signs of a cold which really she did not possess.

It was rather nice to be all by herself for an hour or two, and she settled herself comfortably with a box of cigarettes, and meant to have a delightful evening. But curiously enough, the hours dragged and seemed interminable,

and it was ten o'clock when she thought it must be midnight, and she went up to bed with the hot whisky that Mrs. Lang had mixed for her.

What were the other two girls doing? she wondered. How were they enjoying themselves, and what sort of a host did Mallory make?

She lay in the dark and thought about it, and the more she thought, the more she longed to know how the evening had passed, and as eleven o'clock struck still there was no sound of Eve's car returning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GARNET MALLORY received his guests in the delightfully masculine lounge of his, looking, in Betty's eyes, even more of a story-book hero than ever in the severe black and white of his evening kit.

He enquired politely after the progress of Hester's cold, regretted she had been unable to join them, and introduced the two girls to a young subaltern he had invited over for dinner from the nearby barracks. He was an amusing, very modern young man, and Betty found that she had her hands full in entertaining him, which was not quite according to plan. She watched Mallory talking easily to Eve Jarvis about various mutual acquaintances, all of whom were unknown to Betty, and felt vaguely envious that she could not change places with her. But this boy was certainly very charming, and if she had not already set her cap at Mallory, she felt she could have enjoyed his company infinitely more.

All the time she was vaguely conscious of missing an opportunity, of losing precious time and she had presumably only a few days left of her visit to Five Gables. She could not expect Eve to keep her on indefinitely and now it was Tuesday already! She knew she would be there until Saturday, probably Monday, but after that she must make some definite move.

She glanced across at Mallory, bending over Eve as he refilled her sherry-glass, and she was seized with impatience. Why had he not asked an older man who could amuse Eve, and devote himself to her, Betty?

For a moment, she almost hated the lovely blonde, to whom after all she owed the evening as she did all the other fun she was having this week. But that was already forgotten. It was the immediate moment that mattered to Betty Lawrence.

A minute or two later the manservant opened the door and announced Dr. Harley, and a distinguished-looking, grey-haired man in the late forties, came into the room.

He was an extremely talkative man, and in two minutes had made the conversation general, and it continued so until they went in to dinner, a beautifully planned and served meal, which might have done credit to the most fastidious of hostesses.

Mallory now sat back and watched his guests entertain each other, taking the head of the table, with Betty on one hand and Eve on his other; for Dr.

Harley and the young subaltern between them were adequately capable of undertaking the whole evening's entertainment.

After dinner, and coffee and liqueurs in the lounge, Mallory took his guests to a long narrow room on the floor above which he had had fitted out as a private cinema. And here for an hour, his manservant working the machine, they were regaled with a couple of thoroughly entertaining film stories, another film which Mallory had taken himself abroad, and a number of 'shots' at friends' houses, a great many of the people depicted therein being known to Eve and Dr. Harley.

They returned to the lounge for drinks and Eve frowningly admitted to herself that never before had she been given such a wonderful opportunity and so wasted it. Yet she could not see how she could have acted otherwise. She did not know that Betty was saying almost the same thing to herself, for it had been a futile evening in a way so far as both girls were concerned.

What Mallory thought in his innermost mind she had not the slightest conception; whether he preferred one to the other, or whether he wasn't the least interested in either.

And the evening came to a close without any step having been taken forward in the schemes of either calculating young women.

As Eve drove away from the house, she even treated her beloved car viciously because she was so disappointed and angry over the unexpected events of the evening, and Betty, sitting beside her, was unusually silent, conning over the past few hours, and wondering if she had ever felt so unsatisfied after being in the company of three wholly delightful men.

"It was a flop," thought Eve to herself. "And now I can't possibly make any further move until Friday. And if I can't do something definite then I may as well throw my hand in."

"I'm just as far off as ever I was before I met him on Sunday," thought Betty. "If I can't do something definite between now and Saturday then I shall have to go to that wretched job and live at home. No, I *won't*. I'll do anything rather than that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HESTER appeared at breakfast the next morning with no sign whatever of even the lingering remains of a cold, and declared that Eve's suggestion of hot whisky and the like had produced this amazing result.

"I hope you had a topping evening," she said, looking across at Eve, for Betty had not yet joined them.

"It was a flop," answered Eve, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I suppose actually it was quite fun, but as far as I was concerned, and the wager, I didn't make any headway at all."

"That must have been awfully disappointing."

"It was damnably so, and more when I look at things this morning than it was last night really. Mallory had asked two other quite nice men to dinner, and it was quite amusing in a way. But, so far as I'm concerned, as it's only the wager that matters to me, all most unsatisfactory."

"Must you—go on with this stupid challenge business?" asked Hester, trying to speak so that she would not rile or upset her employer. "Couldn't you just slide out of it and—let's go abroad or something?"

"No, I certainly couldn't. I'm bound to go on with it now, and pay up if I lose."

"It seems to me you're bound to pay either way," said Hester, worriedly.

"Not at all. I mean to make Mallory do that, not me."

The door opened and Betty came in, so the conversation was dropped.

Eve finished her breakfast hurriedly and left the two sisters together.

Betty seemed to be in a very thoughtful mood, and now she glanced across at her elder sister, resting her elbows on the table and her chin thoughtfully upon her hands.

"You know, Hester, if I could marry somebody with money I could help the family quite a bit," she said, consideringly.

"That's very generous of you, Betty." Hester folded her table-napkin, only half her mind concentrating upon her sister's words.

"Anyone with such masses of money as Garnet Mallory," Betty went on, "could afford to make his wife a very colossal allowance and never miss it."

"I suppose so."

“I happen to know that Mums has a tremendous lot of bills that need paying.”

Hester stopped short and looked across at her sister sharply.

“Bills! What do you mean?”

“I was looking for something in her desk and I came across a whole pile of them fastened together. Some that have evidently been owing for months but I suppose Mums hates to tell Daddy about it.”

“That’s terribly bad. They’ll only go on getting worse and worse!”

“Of course.” Betty shrugged her shoulders. “Yet what can one do about it? That’s one of the reasons why I thought I’d try and make a wealthy match.”

It was unusual for Betty to think of anyone else beside herself and Hester wondered what was at the root of this change of attitude.

“I haven’t any spare money to send her just now,” she said, running through her finances quickly in her mind. “I sent her rather a lot at the beginning of the month and I shan’t get anything else until November. Is it really bad, Betty?”

“Well, if they go on collecting, as you say, it will be pretty terrible. Some of them are house bills, but there’s one for shoe repairs that’s pretty colossal, and some things Dick simply had to have and I suppose Mums was weak enough to get them for him. Of course I know he *needs* them, but what can you do if you haven’t the money to buy them with?”

“I shall have to think about this. Poor Mums is so helpless really, and no good with figures.”

“She’s half afraid of Dad, too, that’s the pity of it,” said Betty, sagely. “Much better to put the whole lot out in front of him and tell him about them.”

“Yes, but he hasn’t been at all well lately, has he? Of course Mums hates to worry him.”

“He’ll have to worry much more in the end.”

“I know. But in the meantime perhaps we could do something.”

Betty jumped to her feet with a shrug of her slim shoulders.

“How *can* one get money unless one marries it? I mean, people like you and I. You’ll have to look round for your chances too, Hester, and land a rich fish.”

“How horrible it sounds! What a curse money is!”

“No, my dear, it isn’t at all. It’s the lack of it.”

Hester wandered over to the window and stood gazing out at the sun-flecked garden. The gloom of early morning was already vanishing, and the dull sky was changing to blue.

“I think I’d better go home for a night or two and see exactly how things are. I might be able to do something, or if I can discover just how much Mums needs, that would be a help.”

“Perhaps I could stay and keep Eve company while you’ve gone,” suggested Betty, brightly. “That would be a good idea.”

Hester did not say anything, and Betty was not sure whether she had heard or merely ignored the words. What a brain-wave!

“Don’t suggest going for a day or two, Hester, there’s a pet. Then Eve might like me to stay on and it will give me a little longer time here.”

“But I should think things are getting rather vital at home.”

“Not so vital that a day or two will make any difference.”

“You’re such an odd mixture, aren’t you, Betty? Very generous one moment and terribly hard the next.”

“In a world like this one has to be hard, and ruthless.”

Hester looked at her younger sister consideringly. That was Eve’s attitude too, or most of it. Be ruthless if you meant to get on in the world, but what a lot one lost that way, all the softer nuances of existence, because one had to crush down one’s gentle side, be egotistical and completely self-centred.

Wasn’t that what was so terribly wrong with the world, the craze for each man and woman to get what he or she could for themselves, never minding the others? The spirit of selfishness stalking through all the countries of the earth leaving its trail of war and riot and trouble.

“It’s a pretty damnable outlook,” thought Hester. “What can happen to change it? Even the threat of war simply leaves people where they were when they know they’re secure again. Nobody wants to think of what’s good for anybody else, speaking generally, that is. It’s all such a mess.”

Self-sacrifice was one of the principal tenets of the Christian faith, wasn’t it? Yet, though she would willingly sacrifice herself for her family, to solve their almost unsolvable financial problems, there wasn’t anyone who wanted her to sacrifice herself! There was no one, for instance, who wanted to marry her and whom she could accept for the good of the family finances.

Now she was getting all melodramatic and penny novelettish like Betty, and that would never do. There were some sacrifices too great to be thought of, and yet she did not value her future so vastly but that she could have

given it up for them, and have made a good thing of it whatever the circumstances. She knew she was adaptable, but . . . always a 'but'.

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Later that morning the small car which Mallory kept for the use of his staff and household arrived at Five Gables, bringing a bouquet carefully wrapped in tissue-paper, a dozen of the choicest red blooms from Green Acres' sheltered rose-garden. There was a card attached to it in an envelope addressed to "Miss Hester Lawrence", and underneath Garnet Mallory's printed name the words were scribbled, "Hoping your cold is better. G.M."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Eve. "This seems very unnecessary. What on earth does he send you roses for, Hester?"

Hester was not at all sure how to take this gesture.

"I suppose it was just kindness of heart," she said, rather nervously, for she could see that her employer was annoyed. "It was really very kind of him to think of me."

"Most unnecessary," said Betty.

Hester looked up sharply.

"But why, Betty? It is very kind of him."

"Yes," said Eve, annoyed because Hester's sister had taken up her own attitude. "Awfully decent. You should ring him up and thank him, Hester, that is if your voice isn't too husky."

There was a vague sarcasm underlying the words, but Eve knew that she really ought to be grateful to Hester for falling out of the plans the night before, only there had been no need for gratitude. Hester's presence would not have made the slightest difference to the evening or the unsatisfactory results thereof.

"I'll just write him a line," said Hester, much more offhandedly than she felt.

The arrival of the roses had been a tremendous surprise to her, and she could not but help feeling a rather warm little sense of gratitude towards him. It had been a kind thought; more than that, an unselfish one since it had meant thinking of somebody else. She would hardly have expected it of Mallory. One would have thought he would only have sent flowers to women he was interested in.

That started a new train of thought upon which Hester resolutely turned a mental back. How ridiculous!

There is something innately romantic in the idea of flowers sent by a man to a woman. However prosaic the occasion, or platonic, it is a very sweet tribute and one which every woman appreciates very deeply, much more so than most men realize. The trite slogan ‘Say it with flowers’, contains a good deal of truthful implication, for flowers have their own individual language—not that attributed to them by humans necessarily—but a beautiful appeal that no other gift can carry, making a bouquet of flowers a very gesture of chivalry.

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The next two days passed quickly until Friday dawned foggily, a gloomy morning escaped from near November.

The post brought a letter from Con Chator, who knowing that Hester’s sister wanted a post, had heard of something that might suit her and, with great kindness of heart, wrote to Hester suggesting it. She had an aunt, living in the north, who wanted rather the old-fashioned type of companion, and though Con was not sure if Betty was quite cut out for the job, she suggested that the girl might like to try it.

“Betty’s strong suit is her youth, for my aunt has a passion for the young, and loves to have young life about her. I don’t think the duties are very arduous, but I am enclosing the address in case your sister cares to apply for the post.”

Betty showed a suitable enthusiasm and interest in the suggested job, and said it was “*frightfully* kind” of Miss Chator to remember her. But when Eve had left the dining-room and the two sisters were alone, she made a naughty face, and gloomily declared that the job was anything but the sort she wanted.

“I think you’re wrong,” said Hester. “If this old lady—and presumably she’s oldish,—likes young people you might be able to keep the post until —” and her eyes twinkled at the younger girl, “until you have found the man with the millions.”

“Well, there’s something in that, of course,” admitted Betty. “But I don’t want to remove myself from the scene of action here at the moment.”

“But you can’t stay at Five Gables indefinitely.”

“No, worse luck. And anyhow while I’m writing about it and waiting for an answer, Eve won’t want me to leave, will she?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really see why she should keep you here.”

“I don’t believe you like having me with you,” said Betty, crossly. “You aren’t a bit kind really.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I try to see things from every point of view.”

“And in doing that, you probably miss the most vital ones.”

“I may, but I can only do my best.”

“I hate people who are always trying to do their best!” Betty grimaced. “They’re always so smug and good and hypocritical.”

Hester laughed but there was a sore note underlying the laughter; she was hurt.

“I don’t mean to be hypocritical. I can’t alter myself,” she said, half-apologetically.

Betty had already forgotten what she had said, and was excitedly clapping her hands and exclaiming about the evening.

“The blue georgette frock suits me beautifully,” she cried. “Thank heaven! I’m so excited about tonight.”

“I hope you won’t be disappointed.”

“There you go again, Hester. You really are a veritable Job.”

“Well, I’ve got some work to do, so I mustn’t stop gossiping here,” and gathering up a pile of letters from the breakfast-table, Hester went away to the library and Betty was left to her own devices.

She went up to her room and spent the next hour or two in manicuring her pretty hands, in practising hair-dressing styles and planning for the evening. She was like a child who is going to her first party, and yet all the time there was that shrewd brain working behind the girlish excitement, a calculativeness that was worthy of a woman twice her age.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JINGO stood before the long mirror in her bedroom regarding her reflected image with satisfaction, tinged none the less with a certain disappointment, for Jerry had announced his intention of staying at home and not accompanying the Rodney party to the dance in the Village Hall of Little Creddleton.

The evening had not been referred to until lunch-time that day when, as details were being discussed, Jerry suddenly looked up.

“I’ve got a lot of work on hand; I’m not coming,” he announced, brusquely.

“Not coming!” echoed Jingo, forgetting the silence which was still existing between them.

The strain had become almost more than either of the two young people could bear, but both were proud, both were determined to the point of obstinacy not to be the first to give in, and the barrier between them seemed to grow larger, deeper, wider, as the days passed.

Mrs. Rodney looked upon it with some misgiving, but she was too wise to interfere in the affairs of her children, although she had tactfully broached the subject to Jingo.

“My dear, don’t forget that men are queer creatures, that women have to give way sometimes even when in their heart of hearts they don’t want to, and when you are married . . . it doesn’t do to quarrel, you know.”

“It’s all so petty and futile and stupid!” Jingo had cried, tempestuously. “Just because Jerry’s jealous.”

“You ought to be glad, my dear, that he takes so much interest in you as to be jealous. It’s a compliment in a way.”

“It’s not the sort of compliment I want, nor the sort I can understand. Mums, don’t interfere, there’s a darling. I know you mean well but—this is between Jerry and me.”

“I know, darling. But I can’t bear to see you smashing up a perfectly good marriage right under my nose, and not do something to try to help.”

“I’m not smashing up anything really. This thing’s got to adjust itself. I—I still love Jerry, you know.”

“And he adores you, which makes it all the more difficult for him to give way. Men are made that way. They hate to take the first initiative.”

“He’s tried—twice,” admitted Jingo.

“Can’t you be generous, dear child, and put an end to this absurd situation? It is absurd when you come to consider it by all modern, logical views. You young things are so logical these days, or so I supposed. Wise beyond your years, and yet, look at the two of you! You’re just like two foolish children.”

Mrs. Rodney tactfully changed the subject after this, but her words sank deeply into Jingo’s mind, but no opportunity presented itself, as her husband shut himself away in their sitting-room with his manuscripts and not for the world would she have interrupted him. It was not the right moment, but somehow the day passed and no right moment presented itself.

Now she stood, fully dressed for the dance, in a red frock which made her look extraordinarily lovely, more lovely than usual, perhaps because of the wistfulness about her mouth and a certain lonely forlornness in her dark-blue eyes.

Jerry came into the room suddenly, unaware that his wife was there, and stopped short in the middle of the floor and looked at her.

She turned slowly and looked at him too, and their eyes met.

There was a long moment of silence, a tenseness, then with a sudden inarticulate little cry, Jingo ran across the few yards of carpet between them only to find Jerry’s arms already outstretched towards her. They closed tightly round her as she buried her face in his shoulder, and burst into tears.

“Jerry, Jerry, I’m so sorry. I’ve been a little fool but—I do love you so.”

He could not find his voice to answer her at first and only held her closely, then as their lips met all feeling of hostility died, all silly jealous memories faded, and they knew that they were one again.

“I’m sorry—too, Jingo. I’ve been a bloody fool, but—you do understand, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Perhaps I wouldn’t have liked it if you hadn’t been—jealous.”

“I suppose that’s all it was. Tell me again that you love me.”

She leant her head back against his arm and her eyes shone as she raised her face to his.

“You know that I love you, you dear old silly,” and pulling his head down towards her she kissed him again of her own accord.

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“Come along, children,” called Freda Rodney, as she wrapped her fur coat closely round her.

Outside the night had closed in with a threat of fog and a chill, raw atmosphere.

Jasper, slight, dark, immaculate, emerged from the dining-room, filling up his flat gold cigarette-case with a handful of cigarettes as he came. He was looking bored, but, as his mother admitted to herself, very distinguished.

“I hope it won’t be a dull evening for you, darling,” she said, touching his arm with her hand as he passed her to collect his coat. “There isn’t anybody thrilling for you, is there?”

“There’s Eve Jarvis and her secretary and the pretty girl who is staying with them,” said Joyce, looking more charming than usual, softer, more feminine, in the brocade redingote which covered her very sophisticated evening frock.

Drake had returned that afternoon and now came running down the stairs, a very handsome young thing with some of his mother’s features, but a very definite individuality of his own. His raking dark eyes took in the little group of three in the hall below him and he smiled.

“A charming family group.”

“Don’t be cynical and mocking!” his mother upbraided him. “And do hurry everybody up or we shall be late.”

“I rather like to be late,” said Jasper, smothering a yawn. “Good heavens!” glancing up the stairs as Jingo and her husband appeared in the bend. “Has Jerry melted and is the row over?”

Jingo’s happy, smiling face answered the question without words.

“Jerry’s coming too,” she said gaily, as she danced down the last few steps. “Isn’t it a thrill? Now I’m going to enjoy myself and I thought it was going to be such a deadly evening.”

Freda Rodney’s hand came out and rested on her youngest daughter’s soft flushed cheek.

“I’m so glad, darling child. It’s been going on so long,” she whispered.

Jingo flashed her a radiant smile, and the arrival of the big family car at the front door at that moment put an end to any further confidential conversation, and they trooped out into the porch.

Meanwhile at Five Gables, the three feminine inmates were ready and were packing themselves into Eve's car preparatory to covering the number of miles that lay between them and Little Creddleton.

Each was excited in a different way, perhaps Hester the least of them all, since the evening did not promise any particular thrill for her, and she was rather worried about her mother's affairs.

So from other various households scattered over the countryside cars were leaving and little groups of people were converging on the village hall preparatory to the evening's amusement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE three girls from Five Gables arrived at the village hall, where a mass of cars obstructed the entrance in an orderly confusion.

The strains of the band from London floated out to them and a man's voice, very much Americanized, informed them that he had locked his heart and thrown away the key.

Eve, in sophisticated black that shimmered with silver, looked bored and haughty as she swept through the groups of curious villagers thronging the entrance steps, and Betty, following close upon her heels, could not conceal her excitement in spite of an effort to copy the other's poise and indifference.

She had the comfortable feeling of knowing herself to be perfectly dressed, for Eve's lovely blue georgette frock suited her exquisitely and she saw herself at last as she had always longed to be. Her hair was piled into small, fair curls and she looked actually about sixteen years old.

Hester, bringing up the rear, knew she could not compete with the two 'lovelies' who led the way into the hall, and if she was conscious of a certain wistful regret because she could not claim good looks too, she philosophically shrugged her shoulders. It didn't *really* matter what one's looks were, though it must be rather wonderful to be beautiful so that people, looking at one, said "What a lovely woman!"

Yet Hester knew no envy and could wholeheartedly praise her sister's prettiness and Eve's more worldly and more finished charm.

She said a smiling "good evening" to a group of villagers and received a hearty "good evening to you, miss", in response, which was so warm and friendly that she forgot to compare herself with her companions, and forgot that the frock she was wearing was seeing its second winter and, though its wine-coloured crêpe suited her better than she imagined, it was actually getting a little shabby.

"What an inadequate cloak-room!" complained Eve, casting a contemptuous glance round the improvised room.

"Never mind," Hester answered, comfortably. "It is somewhere to put our coats."

“My dear,” sighed Eve. “You have always the right answer for everything,” and pushing a stray curl into place she turned quickly and led the way out into the entrance hall and thence into the main hall, now converted very happily into a dance-room.

The walls were decorated with festoons of leaves and paper flowers, with draped bunting and Japanese lanterns, and strings of small, coloured electric lights were threaded round amongst the flowers and across the ceiling.

Already a goodly crowd had arrived and chattering voices and laughter made an accompaniment to the rustling of frocks and the whisper of feet upon the polished wooden floor. Through it all the music of the band flowed and the air was full of cheerfulness and what Eve rather scornfully called “*bonhomie*”.

“I say, will you dance this with me?”

The young subaltern who had dined with them at Green Acres pushed eagerly through a group of people and caught Betty by her elbow. At the same moment a man of Eve’s acquaintance took her hand.

“Shall we, Miss Jarvis?” his sleepy, laconic voice asked her, while his lazy, bored eyes admired her.

“Yes, rather, Sir Reginald,” she answered, and allowed him to draw her forward into the swing of the dancing couples.

For a moment Hester stood alone, glancing about her, completely at ease and enjoying the scene before her, the colourful dresses, the smiling and the bored faces, the band playing ‘Music, Maestro, please’.

“I rather agree, don’t you?” said a cool, quiet voice at her elbow. “‘Tonight I must forget’ . . . Well, Miss Hester Lawrence, and how is the cold?”

Hester turned slowly for she knew already who had spoken, yet when her eyes met his she was none the less aware of a sensation almost of shock.

He was standing very near her and seemed overpoweringly tall and big, and his slate-grey eyes staring straight down into hers were mocking, cold, and his thin mouth sardonic.

“Oh . . . hello!” said Hester, weakly. “My—cold has quite gone, thanks, Mr. Mallory.”

“Good.” He smiled as he peered more closely into her face. “It wasn’t very bad, was it?”

In spite of herself she flushed from brow to chin.

“I don’t think I quite understand you.”

“On the contrary, or you would not blush like that. Shall we dance this?”

He slid an arm round her waist and as they joined the dancers Eve, passing with Sir Reginald Ffoulkes, saw them and stared.

“Just my luck,” thought Eve. “He must have seen Hester standing alone and taken pity on her. I won’t let *that* happen again. I suppose it was mean of me not to see that she knew somebody since I know everybody.”

As if to make reparation for her previous neglect, she flashed her secretary a radiant smile, and Hester wondered what had happened. Or was the smile really meant for her partner?

“Now,” said Garnet Mallory, softly, “tell me why you would not come to my house for dinner the other evening.”

“*Would* not?” echoed Hester.

“Exactly. The cold was merely an excuse, wasn’t it?”

“Thank you for those lovely roses,” the girl countered, looking across the arm that held her and avoiding the dark face so near her own. “They were beautiful, and are still lasting—and lovely. It was very kind of you to think of me.”

“Perhaps I couldn’t help thinking of—you.”

“Please, Mr. Mallory.”

“Yes, Miss Lawrence?”

“I detest compliments, especially when they are just said idly . . . for the sake of something to say.”

“Ah, perhaps. But how do you know whether that is the case or whether you are only imagining it? Intuition?”

Involuntarily Hester turned her head and the grey eyes, only an inch or two from hers, caught her glance, gazing down into hers with a compelling power that sent a curious weakness through her limbs.

She forced herself to remain calm and unruffled, angrily upbraiding herself in the secrecy of her mind for such ridiculous, absurd sensations.

“Yes, intuition, no doubt,” she rejoined, and gave a quick sigh of relief as the music ended in an uproar of appreciative clapping.

“An easy escape for you, that,” said Mallory, with a faint smile. “But you may not always get out of it so happily.”

“Hello, Mr. Mallory,” said Eve’s voice behind his shoulder. “Marvellous crowd here, isn’t there?”

“Good evening, Miss Jarvis,” Mallory bowed coolly, nodded to her companion and turned back to Hester as the band started playing again.

“Shall we go on?”

Being wedged amongst the dancers in the very middle of the room Hester had no alternative but to agree even if she had disliked her present partner which would not have been true. He was a beautiful dancer and their steps went excellently together.

As they moved forward again to the tune of ‘Love Walked In’ she had to admit that she would rather dance with him than any other partner, and that—although of course she *really* took no interest in him as a man—he was an amusing and intriguing personality.

She found it easy to escape him when next the music stopped, as the doctor from Wildmore was standing against the wall and immediately stepped forward and claimed her for the next dance. He was elderly, grey-haired, genial, and danced with an old-fashioned bend to his knees that was to Hester half-amusing, half-pathetic. He chatted brightly all the time and she responded eagerly, partly because she wanted to forget Garnet Mallory, partly because it was easy and untiring to talk to the little medico.

Mallory had disappeared and she did not see him again until an hour later, when he calmly interrupted her conversation with her partner of the moment and whisked her onto the half-deserted dance-floor.

He did not wait for an encore but took her to the wide gallery where ‘sitting-out’ places had been arranged, with cushions and screens and discreet lighting to make it as unlike a village hall as possible.

“I want to talk to you,” he remarked, cryptically, as they sat down. “I *like* talking to you, Miss Hester Lawrence.”

“You are very kind,” she replied, demurely. “Shall we discuss gardens or theatres or . . .”

“No. Would you tell me something about yourself?”

Rather taken aback, the girl hesitated.

“I mean it,” he pressed her, lighting a cigarette for her and one for himself. “I should like to know about your family from *your* point of view.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“According to your sister your people live in the dullest place in the world and lead the dullest of lives, with no money and no—er—opportunities.”

Hester bit her lip. How disloyal Betty could be! The way she had described the circumstances of the Lawrences made the older girl ashamed of her sister.

“It’s quite an attractive place,” she answered, guardedly. “Of course, Betty, being young, found it rather dull. And people can make their own opportunities very often, can’t they?”

He smiled at her challengingly.

“I must remind you of that if the occasion arises,” he said, with a teasing smile. “There are of course people who do not seize the opportunities that Fate gives them. I don’t think I can include myself amongst those. What is your opinion? But perhaps you haven’t had a chance of judging me yet.”

Hester deftly changed the subject and talked of her home, of her hard-working father and her mother.

“She’s a wonderful woman,” she concluded the little panegyric in praise of Mrs. Lawrence.

Mallory interrupted her with a cynical uplift of his brows.

“Why should mothers be treated to any greater deference than other women? Always supposing any female creature is entitled to deference.”

“But of course——”

“Why ‘of course’, Miss Hester? Isn’t that just one of the oldest of fallacies to respect and honour women?”

“But, Mr. Mallory, aren’t you overlooking the only reason why men honour women?”

“They belong to the weaker sex, or rather, presumably so, therefore men must protect, cherish and revere them, the mother of the race and that sort of palaver.”

“Only for one reason, or so I always thought,” submitted Hester, quietly, “and that is because Christ’s Mother was a woman.”

He was so taken aback at her words that for a moment he was at a loss how to reply.

“Otherwise,” went on Hester’s thoughtful voice, “why should there *be* all the ‘palaver’ as you call it?”

“You are an extraordinary girl, aren’t you?” said Mallory, unexpectedly. “Do you know you say things to me that I should never have imagined a woman saying? Do you take God seriously then?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

“You believe in Him and say your prayers and all this religious business?”

The colour deepened in her cheeks but her steady glance did not waver from his half-challenging, half-sardonic gaze.

“Yes, I do. I don’t know what I should do without believing in Someone to—well, to help me in difficulties. This sounds very—smug, but I don’t mean it that way.”

He put aside her apology with a gesture.

“And your Someone really helps you?”

“Yes. I know it for a fact.”

“No, it’s pure imagination. Emotional hysteria. You haven’t *proof*.”

“Inside of myself, I *know*,” said Hester, simply. “I can’t explain it but it’s true.”

“You astound me!”

Her warm cheeks paled and she bit her underlip.

“You need not scoff even if you do not believe,” she said, quietly.

“I swear I was not scoffing,” he caught her up, swiftly. “I was honestly astonished. I *am* astonished.” His eyes considered her wonderingly. “Do you ever flirt with a man, or discuss the lighter things of life, Miss Hester?”

“I don’t know. I love the lighter side of life, as you call it, but as for men—I don’t think I affect them that way.”

“Yet you are definitely a very charming girl.”

“Oh, please.” She put up a hand to stay his words. “I hate mere idle compliments, as I told you before.”

“That was not so idle. Actually it was the truth. I don’t say you are beautiful but you have charm . . .”

She laughed, a low amused chuckle. “I know, Mr. Mallory. I’ve read that sort of thing in dozens of advertisements. ‘You may be plain but with a perfect complexion you can achieve charm,’ etcetera, etcetera! You sound just like an advert. for a new cosmetic.”

He laughed too, because her mirth was infectious, and because it was pleasant to share amusement with her at the same thing.

“We have certainly discussed some strange things for a dance-hall,” he said. “I assure you, Hester—can I drop the sedate, early-Victorian ‘Miss Hester’? So out of date.”

“Yes, do.”

“Thanks. As I was saying, I assure you, Hester, that you have provided me with some extraordinary surprises tonight.”

“Have I? We should go back now, shouldn’t we?”

They went down the wooden stairs from the gallery, and came to the door of the dance-hall below. A surge of dancing couples met them, and the

orchestra had just begun to play 'I Hadn't Anyone Till You'.

His eyes rested on her questioningly, but—though she knew he was looking at her, she forced herself not to respond to his look.

As they appeared, Jasper Rodney suddenly stood before them, bowing to Hester.

"Shall we dance this, Hester?" he said. "I've been looking for you."

"Sorry," said Mallory, suavely, "but Miss Lawrence promised me this one," and slipping an arm round Hester he drew her out onto the dance-floor.

"Did you mind?" He bent his tall head and looked straight into her eyes, and Hester, conscious of a curious thrill that was like new life in her veins, and a sense of strange exaltation, answered that she hadn't minded at all. In fact she liked dancing very much and he danced better than Jasper.

He did not ask her if that was the only reason why she did not object to his calmly monopolizing her, as he would have asked any other girl. Somehow the banal and the trite faded away before something so real and genuine and sincere in Hester that the man found himself remaining silent where, on other occasions, the obvious remark, the expected compliment, came all too easily.

They danced, and, if Hester was not such a beautiful dancer as Eve, at least Mallory never thought to compare the two of them. He had forgotten all about Eve Jarvis.

But Eve had not forgotten him.

She did not see him dance with Hester and then lead her to the gallery and, while they talked, miss half a dozen or more tunes. But she saw them dancing now, to the haunting lilt of 'I Hadn't Anyone Till You' and the encore that followed it, and, since they had danced together earlier in the evening and she herself had only had a few with him, she was not unnaturally piqued and annoyed.

Of course he *had* to be polite and dance with Hester, Eve admitted to herself, and forgot to be piqued any longer. She had herself danced more with Mallory than Betty, the hateful, lovely little cat!

She had watched him talking to Mrs. Rodney who had a rheumatically ankle and could not dance, and there had been Joyce too whom he had taken in search of refreshments in the adjoining room. And Mavis had come down from London for a few days at home and was looking quite her best in a flame-coloured frock that suited her rather severe features. Mallory danced with her, and once with Jingo.

“I can’t be rude, can I, Jerry?” Jingo had asked her husband, worriedly. “I shall *have* to dance with him.”

“I suppose so,” Jerry had answered, frowning. “Only one though.”

He took care that Mallory had not the opportunity of more than that one and its encore for he monopolized his young wife completely almost the whole evening.

Poor Eve had plenty of cause to be jealous, and to fear the frailty of the foundations she had laid for the success of her challenge. Yet she had never before doubted the power of her personal charm. Whether or no she were likely to teach Mallory a lesson, she was certainly learning one herself.

There were other delightful women present whom Garnet Mallory knew well, from the neighbouring big houses. They greeted him with a coquettish smile or a resentful one, according to the state of their feelings about him.

“Actually,” thought Eve, “I have been quite lucky to dance with him as much as I have. Though really it is *I* who have condescended to allow him to dance with *me!*”

She laughed secretly at herself, yet was aware of a curious twinge of fear that she who had always handed out the favours should now be ready to accept what the gods of the moment saw fit to hand to her.

“It’s all wrong,” she told herself. “I won’t let myself get all dithery and goofey at the mere thought of him. Before I know where I am I shall be in love with the wretch.”

As if the mere thought crystallized itself into a concrete fact upon the thinking it, she felt a cold, empty feeling within her that convinced her she was not far away from falling in love if she had not done so already.

“I won’t, I won’t,” she cried, piteously. “Not unless he does too.”

A few minutes later Mallory himself was standing before her, smiling urbanely down into her brilliant face.

“May I?” He held out his arm to her.

“You may,” she answered, rigorously commonplace and offhand, while inside her heart seemed to be turning complete somersaults.

She gave herself to his arms and for a few thrilling moments nothing else mattered for her in the world but the fact that he held her closely as they moved across the floor together, their steps faultlessly attuned, while the melody of some romantic, soul-stirring waltz enveloped them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DRAKE RODNEY, having allowed his roving glance to fall upon pretty Betty, decided he might find her amusing and proceeded to deal with the question in his usual way.

Within half an hour they were the greatest of friends (save the word, according to modern standards!) and by midnight had planned 'fun' for each day of the ensuing week.

"But I may have to leave Five Gables any time," protested Betty.

"You can come and stay at The House," Drake replied, sweepingly. "Mother would be charmed to have you."

Mrs. Rodney was not so impressed with Betty but, watching her younger son monopolizing the girl, she merely shrugged resigned shoulders. Like all his previous infatuations, it would pass, and if she encouraged it rather than hindered its progress, then the passing would be but the swifter.

One day perhaps his butterfly fancies would stabilize and he would fall in love and remain faithful to one woman instead of fluttering round the many. Or would he never settle down?

"I don't like Don Juans in the family," sighed Freda Rodney. "I am always so sorry for their girl-friends, although these days most of the young minxes can look after themselves, and they only get what they ask for."

Meanwhile Betty revelled in Drake Rodney's attentions, and had what she described to her sister afterwards 'a wizard time'.

She transferred her intentions to Drake instead of Mallory, deciding that he was more attractive *really* and much more reachable. The Rodneys obviously had money, so why should she not make an effort to secure youth and a playmate in addition to money and security?

The evening drew to a close and people began drifting away towards their cars, first in twos and threes and then in larger groups. Finally the National Anthem was played and the dance was at an end.

As Eve and Hester emerged from the cloak-room, glancing about them for Betty, who seemed to have completely disappeared, Garnet Mallory moved away from a cluster of men, waiting at the entrance doors for their womenfolk.

“How are you—ladies getting home?” he asked, his eyes on Eve’s charming face, lifted smilingly to his.

“How lovely she is!” thought Hester, involuntarily. “Any man must be attracted to her.”

“We came in my little bus and are returning the same way, I suppose,” Eve answered. “It was rather a squash, I admit.”

“Then please allow me to drive one of you. It seems absurd for three of you to squeeze into one car, when I am alone in mine.”

“That’s awfully nice of you for we are miles out of your way,” said Eve, controlling her inner excitement. “It would be marvellous. Hester’s looking for her sister so we’ll leave her to it and go on, shall we? You’ll be all right, Hester, won’t you?”

She gathered her beautiful cloak about her, smiled carelessly at her secretary, and stepped out into the yard.

A sky, spangled with stars, stretched clearly above her head, but the lights of the cars put the starlight to rout. Eve did not notice the lovely sky; she was triumphantly exulting over the opportunity fate had thrown at her very feet.

For an instant Mallory hesitated, while he looked at Hester and raised one enquiring eyebrow.

“I had an idea you did not drive, for some absurd reason,” he said, slowly. “Will you be all right?”

Hester smiled back at him, his friendly interest warming her heart.

“Yes, thanks. I drive whenever Eve doesn’t want to.”

He nodded.

“I see. Good night,—Hester.”

“Good night,” she answered, demurely.

He shrugged briefly at her obvious evasion for, although he would not have admitted the fact even to himself, he had wanted to hear her say his name. He thought somehow that it would sound—different, the way she would say it.

Having no alternative, he followed Eve out to his Mercedes Benz, parked a yard or two away, and as he handed her in, he threw back his head and looked at the starry sky above him.

“A perfect night,” he said, as if to himself, and strolled round to the other side of the car, pausing to light a cigarette before taking the seat behind the wheel.

Eve snuggled down beside him, her shoulder just touching his, and the powerful car slid away from the village hall and took the road towards Wildmore.

• • • • •

Hester searched everywhere for Betty but could find no trace of her. Someone had perhaps given her a lift back to Five Gables, but how *could* she have taken it without telling them about it? She must have known . . . of *course* she knew—that Eve and Hester would be waiting about for her.

It was very tiresome of her, and Hester was unusually irritated at her sister's thoughtlessness. She wanted to get home for it was quite a long drive to Five Gables from the hall of Little Creddeleton.

Would Garnet Mallory go in for a drink? And would they perhaps go a long way round and pause to watch the moon behind the Trusssock Woods?

Hester angrily called her thoughts to account. What did it matter if they did? Perhaps now Eve would succeed in her challenge . . .

"I saw your sister drive away with young Drake Rodney in his brother's car," said somebody to Hester. "The rest of the family were in the big car and Jasper was driving. I heard Drake say that they would get to The House first."

"Thank you so much," said Hester, relieved to know something definite at last about her sister's movements, for the hall was now almost empty and the caretaker was waiting to lock up. "I'll go home and 'phone the Rodneys' from there."

"Marvellous fun, the dance, wasn't it? Good night, Miss Lawrence."

Hester climbed into Eve's coupé which was the last car standing in the yard now that the big Rolls, from which an acquaintance of Eve's had called out the message, had glided away.

Feeling rather forlorn, the girl lit a cigarette for company, and then switching on her engine, prepared for the lonely drive back to Five Gables.

"I hope they don't race too wildly," she thought. "So stupid at night, and Drake can be awfully rash. . . . I wonder where Eve and—where they are now. They left over twenty minutes ago and his car can go very fast. So can this one but I don't like driving fast at night. . . . It's rather fun though, and I wish I could drive more often. . . . I do hope Betty's all right; expect they've taken her back for eggs and bacon. Extraordinary that Eve didn't suggest something like that but perhaps she would have if—Mr. Mallory hadn't stepped forward as he did. . . . Why on earth should he want to call me

‘Hester’? He says ‘Miss Jarvis’ to Eve, at least in public. . . . Really, he’s rather nice. . . . Will Eve take him in for a drink? . . .”

She drove on steadily, enjoying the beauty of the night, the dying silver of the moon, the fading stars, for already the night was almost spent. So at last she came to Five Gables, but there was no Mercedes Benz outside the front door, as she drove past to the garage to put Eve’s car away.

“He could not have stayed long,” she thought, and her heart leaped. “Not that it makes the slightest difference to me *what* he does,” she added, firmly, and locked the garage doors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THERE was no sign of Eve in the dimly lighted hall, so evidently she had already retired to bed.

A tray, set on a low table near the dying fire in the red-and-white lounge, and containing drinks and sandwiches, had not been touched.

At the sight of this Hester stood very still. Perhaps, after all, her employer had not yet returned, was still driving round the country in Mr. Mallory's wonderful Mercedes Benz, or . . . not driving. Perhaps they were sitting and talking, or—true to his reputation—he might be making love to her. Certainly that was what would be happening.

Conscious of a sense almost of shock at this thought, Hester rebuked herself for daring to be resentful towards Eve and curiously disappointed in Mallory. It was nothing whatever to do with her, nothing at *all*, and she had no right to be annoyed or disappointed, or to feel anything about the incident. Eve was free to do as she pleased, and so was Mallory.

As if thrusting aside unpleasant thoughts, Hester turned quickly and went out to the telephone in the hall and rang up the Rodneys' house.

Jasper came to the 'phone. She explained the conversation which had been overheard and repeated to her.

"Your sister? Yes, she's coming here but they haven't arrived yet. Drake is bringing her along for eggs and bacon. We wanted you to come too but couldn't find you, and your sister said you wouldn't be able to anyhow."

"Why not?" In spite of the inherent loyalty to her family and friends which was so much a part of Hester the question fell from her annoyed lips. "I *could* have come easily."

"My dear, how futile! Betty said you and Eve had gone already."

"I expect she made a mistake and mistook Eve's car for someone else's," Hester answered, quickly. "Never mind now. I just wanted to be sure she was all right."

"Oh, she's quite all right," said Jasper, airily. "In fact I can hear a car arriving at the moment which will be them, no doubt. We were to race 'em back but we left them behind before we reached Butler's Hollow," and he chuckled. "Night, night, my dear."

"Good night, Jasper," and Hester put back the microphone.

Silly children, to race cars along narrow country roads in the early hours of the morning. And Butler's Hollow was notably a death-trap. There had been more accidents at that spot than anywhere else within a radius of miles around it.

Hester went slowly back to the lounge, took a sandwich and poured herself a cup of coffee from the thermos-jug.

She forgot Betty and began again to think of Eve—and Mallory.

As if her thoughts conjured their presence the sound of car-wheels grating on the gravel drive announced their return, and the girl found herself straining her ears eagerly while she waited for them to enter the house.

The next moment Eve's laughing voice could be heard with a deep, baritone accompaniment, and the half-open door was pushed wider and she swept into the room.

"How lovely she is!" thought Hester spontaneously, for the fifth or sixth time that evening.

"Hello!" cried Eve, her voice a trifle more high-pitched than usual, her colour deeper, so that her secretary-companion glanced at her more closely. The dark-blue eyes were brilliant and sparkling, the vivid lips seemed more red and more invitingly seductive.

"So you got home before us," said Mallory, his grey eyes upon Hester's face.

"Where's Betty?" Eve glanced casually round the room and dropped down into a deep chair. "Give me a drink, Hester, for the love of Mike," she added, imperiously.

"I couldn't find her," Hester said, and explained how someone had told her about her sister's departure with the Rodneys. "I 'phoned to make sure it was all right but she had not arrived at The House though Jasper thought he heard the car arriving just before I rang off."

"I thought your sister was with you," said Mallory, and turned his inscrutable eyes upon Eve. "You told me Miss Lawrence was only waiting for her sister."

"Well, so she was." Eve smothered a yawn. "That drink, please, Hester."

"Sorry." Hester moved quickly towards the table. "Coffee or whisky?"

"Oh, whisky, rather. I see you are already imbibing or have imbibed," nodding carelessly towards the empty coffee-cup.

"Permit me," said Mallory, quickly, and took the decanter from Hester's hands. "I am sorry you had that drive back alone."

"I rather enjoyed it," Hester admitted, smiling. "It was such a lovely night to drive through, or early morning, and the air was—perfect."

"We came back through Beechcombe," said Eve, blowing cigarette smoke ceilingwards. "I didn't notice the night particularly."

"She means me to think she and Garnet Mallory were too engrossed with each other," thought Hester, bitterly, and raised her eyes to meet Mallory's gaze fixed upon her.

For an instant they looked at each other, and without realizing that she did so, the girl's eyes challenged his. Then she turned quickly away.

There was a certain hard little line round Eve's mouth that puzzled Hester. If she had spent a happy hour with Mallory, why that discontented droop in spite of bright eyes and flushed cheeks?

Mallory was handing the whisky across to her and then mixing a drink for himself when the telephone bell rang shrilly.

Hester rose instantly and went away to answer it and in the silence that fell momentarily upon the two left behind in the exotic sitting-room, they could hear her voice, low and tense, replying to the speaker at the other end of the line.

"I'll come over and fetch her. . . . Jerry will bring her? . . . If you are sure . . . Thank you, Jasper. . . . You know, I'm terribly sorry."

Then they heard the click of the hand-microphone being returned to its cradle, and a moment later Hester entered the room, a pale, wide-eyed but very calm Hester.

"There has been an accident," she said, briefly. "Drake took Betty in his car, as I told you, and—they crashed at Butler's Hollow."

"Oh, Hester!" Eve looked horrified. "What happened? Are they hurt?"

Mallory stood, his back to the dying embers and the grey ash that crowded the hearth, and with his serious face and slate-grey eyes, his height and broad shoulders, Hester never forgot him as she saw him at that moment. There was a new look upon his face, the alertness of a man scenting action; and in those enigmatic eyes of his a flame of sympathy and understanding had lit an unexpected lamp of friendship. The girl could feel it, reaching out towards her like an invisible hand, and her eyes sent back an unconscious message of gratitude.

"Betty's all right except that she is upset and hysterical. She only seems to be bruised a bit, but Drake's still unconscious, though he doesn't appear to have broken any bones. A car was following them and saw them crash into the tree at the bend. Nobody knows how it happened unless it was that

he couldn't negotiate the road, took his eye off for a moment or something. This other car picked them both up and took them straight to The House and they are waiting for the doctor now. It was Jasper's car and it was completely wrecked."

"But you said Jerry was bringing Betty here?"

"Yes. They wanted her to stay because of the shock but she has begged so hard to come back here, and really, I expect, they don't want strangers about. Jasper thought she had better see the doctor first but she's quite all right, he said, and very quiet now. Poor Betty! I think I ought to go and fetch her."

"Of course you ought not. They've several cars and several able-bodied people who can drive her over." Eve yawned then grew serious again. "Poor, dear Drake! I hope he isn't *badly* hurt. He's such a reckless driver though, that he was bound to have a crash one day. Rather unlucky for Betty that she happened to be the one with him."

"If you think you should be with your sister, Miss Lawrence, I'll drive you over to The House now," said Mallory, setting down his glass. "It would, no doubt, put your mind at rest and Miss Betty would probably be glad to have you with her."

"That's awfully kind of you," said Hester, warmly. "I would like to fetch her because she is almost certain to be frightfully shaken."

"Of course. I shouldn't be surprised if the doctor refused to let her come."

"We'll all go," said Eve, jumping to her feet. "You'd better ring up and say so, Hester, or they may start off before we get there."

Five minutes later Mallory was wrapping a fur rug round the two girls in his magnificent car, Eve chattered brightly and wittily, and comparing the Mercedes Benz with the Delage which was temporarily in dock. Hester was very quiet and serious. She was wondering how much her young sister would really be suffering from shock, and how much would be due to her histrionic powers.

They came to the Rodneys' house to find the doctor was still with Drake and there was no change in his condition. A very subdued Betty sat by the drawing-room fire with Joyce and Jingo, and Mavis, in her professional capacity, was managing them all, having taken the matter in hand with a quiet efficiency that had restored calm momentarily to the distracted family.

Hester insisted on their returning immediately to Five Gables and Jerry said he would take them in the Rodneys' big car. There was absolutely no need to bother Mallory any further, or take him out of his way again.

“I shall like the drive,” said Jerry. “I’ll have the car round to the door in three minutes.”

Mallory did not take any notice of Jingo beyond his smiling greeting to her, yet Jerry’s mind, now thoroughly awake to all the dangerous possibilities suggested by that handsome ‘philanderer’, was distorted with jealousy as he went round the house to the garage at the side.

He had longed to suggest that his wife came with him but knew the suggestion would only have proved his ‘damn’ silliness’. Yet he hated to leave Jingo even in the same room with Garnet.

Their reconciliation earlier in the evening already seemed a long way away, and he was racked with doubts, all the more insistent because he was tired and because Jingo and Mallory had almost ignored each other, which in itself appeared suspicious.

Whichever way he regarded the situation it seemed fraught with dangers and difficulties, and that lovely peace of mind and security which he had enjoyed since he fell in love with and married Jingo had left him.

He brought the car round to the front of the house and Eve and Hester immediately appeared, with Betty clinging to her sister’s hand. Mallory followed with Jasper.

“How did they say ‘good night’ to each other?” wondered Jerry, frantically. “Thank God the others were there. . . . Oh, blast this bloody jealousy of mine! Why have I got to feel it after all these months we’ve been so happy? . . . Suppose Mallory’s that sort of fellah.”

“Good night,” said the fellow in question. “I hope you have better news of Drake presently. I’ll ring up in the morning.”

He bid the three girls a collective ‘good night’ and entered his car, leaving just ahead of them, greatly to Jerry Darton’s secret relief. Then the Rodneys’ car slid through the gates and The House was left behind, dark and silent amongst its sheltering trees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HESTER tucked her sister up in bed with aspirin and hot milk and then at last prepared for bed herself, but Eve was still restless and wide awake. She came along to her secretary's room in her severely tailored velvet dressing-gown, hands thrust into the pockets, and a cigarette between her pouting lips.

She curled up on the edge of Hester's bed.

"You don't mind, do you? But I *must* talk to somebody, and I'm so angry with life."

"Angry?" Hester's sleepiness retreated. "I thought you would be frightfully pleased and happy tonight."

"I'm most disgruntled. I wouldn't mind betting that Garnet Mallory has never before driven that distance with a pretty girl and not kissed her."

"Didn't he—kiss you then?" Hester smoothed a crease in her sheet with careful fingers. "You expected it, I suppose?"

"Of course I did. But he was most platonic and even *friendly*. Either I bore him to tears or he is treating me with respect, and I don't know which is the worst."

"Eve, how can you say such things! Naturally he treats you with—well, *some* respect."

"You know he hasn't any for a single member of our sex, unless it might be you, Hester. His voice changes when he speaks to you."

The colour crept up under the elder girl's skin until it burnt a vivid patch of red on either cheek, but Eve did not notice; she was moodily examining her exquisitely manicured hands.

"It's odd that you *have* that effect upon people, as I told you, Hester." She raised her eyes suddenly, and there was a spontaneous admiration shining in their dark-blue depths.

"I don't," said Hester. "I'm not any different from other people only perhaps more old-fashioned inside of my mind."

"You remind me of a line of poetry I read somewhere once and which I've never forgotten." Eve was unusually serious. "Couldn't tell you who wrote it or where I discovered it, but it was something about a woman, and I think I can remember it pretty exactly:

“None knelt at her feet, confessed lovers in thrall,
They knelt more to God than they used, that was all.”

“Don’t,” said Hester, sharply. “I’m not a bit like that, not one bit.”

“Yes, you are. I think it must be rather wonderful, because you don’t get discontented and restless as I do.”

She rose suddenly and went across to the windows, jerking the silken curtains aside and peering out at the night, already greying into the approach of daylight.

“I get just as discontented as anybody else,” asserted Hester. “Good heavens, Eve, you make me sound like a smug sort of—of . . .”

“Elderly spinster?” Eve chuckled. “You aren’t like that, my pet, or I couldn’t have borne you near me for a week, let alone the years you *have* been with me.” She indulged luxuriously in a big yawn. “I suppose I *am* a bit weary.”

She let the curtains swing together with a soft swishing sound, then came and stood at the foot of the bed, her fingers curling round the smooth walnut of the foot-piece.

“I absolutely vamped Garnet Mallory to start with,” she said, suddenly. “Because I meant to lead him on and then snub him.”

“Isn’t that rather a—dangerous game to play, especially with a man of his type?”

“Of course, but then I revel in danger. Anyhow, it didn’t work so I had to change my tactics rapidly. I took a leaf out of your book, darling, and became the completely virginal woman with whom, however, it is possible to be magnificently platonic. All friendly and cool and touch-me-not, but frightfully alluring.”

“Eve, you couldn’t have learnt anything of that from me!” cried poor Hester, horrified.

“Not the alluring part, sweet, but the lovely platonic virginity touch.”

Hester pulled the bed-clothes round her shoulders and buried her flushed cheek on her pillow.

“Go to bed. It must be almost breakfast-time already.”

“I’ll leave a note for us not to be disturbed till we ring,” answered Eve, airily. “Bye, bye, darling,” and she sauntered out of the room.

The closing of her bedroom door a minute later resounded with a soft thud through the quiet house, then all was silence.

Hester shut her eyes tightly and, trying to banish thought, made herself breathe deeply and evenly in an endeavour to woo oblivion.

A few minutes later she was sound asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DRAKE RODNEY did not recover consciousness for some hours and then, according to doctor's orders, had to be kept very quiet. A nurse had arrived at breakfast-time to relieve Mavis, and the routine of the house was completely upset.

"There are too many of us here in the house for it to be possible for the place to be quiet," sighed Mrs. Rodney, at lunch-time.

"I thought Jingo and I might run up to Town," said Jerry, slowly. "You could keep us informed about Drake, and I must see one or two people. I've put it off so long."

"Yes, let's," agreed Jingo, eagerly, for Jerry was not his usual self again in spite of their reconciliation the evening before.

She had waited anxiously for his return from driving the three girls over to Five Gables because she thought the bogey of Garnet Mallory had been driven out and her husband's jealousy had died. But though he took her in his arms and made love to her in the same sweet way that was to her so inevitably Jerry, there was a roughness about him that spoke of jangled nerves and an unrestful mind.

"Don't you *love* me any more, Jerry?" she had pleaded. "You're—different."

"That means you love me less," he had answered, hoarsely. "I was afraid of it. It's all because of that Mallory——"

"Jerry, don't be absurd. We've finished with that. You aren't *still* worrying about it in the back of your mind?"

"I suppose I am," he had almost groaned in answer. "Yet I *know* you were only amusing yourself. It's his damned reputation that makes me act like a fool, and because I never dreamed of you *wanting* to look at another man."

"I don't want to look at him," Jingo protested. "I'm not *attracted* to him," she went on, eagerly. "We played golf together and—it was all so—well, absolutely *platonic*."

She resolutely forced herself to forget that light kiss of his because she knew how little it meant to him, just no more than a handshake, than a fleeting gesture. If it had startled her into strange and odd sensations, that

also was merely in passing. And Jerry must never, never know. It was difficult enough to convince him.

So when he suggested that they left The House for a time she saw the solution to her problem in their speedy flight. It would be easier to make her husband forget Mallory, and to look upon the whole trivial episode in its truly trivial light. Away by themselves she would be able to put everything right.

“That *is* a good idea,” agreed Mrs. Rodney. “And I am sure it will be better for Drake. However quiet we are there is bound to be a sense of *movement* in the house.”

So the young couple packed their bags, stowed their cases away in the small family car, and after tea set out for London with Jasper at the wheel, for he too had decided to spend a few days at his club. He could return home within an hour of receiving a message from The House, and since Mavis would be there for the next two days and Joyce would also be in residence, Mrs. Rodney would not be alone, and so had agreed readily with his plans.

The House seemed very quiet after the three had departed, and the telephone, which had rung constantly earlier in the day, was at last mercifully silent. Joyce had sat beside it for a couple of hours so as to prevent the bell ringing, and she was in the mood to declare that 'phones were more of a curse than a blessing in certain circumstances.

Meanwhile at Five Gables Eve and her companions had spent a curiously unreal day. Breakfasting in their rooms about noon, they had decided to forego lunch and so met for tea in the red-and-white lounge at the usual four o'clock hour.

Betty had slept stolidly and awakened very little the worse for her accident except for being somewhat irritable, alternating with a subduedness very unlike Betty.

“I think I'd better take that job as soon as possible, Hester, don't you?” she had remarked to her sister when Hester looked into her room to see if she were ready for tea. “I feel I ought to do something *definite*, not fritter away my time. I had rather a—fright last night, and I've been thinking how dreadfully easy it is to die, to be killed.”

Hester nodded, understandingly.

“I think you might be very happy, Betty dear, working hard if you can find what you like to work at.”

Betty nodded, eager to justify herself for throwing up her previous post.

“That's just it, Hester. If one's work is horribly—uncongenial, then it's very hard to make a real success of it, don't you think?”

“Come down to tea,” said Hester. “You will probably get a letter on Monday morning fixing it all up.”

About six o’clock Garnet Mallory rang up to enquire how they all were, and if Betty had recovered from her shock of the evening before.

As if she had been expecting his call, Eve leapt to her feet directly the ’phone bell rang.

She had already answered two previous calls, both from friends near by, and Hester smiled to herself for she knew exactly what was in her friend’s mind.

“We are feeling terribly dull and quiet and after-the-party,” said Eve, brightly. “Why don’t you drive over and cheer us up?”

“Thanks very much,” replied Mallory. “I should like to but I’m already booked to dine at the Ponsonbys’. I have to come past your place to get there however so I’ll look in for five minutes, if I may.”

“Yes, do.” Eve assumed a casual offhandedness that was much more her usual self than she was able to appear in her dealings with this man.

She rang off at once, but stood for a long time beside the telephone-table, debating within her own mind her curious reactions to all contact with him, either directly personal contact or merely in speaking over the wire.

She was persistently forgetting the terms of her wager, and more often than not secretly shrugging indifferent shoulders as to the success of the absurd challenge.

Why not act normally, accept the position the fates had created (urged on by her own efforts), and just let matters take their own natural course?

“I suppose actually I am entirely accepting defeat,” she told herself, honestly. “For to admit myself to be—much too interested in him is to lose the wager. I haven’t snubbed him; I haven’t made him realize that all women aren’t alike, simply dropping like over-ripe fruit into his hands when he holds them out. Oh, damn! Hester was right and I ought never to have taken on such a damn’-fool game. It isn’t the stake of silk stockings I have to forfeit that matters an earthly, but the humiliation of telling Con and Inez that I’ve—failed.”

Yet even saying the words slowly and firmly to herself did not rouse her overmuch as a little while ago it would have done. After all, did it matter?

She went slowly back into the lounge and looked at the other two girls, Betty outstretched on a couch, hands folded under her head, looking very sweet and just a little frail and interesting in her new subdued mood.

Hester's head was bent over her tapestry and she did not glance up but went on steadily with her work.

"That was Garnet Mallory," said Eve, and bent to poke the fire. "He is developing the habit of dropping in here on his way to other places. He's coming in presently because he passes the door going to dine with the Ponsonbys." She chuckled. "Gavin Towers is actually five miles east of us."

Betty turned big, interested eyes upon her hostess.

"You like him, don't you, Eve?" she said, blandly. "He certainly is *fascinating*."

Eve frowned.

"I think he's amusing," she said, coldly, and changed the subject.

Hester went on sewing and said never a word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“**I** LOVE SATURDAYS as a rule,” gushed Betty, brightening considerably at the thought of a visitor.

She put up her hands and smoothed the mass of small curls drawn up on top of her head, delightfully conscious that she was looking her best, and that the subdued spirit which enveloped her was vastly becoming.

The calm day had almost completely restored her for actually she was a young woman of particularly virile nerves, and the shock of the previous night’s catastrophe was swiftly wearing off.

The thought of a man to talk to banished her lingering meekness and although her head was going to ache in consequence, at least the compensation of the half-hour seemed worth while.

Hester suddenly remembered she ought to write to her mother, and neither of the other two reminded her that it would be Sunday on the following day so no letters would get delivered any quicker for being written on Saturday instead of Sunday. She went away to the library and left her sister and Eve, mildly discussing politics about which Betty knew nothing at all and cared less, and the knowledge of which Eve herself possessed only an indiscriminate smattering.

Hester knew very little beyond the superficial facts of what was happening here, there and everywhere in the world, but she was interested and liked to hear people discuss the important topics of the day; she liked to hear the views of those people who mattered and who knew what they were talking about and to hear them weigh up the pros and cons of those subjects which were vitally important. In a world where disorder and unrest were the factors of the moment, seemingly irrevocable and inescapable, it was important for every individual to have some acquaintance with the political and economic position of every country in the world.

“Politics are deadly,” Betty would say.

“They are fascinating,” her sister would urge, interested, although rather ignorant of the subject.

She sat down now at her desk in the library and drew writing-paper towards her, unscrewed her fountain pen and prepared to write to her mother.

Meanwhile, in the doctor's house, Mrs. Lawrence was spreading out a row of bills upon the table, staring down at them with white, weary face and frightened eyes. The sum total, jotted down on a loose sheet of paper, startled her for it was even greater than she had imagined. What could she do? What was there to be done but to show the bills to her husband?

Yet she dared not risk that since he was far from well and her common sense told her that to hand the bills over to him would but bring matters to a climax. She was almost afraid that the result might be drastic, and so she put aside the evil day, postponing the telling of her troubles which must inevitably come only too soon.

If only the boys' careers were not so expensive; if only they did not want so much although, dear lads, they were as economical as they could be and did without whatever was possible. But there were necessities that must be found for them. Perhaps the fault lay in having been too ambitious, in wanting to do too much for the family, though the girls actually had been self-supporting.

Hester, bless her heart, had not only provided for herself for years but regularly sent money to help in the family finances. Betty was a disappointment, admittedly; and now that she had no job was an additional worry. But Hester would settle that; she would find something that Betty could do and provide for her.

The ringing of the telephone bell sent her to answer it; it was a patient arranging for a consultation.

As she replaced the receiver Mrs. Lawrence passed a weary hand over her face and sighed.

How terrible was the lack of money! Such a paltry thing, so dead and lifeless, and yet how vital for the happiness and the welfare of everybody!

If she could only see Hester and talk to her what a relief that would be to her mind! Hester was always full of bright and brilliant ideas, and wise solutions to every problem. Perhaps it was rather unfair to heap her worries on young shoulders but actually she had reached a pitch where she did not know which way to turn, or what to think. She just longed to thrust all the bills into the fire and know that her responsibilities went with them.

The ringing of the telephone bell suggested a new idea to her and she went slowly back again, standing for some time looking at the instrument while she debated in her mind whether or no she should ring up her daughter and try to enlist her help. Hester would tell her what to do.

Two minutes later she was waiting for the exchange to connect her with Five Gables, and just after that Hester, having heard a car roll up to the front

of the house and the parlourmaid admit Mallory, for she could hear the sound of his voice, was disturbed in the letter she was writing to her mother by the ringing of the telephone bell and then the sound of her mother's voice.

"I'm so distracted, Hester darling," came the agitated voice from the other end of the line. "Do tell me what to do. Listen and I'll tell you just what's happened."

Hester listened while her mother poured out her troubles, and the girl's face grew more and more serious as she heard the full story of the accumulated bills.

What could she say to comfort Mrs. Lawrence? What was there of cheer or advice that she could pass on to the distraught, worried woman?

"Mother darling, I'm most frightfully sorry," said Hester, her voice deep and warm with sympathy and loving understanding. "And you don't think you ought to tell Father about it?"

"I dare not. He's so very unfit that I'm almost afraid—I don't know what to think about him. I believe he's on the verge of being very ill."

"I'll come home and we'll see what's to be done about it," said Hester, making up her mind on the spur of the moment. "I hope to fix up this job for Betty and I'll come on Monday. Eve will spare me. I'm sure I shall be able to arrange that quite all right even if Betty stays on here for a day or two. Just leave it to me, darling, and I'll fix it all up for you."

"I *knew* you would." Already deep relief thrilled through her mother's voice. "I knew everything would be all right if I could only tell you about it. It seems so horrid of us all to put our worries and troubles on your shoulders though, Hester darling. What should we do without you?"

"Don't think about it any more. Just put aside your worries and I shall try to be with you on Monday. I'll arrange it all with Eve this evening. She has a friend with her now so I can't go and ask her or I could tell you straight away. But I think it will be better if you leave it to me to settle and then I'll give you a ring tomorrow."

As she replaced the receiver, she faced the problem seriously, and with some fear. How could she solve it? What means lay in her power to pay off those bills her mother owed without letting her father know anything about it?

She sat down beside the library fire, hands hanging loosely between her knees, staring into the glowing heart of the coals, with a sense of deep despair. How could she, earning what she did, find the amount of money that must be found to make everything all right at home?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

HESTER folded her completed letter to her mother and placed it in an envelope, then carried it out into the hall to put it upon the deep brass salver kept for the purpose of holding letters ready for the post.

It was a purely mechanical action and she was lost in thought as she opened the library door and stepped out into the hall. At that identical moment the door of the lounge also opened and Eve came out, followed by Garnet Mallory.

“Hello! Finished your letter?” Eve’s voice was crisp, imperious.

“Yes.” Involuntarily Hester hesitated. “I was just going to put it with the letters for the post.”

“Good evening, Miss Lawrence,” said Mallory’s voice, suavely. “You know, of course, that there’s no clearance from letter-boxes on Saturdays and your letter won’t go any quicker than if you wrote it tomorrow.”

“I’d forgotten,” faltered Hester, and then laughed. “Anyway, I wanted to get it written.”

He nodded understandingly.

“Preferring to write letters to wasting your time listening to idle conversation perhaps.”

“What nonsense!” interrupted Eve. “Really, you two say such odd things to each other. Hester wrote to her mother because she was worried about her or something,” vaguely, “but then she always makes such a hooaha about everything, don’t you, Hester darling? That’s your nature, of course.”

“Do I? I didn’t know I did.”

“Perhaps it is always about the things that matter,” intercepted Mallory, picking up his coat from the hall chair where he had laid it and slipping it over his evening kit. “So many people fuss over trifles and take no notice of the vital matters. Do you share my opinion, Miss Hester?”

Eve did not give her secretary a chance of replying, but cut in with a question and messages to the people with whom Mallory was presently dining.

Hester discreetly left them and went quickly into the lounge before the man had a chance of addressing her again.

“Isn’t he a duck?” gushed Betty.

“Hush! He’ll hear what you say,” said Hester, hurriedly closing the door.

“I don’t mind if he does. I think he’s a pet. Actually he’s nicer than Drake Rodney, only Drake’s young and he’s rich and—do you think I should have any chance with him, Hester?”

“Are you setting your cap at him now? Yes, he’s young, attractive and charming, but rather fickle, I should imagine.”

Betty shrugged her shoulders.

“I expect I should be fickle too. But how wonderful to have constant change. And who wants to marry one man and stay with him for the rest of her life?”

It was Hester’s turn to shrug now.

“That’s just a matter of opinion, isn’t it? If you are the polygamous kind or the changeable sort, then I suppose it’s all right to keep on having husbands.”

Betty chuckled mirthfully.

“Sounds odd, doesn’t it?”

Just then Eve came back into the room, and glanced at the sisters with raised eyebrows and a mocking smile.

“Who’s claiming a lot of husbands?” she wanted to know.

Betty repeated the conversation and Eve laughed.

“Perhaps you’re right, Betty. They say that variety is the very spice of life and I’m sure it is true. After all, one changes one’s friends, not from any lack of true friendship but because different people suit different stages in one’s life and one’s mental development. Probably in two years’ time Con Chator and I, for example, won’t have anything in common at all and we shall hardly meet. Or if we meet it will only be as the most casual acquaintances, whereas six months ago we saw each other every single day. It’s only human nature, isn’t it?”

Hester nodded.

“Yes, unfortunately it is.”

“Well, of course you’re different, Hester,” said Eve, with a sigh of resignation. “You’d like to stay the same and go on the same day after day, year after year. I like to get about and see things and have change, change, change. Betty feels the same, I know.”

“I definitely do.”

“Stuck in one place,” went on Eve, “life is so dim. It’s only variety that gives any glamour to existence.”

Hester picked up her tapestry and bent her head over her work, listening to the desultory argument that went on between the other two girls, agreeing to some of it, rather sorry for other points of view aired by these two, sorry because she was so conservative at heart and hated the restless changeableness which was at the root of everything at the existing moment. Everybody wanted something different from the life of years ago. Natural, of course, but carried now to extremes. The swing of the pendulum swept the world from one extreme to another, and there seemed no middle course along which one might pursue one's way and be contented and find happiness.

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Eve was quite agreeable to Hester's suggestion of going home; in fact she was quite enthusiastic about it.

"Of course you must go, my dear. I couldn't bear to think that your people wanted you and I kept you away from them. Don't worry about Betty; she can stay on here with me until we fix her up with Con Chator's aunt. Stay till Tuesday if you want to, and go tomorrow. Wouldn't that be a good idea? There are Sunday trains only not very good ones but it would give you an extra night at home."

"That's awfully kind of you, Eve. I'll look up the trains at once."

They were certainly not good trains but if Eve could take her to a junction some ten miles away, it would make the journey infinitely easier. And this Eve was only too delighted to do.

Consequently they planned to leave Five Gables in time to catch the twelve o'clock train on the following morning. But, in the way in which these things happen, Fate intervened, and the telephone bell rang directly after breakfast.

It was a call from Hester's home. Peter was at the other end of the line to say that Dr. Lawrence had come in the night before not at all well and seemed to be suffering from a chill. This morning he was much worse and they feared he had pneumonia.

"Mother wanted you to know because you said something about coming home. It isn't serious, of course, although the dear old chap does seem pretty bad. I'm afraid he's been working up for something like this for a long time. What do you think about it, Hester?"

Hester hurriedly explained that she was in any case coming that day and catching the twelve o'clock train. But there was an earlier one which with a

bit of a rush she might manage to get. She would leave Betty behind unless Peter thought . . .

“No,” answered Peter. “I don’t think he’s as bad as that, at least I hope not. I don’t think Betty would be of much use here and it would be wiser for her to stay at Five Gables if it can be arranged.”

“Yes, all that is arranged already,” Hester answered. “I won’t stop for any more now, Peter, but tell Mother I shall be home about lunch-time, with any luck.”

She rang off and rushed away to find her employer and ask Eve if she could possibly manage to run her into the junction a couple of hours earlier than they had intended.

Yes, certainly Eve would.

As Hester packed a few necessaries into a small suit-case, although her mind was concentrated chiefly upon the subject of her father and her home, a thought threaded through the others. Why was Eve so anxious to get rid of her? Had she some plan brewing in her mind?

Quarter of an hour later they were on the road, caught the train with a bare minute or two to spare, and Hester was bound for home.

Eve drove back to Five Gables, a thoughtful look on her lovely face, her eyes bright, her mind working actively. With Hester’s departure she felt as if certain restrictions had been removed from her; she was free to do what she liked without anyone to criticize or wonder about her. And she was unaccountably glad.

CHAPTER THIRTY

HESTER was not to forget that Sunday for many a long day. Her mother's relief at her presence was a great strength to her, but she found herself in the position of prop to all the family, who instinctively turned to her for support and leadership. She and Peter between them seemed to have to plan and scheme and arrange everything for the others, as they had often done before, since Dr. Lawrence was such a busy man and seemed to have no time for family affairs.

Mrs. Lawrence's constant cry was what on earth would she do without her daughter, and Hester was conscious of a deep humility because she felt herself so inadequate, so far removed from the heights upon which she was expected to stand. She thought herself such an ordinary woman, and the demands made upon her by her family only increased the smallness of her opinion of herself.

Dr. Lawrence grew steadily worse, and the night was one of dread and anxiety in the Lawrence household. But by Monday morning he seemed a little easier and their hopes rallied.

Coming down the stairs to the hall from his room early that day Hester saw the morning post laid out on the hall table, and lying on the top of the pile of letters was the one she had written to her mother on Saturday night. It looked so strange lying there addressed in her own handwriting, and she took it up and held it for a moment, weighing it in her hand, while her mind carried her back to the brief incident of that evening when she had taken the letter out into the hall and met Eve and Garnet Mallory there.

He had spoken to her; in fact he always had a remark to address to her, a look to give her. He never ignored her presence but seemed rather as if there was something about her which arrested his attention. He seemed to *want* to talk to her, and the consciousness of this brought a warm and happy feeling into Hester's worried heart.

She took the letter into the kitchen where her mother was busy helping the young and inexperienced maid with the breakfast.

"Darling, this is the letter I wrote to you on Saturday," she said, handing it to Mrs. Lawrence. "Doesn't it seem queer to think that I got here before the letter?"

“Life *is* queer. It’s full of worries and muddles and difficulties,” sighed the doctor’s anxious wife. “Why can’t things be simpler?”

“I suppose they’d be very dull if they were.”

“Carry this tray into the dining-room, there’s a dear. Peter must have his breakfast in five minutes’ time or he’ll be late at the Bank, and I don’t really think we ought to keep him at home. After all we can ’phone for him if we need him.”

“Of course.”

Hester’s presence seemed to re-establish her mother, to give her a new strength and the power of once more facing the daily round and the common task.

Together they finished getting the breakfast, taking it in turns to listen for the bell from the doctor’s room in case the nurse who had been called in the night before should need anything.

So the day progressed slowly on towards the evening, and the doctor’s condition remained very much the same.

“You won’t have to go back to Five Gables yet, will you?” Mrs. Lawrence wanted to know anxiously.

“Of course not. Eve is always understanding, and I’ll ring her up presently and tell her exactly how things are going. She won’t want me back until you don’t need me any more.”

Mrs. Lawrence sighed. She would like to have said how wonderful it would be if Hester could have stayed at home but she knew that the girl must earn her living. Besides, at the mere thought of money, the question of those bills rose up again in Mrs. Lawrence’s mind. There was that matter to be settled, but so far they had not had the time nor the inclination to tackle the subject.

That evening, however, after the night nurse had arrived to take over the patient, for mother and daughter had nursed him during the day, they sat down by the dining-room fire and Mrs. Lawrence brought out piles of bills and laid them before her daughter.

“I’m terribly ashamed,” she said, in a low voice. “It is dreadful to have to admit that I’ve been so neglectful and let them accumulate so much. Things ought to be the other way round, oughn’t they, darling? The daughter bringing the bills to the mother to be settled, not like this.”

Hester comforted her mother and tried to appear far more cheerful than she felt, for as she looked at sheet after sheet, her heart sank within her. How

could she obtain the money to pay them unless she could persuade someone to lend it to her?

Eve. . . . The idea flashed through her mind. Would she lend her the money? No, it wouldn't do to ask her, especially as it meant a large sum of ready money to settle these accounts.

Hester racked her brain in vain, and it was not until close on midnight when Mother and daughter had said 'good night' and gone to bed, Hester in Betty's room and her mother in the little spare-room which Hester was accustomed to use when she came home to stay, that a brilliant inspiration flashed across her mind.

"But how impossible! Mad and stupid. Besides, it was Eve who undertook the wager, not me. I couldn't do it. . . . But a hundred pounds would be a wonderful help."

The thought persisted as she tossed from side to side in her bed. Why should it not be as fair for her as for Eve? . . . No, she could not so humiliate herself. And yet how infinitely more humiliating was the situation as it now existed, with all those debts pressing in upon them.

Better than a wager would be to find a rich man to marry. But how absurdly melodramatic and like a penny novelette! And yet again, how simple the solution.

She thought of the different people she knew, the men she liked and who had sufficient money to meet her requirements. She smiled wryly at this thought. She had never dreamed of becoming a seeker after gold, looking for a man to marry for his money. Marriage to her was something so wonderful, so different from the ordinary idea of it, that to look upon it as a matter of convenience, as a business arrangement, was absolutely and overwhelmingly horrible.

Yet she could not see any other solution to the problem.

Even if Betty made the wealthy marriage she was planning, would Betty settle the family's debts? Hester very much doubted it.

She tossed and turned and could not sleep. Money, money, money. She *must* find some. . . . There was Jasper Rodney; he was wealthy, he liked her, she liked him. Could she imagine herself married to him?

She dragged the clothes up round her neck and shivered.

But, on second thoughts, there were men who would be infinitely less desirable as a husband than Jasper. He was understanding and kind; he was experienced . . . her thoughts broke off sharply at this word. Experienced! The very idea suggested spontaneously the name of Garnet Mallory.

How absurd! As if he could enter into her plans; even if she could have brought herself to the thought of marrying him, would he dream of marrying her?

Her face flamed in the darkness as she buried it in her hot pillow.

“I’m mad; there’s something wrong with me to think of such things. Utterly and absolutely mad!”

Yet the thought, so insiduously rising to the surface of her mind, dominated all other, and her dreams were haunted with the presence of the man, so that she woke the next morning, heavy of head and even heavier of heart, and with a curious premonition that the idea which had leapt to her mind in the night was the only solution to an almost unsolvable problem.

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On Tuesday morning Eve rang up to say that they had heard from Con Chator’s aunt that she wanted to see Betty and to have her to stay for a week-end so that she might ‘vet’ her, as Eve expressed it. Here was Betty to talk to Hester about it.

The two sisters chatted together but Betty was too full of excitement to want to hear very much about home affairs once her elder sister had assured her that the doctor was getting on quite as well as they could expect, though progress was going to be very slow. The worst of the illness had been averted, but it looked as if eventual convalescence would be a long and sorry business.

“It’s more of a breakdown than anything else,” said Hester. “Poor Daddy! It’s going to take an awful time to get him well again.”

“Then I’d certainly better get a job, hadn’t I?” came Betty’s voice eagerly from the other end of the line. “I’m to go and stay with this old lady on Thursday, and Eve is awfully kind and has given me some lovely clothes which she says she doesn’t want any more. They fit me marvellously, so I shall have quite a nice wardrobe to go with. Isn’t she a pet?”

Hester agreed that she certainly was, and after trying to fix up several other points of importance with a Betty much too excited to attend to details, their conversation eventually came to an end.

Mrs. Lawrence was delighted at the prospect of Betty really getting a post, and it certainly seemed as if things might be getting a little easier, now that the worst of the doctor’s illness had abated.

They must still be very careful as there was every chance of a relapse, so Hester insisted that the night nurse must remain, and she must make her own

plans to return to Five Gables on Thursday, although Eve said she could stay until the end of the week if she were needed.

“We’ll see what happens,” said Hester, rather vaguely.

In her mind she was revolving a chaotic mass of difficult, complicated thoughts. She must get back to Five Gables and see if there was anything in this premonition of hers. She must meet Mallory again . . .

“You fool!” she apostrophized herself. “What on earth is meeting him going to do with it? How could you get money from him? . . .”

Would he lend it to her? She wondered if this could possibly happen and so solve the difficulty? She felt that she could ask him whereas she could not ask any other man, because he would understand and he would know that she had no ulterior motive for borrowing the money from him, only to pay off the home debts. And she could gradually pay him back as time passed.

“Of course. What a fool I am not to have thought of that before! I know it’s supposed to be all wrong and stupid and all that sort of thing to borrow money from a man, but I believe I could from him. The Victorians and the Edwardians would gasp at me; even Mother would be horrified. But honestly I think an honourable loan which I mean to pay back is much less dishonourable than owing money to tradespeople and that sort of thing.”

The fact that Mallory was only the briefest of acquaintances and not even a close friend did not somehow enter into the question. Hester felt as if she knew him extraordinarily well, knew some secret part of him that no one else knew. It was as if there was an understanding between them that had nothing to do with the fact that he was a man and she was a woman, neither had it anything to do with the ordinary conception of friendship. Yet, to Hester, that was just what explained it, it was the very essence of friendship.

“If the opportunity arises, at least I could broach the subject,” she concluded, in her own mind.

The words brought to memory what he had once said about opportunities arising and the seizing of them, and the remembrance carried with it a little vague tenderness. She smiled and knew that could he have been there, he would have smiled also, with amusement and understanding.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ON the Tuesday of Hester's absence from Five Gables, Eve suggested that she and Betty should drive round the country and see some of the local beauty spots. It was a lovely autumn morning strayed unexpectedly into November from the golden mid-October, and though most of the trees were stripped of their leaves and stretched their bare, yearning branches towards the pale sky, there was yet about them a certain graciousness and a beauty of line and proportion since no colour remained but the drab shades of bark and bole.

"That *would* be fun!" gushed Betty.

"It would pass the time away," Eve answered, with a politely concealed yawn.

She missed Hester; missed her quiet but cheerful personality in the house, her sunny good humour, her practical common sense and efficiency. Betty palled after a time; her easy laughter rang insincerely and her conversation was shallow and uninteresting.

"You and Hester aren't a bit alike, are you?" Eve remarked to her suddenly, and the girl smiled and positively preened herself.

"No, we aren't. We wouldn't suit our own particular selves if we were, do you think?"

"I suppose not." Eve was in one of her blunt, outspoken moods. "You know, you might copy her a bit more and not lose by it."

Betty opened her big eyes wide and stared.

"Oh! I see now, you weren't exactly complimenting me on being unlike my sister."

"No, I'm afraid I wasn't. It seems odd to find two members of a family so different."

"I think you are being rather rude, aren't you?" The girl was not quite sure how to take the frank almost insult, or what attitude to adopt in response.

"Perhaps I am." Eve relented. "You are a very pretty little thing, Betty, which of course you know very well. But here is a scrap of good advice for you, my dear. Pretty faces don't catch men like they used to do. Somehow the members of that sex have grown a little wiser with the years, though

there are probably still some exceptions. They ask for a certain amount of intelligence as well; not learning and being a too-clever intellectual but having brain of a sort.”

“Well, of course.”

Eve raised her brows and lowered them again.

“Of course, as you say. A clever woman can often appear much more intelligent and brainy than she really is; I mean ‘clever’ in the way that some of our sex can be without really possessing any brains. And they play their cleverness like a bridge player his trumps.”

Betty continued to stare. She wondered if Eve were often ‘taken like that’, and had she been Hester would have known that now and then Miss Jarvis became very introspective and loved to expatiate at length about human nature and men and things, although her knowledge of psychology was limited.

She went on now, chatting rather indiscriminately about this and that and creating in the mind of her listener the vague impression that pretty women were a drug on the market and beauty counted for very little; that brains mattered and good reading and studying human nature. But one needed to have a ‘good time’ as well, or incidentally one never could know how one’s fellow creatures would react under the stimulus of pleasure.

Presently they set out for their drive and after scouring the bare but lovely country found themselves at noon close to Green Acres.

“We may as well call on Mr. Mallory,” said Eve, offhandedly, and swung the car in through the gates.

They had not seen him since the Saturday evening before when he came in on his way to Gavin Towers for dinner, and Eve had made herself wait patiently for the days to pass. It was part of her plan, but the main features of this were changing rapidly as the hours went by.

“It’s madness to haunt him like this,” she told herself, fiercely, as she drove up the drive to the accompaniment of merry prattle from her companion. “He isn’t the type of man to be hunted, and yet, what else is there to do? He doesn’t *really* seek me out, not in a way that is important; and I’ve tried surprises and got nowhere. I’m just up against a blank wall with him. . . . One of these days I will try something really drastic; I know I’m working up to that and yet I am just a little afraid.”

She knew that, if only where she herself was concerned, things could not continue much longer in their present indefinite stage. She must make one last, desperate effort and then—if need be—acknowledge that he had defeated her. He *had* done so, in some ways, for his attraction had caught

her in its mesh, as a fly is caught in the web of a spider, and—perhaps the most vitally dangerous of all her symptoms—she had no desire to escape.

Her usual independence had deserted her; her pride was forgotten.

When Betty had left on Thursday for her week-end with Con's aunt, she would make her last big effort to win the wager. Did the wager matter so much now, . . . or did it?

Hester would still be away, for Eve had 'phoned that morning and urged the girl to stay till the end of the week.

Dr. Lawrence was getting on slowly and they had dispensed with the day nurse. Hester and her mother were taking the nursing between them, but in a day or two longer Mrs. Lawrence, with the little maid, and the two boys could carry on, though with difficulty. Then unexpected help offered itself.

"I might get back Thursday," said Hester, on the 'phone. "One of Father's sisters has written to say she is coming along to help us, which will be marvellous as she has had lots of nursing experience. It all depends if she can come this week or next. Mother says she can manage but I don't want to leave her too long, more or less alone."

"Of course not," agreed Eve. "But I'm quite all right here, so don't hurry back. I might drive over to the—er—Lintners on Thursday for a couple of nights, so I shan't expect you until about Saturday."

"That's awfully kind of you, Eve."

"I've got till Saturday," Eve told herself. "Between now and then I have to put myself and—Garnet Mallory to the test, and find out whether I have succeeded or—failed."

At that moment they came to the house, mellow and beautiful in the mid-day sun, yet with a curious air of aloofness as if the shell remained but the soul of the house had departed.

The girls climbed out and approached the stately front door, rang the bell and waited.

"Perhaps he's out," suggested Betty, brightly. "Such a heavenly morning!"

The door opened and Mallory's manservant was bowing his smooth, austere head to them.

"I regret Mr. Mallory is away from home," he said, in his even, expressionless voice. "He went to London yesterday, madam."

"Oh!" Eve nodded offhandedly. "Tell him we called in when he comes home."

"Certainly, madam."

“Has he gone for long?” chirped Betty.

“He left no instructions, madam,” the servant answered, urbanely. “We understand it is for a few days.”

Eve was already moving away towards the car.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, over her shoulder. “Come on, Betty.”

As she slid into the seat behind the wheel, she bit her underlip fiercely.

“Damn!” she said.

“It is disappointing, isn’t it?” Betty agreed, with a sigh.

“I was not referring to Mallory at all,” answered Eve, coldly. “I jabbed my ankle against the gear-lever as I got in the car.”

“Oh! . . . What rotten luck!”

Betty subsided into her seat and said no more.

“Liar!” she thought. “Of course you are bitterly disappointed but you wouldn’t admit it. . . . It’s deadly anyway.”

Aloud she presently ventured the suggestion that they called at The House on the way home to see how Drake was progressing.

“I ’phoned this morning,” Eve said, shortly. “He’s getting on very well. They don’t want visitors and the bell ringing and all that.”

“Oh!”

To herself, said Betty: “You bad-tempered cow! Because you don’t want to go there yourself and Jasper’s away, you don’t think of anyone else. . . . Perhaps I’ve had enough of Five Gables for the moment. Time I moved on to something else, only you never *know* in an establishment like this who is going to turn up next.”

Betty was right, for they had hardly risen from the lunch-table when some friends of Eve’s, motoring through the district, dropped in upon them, and an hilarious afternoon followed.

The party consisted of two girls and the brother of one; all three were light-hearted, wealthy, carefree young folk, just after Betty’s own heart.

“I suppose you’d call them Bright Young Things,” she said, to Eve, when the car drove the trio away in the early dusk and the two girls were again left to their own devices.

Eve’s gay inconsequence and laughing wit seemed to disappear with her departing guests. She became moody, cold, haughty.

“That phrase went out years ago,” she said, in that patronizing tone of voice that made Betty secretly furious. “You don’t call the young set Bright Young Things nowadays.”

"I'm sure I beg your pardon if I said the wrong thing," said Betty, offendedly.

"All right, don't get in a fluff about it." Eve yawned. "Gosh, I'm bored stiff."

She lit a cigarette and puffed fiercely at it, ignoring Betty's hurt, disgruntled expression.

"I think I'll look for a book in the library," said Betty, and tactfully effaced herself.

Eve walked to the windows of the lounge, jerked a curtain aside and stared out at the dark night, the sky slowly lightening as pale star followed pale star until the whole vast dome was faintly illuminated.

"Damn Garnet Mallory!" she said, forcefully, half-aloud. "Damn this sleepy country hole! I wish the Forsyths had never come this afternoon because it's so much duller now they have gone."

The telephone bell rang and she swung round and rushed out to answer it. A wrong number!

"Careless, stupid fools of people! Why can't they find out the right numbers before they 'phone? . . . I just feel in the mood to do something really mad and bad, but what's the good of shooting the moon without someone to help? . . . If Garnet hadn't gone to Town I'd have driven over to Green Acres, and if only I had a spot of luck there'd be a fog and I'd have to stay. Oh, heavens! What an idea! And if you can't get a fog in November, when *will* you get one?"

She stood on the hearthrug, staring down into the fire, and a smile slowly tilted her red lips.

"I'll pray for fog, pray like anything, and then perhaps there will be one between now and Saturday. Or storms or something. The wireless prophesied everything that *could* be bad weather, which is why I thought of fog, I expect. Cause and effect. Oh, boy! What fun! . . . If I were there staying, would Garnet come out all virtuous—or not? . . . And what do I *want* him to feel? . . . I believe I'm falling very—badly in love with him. Hell!"

The grandfather clock in the hall softly chimed seven, and Eve gave an excited laugh.

"I *know* he's not staying long in London. I can feel it in my bones, and the sort of way that butler fellow spoke. If he'd *known* Garnet had gone away for a long time, I don't believe he would have been so guarded and careful in his remarks. But how am I to *know* when he gets back? How? Without pestering the household or giving myself away?"

Ah! Betty. *She* could be made to ring up and give her name, and Mallory would think it was Hester. What a yell! Poor, darling Hester, who hadn't the guts to ring up a man or flirt with him.

"I bet he was bored with her at the dance," thought Eve, happy again as her active mind jumped from plan to plan, "I'll make Betty ring up tomorrow after tea."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

GARNET MALLORY let himself into his service flat and shut the door. He tossed his hat onto a chair in the narrow hall and hung up his beautifully tailored greatcoat.

A couple of envelopes stared at him from the neat little letter-box fastened in the door, and which had apparently arrived by the late afternoon post.

He carried them into the luxurious sitting-room where curtains had already been drawn and the cosy friendliness of the room received him.

With a sigh of content and satisfaction he leant a shoulder against the high narrow mantel above the electric fire and ripped open the letters.

One was an invitation to a dance early in December, and the other a receipted bill.

He dropped them both onto the writing-table that occupied an alcove near the fire, and then lit a cigarette, and strolled over to the elegant, inlaid rosewood cabinet that was actually a concealed cocktail-bar.

He poured himself a glass of sherry and carried it back to the fireplace. As he did so his glance fell casually upon the big chair where he usually sat, a notebook beside him while his active brain evolved ideas for a new book.

Invariably the nucleus of each novel was formed in the midst of a rush of gaiety in London or on the Continent, and he would get down innumerable notes. These he would then collect together, and take them to the quiet and restful seclusion of Green Acres.

The sight of the telephone reminded him that he had not got in touch with his country home at all that day. In fact the day had passed all too swiftly, with a call on his agent in the morning, a society wedding and the ensuing reception in the early afternoon, and now a sherry party from which he had just returned.

He took up the hand-microphone and put through a call to Green Acres, and a minute or two later was talking to his man at the other end of the line.

“No callers or messages, Tomlinson?” he enquired, after hearing that everything was in order and that Tiger, his Great Dane, had recovered from a threatened cold. “I meant to ring you last night but I’ve had a pretty busy time.”

“Miss Jarvis and a young lady called yesterday morning, sir.”

“Ah!” (With Hester Lawrence then, and he had missed her. A pity, for he found Hester vastly intriguing. Of Betty’s existence he had completely forgotten.)

“And Miss Lawrence rang up an hour ago, sir.”

“She *did*. She left a message, of course?”

“No, sir. Hearing you were still away from home she was very sorry and rang off, sir.”

“I see. Well, that’s all, Tomlinson.”

“Yes, sir. Begging your pardon, Mr. Mallory, sir, but we are looking forward to your return after your last very brief visit here, sir, and we all hope, particularly Mrs. Tomlinson and myself, sir, if you will excuse the liberty, that it won’t be long before you are back at Green Acres again.”

“I’m coming back tomorrow,” said Mallory, suddenly, and was himself surprised at his own unexpected decision. “I’ll be down for lunch.”

“We shall be most happy, sir,” and the expressionless voice became positively human in its satisfaction.

“Good night, Tomlinson.”

“Good night, sir. And thank you very much, sir.”

Mallory stood for a long time gazing unseeingly into the glowing bars of the electric fire.

What, in heaven’s name, had prompted him to decide so swiftly on a return to the depths of the country with November well launched and the season of frosts, fogs and tempests full upon them?

Then he laughed aloud as he crushed out the end of his cigarette in an ash-tray.

“I wonder what Hester Lawrence rang me up about?” he muttered. “What *would* a girl like that have to say on the telephone to a man like me, for I’m fairly certain Miss Eve Jarvis wouldn’t let her leave any name but Eve Jarvis; if the message were from her. . . I must find this out. . . . Hester Lawrence! Sounds like a character in an Edwardian novel! . . . Hester. Pretty, quaint little name.”

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Jerry Darton pushed open the door and entered his bedroom at the hotel where he and Jingo were staying.

He entered heavily, head bent, frowning brows drawn down over his eyes, and he looked particularly plain and big and angular to his wife as she swung round from the stool in front of her dressing-table.

“I didn’t think you’d be back yet, Jerry,” she said, brightly.

“Huh! Saw Caverns and had a yarn with him, and I didn’t think there was much point in hanging about and waiting for Morris,” he answered, shortly, referring to his agents.

He shot a quick glance at the girl in the bright pink dressing-gown, combing her hair and looking absurdly young and childish.

How sweet she was! Yet how far from him, since jealousy had reared a barrier he could not seem able to destroy. And now, as he returned from his interview with his literary agent, fuel had been added to the fire of his jealousy, for he had caught a glimpse of none other than Garnet Mallory himself passing in a taxi. He had been standing on the edge of the kerb waiting to cross over with a group of other pedestrians and Mallory had flashed past. There had been no mistaking the haughty, good-looking man, and Jerry had fumed inwardly, his ugly face becoming uglier in its grim wrath.

Had Jingo known that Mallory was in Town? Had they perhaps been seeing each other whilst he was at Caverns’? He tried to thrust aside these unworthy thoughts but in spite of himself they persisted.

Of course he was sure of her. Did they not love each other? He could trust her to the uttermost . . . or so he thought until a week ago and that unfortunate incident founded upon the knowledge that she often went to Green Acres, and that she saw much too much of the handsome ‘philanderer’, and Jerry had become rather pathetically aware of his own lack of attraction when compared with that other fellow.

Yet she had chosen him from amongst a good many other men when she gave him her love and took his and his name in return. He could remember the agonies of jealousy he had suffered over someone else who had wanted her, but she had smiled upon him, Jerry, and he had thought himself safe for a life of happiness, unlike so many of their contemporaries who changed partners much too often.

So he entered the hotel, feeling at odds with life altogether, furiously angry with himself and therefore by no means kindly towards Jingo.

She sensed something of the rage that seethed within him, his disappointment and bitterness and bad temper, but she had no idea of the cause.

“Haven’t things gone well, darling?” she ventured, as he dropped into an armchair and continued to say nothing.

“Yes, in a business way.” He lit a cigarette, fumbling with his lighter, wondering whether to dive straight into the subject which was worrying him or to wait.

Jingo finished her hair, passed a powder-puff over her face and stood up. She came slowly towards him, smiling, trying to ignore his ill-humour.

“You haven’t kissed me, Jerry.”

He looked up at her and for a moment his face was distorted.

“What have you been doing with yourself since we had tea together?” The words came out short, clipped, harsh.

She raised her eyebrows at him, and her colour faded a little. She had never imagined that Jerry could assume such moods; only in the last ten days had she learnt of this other side to the man she had married.

“Don’t speak to me like that. What should I have been doing? I went out to do a spot of shopping, because I’d laddered my last decent pair of stockings and I had to have some more. Evening ones, I mean. What was wrong in that?”

Her own voice assumed a tone of acerbity, and her small chin came up, her eyes glinting with spirit. No man was going to speak to her like that, whether he were her husband or no. And Jerry must learn, once and for all, that she was an independent woman, that he could not rule her comings and goings so that he made the shopping expedition to buy stockings seem a guilty exploit.

“You didn’t go to meet anybody, I suppose?”

He flung the words at her, yet his miserable eyes were some excuse for his harsh stupidity.

“What on earth are you getting at, Jerry? Are you going to become jealous and beastly like this all the time? What have I done that you should treat me like this? I never heard of anything so absurd.”

“I’ve just seen Mallory,” he blurted out. “He passed me in a taxi and I wondered . . .”

She went very white.

“I think you’re abominable. Isn’t that wretched business all over and done with? You do nothing but bring it up and sling it at me until—until you make me feel like running away from you.”

He rose to his feet suddenly.

“Do you feel like that, Jingo?”

“I certainly do. I don’t see why you should treat me like this; it’s all wrong. You’ve no right to talk as if you were my jailor, instead of my husband. I thought we loved each other.” Her voice quivered on the words, and involuntarily he took a step towards her, but she retreated from him.

“I’m sorry, Jingo. I’m just het up and miserable and I feel awful when I think of that bloke . . .”

“You know perfectly well he means nothing at all to me, and that I mean less than nothing to him. What are you making all this fuss about, Jerry? I haven’t given you any cause to be really jealous of him.”

“I know you haven’t, actually. But I can’t help thinking . . .”

“Your imagination is becoming a perfect curse. It gets you in all sorts of queer ways now that it never did before, and it’s making you cruel and unfair and altogether—altogether rotten. I hate you like this.”

“I hate myself, but what can I do about it? I can’t help feeling jealous and——”

“And distrusting me,” she interrupted him. “You’re a brute, Jerry, and you’ve no right to act like this. You make all this hooaha about nothing whatever and I have to bear the brunt of it. It’s damned unfair! You’re just spoiling everything, and you’re making our love sort of cheap.”

“I can’t help it, Jingo.”

“Of course you can help it. Pull yourself together. If you’re going on like this then I’ve finished. I can’t bear this sort of a life, with you jealous of every minute that I spend away from you, suspicious and not trusting me and all that. We Rodneys aren’t used to such treatment. We expect our husbands and wives to trust us.”

“That’s all right, up to a point. But you admitted yourself that you were foolish about Mallory, that he attracted you temporarily . . .”

“Only because I was lonely and had no one to go about with.”

“Exactly. And mightn’t you have been lonely between tea and now?”

She flung away from him.

“You’re impossible. It’s useless to argue with you.”

“Not at all. That’s just what a woman always says when she’s getting the worst of it.”

She turned round slowly and looked at him, very white.

“You think I’m getting the worst of it? Then that’s because you want to think it. I’m absolutely innocent, completely guiltless; I haven’t even thought of Mallory since we’ve been here in London. But now you come and thrust him down my throat and make me think about him. If you’re not

jolly careful I'll let myself think of him as much as I like, and you can go to hell."

"Jingo! Don't talk like that."

"You make me. You're behaving like a cave-man only without his charm."

"Thanks. I suppose in a moment you'll tell me that Mallory's darned handsome and I'm as plain as a pike-staff."

"Well, what of it? It's the truth, isn't it? Did I mind how plain you were when I married you? Of course I didn't. I loved you for yourself, not for your looks . . ."

"Loved, did you say? Don't you love me any longer?"

"Of course I do. My love isn't so short-lived as all that, but you make it very hard for me, and I don't see how any woman could feel gentle towards a man who treats her as you treat me. What's wrong with me, anyway? Why should you suddenly be so queer and suspicious?"

"I suppose it's because I love you so much."

"No, that's where you're wrong. It's because you don't love me enough."

"All men are jealous."

"Yes, so they may be. Or at least when they are given proper cause. If you imagined you had a little cause when we were at home, you haven't a grain to go upon here, and you know it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am, Jingo, but that doesn't alter my state of mind. I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself, and really in my heart of hearts I'm sure things are all right and I shouldn't feel like this. I do trust you, darling, but . . ."

"There can't be a 'but' in it if you really trust me."

She tore off her dressing-gown and flung it across her bed, picked up the frock which was carefully laid out and slid it over her head.

"At least we need not miss our dinner because we're quarrelling, I suppose. Or does your jealousy make you choke at the thought of eating with me?"

"Don't talk to me in that cold, aloof, beastly tone of voice."

"How do you expect me to talk to you? I think you're utterly impossible. You come in here and blame me for what I haven't done; you look at me with horrid suspicious eyes, and you tell me in one breath that you still love me and yet you don't trust me. To us Rodneys, love and trust go hand in hand. I dare say I shall look at a hundred other men between now and the

time I'm sixty or so, and think how handsome and attractive and charming they are, and like to talk to them and perhaps play golf with them or go round in the country in their car or look at their pewter; but it doesn't mean I love you any the less. Don't you ever expect to get a thrill out of looking at a beautiful woman, or talking to a pretty girl? Don't be so unhuman and stupid and Victorian. Although the Victorians weren't as bad as you are."

Jerry walked slowly across to the door of his dressing-room, hesitated a moment and then with a shrug of his powerful shoulders went through and closed it behind him.

For a long moment Jingo stood as he left her in the middle of the floor, her frock falling about her, then with an impatient movement she put her hands to the fasteners and began rapidly to hook the tiny hooks in their place.

"The beast! How can he behave like this? . . . My Jerry. He doesn't seem like the same man at all. He's changed completely, and what am I going to do about it? Will he ever come back to being the same man again? I thought he had since we came to London, but now I realize that he was never quite the dear old thing he always has been. What *am* I going to do about it?"

She completed her dressing, and then after a long indecisive wait she went to the door between their rooms and knocked. She turned the handle and went in, to see her husband sitting on the edge of his bed, in his shirt-sleeves, his coat tossed upon a chair. He had made no further move towards changing, and his ugly, nice face was still covered with that mask of hate, bitterness and misery.

She stood for a moment and looked at him, her hands hanging at her sides, and slowly he raised his head and stared at her.

"Jerry." She took a step towards him. "Aren't we being foolish and stupid to spoil our love over anything so futile as a mere man you've imagined interests me? You know the truth of it all. Can't you forget your silly jealousy and your temper? I'm trying so hard not to lose mine and so smash up everything. Why *should* we when we could be so happy together?"

He rose slowly, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's my fault, Jingo. But I just can't seem to sort things out in my mind."

"Perhaps we're being together too much. Perhaps I ought to go away from you because you've been working, and that's maybe muddled your mind up a bit." She was trying so hard to be wise and older than her years

and sensible, because she did not want to smash up the wonder of their love. It was all so futile and silly and pointless.

“Perhaps you are right,” he admitted, slowly. “Perhaps if I got away from things I should see them more easily. I reckon I’ll run down to Devonshire and have a couple of days at home. What will you do?”

She smiled wanly.

“Do you mean to tell me you’ll trust me away from you?”

He put out his hand as if she had struck him.

“Don’t, Jingo. I do trust you, my dear—at least I think I do.”

“That’s just it. You aren’t sure, and until you can be sure there’s not going to be any happiness for us. I’ve told you that I was a fool for a few brief moments but that’s all over and it never will come back again . . .”

“How can you be certain? It might.”

“Then it’s up to you to see that it doesn’t,” she said, with a sudden outburst of spirit. “You should make yourself so darned charming to me, so loving, so dear in every way that I don’t want to look at any other man. You see? It’s not only up to the woman but the man should make an effort to keep her, just as a woman should try to keep a man. Each should see that their partner hasn’t the opportunity of getting into mischief, if you like to put it that way. So it’s not only my fault, it’s yours for neglecting me and for not trying to make yourself enough to fill my life.”

He was silent for a moment, thinking over her words, then he nodded.

“You’re perfectly right. It is definitely a two-sided question. I suppose all partnerships are that. But most particularly a matrimonial one. All right then, Jingo,” and he moved across to the wardrobe and began taking out his evening kit. “I’ll go home tomorrow and think it all over, and I’ll tramp about the country a bit and try and get away from my writing and clear my mind. Then, when I can see sense, I’ll come back to you.”

“That’s right, Jerry. We aren’t going to break over nothing without making some effort to smooth things out. I love you; you know that.”

“And I love you, but how big is our love, each for each?”

She looked a little bleak, and twisted her hands together while her breath came more quickly.

“You aren’t doubting the lastingness of our love, are you, Jerry? You aren’t thinking that perhaps we shall be better apart for always?”

“I hardly know what I think.”

“Then stop thinking, for heaven’s sake. Wait until you get home, and there with your mother, who’s a dear soul, perhaps you’ll be able to sort

things out. At least tonight we have to dine together, or don't you want to come down to dinner?"

"Of course."

"I'll go on down to the lounge," and she went quickly away from the room.

He stood when she had gone, torn in his mind between the suggestion she had made and the obvious common sense of their separation. It was all so stupid and yet it seemed, at the same time, so utterly inevitable.

Was this how the break began in marriages which eventually were smashed on the rocks of incompatibility or some other such reason?

"Damn!" said Jerry, bitterly and succinctly. "Oh, damn and blast everything!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“IT seems to me that you two are a couple of fools,” said Jasper.

The brother and sister and Jerry Darton had met in a corner of the big lounge, at some distance from the various groups that occupied it in the first part of the morning. Most people were reading their newspapers and took no notice of the good-looking pair and the big plain but nice-looking young man who were engaged in such earnest conversation.

Jingo, dressed ready for the station, for she had asked Jasper to see her off to Wildmore, and he had come immediately to the hotel from his club in answer to her 'phone message, sat leaning forward in a deep chair, her eyes on the carpeted floor, her fingers twisting nervously round the strap of her handbag.

Her husband was perched on the arm of a chair near, trying to avoid seeing her, looking at Jasper as he stood with his back towards the room, his hands thrust negligently in his trouser pockets, glancing frowningly from one to the other and wondering what the deuce he could do to patch up what was evidently a rather 'sticky' situation.

“We've decided to go away from each other for a few days.” Jingo answered his remark in a voice much more high-pitched than her natural tone of speaking. “Nothing you say will make any difference, Jasper darling, so you may as well be silent. I didn't want Jerry to bother to come to the station with me because he's going straight off to Devonshire and his mother.”

“Humph! Sounds pretty sinister to me.” Jasper hunched his shoulders and turned his attention for a moment entirely upon his brother-in-law.

“Jerry, are you doing a wise thing? Heaven knows I don't want to interfere; I think we're the last family to do that sort of thing. We always leave each other to run his own affairs, and rightly. Most of the trouble in this world is made by interfering, well-meaning people. But it seems so damned silly, and sad too,” he added, his voice softening, “to see you two young things just about mucking up your lives.”

“We aren't,” interrupted Jingo, rather sharply. “We're going to get away from each other because you know how it is, Jasper, when one looks at a picture sometimes. One has to get at a certain distance to see the perspective, to get it into focus.”

Jasper nodded, straightened his shoulders and stiffened his tall straight figure.

“Well, perhaps you’re right. It certainly does one good sometimes to get away from some people, but I hadn’t thought that would apply to you two. However, that was only my own private opinion. If you’re ready, Jingo, we’d better get a move on, or we’ll miss the train.”

The young couple rose instantly to their feet and faced each other, and with a rather surprised, half-amused glance at them and a shrug, Jasper turned away. Was this all the ‘good-bye’ they were going to say? Apparently so, for they merely made a cool, rather nervous remark each, and moved after him across the lounge to the big hall outside, where Jingo’s cases were ready to be taken with her to the taxi Jasper had sent the commissionaire to fetch.

A moment later she had left Jerry and was rolling along the London streets beside her brother.

They did not say much and the journey was only a brief one. Arriving at the station, Jasper bought her some newspapers and magazines and found a corner seat for her in a first-class compartment with only one other woman for companion.

There was no time to spare and the train was due to leave the station almost as soon as Jingo was comfortably settled.

“I don’t mean to butt in,” said Jasper, as the doors were shut and the air was suddenly filled with the flurry of imminent departure, the train seeming to quiver in anticipation as the last passenger was hustled into his seat. “But handle this thing carefully, won’t you, Jingo? So much depends on it, because you’re both so young.”

“Isn’t that an advantage?”

“In a way. But you young things haven’t the level-headed balance of people ten years your senior.”

A flicker of fun passed over the girl’s pale face.

“Thank you, Grandpa. I’ll remember your good advice,” she said flippantly, then the train was moving and she had to wave her hand as Jasper’s figure retreated until presently she had left him behind.

She settled herself more comfortably, opened a magazine, more as a means of self-defence than for any other reason, since she could not forget the miserable, hurt, puzzled look upon Jerry’s face as they took their brief, extraordinary farewell of each other.

But it was better so, she told herself firmly. It was much better that they should get away from each other and presently things would adjust themselves. Or did things ever adjust themselves?

Of course. Was it not one of the oldest and wisest adages that time healed wounds, smoothed over rough places, taught perspective, adjusted focus . . . oh, a hundred and one things. Time was the most wonderful thing, if that were the case. But Jingo, in spite of trying to be wise, was also a little sceptic and more than a little afraid.

She had so much in her life; she had thought herself the luckiest girl in the world with everything that she could possibly desire. Perhaps she had taken it too much for granted which is so often the way of things, but everything seemed to have dropped into her lap.

“Except the one thing that really matters,” she told herself, “and that is keeping the things that Fate has given me. . . . Is it my fault or what is the reason? . . .”

She found herself thinking entirely of Jerry, of the happy moments they had known together, of hours of lovely companionship; she thought of his rugged, plain but so lovable face and found that it held a beauty for her that all the handsome looks and charming personalities of other men could never give her. Mallory was charming; he seemed to possess all those attributes that go to make up the perfect man, and yet she knew how most imperfect he was, in character at least. Or should she say, at most?

He possessed the amazing gift of words, of being able to express this and that thought or emotion so that it was a delight to listen to him. Jerry was not gifted that way, but perhaps she should have remembered that some of those people who think the most and feel the deepest are invariably the most inarticulate.

But she hadn't resented him, hadn't found fault with him. It was he himself who found fault with the whole of their life at the moment, of her outlook, of everything to do with her, apparently.

She moved restlessly and a magazine slipped from her knee to the floor, sliding across the carriage towards the lady in the opposite corner.

She was a slim, tired-looking woman in the middle forties, but her smile as she bent to pick up the paper and return it to Jingo, was one of the most beautiful that the girl had ever seen.

“Thank you so much,” Jingo said, smiling back.

“They have such slippery covers, haven't they?” said the other traveller.

She was beautifully dressed, exquisitely groomed and finished, but her eyes were the saddest thing Jingo thought she had ever seen, just as her

smile was the loveliest.

But presently the girl forgot her companion, as the train carried her out of London and into the country and she caught a glimpse of the morning sunshine upon the fields and upon the wooded hills. Yet the beauty all about her brought no satisfaction; she was seized with a gnawing and intolerable hunger, something unnameable and inexplicable, which was like a searing flame within her and would not be quenched, and she knew that it was her loneliness for Jerry, and her desperate disappointment at the way Fate was working and forcing them apart.

It wasn't fair that Garnet Mallory should have had the power, although indirectly and certainly without intention, of so altering the smooth surface of Jingo's life. Bitterly she resented this, and yet at the same time could not blame the man. Although it only carried out what she and her family had already heard about him, and what Jasper believed so implicitly even if his family did not, that Mallory was in short, a 'rotter'.

It was a curious and rather frightening thought, the power that some people had upon the lives of others. Was it that Fate happened to choose them to be instruments for its purpose or was there no such thing as an actual Fate controlling the lives of everybody, the whole vast cosmic world spread over the colossal area of the earth? Life was made up of strength and weakness, of extraordinary powers to do this and that. God has made us marvellously, thought Jingo, or perhaps we were not made by some Supreme Being but just occurred,—'evolved', that was the word, wasn't it?—out of nothingness into millions of individual entities.

Perhaps it mattered the way in which one stood up against the various powers in the earth,—or perhaps it did not!—the power of love and hate, of courage and cowardice, of facing trouble, of caring for others, unselfishness, all the hundred and one qualities that made up character. Character! That was the most vital thing in the whole of existence. Character, . . . the one definite and absolute thing that is entirely our own, and which we shall take with us when we die; that curiously personal possession, so individual, so ephemeral and yet so lasting, that makes each one of us our own special self.

We go on living, building about ourselves the house which we carry with us, almost as a snail carries its home upon its back. We weave a web and struggle along in the making of it, building up the "fatal fabric of character. We watch the process in our consciousness". And as we build, so the experiences we face, the lessons we learn, go towards the making of this very perfect—yet in our hands, imperfect—thing.

Jasper Rodney had rung up The House, so Jingo found the big family car waiting for her when the train at last drew into the station of Wildmore.

“Good-bye,” said the woman in the corner, with her lovely smile. “I would like to have talked to you but you looked as if you wanted to be alone with your thoughts.”

Jingo flashed a smile back at her, with a little surprise in her eyes.

“But how nice of you! I should like to have talked, for my thoughts were not too pleasant company.”

“It helps sometimes, just when one is a ship passing in the night, as it were. So good-bye, and I should like to wish you everything of the best, for you look too young to be so troubled.”

“I suppose we all get it some time or other. Good-bye, and thank you so much.”

Jingo never saw the woman again but she remembered her, and something about her eyes and patient, suffering mouth, made the girl ashamed that she was so self-centred, so surrounded in her mind with her own affairs that she had not realized the presence of this woman who might have been glad to talk.

“How selfish one can be!” Jingo said to herself, as she took her seat in the family car. “Trouble ought to make one just the reverse, and more eager to understand other people and help them. But I don’t know that it does always. Is that because I’m young? . . . Oh, curse this youth, that everybody thinks so wonderful. I believe I’d much rather be in the thirties. Things couldn’t hurt one so much surely.”

Of course they could but Jingo was too young to realize that. No one at her age can picture his or her life in ten or twenty years’ time, or appreciate that they won’t feel so very different, that they will still yearn for those things which they have missed, when their young days are slipping behind them, the fountain of youth becoming dry so that goldfish no longer dart amongst the scented spray.

To her it seemed an incredible length of years between twenty and thirty, and again into the forties; and yet she would like to have Combined the experience that she would then know with that abundant, inconsequent vitality which is the prerogative of the very young.

She found Mrs. Rodney waiting for her, with the news that Drake was very much better but still had to be kept quiet and see no visitors, except the family.

No reference was made to Jerry until coffee had been brought to the girl, and she had relaxed by the sitting-room fire, her hat tossed on to a chair, and

a cigarette between her lips.

“Does this mean that things aren’t right between you and Jerry after all?” asked her mother then, gently.

“We thought it was wiser to get away from each other for a little while,” answered Jingo, carefully. “We’ve been together ever since we were married, and never separated even for a night. Don’t you think it’s wise Mother?”

“Yes, my dear. You know your own affairs best and often it is better to separate for a short time. But don’t let it be for too long. Remember that men are very human creatures, and very much little boys; not that they want you to think them that and would be rather ashamed that you should. Yet the fact remains. You must handle them tactfully, gently, understandingly. You have to remember that they are quite different from us, that their mentality is something absolutely apart from our own.”

“I know. It does take some crediting, but I thought I was being rather wise having listened to your advice, Mother dear. You see, you’ve always brought us up not to be fools about men.”

She looked across the room and out through the windows where the greyness of the day had slid away into the warmth of noon, and the world was flooded with light, the pale sky vaguely blue as it stretched widely above the bare trees. Her eyes rested upon the undemanding sunshine, and she thought how wonderful and peaceful and aloof, how sexless, it was, just like the moon trailing its silver glory across the night. Life was so difficult, so hurrying and bustling and restless, whereas nature presented an eternal contrast in its illimitable graciousness and quiet, and the slow and yet unceasing movement of progression, development, the passing from one season to another. It never stopped, it never stayed, yet it never rushed nor worried nor flustered. And the ultimate result never failed.

“I think I ought to have some work to do or something definite. The days are so long and I am such a useless person,” said Jingo at last, a little sadly.

“My dear, the best thing that could happen to you,” said her mother, firmly, “is to have a baby. That would fill up your time and your thoughts and you would have no wasted hours, no feeling that you were living in vain or needed a job of work to do.”

The girl stared thoughtfully into the fire and said nothing. Perhaps the same idea had passed through her own mind, but not even to her mother could she express quite those innermost, secret imaginings.

Mrs. Rodney gave her daughter a quick glance, frowned a little, and then smiled.

“Perhaps that is what is wrong with you. It often makes women restless and nervy and disturbed. But don’t tell me if you’d rather not, Jingo.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, darling.” She jumped to her feet quickly. “I don’t think I want anything like that to happen to me. Besides, . . . Jerry used to be so kind and now he isn’t any longer. And that complicates matters so.”

“I don’t think so at all. I think it would just simplify the whole situation, smooth out the troubles and worries which you two young people have so stupidly brought upon yourselves.”

“It’s Fate, Mother darling, that seems to have messed things up for us.”

“Don’t you believe it. A few straight words and a swallowing of pride on both sides and everything would be right. Jerry’s a fool, and I think you’re a little bit of one yourself, dearest. I’m being awfully frank with you and not thinking about being tactful, so you must understand what I say and take it in the spirit in which I mean it.”

“I will. I’m not taking offence, but trying to be wise . . .”

“Are you?” Mrs. Rodney smiled whimsically. “Quaint sort of wisdom, my dear, but never mind that. I’m talking to you as one woman to another not necessarily as mother to daughter, because I think really you have the good sense to put things right between you and Jerry. It’s gone on long enough, but this move of yours should be the final and decisive one. Leave him for a couple of days and then recall him. Surely, Jingo, that is what you would wish to do yourself? Now,” putting up a hand as Jingo’s lips pouted doubtfully, “I know you’re going to talk about pride, but pride of that sort doesn’t come into the question of love.”

“We’ll leave it then for a couple of days as you say, Mother mine, and then perhaps if I’m still doubtful in my mind you’ll advise me again. I do want to be sensible and—I do love Jerry enormously.”

“He loves you. Now we won’t talk about it any more but we’ll just forget his existence. You said he wasn’t kind but he would be; all men are cruel in streaks. They can’t help it, it’s their nature and one has to accept it as that and try to understand the psychological foundation which is the cause of such an effect. . . . More coffee, darling?”

So few men know how to be really kind to a woman, so very few. They do not appreciate the fact that the genuine tender kindness of a man who loves a woman means more to that particular woman than the charm of a so-called perfect lover, his delightful phrases and the graceful way he can kiss

her hand. Women do not want their hands kissed; they want their hearts to be held tenderly so that they are not bruised, for a bruised heart does not heal quickly and a kiss upon the hand is more easily forgotten.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“WELL, good-bye, Betty, and all the best of luck. I hope the old lady will approve of you and that you will land the job.”

Eve nodded friendly to her secretary's sister, whom she was just seeing off at the junction for her journey north.

Betty was very excited; not so much at the prospect of the job itself which lay ahead of her but at the change to another place, where she might meet new people. She loved changes. There was always the element of surprise and the unexpected about them; one never knew whom one might meet round another corner or in a fresh house, and Betty was determinedly optimistic. She was sure that good things lay in store for her, waiting only for her to stretch out her hands and grasp them. She forgot that to get a great deal out of life one must also give a great deal; life gives back what one puts into it, for personal endeavour is what counts most, and the unselfish considering of other people's points of view and other people's necessities beside one's own.

Eve stood back as the guard came along the platform, unfurling his green flag.

“Bye, bye,” cried Betty, excitedly. “And thanks most awfully for all your kindness.”

These last words were merely an afterthought, for after all she wanted to be able to come back to Five Gables, and a few words of appreciation were never wasted.

“That's all right,” Eve called back, and waving a casual hand turned and wandered out to her car, waiting amidst a group of other cars in the big yard outside the station.

She drove back to Five Gables, threading her way through the miles of country, and singing half under her breath, with sudden outbursts aloud, because she was so glad at last to be alone.

This was a new attitude for her for she hated not to have some of her friends around her, but today was the day planned to have important results, and fate seemed to be playing into her hands.

Quite by chance at breakfast that morning she had found from the parlourmaid that Garnet Mallory was expected home some time that

morning. It had all happened in a very roundabout way and Eve was not at all sure how the news had filtered through, except that it was something to do with the postman whose brother delivered the letters at Green Acres and who was 'walking out' with Eve's housemaid.

How the news spread from one to the other and in such a short time the girl had not the slightest conception, but in the country news travels on apparently invisible wings, and even miles in between houses is no deterrent for knowing what happens there. Perhaps there had been a telephone message which someone had overheard, or perhaps a telegram passing through the post-office.

Eve shrugged her shoulders, for she did not mind how people knew things so long as she was able to find out anything that particularly interested her. And the fact that Mallory was to come home today interested her vastly.

She had Thursday and Friday to herself for Hester would not be back until Saturday.

"Love stepped right in and stole my heart away," she sang, lustily, and then chuckled at the words. They seemed curiously applicable. Fateful even.

"I never dreamed that I should fall in love and certainly not with a man like Mallory," she thought. "Yet I don't see why not. The only thing is that I didn't *want* to. I would so like to have remained cold and aloof, and completely immune to his charm. But I suppose things always happen that way. Those you want to fall in love with, you can't; and vice versa."

She arrived home, left the car in the drive, and went singing into the house.

The sun shone warmly upon the cold earth and the mist of early morning had dispersed itself some time ago, but Eve's heart was joyful. With such a cold spell following the rain of the day before there was every possibility of the foggy elements which she craved for and which were necessary for the success of her scheme.

It was a very simple little plan, but she was wise enough to know that simplicity invariably won the day. Anything too complicated only invited further complications and therefore eventual failure.

The parlourmaid met her in the hall.

"Miss Lawrence rang up, Miss Eve," she said. "But she wouldn't leave a message as you were out."

"That was just to speak to her sister or to enquire about her going away, I expect," said Eve, offhandedly.

“She said it didn’t matter when I told her you had gone to the station, madam.”

“That’s all right.”

Eve wandered into the exotic lounge, paused for a moment to look out through the window at the sun-flecked garden, with its bare trees, its close-cropped, cold lawns, and the empty flower-beds of winter. She gave a little shiver, and moved across to the fireside. Thank heaven for a fire. And a coal and wood fire was so much more alive than gas or electricity, however much modern cleverness had produced almost a replica of the natural fire. You couldn’t poke it; you couldn’t make it up and put a new log upon it and watch the flames leaping round the newly burning wood, the sap sizzling as it oozed out and dripped upon the glowing embers beneath. It was so friendly and warm and comforting always.

Eve ate her solitary luncheon and wished that the hours would pass more quickly. How they dragged when one wanted them to pass, and conversely how they fled when one wanted to delay the swiftly passing moments!

A new batch of library books had arrived from Harrods that morning so now she unpacked them, selected one which looked interesting, and stretching herself upon the couch with a cigarette in her mouth, prepared to pass away the afternoon as best she might, with now and then a little smile of inner amusement, and now and then a vague inward tremor, not exactly of fear, but a certain doubt as to whether she would be able to be successful in the little scheme she had evolved.

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Maud, the parlourmaid, brought in her tea, and set it on a low table beside her near the fire.

“Shall I draw the curtains now, madam?”

“Yes, you might as well,” said Eve, and laid aside her book. “What’s the weather like?” she added, carelessly.

“It’s turning into a horrible evening, Miss Eve,” said Maud, as she drew the curtains across the windows and shut out the grey, bleak afternoon. “There’s a fog coming up.”

“Oh dear, what a nuisance!” Eve poured out her first cup of tea with elaborate concentration. “I’ve got to go out afterwards too.”

“It’s very dangerous in the country in fog, isn’t it, madam?” Maud said conversationally, as she finished arranging the last curtain. “You hear of so many accidents.”

“Yes, it’s not pleasant. However, engagements have to be kept.”

The door closed quietly upon the maid, and Eve sat very still for a moment, staring into the fire.

The fog she had prayed for had arrived, and for a moment she was almost afraid. Should she go on with her scheme, or should she ‘scrap’ it.

With a little shiver she turned to her tea, and thrust the other matter momentarily aside. Of all things she hoped she was not a coward. And what she had planned to do, that she would see through to the bitter end.

Only she hoped the end would be anything but bitter.

Part of the attraction of the whole business was the uncertainty; she hadn’t the least idea how Mallory would respond to her advances, or how he would react in the circumstances into which she was going to thrust him. It was all terribly thrilling.

She nibbled a macaroon and wondered how soon she had better launch herself upon her adventure. Immediately perhaps, because when she drew near to his house she could go slowly, or even wait a while before she became ‘lost’ in the fog.

Being found was going to be great fun, she was sure; and yet deep within herself she knew a faint cold feeling of vague uncertainty and dread.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

GARNET MALLORY arrived at Green Acres in time for lunch on that auspicious Thursday, and when he rose from the table and went into his sitting-room he paused for a long moment by the telephone. He eyed it doubtfully, dubiously; put out a hand to take the microphone from its cradle, and then thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and turned away.

He had rushed back from London with some vague idea of instantly ringing Hester up, but now that the time had arrived when he could do so, he hesitated.

Wasn't he rather a fool? What would she think if he rang?

He strolled across to the fire and stood gazing down into the glowing embers, and cursed himself for more than a fool. And he had sworn that women should never make a game of him. But Hester had not consciously done so; it was only his thoughts and himself who were creating this ridiculous situation.

Yet he had not been able to get her out of his mind. She was so different from other women, so undemanding, so simple and gentle, so utterly unlike his conception of her sex.

Perhaps his mother had seemed like that when she married his father, but that had not prevented her acting as other women acted. Of course they were all the same fundamentally, and underneath that sweet, strange, friendly and frank mask—if mask it were—no doubt Hester Lawrence was just like all the others. He must think so; he must prove that she was the same so that he could be true to his conviction, and might continue to uphold the 'faith' that had been his since boyhood.

With an impatient gesture he strode out of the room, and five minutes later was tramping down the drive, his face to the open moorland, his brows drawn frowningly down over his eyes, and his mind in a turmoil.

At his heels his dogs followed him, but even they could not for the moment supply that strange want, that unusual aching need of which he was conscious.

He walked until the early dusk with its threat of fog began to close down over the world, and then retraced his steps homeward. The fog lay thickly

about the countryside as he entered his gates, with patches of clearer visibility, and in the hollows a density that could only be pierced for a matter of about ten to fifteen yards.

It wouldn't be pleasant motoring today, and he felt quite glad to find himself at home again, with the leaping flames from his log fire to welcome him and the belated tea waiting beside it.

"Going to be a nasty night, Tomlinson," he said, as his man brought in the old silver teapot and set it down on the gate-leg table.

"Yes, sir. One of those real nasty November fogs coming up."

So Eve and her parlourmaid, Garnet and his manservant, all commented on the evening and the weather, each unconscious of the events of the approaching hours, each expecting something very different from that which actually happened. Eve knew she was in for an adventure; and Garnet looked forward to an evening by himself because he had not the inclination to ring up any of his friends, but was seized with a mood for solitude. A solitude, moreover, that was peculiarly disagreeable to him.

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Hester Lawrence had rung up her employer that morning, not as Eve had imagined to wish Betty 'good-bye' or to give her any message on her departure to the north and the hoped-for job, but to tell Eve that Dr. Lawrence was considerably better and she really was not needed at home any longer. Her aunt had arrived the afternoon before and Hester was quite at liberty to resume her work and come back to Five Gables.

When she discovered that Eve had gone to the station with Betty, she decided that there was no point in leaving a message and that she would just come back of her own accord. She was sure that Eve would be delighted to have her, since she had done this on previous occasions, returning a day earlier than she was expected, and Eve had met her with open arms.

"I hate being alone," Eve always said. "I love to have plenty of people round me. I like the house to be well-staffed, and I hate it when you're not here, Hester darling. You make everything go so smoothly and well, and nothing goes wrong. I quite dread the time when your holidays are due to you."

So Hester, with the feeling that not only was she doing Eve a kindness but was herself glad to come back, caught an afternoon train which would bring her to Wildmore about half past five. She would then take a taxi

because she did not want to bother Eve to meet her, and would be 'home' at Five Gables by six, if the train were punctual.

Nothing would have been further from her thoughts than the fact that she might be unwelcome; she never dreamed that Eve had made plans which were based almost entirely on the assumption that Hester would still be away and so could not complicate matters for her.

However, the slowly thickening fog delayed the train and it was some time after six o'clock before it ran into the station at Wildmore.

"There's a nasty fog coming along, miss," said the driver of one of the two antiquated taxis standing outside the station. "We'd better push along quick if we don't want to get caught in it."

Consequently the journey was a slow one and instead of taking the usual ten to fifteen minutes, it was after half past six before Hester alighted at the door of Five Gables, paid and dismissed the man, and rang the bell.

The heavy oak door with its nail-studded surface was like a door leading to home, for Hester loved being at Five Gables, even if some of the rooms and furnishings jarred upon her. It was just that she wasn't modern enough, she supposed; the general atmosphere of the place, and her life under its roof, were just what she loved, and she was glad to be back.

Besides, during the next few days she had to solve the problem of her mother's finances, and try to borrow from somebody, or think of some other plan by means of which she could meet those outstanding bills.

Maud was surprised to see her when she opened the door.

"Oh, Miss Lawrence!" she said. "Miss Eve doesn't expect you, does she?"

"No. I was going to tell her this morning on the 'phone and then as she was out I didn't bother. I thought she'd be glad to see me in any case." Hester stepped into the hall and the door was closed upon the nasty night outside.

"She's gone out, miss," said Maud. "It's not a very nice night for motoring either, is it?"

"It's foul, Maud. Do you know where Miss Eve has gone?"

"No, Miss Lawrence, I don't know at all. She just said she had an engagement to keep and what horrid weather it was to go out in, but she went, and she seemed rather excited, I thought. So I expect it's something nice."

"I expect so," said Hester, non-committally, and allowed the maid to take her case upstairs. She followed her rather more slowly, wondering what

engagement could have taken Eve out on such a night, knowing how the girl hated to drive in fog, as all motorists do.

She cast off her hat and coat, and when Maud suggested “a nice hot cup of tea”, agreed that it would be delightful, so she came down quickly to the lounge, for there was no fire in the library which was so essentially her room.

She stood holding her fingers to the blaze, wondering without very great interest where her employer had gone, until suddenly, as if an intuition had lit a small spark in her brain, the thought of Garnet Mallory flashed across her mind. Surely Eve had not gone to Green Acres! That would be such an extraordinary move. She had already bearded the lion in his den, as it were, without very great success, although by so doing she had instigated the friendship which had followed.

But on a night like this with the fog deepening all the time so that she could not really hope to return . . .

Hester stiffened in every limb. Was *that* what Eve intended to do?

Maud brought in the tray of tea, chatted a little and then went away again, leaving Hester with her disturbing thoughts.

What ought she to do in circumstances like these? Or would Eve be furious with her if she did anything? Then again there was always the supposition that, if Eve were held up anywhere, she would blame Hester for not finding out and helping her.

But there was the telephone and Eve could ring her if she wanted to. . . . Of course not, how stupid! She would not know that Hester was home! So she could not ring and give her secretary orders, although she would no doubt tell the maids if she were stranded anywhere.

Hester chased the subject round and round in her mind, unable to come to any definite conclusion.

She felt that, to salve her conscience she was responsible in part for Eve, though her employer would be the last to say so unless it suited her—and it was really up to her since she had returned unexpectedly to find out if Eve needed her.

She might get into difficulties, but then, was she not old enough to arrange her own way out? She might be furious if Hester interfered.

“I don’t know what to do,” thought the girl, sinking down on to the corner of the couch, drinking her tea thoughtfully. “Actually I can’t do anything for a time. I must allow her to fulfil this engagement whatever it is, and give her a chance of getting back normally. Probably she’s gone over to The House to see the Rodneys.”

This was a supposition worth investigating. Presently she could ring them up and enquire how Drake was progressing and mention that she had come home, in case Eve should be there.

She drank her tea, smoked one cigarette, and then finally, since it was past seven o'clock, made her way to the telephone outside, and rang up the Rodneys' house.

No, Eve was not there, had not been invited and they were not expecting her. Drake was better, but must be kept very quiet for a long time so they were not asking any friends over until he was really fit to see them. It was nice to hear that Hester was back at Five Gables again and how was her father?

After talking to Mrs. Rodney for some little while, Hester rang off, and then sat on by the telephone-table, gazing unseeingly at the decorative instrument and wondering whether she should make some other move now, or remain passive.

"I wish I knew what was *right* to do," she muttered. "It's so difficult sometimes to be able to tell what is one's duty and what would be, as Eve would call it, overstepping the mark. I expect she's all right and I'd better wait."

She found a pile of letters waiting on her desk in the library for her attention, and ran through them quickly, putting them aside to be dealt with on the morrow, then changed her frock for a simple long-sleeved, long-skirted black crêpe that gave a very sweet dignity to her slim, brief height.

By this time it was very nearly eight o'clock and there was still no sign of Eve.

"But you expected her back for dinner, didn't you, Maud?" she questioned the parlourmaid.

"Oh yes, Miss Lawrence. She never said a word about staying out, and dinner was all planned for her."

"She must have been held up by the fog, but it's strange that she hasn't telephoned."

It certainly seemed very curious that Eve should go out, planning to return for her evening meal, and not 'phone to say that she would not be back, after all. So Hester decided she must wait, at any rate for a little while, although as Maud suggested, the dinner would no doubt be ruined. At half past eight Hester decided to have her meal, and she ate it in solitary state, her worry about Eve increasing as the moments passed. When nine o'clock came and there was still no message from her, she rang up two of the houses

within reasonable reach where Eve might have called, but she had not visited either of them.

Now definitely worried, Hester wondered what on earth she should do next. She came to the idea of ringing up Green Acres, because if Eve was not there and she had no intention of going there, she might be rather glad if Hester should enrol Garnet Mallory's help in finding the missing girl.

But just as the clock pointed to quarter past nine, the telephone bell rang.

Hester ran to reach it, took up the receiver and called "Hello!" breathlessly through the 'phone.

"Is that Hester Lawrence?" said a man's voice from the other end, and her heart stood still. "I understood that you were still away."

"I came back this evening. Who is that speaking?"

"Garnet Mallory." A low laugh came along the line to her ears. "Didn't you know?"

"I suspected, but I wasn't sure." An idea flashed through Hester's mind and she quickly put it into words. "Did you want Eve?"

"No, Eve Jarvis is here with me at the moment."

"With you! I'm so relieved, because I was getting awfully worried about her."

"I think you still need to be. It's a terrible night and Miss Jarvis is not at all keen to brave the weather. Personally I can't blame her. However, my car is bringing her home in a few moments, and I rang up to tell her household that she was safe. It was an inspiration that moved me, for I had a kind of feeling that I must ring up and I might have known that you would answer, Hester, mightn't I?"

"He's baiting me," thought Hester, but she was so relieved to know where Eve was on such a night that she ignored his words, except to say:

"You love mocking people, don't you, Mr. Mallory? But I'm awfully glad to know that Eve is safe, and I will be waiting for her."

"Wait a minute. Now that I know you are there I have something else to say to you." The man's mind had been working swiftly as he held the telephone. "I don't think I will let Eve come home after all."

"Not let her come home, what do you mean?"

"Just exactly that. Unless you have a suggestion to make that would persuade me to let her go."

"Me make a suggestion! I don't think I quite understand you."

"You're a great friend of Eve's, I believe, and she has done a lot for you. Would you do anything for her?"

“Of course I would. Still I don’t get you.”

“You will in a moment. I should imagine that friendship meant a tremendous lot to you, self-sacrifice and all the rest of it. Am I right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Then I’m going to put you to the test. I shall send my car but without Eve, and you must come back in it. Then my second chauffeur shall drive her back in her car, if you decide to stay with me in her place. Do you understand me now?”

There was a long, throbbing silence from Hester’s end of the line.

“You heard what I said?” His voice sounded peremptory, partly because he was exerting himself to control the excitement that leapt within him, a strange excitement such as he had not felt for years and which no one before had been able to arouse within him. “Are you still there, Hester?”

“Yes, I’m trying to realize what you said.”

“I suggest that you come in Eve’s place but I hold her hostage until you arrive. Is that quite clear?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

“You quite understand the position, don’t you, Hester?”

How cold and implacable his voice sounded; the girl had no idea of the leaping passion beneath the words, nor the battle that was being fought between the two vital sides of the man’s character.

He had the opportunity now of proving that of which he could not be sure, of testing Hester’s character and finding out whether she was the same as all other women or absolutely different, the exception perhaps to prove the rule.

“Peters will leave Green Acres within five minutes,” the cold voice informed her. “He may take some little time to cover the distance but you will hold yourself in readiness to return, unless you decide that friendship isn’t worth it.”

“But Eve?” In spite of herself the words were wrested from Hester. “What will she think about this? What does she want me to do?”

“It does not rest with Eve, but with yourself. Perhaps you know that she won’t mind staying, in fact I think she has no objection at all. The matter actually lies entirely in your hands.”

“So that I may not be doing a friendly act after all.”

“You will certainly be doing a friendly act. But there again I must leave the matter in your hands to decide as you think fit.”

Without another word he rang off, and Hester was left leaning against the telephone-table, extraordinarily weak in every limb, her knees shaking under her.

There seemed no alternative. Because she was fond of Eve, because she owed her so much for all that the girl had done for her in the past years, she must save her from her own folly. Again she was seized with a sense of her responsibility towards her employer, besides the feeling of responsibility towards her as a friend.

The only doubtful point was how Eve would look upon any action she might take.

Her disturbed thoughts were interrupted by the repeated ringing of the telephone bell. After only the briefest hesitation, Hester lifted the receiver, wondering whose voice and what she would hear along the line.

It was Eve speaking to her, agitatedly, and in a strangely shrill, hurried voice.

“Is that you, Hester? I don’t know what nonsense Garnet Mallory has been saying to you over the telephone, but he refuses to let me leave the house. He says he’s asked you to come along, and for heaven’s sake, come. The man has insulted me beyond measure, the beast! And he says he won’t let me go until you come over to Green Acres. Thank God, you’ve come back!”

Hester was utterly dumbfounded at this complete change of front on Eve’s part. Or was it that she was acting a part in front of Mallory?

“I’ll come directly Mr. Mallory’s car arrives to fetch me,” she said. “You’re all right, aren’t you, Eve?”

“Can’t talk now. But do hurry. I can hear him coming back, so there isn’t time to say any more. He knows I’m ringing you though, and he’s just laughing about it.”

The click of the receiver came before Hester could say any more, and she turned away even more mystified than ever at what could have been taking place at Green Acres.

She went to her room to get a thick coat and tied a scarf round her hair for warmth, guessing that Mallory’s efficient chauffeur would not take very long to reach the house, and a glimpse out of the window showed her that the fog had lifted considerably. It was to be hoped that it was even better in the vicinity of Little Credleton.

Yet Hester remained torn in two directions, between fear because there was something in Mallory’s voice that she had never heard before in his or any other man’s; a certain excitement because of the unexpected turn in the

events of the evening; a relief to know that Eve was safe, and bewilderment at the change in Eve's attitude. All these feelings mingled together, but chief amongst them was a certain secret pleasure at the thought that soon she would see Garnet again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

EVE had set out in her car according to plan, and though progress was necessarily very slow owing to the fog, there were strips of country where it was not at all dense and she found herself near Mallory's small estate with the clock on the dashboard only pointing to six.

Surely it was too early to arrive at his house with any hope of staying for a length of time, and the fog round about the roads just here was hardly dense enough to justify the fact that she had lost her way.

She chose a wide, safe strip of road, stopped the car, allowing the engine to run so that any approaching vehicle might have warning of her presence there, and lit a cigarette while she considered the situation.

About half past six she might venture to approach his house, she thought, and plead fear of the thickening fog and the dangers of the road.

It was very cold, very bleak, in spite of the warmth of the car and the furs with which she was enveloped. She was vaguely conscious of being just a little afraid. This was utterly unlike herself, yet it made her more determined than ever to go on with her plans, and gave to her an outlook and a sense of perspective that she would probably not have had could she but have looked at the matter with unprejudiced eyes.

But she had been forcing herself on to this step for a long time, half-unconsciously, and now that the moment had almost arrived, the old proud, sensible Eve had disappeared entirely into the madcap, and that side of her nature which was desperately eager to take risks, anything for a thrill, had definitely assumed the upper hand.

A little later she threw away the end of her third cigarette, slid into gear, released the brake and glided forward along the road. The remaining distance to the gates of Green Acres seemed to be covered in a mere flash of time, and presently she was driving slowly up the approach to Mallory's old grey-stone house.

Leaving the lights of her car still on, she pulled the heavy chain and heard a bell reverberating deeply within the house, and bit a nervous underlip while she waited for the door to be opened. A warm glow fell from the lamp in the porchway and she glanced apprehensively at her wrist-watch, to find that she had delayed even longer than she had expected and it was already seven o'clock.

Then the door swung open and Tomlinson was standing there, his back to the lighted hall within and a flicker from the lamp above his head shining upon his face so that she could not guess at his expression.

“Good evening,” she said, with that smile of hers which so seldom failed to enthrall those who beheld it. “I’ve come for shelter. The fog is getting so dense that I was too afraid to drive home through it. Can I come in and wait for a little while, until it clears?”

“Will you step inside, madam?” the butler replied. “I will inform Mr. Mallory that you are here.”

Eve feigned surprise so cleverly that the man was completely deceived.

“Mr. Mallory home! I thought he was away. Perhaps I’d better not stop then.”

“I’m sure he would not wish you to go away,” Tomlinson answered, suavely. “Won’t you step this way, madam?”

Still protesting, Eve followed him into the big hall, just as Mallory came down the stairs, having overheard the conversation.

The girl caught her breath as she watched him descending towards her. How magnificent he looked in dinner kit. How unbelievably wonderful it would be if he could feel for her what she felt for him!

“Hello!” she called brightly. “I’m terribly sorry to be butting in, but as a matter of fact I thought you were still in Town. So I just came in to shelter from the fog which is getting perfectly appalling, and I’m terrified of driving through it.”

He stood for a moment looking at her steadily, then nodded over his shoulder to his servant.

“Bring some drinks, Tomlinson. Won’t you come in by the fire? I expect you’re frightfully cold, aren’t you?”

He ushered her into his big sitting-room, and Eve gave an exclamation of pleasure as she met the warmth of the leaping flames.

“How marvellous! I certainly am shrammed to the bone. It’s a beastly night, and I wouldn’t have gone out only I’d promised. Now coming home the fog is getting dreadfully thick and I’m sure I shall never find my way back to Five Gables. You don’t *mind* me sheltering here?” She threw a questioning glance at him which he returned with the same quizzical, half-mocking, wholly polite manner in which he had listened to her first words.

“It is certainly safer indoors than out in weather like this. If one follows the ordinary course of things the fog should get worse instead of better.

Would you not be wiser to get home while it is possible? One of my chauffeurs could take you back.”

“How terribly affluent that sounds!” flippantly. “How many do you employ?”

“Two. I find it necessary,” came the rather curt response. “But you must have a drink first of all.”

She pulled off the impertinent little felt hat she was wearing, tossed it on to a chair and then slid out of her fur coat.

“It’s so warm and cosy in here that, as our old nurses used to say, I shan’t find the good of it when I go out.” She laughed softly. “It’s delightful here. What a lovely home you have!”

“I had the impression that you also possessed one.” He glanced at her with slightly raised eyebrows, and she felt her colour deepening.

It seemed impossible for her to say the right thing to him, she who never faltered for a word: she, who could overwhelm anyone with her conversation, could meet any situation and never be at a loss. For once in her life she was almost tongue-tied and found herself breaking into words that had no meaning, wishing she had remained silent, and yet finding the silence overpoweringly nerve-racking.

Tomlinson came in with a tray of drinks, poured them a sherry each, handed the glasses and withdrew.

“Here is to your safe return to Five Gables,” said her host, still unusually unsmiling.

“You’re terribly serious, aren’t you, Garnet? You don’t mind me calling you that, of course? What if the fog thickened and I had to stay—longer than I meant to; how would you respond to that?”

She challenged him blatantly because she found herself no longer able to skirmish strategically. She wanted to bring the fight into the open, to finish with beating about the bush, and now she looked at him challengingly and he stared back at her, thoroughly aware of her meaning although he could not know, she felt sure, that she had been aware of his return. He must imagine that she thought the house empty of his presence and yet that half-mocking, half-sardonic expression did not lift from his dark face.

“Did you have a decent time in Town?”

“There was a special wedding I had to attend and a reception afterwards which was deadly dull. Then there were several other engagements which I’d promised to fulfil and felt I could not back out of them.”

“Are you always so meticulous?”

“When I promise anything I like to keep that promise.”

She nodded, turning her brilliant eyes upon the fire.

“Yes. Promises can be rather—difficult to keep sometimes, can’t they? One undertakes a thing on the spur of the moment, in a sudden spirit of enterprise or foolishness, or mere boredom, and then one has to go through with it.”

He stood in the middle of the hearthrug, the sherry-glass in his hand and looked down at her as she relaxed with her usual supreme grace in a corner of the deep couch.

“Are you referring to any definite enterprise?” he asked slowly.

“Perhaps I am.” Then on the impulse of the moment she rushed into further words: “I undertook a wager once, like a fool. I was bored stiff with life and I heard friends of mine chatting about a particular character, a man of course, who thought all women beneath him, absolutely inferior creatures, only brought into the world for man’s amusement. Such an extraordinary point of view, don’t you think?”

She lifted her eyes suddenly to his face and looked at him, but he only shrugged faintly and returned her gaze with the same enigmatic look, the same vaguely cynical lift to his mouth, giving it a cruelty, the knowledge of which slowly became impressed upon Eve. She had not thought of him as having a cruel nature, but now she was conscious of a certain vague, cold feeling of definite fear. What had she done to place herself in the power of this unknown man?

No longer did he appear an acquaintance, even a friend; no longer could she fortify herself with the thought that she was capable of coping with any situation whatever that might arise, particularly in reference to the opposite sex.

She knew herself to be weak because she was in love with him, her position weakened still further by his attitude towards her sex; and her nerves were already playing her tricks. Nerves in Eve Jarvis who had always scoffed at such a thing!

“Have some more sherry?” suggested Mallory, putting aside the suggested subject as if he had no desire to discuss it with her. “Now tell me how Drake Rodney is getting on. I haven’t rung them up yet, but I expect it will be a pretty slow business.”

They discussed Drake’s condition, vaguely the Rodney family, hunting in the district, golf, and then a silence fell upon them.

“You will have some dinner with me before you go home?” asked Garnet, suddenly.

“Thank you. That’s very nice of you. If you will forgive me not being changed,” glancing down at her dull blue Angora frock. “I’d love to stay.”

“I am sure that you look quite as charming as you always do,” he answered, with a smile which she knew meant nothing whatever.

In her heart of hearts, she was thinking: “I believe I hate him. I believe that really he is cruel and heartless and horrible. Yet he fascinates me. . . . Am I still in love with him at the same time? Yes, I believe I am. But it doesn’t keep me from all these other feelings as well. He’s hateful, cruel. Why did I never realize that before?” Then metaphorically she shrugged, for now she must go on with the game, since he also was playing a hand.

Mallory pressed the bell and told the butler, when he came in answer to the ring, that Miss Jarvis would be dining with him, and they would have dinner as soon as it was ready. “Tell Mrs. Tomlinson to come along and look after Miss Jarvis, who might like a wash before dinner,” he added.

“How amazingly thoughtful of you!” laughed Eve, rising, and moving towards the door. “I certainly feel a bit grubby after driving in the fog.”

She passed through the open door and the butler closed it upon her, and a minute later his wife came from the kitchen regions to conduct her through the house.

Mallory stood where she had left him, his back to the fire, frowning into space, his mind moving slowly but relentlessly along a certain path of thought.

This girl had had the impudence to challenge him; she had, moreover, had the audacity to take risks such as no other girl of her age should have done, and because she was acting in a young, foolish, utterly stupid way he was tempted to teach her a lesson.

But when she came back into the room ten minutes later, looking so fresh and lovely, her golden hair smooth and gleaming, her nose freshly powdered, he had to admit that she made a very beautiful picture to look upon, and her company, since she was witty and bright and alluring into the bargain, would undoubtedly pass away a solitary evening.

Yet all the time in his mind the fact nagged at him that presently Hester must be told that Eve was here, or would she not know till afterwards? He had purposely avoided any mention of her until now but he found himself waiting eagerly for an opportunity to find out anything that he might about his companion’s secretary.

“I suppose Miss Lawrence has been with you some time?” he enquired casually, as they drank their soup.

“Oh, ages. Don’t know what I should do without Hester; she runs everything for me.”

“Amazingly efficient, I should imagine.”

“Almost frighteningly so. She’s been home for several days because her father’s been ill.”

He glanced up quickly.

“I understood she rang me up a couple of days ago.”

Then he was sorry he had spoken, in case Hester had not wished Eve to know, but the words had escaped him involuntarily.

“Oh, that was Betty, her sister.”

Since there was now no further need for secrecy about the matter as it had already gone into the past, Eve did not hesitate to explain the instance.

“She rang up for me, but now I really forget what it was all about. Hester’s still away. She went on Sunday and hasn’t come back yet.”

“I see.”

Tomlinson removed the soup plates and brought the next course, but Garnet stared moodily at the polished table in the glittering oak of which was reflected the beautiful cut-glass and heavy silver of the table’s appointments. So Hester had not rung him after all! And he need not have rushed back from London in the hope of seeing her, or was that *really* what had brought him?

He shrugged the thought aside because he was ashamed of it, ashamed to admit to himself that any woman had any power over him whatever. He had fought his way through life, thrusting women out of his path when they assumed too great an importance for him or for his peace of mind, but the effect that this girl had upon him was so different from that of other women. It was not that she fascinated or allured him, it was not that physically he desired her as he had desired other women, it was not that he even wanted to touch her in his present mood, but in some inexplicable, secret part of him he needed and wanted her.

Dinner passed slowly, but at last they rose to leave the dining-room and went back to the fireside where Tomlinson brought them coffee and liqueurs.

Eve was no longer enjoying herself; her mind was made up and the wager must go. Whether she won or lost it no longer mattered, only that she must make her escape from Green Acres.

Garnet Mallory had been the completely polite host to her and yet, underlying that politeness, she sensed that streak of iron cruelty and she was frightened.

She did not want to attract him, did not want him to make love to her, only wanted desperately to get away.

As she set down her empty coffee-cup, she glanced elaborately at her watch.

“Good heavens! How the time flies, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, when one is interested or amused.”

She forced a light laugh.

“I know. One goes to the dentist and time hangs heavily while one’s waiting in the waiting-room, and every minute seems a week. But I was referring to this topping evening I’ve had with you, Garnet, and I do thank you so much for it. Now it is time for me to get home.”

“It’s still very foggy,” he said, urbanely.

“Let me see if it is as bad as it was.” She rose and went to the windows, drawing aside the curtain and peering out into the night. “Of course, it’s so dark it makes it very difficult to know from here, but I believe I can pick out a tree or two not too far away. Anyway, I’ll make the attempt.”

“You have changed your mind very quickly, haven’t you?”

She walked back from the windows to find him standing on the hearthrug and facing her, and when she would have moved aside he put out a hand and took her wrist between his fingers.

“Changed my mind? Oh no. I’ve had the shelter I wanted and now I’m not nearly so frightened. Of course, if you could spare one of your chauffeurs to drive me back, perhaps I should really be rather relieved.”

“By all means, if you go.”

“If I go!” she echoed, and stared at him with wide eyes. “I don’t think I understand you.”

“Yes, I think you do, and that’s why at last you’re a little frightened, aren’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Eve Jarvis isn’t frightened of any man.”

“No? Perhaps not. But will you be afraid to stay here with me? I don’t mean only for the rest of the evening, but till—tomorrow?”

She fell back a step, and stared at him.

“Please don’t talk nonsense to me. I shouldn’t dream of staying here until tomorrow.”

“You might not dream of it, but I might force you to.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not? To appeal to Tomlinson would be ridiculous, since you came here of your own free will. And I suggest that you have too much pride to lower yourself in the eyes of servants. I might of course make it easier for you so that he doesn’t know you have stayed longer than the conventions warrant, or I might consider you needed a lesson, my dear, for playing stupid, childish pranks when you’re a grown-up woman.”

Their eyes met, each seeming to measure the other’s strength, but hers fell before his look.

“I think you’re a hateful bully,” she said, low and tensely. “No wonder you’ve got the reputation you have.”

“Then, knowing my reputation, why did you risk yours by coming to see me this evening?”

“I didn’t know you were here; I thought you were still in London.”

“Can you look me straight in the eyes and tell me honestly that that was your impression? If so, and if you are speaking the truth, which I shall know, then I will ring the bell and my chauffeur shall drive you home at once. Or did you come, knowing I was here, to play out this stupid game of yours?”

The blood flamed in her face and then faded, for whatever else she might be Eve was no liar and she knew she had to speak the truth.

“I—I heard a rumour that you had come back,” she admitted. “I wasn’t certain, but—yes, I *was* certain. I shouldn’t have come if you hadn’t been here.”

“Thank you. At least I admire you for your honesty. But what I have said, goes. Since you came here of your own accord, then, Eve Jarvis, here you are going to stay.”

“I won’t. You can’t make me.”

“I shan’t *make* you, but you’ll stay, because you’ll be too proud to go. . . . Now I’m going to ring up your place and say you are marooned for the night. Everything will be quite in order. I don’t see that we need even mind letting Tomlinson know, since fog is an excellent excuse. Or so you thought, didn’t you?”

She shivered.

“Somehow I hadn’t looked upon it quite like this. I thought—I thought you would be different.”

“Quite. You thought I should make love to you so charmingly that you wouldn’t mind staying, or you would stay as long as you chose and then you would get up and say ‘I have no use for you at all, Garnet Mallory’, and leaving me distraught with disappointment, you would walk out of the house

and get into your car and drive home, even if it were midnight. Wasn't that something of your plan?" He bent his head and looked into her face, surprised at the strange expression upon it. "That wasn't quite it? Perhaps you thought you wouldn't mind staying with me?"

She made an impatient gesture, wrenched her wrist from his fingers, and turned her back upon him. He seemed to have an uncanny power of reading her mind, and translating her thoughts into words that made her ashamed.

"I may have thought that," she said, in a low voice. "But I have certainly changed my mind now."

She straightened herself, stiffened her shoulders and bravely faced him.

"I should be very glad to leave you, if you please."

"That is so often the way, isn't it? We want something and then when it is ours, we no longer desire it. But don't you think you've gone rather far now to draw back? Anyway, I think it is quite time Miss Eve Jarvis learnt a lesson, and I'm going out into the hall to telephone to Five Gables to tell them that you'll be staying here the night."

She swung round to protest, but he put up his hand with a gesture that was so implacable and relentless that in spite of herself the girl's courage wilted. She sank down on to the edge of the couch and meekly let him pass out of the room to the telephone in the hall.

She could vaguely hear his voice speaking, heard its tone of surprise, and then, a moment or two later, he came back into the room.

"You are reprieved, Miss Jarvis. Your excellent friend, to prove her friendship, is prepared to change places with you."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Miss Lawrence returned unexpectedly this evening . . ."

"What, Betty!"

"No, Miss Hester Lawrence, your secretary. Today, deciding she could leave her people, she has come back to you. I expect she thought you would be glad to see her."

"I *am* glad. I'm most tremendously relieved to hear she's come back. What do you mean about her coming *here*?"

"I suggested that I held you hostage until she arrived, and, as I said before, to prove her friendship for you she is prepared to come here herself to ensure your release."

"This is so utterly melodramatic and stupid! But I don't think Hester will come."

"I think she will. Why shouldn't she?"

“Well . . .” Eve broke off. She could not explain to him that Hester might have any hesitation because of the wager, but if she could get to the telephone and make Hester realize that she, Eve, desperately wanted her, then everything would be all right. And perhaps between the two of them, they could master Garnet, and make him change his plans.

She moved towards the door.

“Let me just say a word to her on the telephone and she will come.”

He raised his brows at her.

“So obedient?”

“It’s not a question of that at all. Probably she won’t like to butt in, and will think I might resent it.”

“You’re perfectly right. Probably she does think that. I certainly give you permission to telephone her, if you don’t make any more plots and plans.”

Without another word she rushed out into the hall but she had only said those few words to Hester which had reached Hester just when her anxiety was reaching a high pitch, when the sound of footsteps made her hurriedly ring off. But it was not Mallory coming into the hall: it was Tomlinson, with his inevitable tray of refreshments, whisky-and-soda, *en route* for the sitting-room.

He seemed rather surprised to see his master’s visitor in the hall, but stood aside for her to lead the way into the room.

Then he set down the tray, made up the fire and retired again.

“Hester is coming, isn’t she?” Garnet looked at her steadily, with his cold eyes and his mouth set in its cruel lines.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Then let us drink to her speedy arrival, for I sent the car to fetch her directly I had finished my conversation with her.”

“You rang your chauffeur straight away?”

“Yes. He lives over the garage so everything is marvellously easy for me, isn’t it? The villain of the piece doesn’t always have every facility to hand as I have. Extraordinarily lucky, aren’t I?”

She did not answer his mockery, but sat on the edge of the couch, hands clasped round her knees, staring into the fire, longing, longing for Hester’s arrival.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“**A**T least have a whisky-and-soda while you are waiting for Miss Lawrence to come,” suggested Mallory.

“Thanks. I could do with one.” She spoke abruptly, avoiding his quizzical eyes, the half-smiling mouth which made her feel as if she wanted to strike him. Yet in spite of her antagonisms towards him she could not hide from herself the fact that she might hate him but at the same time she could feel the power of his irresistible charm, shining through that other self which at the moment was so blatantly in evidence.

She accepted the drink, and listened silently while he made various casual remarks, such as any polite host might make to an almost unknown guest.

Time crawled by on leaden wings, and for long minutes there would be silence between them, broken by spasmodic efforts at conversation. Very slowly the hands of the clock crept round the face, and an hour had passed. It was as bad as being at the dentist’s, thought Eve, with grim humour. Then suddenly the tension between them was broken; there came the sound of voices in the hall and the door opened and Tomlinson’s impassive face appeared in the aperture, his expressionless voice announcing: “Miss Lawrence.”

Hester walked into the room.

Eve leapt to her feet, almost spilling her second drink as she did so, and swung round towards her secretary.

“Thank God, you’ve come, Hester. I was so afraid . . .” She broke off, and forced a laugh, clutching eagerly with metaphorical hands at her shaken control.

“Of course I came, directly I knew you wanted me,” said Hester, and then inclined her head gravely towards Mallory. “Good evening, Mr. Mallory.”

“Good evening, Miss Lawrence. This is most kind and considerate of you.”

Hester looked at him very straight, as if questioning his words, and searching for the mockery she knew must be hidden there.

“It is all rather like a play, isn’t it?” she said, mildly. “Is this a rehearsal for something?”

She glanced from one to the other and smiled, as if the situation were one full of humour.

Now fully controlled and more relieved than she would like to have owned, Eve shrugged her shoulders and laughed gallantly.

“It is all frightfully dramatic and silly,” she said, curtly. “But I’m awfully glad you’ve come, Hester. It was very unexpected you getting back to Five Gables tonight, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. My father was so much better that I thought you might be glad for me to return. You are sometimes, you know.”

“Of course. I’m always glad to have you. Well,” she glanced at their host doubtfully. “What is the next move, Garnet Mallory?”

“To offer our new visitor a drink, don’t you think?”

“I don’t want anything, thanks. As a matter of fact, it doesn’t seem long since I had dinner.”

“Did you wait for me?”

“Yes, until quite late, then I thought you must be dining somewhere.”

“You were perfectly right,” said Mallory, suavely. “Eve and I had a remarkably interesting dinner together.”

It seemed as if they were all making conversation; as if the two girls by hedging were trying to gain time and thereby turn a melodramatic situation into one that was smooth and easy and ordinary. But Mallory, though he apparently appreciated their efforts, smiled to himself and waited his chance.

Eve finished her third drink and set down the empty glass, standing for a moment smoothing her skirt with uncertain fingers.

“Hester and I will tear ourselves away from you, Garnet, and thank you so much for a pleasant evening,” she said, attempting to carry off the situation with a high hand. “Don’t bother to come out; I can collect my coat as I go through the hall.”

“Of course I shall see you off. But you seem to have forgotten our bargain, which was that you only left if Miss Lawrence arrived. Now that she is here, I have no objection to your going home, but I wish my man to drive you back.”

“The fog has lifted considerably,” said Hester. “In another hour it will be a wonderfully clear night.”

“Then I prefer to drive myself, thanks. Besides, how would your man get back again?”

Hester was conscious of a vague fluttering within her; surely Eve was not going to leave her there!

“How shall I be sure that you drive yourself straight back to Five Gables? That is all part of the bargain, you know,” said Mallory, steadily. “I will give you the necessary time and then ring up to see that you are at home. Is that all right?”

“It’s madness. You’re behaving just like a lunatic.”

“Perhaps I am, but in this matter you have to give in to me. Either you return straight home now, and I ring you when you have had time to get there, shall we say a quarter to eleven? Or you will remain here and Miss Lawrence go back. Choose between yourselves which does which. Shall I say it is immaterial to me?”

Yet his eyes narrowed as he looked at the two girls standing together, and neither of them knew how anxiously he really waited for their reply.

“You had better go home, Eve. At least your reputation means more than mine does,” said Hester, quietly. “Perhaps I can talk sense to Mr. Mallory.”

“I haven’t succeeded in doing so. He must be mad.”

“Perhaps we all are, a little.” He smiled from one to the other, but it was a cold, mirthless smile. “Even in these modern days one comes upon strange situations, and here is one tonight. However, will you girls make up your minds? Who is going to drive herself back to Five Gables and who is going to give me the pleasure of her company?”

“I’ll stay, Eve,” said Hester. “At least I can do that to help you.”

“It seems so damned unfair to leave you, though,” hesitated Eve. “How *can* I?”

“You have no choice.” Mallory’s voice had a sharpened edge to it. “Please don’t waste any more time. One or the other.”

Hester gave Eve a little push towards the door.

“Do go, Eve. It will only anger him,” she said in a voice too low for him to hear, for he had turned aside and was throwing a log on the fire. “I expect I shall get away presently, and he will send me home. He won’t want me here, as he might have wanted you.”

There was no false modesty in her words but just an actual statement of facts as it seemed to her. She could not imagine that Mallory would see any attraction in her when obviously Eve left him cold.

“Very well.” Eve walked slowly to the door then turned back and looked across at the other girl. “I think I might go to the Rodneys or get some help or something.”

“For heaven’s sake, do nothing of the kind,” said Hester sharply. “We don’t want the whole world to know about this. We just have to hope that everything will settle itself, and no one will know that you might have been . . .” She broke off, unable to say the blatant words, and a faint tinge of colour crept into her face.

Mallory politely bowed Eve out of the room, closed the door behind her, helped her into her fur coat, then took her to the porch and saw her into her car.

“You’re going to play fair, aren’t you, Eve? I have to trust you that much, you know.”

“Of course. Both Hester and I always play fair. Good night.”

She had already switched on her engine, and now she let in the clutch and shot away down the drive, feeling as if she were in a dream or a nightmare, unable to decide in her mind whether she should have stayed or whether there was something she could have done to help Hester. Yet Hester was very well able to look after herself and would no doubt find some way out of the *impasse*. It was silly to worry. Actually, it was her fault that this stupid situation had arisen, but Hester would somehow make everything right.

Satisfying her conscience in that way, she drove swiftly homewards, for the fog had lifted and the stars were beginning to shine through the clearing air.

She had only just put her car away and entered the house when the telephone rang.

“Yes? Who is that?”

“Mallory here,” came his voice over the wire. “You have reached home safely?”

“Quite, thanks. You might give my love to Hester,” and she slammed down the receiver.

Mallory turned slowly away with a little smile and went back to the sitting-room.

Until it was time to ring Five Gables he had entertained Hester as if she were a most valued guest, had overruled her objection to a drink and brought her a whisky-and-soda. He had then enquired about the health of her father and listened while she talked about her home, all the time waiting until Eve should have reached home and the time had arrived for him to call up the house.

When the hands of the clock at last pointed to the quarter before eleven, he rose, excused himself politely and went out into the hall.

Hester remained where he had left her, sitting in the corner of the couch that Eve had occupied, her hands pressed together, and trying not to be frightened, assuring herself that he would continue to be polite and friendly as he had been since her arrival, and yet vaguely aware of some strange difference underlying his attitude towards her.

Then she heard the ting-ting of the telephone bell as he rang off, and the next moment he had opened the door and come back into the room. He closed it behind him and there was a strange air of finality in that closing door.

The girl turned slowly and looked at him as he walked across the room towards her.

“Now, Hester. We are alone at last, you and I,” he said.

“We have been for the last half-hour or more,” she parried, lightly.

“Not as alone as we are now,” he answered. “The servants have gone to bed and the house is locked up all except the front door. How do you feel about that?”

“How do you expect me to feel?”

He shrugged his shoulders, and sat down on the couch beside her.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a long, long time, and now I’ve got my opportunity. Do you hate me for making you come here?”

“No, why should I? I dare say you have a very good reason.”

“You’re so frightfully logical, aren’t you? Supposing I have no—what you would call ‘good’ reason? Would you hate me then?”

“But you must have some motive.”

“Motive, no doubt. Perhaps it is just that I’m very attracted by you and I want to have you here with me.”

“You always like mocking somebody, don’t you?”

“Do I? Perhaps so. But then I have been brought up to look upon the whole of life as something of a mockery.”

“I think that’s rather a pity.”

For a moment he was silent then he went on:

“I heard that you had rung me up while I was in London, but it wasn’t you at all apparently. Eve said it was your sister Betty with a message from her. Tomlinson told me when I rang up from Town last night . . . yes, I’ve

been up to Town for the last few days. . . . When I heard what he said I came straight back this morning.”

“Oh, did you? Why?”

“Because I thought the telephone message was from you.”

She made a bewildered gesture with her hands, and looked at him questioningly.

“I don’t quite see what you mean me to understand from that?”

“It is obvious, my dear. It meant that you had the power to draw me back from London. It’s a horrible admission for a man to make who has never before admitted that a woman could have power over him. You see how weak I am to be so honest with you.”

Hester shivered. This was all being even more dreadful than she had dreamed, and she felt none of the pleasure nor the joy that she had expected in seeing Mallory. Yet all the time her heart ached for him, and she longed to tell him to put aside this self of his which was so unworthy, so entirely what he had made of himself rather than the essential man. And everything was so queer, so unexpected, so bewildering.

“I suppose I am frightfully out-of-date,” she said, hesitantly, “but this is such an unusual and strange evening, and I’m afraid of anything unusual and strange or out of the ordinary.”

Mallory looked at her steadily.

“Because anything like that is a ‘shadow over the plains’,” he suggested. “But then you see you are that yourself.”

“I am?” She turned startled eyes upon him.

“Didn’t you know it? All my life I have been brought up to hate and fear women. Yes, *fear* them. That surprises you, doesn’t it?”

She nodded, without speaking.

“Fear them as something dangerous, vicious, and to be avoided except as a means of—amusement.”

Hester nodded, her sorry eyes on his face.

“You knew that? Yet you look at me as if you were—sorry for me.” Suddenly the arrogance had gone from him, and he looked strangely young, almost diffident, and perplexed.

“I *am* sorry for you.”

He frowned at that. “I want no one’s pity, least of all a woman’s.”

“I think it’s so dreadful that you should have lost so much,” said Hester, gently.

“Lost?”

“Yes, to lose faith is one of the most—hellish things in life that I can imagine happening to anyone.”

“I have never looked upon it as a loss.” He gave a sudden quick sigh, and then with a shrug seemed to thrust these emotions aside. “But none of this is going to make any difference to us tonight. I shall still hold you here as—hostage, shall we say?”

Hester flung out her hands in a little gesture of resignation.

“I can’t fight you about that, can I? So I must just sit here and bear it for as long as you intend to keep me a prisoner in your house.”

“Ah! So you think I’m just going to let you sit there, smoking what cigarettes you wish (please go on, I like you to smoke), and—talking to me to while away the time, as it were.”

“Isn’t that what you mean?”

“Not at all.”

He had been leaning back against the couch at some distance from her, but now he turned suddenly and faced her with only a few inches of space between them, and for the first time a faint flicker of fear passed over the girl’s face. His raking eyes saw it and he smiled, even though at the same moment he thrust out his chin as if stiffening his determination.

“Well? That startles you, doesn’t it?”

Her hands pressed together in her lap but she met his eyes bravely, and he was the first to turn his glance aside, almost as if he were a little ashamed to meet her look, and yet were angry and bitter that he should feel these strange and unusual sensations.

“You know my reputation surely? But you must, or you wouldn’t have been so ready to help Eve get away from me.”

“I have heard some not very kind things said about you,” admitted Hester, gravely.

“And of course you believed them?”

“Some of them. But I don’t believe that you are either cruel or—vicious.”

“I see. But you’re wrong there, because I am cruel. It has been said that any woman who holds the least attraction for me is not safe in my company. That I think as little of kissing a woman as most men think of patting their dogs; rather less, perhaps.”

She did not answer, only looked at him with those half-wondering, half-sad eyes of hers that goaded him like a scourge.

“Doesn’t *that* frighten you, Hester Lawrence? Doesn’t that make you flinch away from me? Even you are not safe from me.”

“Even I?” she echoed, questioningly.

“Yes. That was what I said. I happen to admire you rather a lot, not in the way that a man admires a woman ordinarily, but as a man—reveres something a little—holy.”

He rose suddenly to his feet as if he could no longer sit quietly beside her, and his voice harshened.

“Damn you, why should you have this effect upon me? You look at me with those strange, sad, Madonna eyes and I’m damned if I can stand it!”

She bent her head and studied the wreathed fingers in her lap, and was acutely conscious of tears that stung the back of her eyes. That glimpse of the man’s innermost soul, the reflection in his face, was of a creature in torment.

He strode across the room and jerked aside the heavy curtains, standing to stare out at the darkened garden, lit faintly by the dim light of a now visible November moon.

For a long minute he stood there, then dragged the curtains into place and came back to the fireside.

Hester sat, as he had left her, a small and somehow forlorn figure on the edge of the couch.

He stood, staring down at her, every muscle tense, his hands clenched at his sides, then she raised her head and their eyes met. A shudder seemed to grip him, then passed, and the tension went out of his attitude.

“You win,” he said, and his voice sounded immeasurably tired. “Without saying anything, without any word, you win. I meant to kiss you, to make love to you. I thought it would be—what you said you were afraid of and which I look for and never can find—a shadow over the plains . . . but I can’t . . . I can’t touch you, curse you!”

Then he smiled, a smile that lit his dark face into such sudden sweetness that Hester caught her breath.

He put out a hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Are you afraid of me now, you fearless woman?”

“No.” She smiled at him, and again their eyes met in a long, strange look. “No . . . I’m not afraid of you.”

“Thanks. Most women are, and they *like* to be. . . . I knew you were different. . . . Could we be—friends, do you think?”

She held out her hand to him.

“I’d like to be friends with you.”

He took her hand and held it for a moment, looking down at the small fingers against his large palm, then with a sudden swift and involuntary movement he bent his head and raised them to his lips.

“I shall value your friendship as one of my most precious possessions,” he said, in a low voice, then he turned away from her. “I’ll get my car and take you home,” and the door closed upon him.

Hester sank down limply upon the arm of the couch, and for a moment shut her eyes.

The ordeal was over, and it was over so much more quickly than she had imagined. She was safe and she was—free. She had won a victory over him, a victory that no other woman had ever won, but she had no thought for that, only sorrow for the tragic influences that had made Garnet Mallory the man he was when she could glimpse beneath that superficial surface the man that he might have been.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

WHEN she had put her car away and entered her house, Eve was astonished to find herself shivering. She hardly even realized the fact until she had answered Garnet Mallory's 'phone call, and then made her way to the scarlet-and-silver lounge.

She switched on a shaded lamp, and in the warm glow that fell around her knelt in front of the fire, raking together the red embers and blowing upon them with the great brass bellows. She placed a new log on the top of the little heap of glowing coals, and worked strenuously with the bellows until little blue flames leapt round the wood in response to her efforts.

Maud had met her in the hall when she came in looking rather surprised to see her, anxious and relieved at the same time.

"We were so afraid perhaps you had got lost, Miss Eve," she said.

"I was all right."

"Did you see Miss Lawrence?"

Naturally the maid was all agog, and Eve realized that the events of the evening had certainly been commented upon in the kitchen, but she did not care.

She sent the parlourmaid to get her some hot coffee, and it seemed to her when she came back again that the maid looked at her strangely.

Perhaps it was foolish to pass over the evening without any explanation, but that was ever Eve's way. What her domestics chose to think was their affair; it did not do to associate with one's staff too personally, she thought. If they liked to think the happenings of that evening peculiar, then it was up to them. Actually they might have been the most natural occurrences in the world; a foggy evening, a delayed return, but of course she must remember that Hester's unexpected advent had added to the mystery of the situation.

Eve was bodily cold, and cold also to her very heart. The evening had shaken her nerve, and she had lost, if only momentarily, her tremendous confidence in herself and in her attraction.

Her pride and her vanity were both sore and wounded; and she felt very much like a small child who has been deservedly rebuked for some childish naughtiness.

Then she began to wonder whether she should have left Hester at the house, whether they should not have stayed together, whether she had failed her friend. But all this was entirely by the way, since Hester was so eminently capable of taking care of herself.

She remained on the rug by the fire, sitting with her knees hunched up, the coffee-cup in her hand, a cigarette as ever between her lips. She frowned at the fire, but slowly as she grew warmer, a more normal attitude took possession of her and she began to look upon things in a more sensible way.

She was making a mountain out of a molehill; actually the whole incident was small and petty and trivial . . . or was it? To her it seemed to have assumed gigantic proportions of vast significance, and she felt that in some ways it was a turning point, though in what way she was not quite sure.

Actually the wager now ceased to exist; she had failed, and failed ignominiously. She would have to admit to her friends, Con Chator and Inez Latimer, that she had not been able to succeed in the challenge, and the fact grated upon her. At one time it hadn't seemed to matter in the least; but now she was humiliated by the remembrance of Mallory's attitude towards her.

She tried to comfort herself with the thought that it was only because the man was so autocratic a type, and yet she felt that that was not quite the right word. It described him adequately when applied in its true meaning, and it was very much this side of him that attracted her so vitally.

The word autocrat comes from *autos* meaning self, and *kratos* meaning power; a man who holds all power in his hands. It does not mean anyone arrogant or egotistic, but very splendid.

Was this a description of Mallory or did it only exist in her own imagination? She could modify it very definitely by her knowledge of him, by her experience only this evening; and yet she rather liked to think of him as that . . . "a man who holds all power in his hands".

The hands of the little clock on a side table, a dainty trifle of red lacquer and silver, pointed to a quarter past eleven, and then half past, but still Eve sat on by the fire, her mind turned in upon itself, thinking long thoughts and sorting out the complex material that had collected in her mentality.

Slowly things straightened out, and she found herself looking back upon the past few days, in fact upon the events of the last few weeks, with a far saner philosophy, and a wider comprehension, not only of other people's reactions to the stimuli of past happenings, but to her own. And she had to admit that she was just a little ashamed of herself.

“I needn’t have been so blatant. I have followed him about terribly and tried to force issues. . . . Tonight was rather a shock, to find that any man could so easily resist me. Just as well. It doesn’t do for a woman to think that all men will fall for her charm. . . . I think actually I’ve been a bloody little fool.”

Twelve o’clock! She rose and stretched her cramped limbs, put another log on the fire, and began to wonder, a little disturbedly, as to what was happening to Hester.

She became imbued with a new courage, and was contemplating the prospect of getting her car out again and going back to Green Acres to look for her secretary when the faint sound of a car approaching the house made her hold her breath.

So everything was all right! She needn’t have worried, for undoubtedly this would be Hester returning. What a shamozzle they had made about nothing at all, or rather that she had made, seeing everything in tremendous magnitude as if she had placed a very small atom of dust under a microscope.

“That’s why life gets us down sometimes, I suppose,” she thought. “We magnify tiny little happenings until they seem colossal and their importance far, far beyond the truth.”

The maids had gone to bed, so Eve herself went out into the hall, put down the catch of the door and opened it, so that a flood of light drifted out into the dark drive, just as Hester appeared at the bottom of the steps.

“Hester! I’m awfully glad to see you,” said Eve, her relief showing itself unmistakably in her voice.

Hester was alone, and came quickly up the steps, looking so much her usual self except for a different light in her eyes and a softness about her mouth, that Eve glanced at her again.

“Who brought you back? Are you alone?”

“Yes. Garnet Mallory drove me over but he’s gone straight back again.” They closed the door and drew the bolt between them, then Hester followed her employer into the lounge.

“Well, what happened?” Eve wanted to know eagerly.

“Nothing. We just talked for a little while and then—then he brought me back.”

“Was that all? How terribly dull!”

Hester laughed in spite of herself, though there was a weary undertone to the laugh, for the last hour or two had not been without a great element of

strain, and she was beginning to feel it.

“What did you expect to happen?”

“Oh, I didn’t know. Of course there was a chance that he might keep you there all night, but I didn’t think he would somehow.”

Hester smiled.

“You didn’t think I had enough attraction, you mean?”

“Well, yes and no. You see, there’s that something about you that I’ve tried to explain before, Hester, that keeps people from doing the obvious thing. Men wouldn’t respond in the same way as they do to other people, they would treat you differently.”

“Do you think so? Perhaps you’re right. Anyway, Garnet Mallory treated me very—decently. I like him, and I think that actually he’s an awfully nice man.”

“With a reputation such as he has?”

“Yes, even with that. After all, Eve, so much of it may be merely rumour. A small incident happens in a man’s life perhaps, and as it gets related and passed on from one person to another it grows and grows and grows. You know, like a snowball rolling down a slope.”

“Yes, I know. But there seems so much evidence to prove that Mallory is a—rotter.”

“I don’t agree with you. Quite probably he has had any amount of affairs with women, but then we know he hates them and treats them—in just that particular way. But we don’t know for a fact that he has ever been unkind to anyone or ill-treated them, or made love to a woman who wasn’t willing to be made love to.”

Eve looked thoughtful.

“No, there is that about it. Hester, you are amazing the way you look upon people, and see things from a different, from a sensible point of view.”

“I’m awfully tired,” Hester interrupted. “I’m going to bed if you don’t mind, Eve. . . . I hope you didn’t mind me coming back tonight but I thought you might be glad to have me, since Father was so much better and I could get away.”

“I’m delighted to have you. As a matter of fact, you saved my dignity by returning, for Garnet had definitely made up his mind thoroughly to humiliate me. He said I deserved a lesson, and I suppose he was right. Anyway, I’ve finished now with wagers and stupid things like that.”

“I’m glad you have.”

“You realize, of course, that I’ve lost?”

“I suppose you have. I’m sorry for your sake, Eve, but terribly glad the whole thing is over.”

“Perhaps I am too.” Eve heaved a sigh of relief. “Now I must turn my activities in another direction. And I think we’ll start straight away by going back to Town tomorrow.”

Hester felt her heart sink. To return to London now just when life was becoming interesting, when she was looking forward to meeting . . . She put the thoughts aside.

“Shall we talk about that tomorrow? You will forgive me being so weary and going off to bed? It’s very late and actually I’ve had an awfully tiring day. I had a lot of things to see to before I left home.”

Eve was instantly penitent.

“Poor old Hester. How selfish of me to keep you here talking! You *must* be tired, my dear, so let’s go up to bed.”

She linked her hand in her secretary’s arm and led her out of the room, and a minute later they separated outside their doors on the floor above.

But tired though she was, and quickly into bed with the light out, and her weary head upon the pillows, Hester could not sleep.

She went over again in her mind the conversation of the evening; this had Garnet said to her and this had she replied. He had looked at her strangely, and the expression in his eyes had roused queer new feelings within her. She knew that they could never meet again on quite the same footing, and the evening had marked a milestone in their friendship. He meant something vital to her, and she knew instinctively that she also meant something very vital and significant to him.

She turned again on her pillows and shut her eyes, trying to count sheep, and then smiling at herself for the inanity of such a practice. Yet she could not rest.

“The terror that whispers in darkness and flames in light,
The doubt that speaks in the silence of earth and sea,
The sense, more fearful at noon than in midmost night,
Of wrath scarce hushed and of imminent ill to be,
Where are they? Heaven is as earth, and as heaven to me,
Earth: for the shadows that sundered them here take flight;
And naught is all, as am I, but a dream of thee.”*

* Swinburne

To Hester the remembrances of the evening were gathered together into one complete and overwhelming sensation that had taken her heart and her

life, which was:

“ . . . a sleepless hidden thing,
Full of the thirst and hunger of winter and spring,”

and had made of it something vitally and tempestuously alive, so that she longed to make her vague dreams materialize, but found herself encircled with shadows and “naught is all, as am I, but a dream of thee”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

WHEN the two girls met at a late breakfast the next morning, Eve was full of her determination to return to London forthwith.

“I’m sick of the country. I want a bit of London and gay life.”

Hester knew that there was nothing to be said, and so prepared, with a little inward sigh, to make the necessary preparations for the removal back to the flat in Town again.

“Shall Maud go on in advance, or what is your plan?” she asked, steadily.

Eve tapped her fingers restlessly on the breakfast-table, glancing out at the gardens which lay grey and bare beneath the heavy sky.

“It isn’t much of a day for motoring up, is it? No, I think I’ll go over to the Lintners’ and have a couple of nights there and come back for you. Would you be awfully lonely left here until the week-end?”

Hester’s heart leapt, and a faint colour crept into her cheeks.

“No, not at all lonely. In fact there are rather a lot of things I want to do. There is a whole pile of correspondence which came while I was away and which I must tackle. I had a look at it last night.”

Eve nodded.

“All right then, we’ll arrange it that way. I’ll go over to the Lintners’ and come back on Sunday, probably in the afternoon. We’ll then go back to Town on Monday if the weather is decent. Maud can come up with us or go on an earlier train.”

So it was arranged, and Hester went off to the telephone to ring Eve’s friends and arrange things for her, praying inwardly that they would be at home and that the visit would be acceptable. Supposing they couldn’t have Eve and she decided to go to Town after all?

But everything was all right, and Eve arranged to drive to the Lintners’ place that afternoon.

Hester then turned to the accumulated correspondence in her library, bent her head over the piles of letters, but in her heart a little bird of happiness sang its song, and she felt that life was very good and she was thankful just to be alive.



Hester pushed aside the tea-trolley and lit a cigarette, leaning forward, elbows on knees, to gaze into the heart of the fire.

Something very responsive and human and friendly about a fire, she thought. The leaping flames were an inspiration or a challenge, or merely a little banner of good cheer waving against the grey smoke.

“Poor Eve! I’m sorry for her sake that she has lost her wager, but it was a foolish thing from the beginning. . . . Actually she got out of it all very well. . . . Or did she? Perhaps there was nothing to escape, but I believe Garnet Mallory might have been ruthless because . . . well, it’s partly his nature, partly what he expects of himself, and the rest would have been his sheer annoyance at Eve’s silliness. Lucky she didn’t make things worse for herself by falling in love with him! . . . What would it be like to be in love with a man like that, and to have him—in love—with oneself? I can’t imagine it.”

She thrust the thoughts aside, but memories of the evening before persisted. And entangled amongst them was the immediate problem of her mother’s money affairs. Should she or should she not approach Mallory?

“Of *course* I can’t,” one side of her asserted, horrified at the thought.

“We are friends,” another side protested. “He wanted to be friends, and friends help each other.”

Sometimes—sometimes, but circumstances might alter cases.

Hester frowned at the fire and sought for an answer that would not come. She remembered vaguely the advice of the Apocrypha, though not the actual words, and felt that in spite of her hesitations she might be right in pursuing her own determinations.

“Let the course of thine own heart stand,” the Apocrypha says, “for there is no man more faithful unto thee than it. For a man’s mind is sometime wont to tell him more than seven watchmen that sit above in a high tower.”

Her conjectures had just arrived at this pitch when the library door opened and Maud announced: “Mr. Mallory.”

Slowly Hester rose and turned to face him as he came across the carpet towards her in the dim firelight, for she had switched on no lights and had been lost to the gathering dusk in her dreams.

The parlourmaid moved forward quietly to draw the curtains and turned on a standard lamp near the fireplace.

“I was dreaming,” smiled Hester, a little nervously. “Have you had tea?”

“I rarely take it, thanks. I just came over . . .” He broke off as if he too were nervous.

“Smoke, won’t you?”

She offered him the cigarette-box, and the moments that Maud took to remove the trolley and herself and close the door were covered with apparent ease.

As the latch clicked, Garnet turned swiftly to the girl still standing beside him on the hearth.

“I *had* to come over to see you,” he said, hurriedly. “Do you mind?”

“Why, no, of course not. Won’t you sit down?”

He shook his head as if impatient at her words, and then suddenly flung out a hand and caught hers into his. His fingers closed firmly round her slender wrist and she could feel the iron strength within them.

“I want to ask you something. Of course you’ll be surprised, even perhaps more than that. But I assure you I am not in the least mad, and the proposition—if you like to call it that—is based on the fact that we thought we might be friends, you and I.”

“Yes?” Hester stared at him, wide-eyed, while the beat of her heart quickened and her blood stirred.

“It isn’t a question of love,” he went on, still in that low, urgent voice. “No doubt you would laugh at me and disbelieve me if I talked about such a subject as between you—and me. But I haven’t stopped thinking about you since yesterday, and—will you marry me, Hester?”

“Oh!” The colour drained from her face, and amazingly her heart resumed its natural action and she felt very cold and distant and terribly apart from the strange scene in which actually she was playing the role of lead.

“You know what I think about women, or should I say ‘thought’? For you have upset my original ideas about your sex quite utterly, and—I hardly know what I *do* think now. Only I can’t bear to think of losing you or of not seeing you, and I feel—this sounds frightful cheek perhaps—but I feel you could help me rather a lot. And I have never asked help or a favour from any woman before.”

“I see.” How cold and remote her voice, and how judicial! “You want to marry me as a kind of—safeguard; is that what you mean?”

“Perhaps I do.” He began to draw her towards him. “You make me a different man, and you take away that loathsome scorn and rottenness that ordinarily I feel towards the world in general.”

“An antidote. I don’t suppose many women have been asked to marry a man as an—antidote, and . . .” She broke off, unable to say any more.

There was no reason for her to take offence at his suggestion, she assured herself, yet knew that she was hurt to the very heart of her, that something warm and pulsing and alive seemed to have been struck a death-blow and to be numbed to its heart. Yet, feeling returning would only add to the agony.

“You aren’t annoyed with me for what I have said?” He bent his head and peered into her pale face. “By Jove, you look almost angry!”

“I am. I—I think it’s an insult . . .”

“No, I never meant it like that. I’m frightfully sorry. I suppose I’m a clumsy fool, but honestly——”

“All right.” With a gesture of her hand she put aside his explanations. “I expect it seemed all right to you.”

“I suppose I ought to have made a pretty speech of it.” A shade of scorn crept into his voice. “But I thought pretty speeches meant nothing to you.”

“They do—mean nothing, but that isn’t the point. After all, a proposal of marriage . . .”

“I see.” Then he smiled that sweet smile that transformed his face and lit it to a rare charm. “Of course it does all sound rather businesslike but I happen to find you one of those unusual women to whom one can be frankly and honestly oneself. Do you realize that is much more than a pretty speech?”

Hester had regained her self-possession, and was bitterly regretful that, for a moment, she had allowed him to see the hurt which he had given her. Or perhaps he did not yet realize it as such?

“It was all my fault,” she said, falteringly. “Please forget I was so stupid.”

“You were hurt,” he said, suddenly. “Why were you hurt?”

“Don’t. It’s all over now, and I thank you very much for your kind offer, but——”

“Don’t turn me down.” He spoke with the urgent pathos of a small boy, crying for a far-distant and unattainable moon. “Don’t say ‘no’ to me. I promise you I would try to make you awfully happy, and . . . I’ve finished with all other women.”

“I *was* going to say ‘no’,” said Hester, slowly, “but I have suddenly remembered something. Will you sit down and let me tell you about it? No, opposite me, please.”

Obediently he sat down on the other side of the fireplace and Hester went back to her original seat. Then slowly but very clearly she told him about her mother's debts, her father's illness, the expenses of the family, and the way they turned to her for a solution to their difficulties. She told him how she had thought of asking him to lend her money, because she felt they were friends.

He listened without a word until she finished speaking, his eyes never leaving her face.

At last: "That's all," she said, quietly.

He stood up, squared his shoulders, and looked down at her with a quizzical smile.

"Well, Hester, it seems to me we can help each other," he said, steadily. "Supposing you marry me and I promise in return to settle all your mother's very small debts, to make an allowance to each of your two brothers until such time as they shall be qualified and able to stand on their own feet? Also I am prepared to ensure your parents an annual income that shall put them beyond any chance of poverty or want, and I'll pay your young brother's school fees until he leaves, and see that he is duly trained for some suitable profession."

Colour flamed over Hester's face and died again, and she could not lift her eyes to the face above her that had become so kind, so friendly, and—strangely—so tender.

"I should be—ashamed to accept so much," she began.

"You would be giving much in return," he answered, and bending down, took her hands and drew her to her feet. "Well, Hester?"

"Do you mean a purely—business arrangement, this marriage?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"Oh no, why?"

She tried to pull against his compelling hands and could not, for slowly but relentlessly he was forcing her into his arms.

"You accept?" His voice was very low, and his face only an inch or two from her own.

"I—I . . . yes, I accept," she said, in a sudden rush of frightened words, then his arms were round her, and his lips hovered above hers.

With a frantic movement she broke from him.

"No. You said there was no question of love about this," she cried.

He smiled.

“Are you in love with me? Am I in love with you? Perhaps not. But you are an attractive woman, Hester, and since you have promised to be my wife, I suppose I may kiss you.”

“No. It’s horrible.”

“My kissing you?” he bantered. “You haven’t tried it.” Then his voice harshened and the hands that caught her by the shoulders were like steel clasps. “By Jove, if you agree to the bargain, you must stand by your word.”

“I don’t think I—can.”

“Then think quickly and make up your mind. Have you forgotten all it means to your people?”

“I—had forgotten.” A shiver went through her, not at the thought of this man’s touch, or his kisses; they thrilled her to the heart and she knew an almost uncontrollable longing to lay her head on his shoulder and admit that, whatever he might say, she loved him. It was only the shame of receiving his kisses, the pain and despair, since they meant nothing to him. . . . Yet if she loved him herself did not that alleviate her ashamedness?

“I—agree,” she said, suddenly submissive, and stood quietly waiting, hands clasped before her, lids drooped above her eyes.

For a long time he stood regarding her, his hands on her shoulders, then he turned aside and let her go.

“Very well,” he said, and his voice was still hard, concealing feelings the girl did not dream him to possess. “I won’t rush you.”

He lit a cigarette with a steady hand and tried not to see the relief that swept her face at his action, or the relaxation of her tense figure.

“But this is only a postponement,” he added. “Now we can announce our engagement, and tomorrow you had better come up to Town with me and choose a ring.”

“Oh—I——” She faltered and was silent.

Understandingly he shrugged his broad shoulders.

“You’d rather not? Very well, I’ll choose one myself and bring it to you tomorrow. Will you come and dine with me at Green Acres, and I will ask—er—suitable chaperones?”

The gentleness and tenderness had gone from his voice and his attitude, and he spoke with that bitter undertone which was so much a part of him.

“I’ll see about a special licence because there’s nothing to wait for, is there? Or do you prefer a big wedding?”

“No. I’d rather it were—quiet.”

“Very well. Then I’ll remove myself from you for the present, and give you a call in the morning as to the final arrangements for tomorrow night.”

She went with him into the hall and opened the door, and he turned and looked at her with a flicker of amusement lightening his frown.

“Are you desperately afraid of me, Hester Lawrence?”

Her eyes looked up at him, then dropped before his intent gaze.

“No, . . . I don’t think so.”

“Then, for God’s sake, don’t be so damned meek. It isn’t like you. Good night,” and with the words he was gone, and the door had banged behind him.

CHAPTER FORTY

HESTER could not sleep that night for thinking about the strange ‘bargain’ between herself and Garnet Mallory. The unexpected—the most devastatingly unexpected—had happened and she was engaged to him, *engaged* to him.

She repeated the words aloud as if the better to convince her incredulous mind, and then held her breath, for her voice, speaking into the darkness, came back to her with a curiously sinister ring. How absurd! She was imagining things, yet the whole situation was incongruous and full of strange as well as happy possibilities. Or was she all wrong in imagining they might be happy?

She rose the next morning feeling as if she moved in a dream and as if the events of the previous evening could not have occurred. It was just something she had imagined, dreamed about . . .

Yet when the telephone bell rang before she had risen from the breakfast-table she was afraid to answer it, and waited breathlessly while Maud spoke in the hall, and the faint murmur of her voice carried into the silent dining-room.

It was a clear and lovely morning with a faint haze lying in the far reaches of the garden, and the sound of birds chirruping in almost spring-like fashion. There was so little that was November, and so much of the promise of early April.

Hester sat, nervously clasping her hands together, waiting to be called from her lonely breakfast-table.

Maud came to the dining-room door.

“Could Mr. Mallory speak to you for a moment, Miss Lawrence?” she wanted to know.

“Oh yes,” said Hester, rising, and surprised to find that she was speaking in her ordinary voice. What she had expected of herself she hardly knew, only not to find herself saying ordinary things in an ordinary way.

She went out into the hall and took up the microphone, vividly conscious of the parlourmaid’s slow progress towards the kitchen regions.

“Hello.”

“Is that you, Hester?”

“Yes. . . . Good morning.”

The baize door swung behind Maud and Hester unconsciously relaxed.

“This is just to ask you if you remember last night and are still of the same mind?”

“I certainly haven’t forgotten. Have you changed your mind?”

“How evasive a woman can be! No, I think just the same. And you?”

Hester drew a deep breath before she answered.

“Yes. . . . Yes—thank you.”

His laugh came softly over the wire, but it was a ‘nice’ laugh, the girl decided, not a scornful or a mocking one. “That’s all right then. About my journey to Town this morning. I’ve had a business letter which means I shall have to go up on Monday so I think I’ll postpone my journey till then. Will that be all right for you?”

“For me?” surprised. “Does it affect me in any way?”

“Undoubtedly. I shall now be able to see you this morning, and we might lunch together. Probably you would prefer that to a formal dinner tonight?”

“I don’t know. I hardly know where I am yet.”

“Still bewildered?”

“Very. I haven’t become used to the thought yet.”

“Then please hurry up. For on Monday I mean to find out about getting a special licence and all that.”

“But there’s no hurry.”

“Isn’t there? What is there to wait for? But we can’t discuss this on the telephone. May I come over presently?”

“Of course.”

“Do you remember my last words to you last night?” His voice had tensened, and she was conscious of something in leash, anger perhaps, or merely exasperation.

“I think I do,” she answered, slowly, as though the words were indelibly printed upon her mind.

“Then please remember them. I loathe a meek woman. I shall see you later, so until then, ‘*au revoir*,’” and he rang off.

Hester turned slowly away.

It was dreadful, this queer sensation she had of being in a dream, acting and taking part as if in some play that had no real and vital meaning or influence on her life. And that second self which can criticize one’s actions seemed to sit up aloft and mock her.

She gave herself a mental shake and tried to face the day as if nothing extraordinary had happened, but found herself jumping nervily when half an hour later the telephone bell rang and she went to answer it.

This time it was Eve.

“Just rang up to know if everything was all right.”

This was such an unusual procedure on Eve’s part, that Hester wondered whether she had heard anything, then laughed at herself, for how could Eve hear any news about her secretary all those miles away and when no one else knew of her ‘engagement’.

“The Lintners have a lunch engagement tomorrow so I may come back this afternoon,” Eve went on. “They’ve got a sherry party tonight and I don’t want to go to it particularly. They don’t want me to leave, but I think I may. I feel so restless I can’t stay anywhere.”

“Oh! Shall we expect you back then?”

“Probably.” Eve rattled on about various small matters and finally rang off, and Hester found that she had still not told Eve the news about herself which she supposed she should have done.

But she was glad to postpone the moment, feeling that she would like to tell Eve herself and yet dreading to see the expression that would pass over her employer’s face when she heard. Eve might think that Hester had played her false, had treacherously stolen something which she did not want herself and yet would resent her secretary possessing.

An hour passed, then there came the sound of a car in the drive. Hester waited anxiously in the library, sure that it would be Garnet Mallory and fearful of meeting him.

A few minutes later Maud ushered him into the library.

He took her hand in his and smiled down into her face, noticing the withdrawn expression, and the wide, perplexed eyes.

“You aren’t yourself, Hester,” he said. “You seem to be different.”

She glanced at him quickly.

“I’m sorry. It’s only that I’m so bewildered at the way things have happened so quickly.” Then she smiled at him. “Silly of me, isn’t it?”

“Very. Now, to get down to brass tacks. There are various financial details we ought to fix up, so if you can spare me five minutes for a business talk . . .”

She nodded, the while her heart grew heavy. Yet that was his side of the bargain, and she should be glad, relieved, if only for her family’s sake.

For ten minutes they talked money, and Mallory made a note of the various amounts necessary to fulfil the obligations he had undertaken in his promise to Hester the night before.

Then Maud brought in sherry, with a glance at Hester for approval.

“Thank you, Maud.”

When they were alone again he raised his glass and toasted her.

“To our new life together,” he said softly, his eyes on hers. “And may you cease to be afraid of me and grow to . . .” He broke off, and looked at her more straightly as the colour slid up under her skin.

“Yes?” she prompted him.

“What shall I say?” Then he smiled. “That we may grow to love each other?”

The atmosphere between them grew tense. Both were aware of strange reactions following upon those vital words.

Then the library door burst open and Eve Jarvis came into the room.

“Hello, folks. I never expected to see you here, Garnet.”

Her eyes fell questioningly upon Hester who had flushed at her arrival.

“This is a surprise, Eve.”

“Obviously. Ring the bell, Hester, and order a glass for me, will you? I could do with a drink.” She pulled off her little high-crowned hat and tossed it onto Hester’s desk, then dropped into a chair, and groaned. “I’ve come hell for leather, because I thought I’d get back for lunch. The Lintners decided to go up to Town earlier since they knew I was coming back this afternoon, so I said I might as well come on now. Rather a flop, my stay with them actually! I don’t think I was wanted really. Well, Garnet?” and she glanced across at him brightly. “You’re looking very serious. How’s the world treating you, or not often as they say?”

Her manner was so artificial, so hardly, metallically bright where usually she was charmingly casual, that Hester looked at her again. A small bright spot of colour burned in either cheek, and she had to admit that Eve looked very lovely. How could Garnet have preferred *her* . . .

“I *am* very serious,” said Mallory, quietly. “I came over to see Hester about a rather important matter. Shall I tell her, Hester?” glancing at the girl who was sitting nervously on her chair, twisting her fingers together, most unlike herself. She seemed to have lost her self-possession, the poise which was so essentially Hester.

“Why yes, do tell her, if you like.”

“Hester has done me the great honour,” said Garnet looking straight across at Eve, “to consent to be my wife.”

“Your wife!” echoed Eve, in a low, stiff voice. Then she turned and looked across at Hester, and the blankness of her face and the expressionlessness of her look was like a blow to the older girl. “You’re going to *marry* him, Hester?”

“Yes.”

“Won’t you congratulate us?” Mallory’s voice, cool and clipped, cut across the tension of the atmosphere.

“Why yes, of course,” said Eve, eagerly. “I congratulate you both immensely, and hope you’ll be *frightfully* happy.”

Maud appeared at the door at that moment in answer to the ring of the bell, and went to fetch a sherry-glass as directed, and they awaited almost in silence for her return since the door was ajar. Then Eve jumped to her feet, poured herself a glass of the rich brown liquid, spilling some on the silver tray in her haste, and raised the fragile glass in her hand.

“Here’s to your health and your happiness, both of you.” She drank, and then turned back to Hester. “You’ve been frightfully secret about it, Hester; you might have given me an inkling.”

“I didn’t know myself until last night,” said Hester, hurriedly. “It’s all been so sudden, and so unexpected. How could I tell you, Eve, when I didn’t know anything about it myself?”

Eve shrugged.

“Not even a woman’s intuition?”

Mallory did not give the girl time to reply, but cut in with some casual remark which led the conversation into other channels. A little later he took his departure, since he saw that it would be a wiser move than urging Hester to lunch with him, and when the two girls were alone, Eve’s artificial attitude vanished. She swung round on her secretary with sparkling eyes.

“I think that’s a very dirty trick, Hester.”

“Eve! You can’t say that. After all, your wager was over and finished with, and you didn’t want to marry him yourself, did you?”

“Certainly not. But I feel as if you’ve gone behind my back . . .”

“You’ve no right to say that. After all I’m perfectly free to marry whom I choose, and so is Garnet Mallory.”

For a moment Eve did not reply, then she swallowed, pulled herself together and held out her hand to her secretary, with an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry, Hester. It was such a shock. And you forget what it means to me, that I shall lose you and have to stand on my own feet or find some other secretary, and no one will ever be able to take your place. Forgive me, I’ve been a pig. I admit it was rather a blow . . .”

“Why should it be?”

“Say that it was just my vanity and my pride,” said Eve, sweepingly. “After all, you forget that I failed to attract him and you’ve succeeded.”

“I see. I’m afraid I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Then that’s all right and everything’s as it should be. I should think lunch must be nearly ready. I must go and have a wash quickly for I’m dying of hunger.” And she swung out of the room, whistling as she went, and breaking into song as she gained the stairs, informing the world in general that it was *The sweetest song in the world*.

Hester remained where she was left, staring in front of her, feeling as if some of the joy had gone out of the future, and that having seen Mallory she felt more afraid of him than she had done the night before, and could only look ahead to what lay before her with fear and trembling and doubt.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“I’LL WRITE to Inez and Con Chator,” said Eve, at lunch. “There’s no need for a meeting in Inez’s studio in December now that everything’s come to an end. The wager’s over, and I’ve failed, and that’s that. They’ll be interested to hear that you’re engaged to him. In fact I should imagine a great many people will be interested, Hester. Do you realize that you’ve captured the woman-hater?”

Hester flinched secretly, but smiled across at her employer as if she had made a very witty remark.

“Funny, isn’t it?” she answered, evenly. “I can’t realize it myself.”

“I should think he’d make a wonderful and at the same time a most difficult husband,” went on Eve. “No doubt you’ll be able to cope with him. I don’t think I have come across any circumstances or happenings that you couldn’t cope with, dear Hester. You’re so frightfully efficient.”

Was there a sting in the words, or was Eve quite unconscious of any malice? Hester hated to feel that her employer was angry with her, and yet that was not quite the right word; exasperated perhaps, or was she merely jealous?

Eve had so much, she need not begrudge to Hester what Fate had yielded to her. But it generally happened to those who had much came the more, and from those who had little was taken away, as the Bible says, even that which they had.

Lunch over, Eve suddenly made a rather generous suggestion.

“I think the announcement of your engagement ought to be made from here, in a really sort of formal way,” she said. “We’ll ring up the Rodneys and see how many of them can come over and dine, and then we’ll all drink your health.”

“Oh, must you?” Hester hated publicity, and drew back shrinkingly from such a suggestion. “Don’t, please, Eve.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” answered Eve, ruthlessly. “You should be delighted. You’ll have to get used to people meeting you as Garnet’s fiancée, so you might have a little practice here. I’ll go and ring up Mrs. Rodney straight away.”

But the Rodneys were not available. Jingo had fallen down several stairs that morning and badly sprained her ankle, and Mrs. Rodney declared herself rather anxious about her. The child seemed so depressed and overcome with the shock that she was going to be kept in bed for a couple of days.

“And of course,” said Mrs. Rodney, “Drake is still an invalid, so you must count us out, Eve dear.”

“Then I’ll tell you what I was giving a little dinner for,” said Eve. “It was to celebrate Hester’s engagement.”

“Hester’s engagement!” echoed Mrs. Rodney. “My dear, I’m so thrilled about it! Who is it? Anyone we know?”

Eve laughed. “Rather. Someone you know quite well. In fact, it’s Garnet Mallory.”

Mrs. Rodney’s surprise kept her speechless for a moment, and then she sent an eager message to Hester, and hanging up the receiver went quickly to tell the news to her family.

They were all astonished as Eve had thought they would be, and wondered, not as Eve would have wondered what Mallory could have seen in Hester, but whether the man had it in him to make the girl happy. They were fond of Hester, and they wanted her to be happy in the future, and they were sorry that Mallory was the man of her choice.

Jingo lay in bed as her mother told her the news, and then left alone, turned her face into the pillow. She was glad, glad for Hester because she knew that Garnet could be delightful as well as—whatever it was people thought him. She thought Hester might be happy, and for herself, . . . well, it was rather a relief. It put Mallory definitely out of the picture, and perhaps now Jerry would be convinced . . .

She heaved a very deep sigh. How complicated life was! How foolish of Jerry to think that she could love anybody else but him, when he was so dear to her, and looking back she had only to remember the lovely hours they had spent together and he must know, *must* realize that their love was something apart, something that made life beautiful, something not easily to be given up by either of them.

Unknown to Jingo her mother had put through a telephone call to Jerry’s home, and told him about the girl’s accident. Jerry, instantly anxious, forgetting everything else, said he would come back at once.

Fully satisfied, Mrs. Rodney hung up the receiver, and smiled to herself. After all Fate had a strange way of working, and Jingo’s accident might have

been destiny solving her own problem for her, and making it easy for her and Jerry to come together again.

• • • • •

Hester did not want to see Mallory again that day, and as if realizing her thoughts, he thoughtfully left her alone, only sending over flowers from the greenhouses of Green Acres.

On Sunday morning he rang up, and persuaded Eve and Hester to come and lunch with him, a friendly, more or less easy meal, at which he exerted every effort to put Hester at ease and to make it a very delightful hour for all of them. The girl was surprised to find how pleasant the time was, and when he saw them off in Eve's car in the middle of the afternoon she realized that actually she had quite enjoyed it.

"I shall be two or three days in Town," he had said, when Eve, being as Hester thought facetiously tactful, had left the two together in the sitting-room before they left, "but I shall be pretty anxious to get back again."

Hester said nothing.

"You won't miss me, even a little?" He bent his head to look into her eyes, as she lifted her flushed face with a vaguely tremulous smile.

"It will be peaceful without you."

"I don't think that's a very kind statement," but he laughed, and did not press her further.

Back again at Five Gables, and during the day or two that followed, Hester certainly found it very peaceful without the knowledge that he was just at the end of the telephone and might be over at any moment.

Eve had decided not to go to Town yet but to stay on in the country, and spent most of Monday and Tuesday in tearing around in her car, lunching with friends within a radius of twenty miles or so, and Hester did not see very much of her.

On the Wednesday morning she received her first letter from Garnet in which he told her that he would be returning that evening and would come over to Five Gables to see her and to tell her of his stay in Town, and what he had accomplished. They would then arrange dates together and since there was nothing to wait for would be able to 'get on with it'.

Hester stood at her bedroom window for a long time, the letter in her hand, turning over the contents in her mind. Tonight she would have to be definite, would have to agree to whatever he suggested, and she knew an

inward hesitation and tremulousness that yet had nothing to do with the fear she had first felt of this man to whom she had promised herself.

They were friends; they had agreed to be friends, and on that basis she must try to build up a happy life with him.

With him! she repeated to herself. Really, she was very lucky, for she might have hated him . . . instead of which . . . she could follow those thoughts no further. She could only wait, filled with a new and thrilling excitement, for him to come to her that evening.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

EVE looked at Hester a little strangely when she told her that Garnet Mallory was coming back that evening and that he would be over after dinner.

“Then I’ll leave you in possession,” said Eve, briskly. “I’ll go over and have dinner with the Rodneys; I haven’t been there for ages and I’m sure they’d love to have me.”

“Please don’t feel you have to go out,” said Hester, the colour creeping up into her cheeks. “It’s frightfully nice of you but . . .”

“Why, you’re blushing like a girl!” Then Eve put out a hand and touched her friend affectionately on the arm. “Sorry to tease you. I know I was a pig about you getting engaged first of all, but you don’t think me that any longer, do you? I’m so terribly fond of you, Hester, and I shall hate to lose you.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you. I shall miss you frightfully, Eve. You’ve always been so good to me.”

“Nonsense. Who wouldn’t be? You’re the sort of girl that people can’t help being good to. I only hope . . .” She broke off uncertainly.

“Yes? Tell me.”

“I only hope Garnet Mallory’s good enough for you, and that he’ll look after you and be decent.”

Hester looked down at her clasped hands quickly, to hide the shining of her eyes, the warm tremor of her lips, but Eve had seen the sweet expression and she marvelled at the change the last few days had wrought in her little secretary. There was a certain radiance about her, something which seemed to glow as from an inner light, but she supposed that, according to the old saying, it was a fact that when a woman was in love she was transformed.

“I expect he’ll want to get married pretty soon, won’t he? There’s nothing to wait for.”

“That’s what he says. I suppose there isn’t actually, only I don’t want to leave you in the lurch with no one to do anything for you, Eve.”

“My dear, don’t worry about that. I think I’ll shut up the house and the flat and go abroad for a bit. Do me good. I’ve been too long in England and

to get out of it for a while will be a change. But don't let anything like that worry you."

"That's good of you."

Eve shrugged her slim shoulders.

"The least one can do between friends. Oh, by the way, I had a letter from Con this morning, and she offers you her heartiest congratulations. And she says her aunt is awfully pleased with Betty and wants her to stay on indefinitely. That was a very good move, sending your sister up to her."

Betty had rung up on the Monday to say that the old lady wanted her to stay on but she did not know that she would want her permanently, she thought it was only to prolong the trial visit. Now Hester could heave a sigh of relief and feel that Betty also was off her hands and her whole family was provided for, thanks to Mallory's generosity. She had nothing to worry about, nothing to plan for or cause her any mental disturbances except her own future. Her own future!

Eve was speaking, and she forced herself away from her own thoughts.

"I'll go and ring up the Rodneys, and see what they say about this evening."

Yes, they would be only too delighted to have Eve. Drake was well enough to be able to appear at dinner, and Jingo's ankle was considerably better, although Jerry still carried her about the place.

Mrs. Rodney did not say how happy and relieved they all were at Jerry's return and that the little upset between husband and wife was now smoothed over, and Jerry and Jingo looked at each other with new eyes and wondered why on earth they had been so silly to allow anything, even a man, to come between them.

"We shall be delighted to see you, my dear," said Mrs. Rodney. "Are you being tactful and getting out of the way of the engaged couple?"

Eve laughed and explained that she was, and hung up the receiver rather more thoughtfully than usual, feeling that warm little sense of satisfaction within her that comes from doing something for someone else even at the cost of one's own convenience and at the price of some little effort.

Dear Hester! She hoped that she would be happy. With Mallory, she ought to be. . . . Or ought she? He was a difficult man, but he was—marvellous. Eve bit back a sigh, as she tried not to think about him, nor to think and dream of those things which now would never be hers, and to long for a moon that was for ever unattainable.

“I hope you’ll like it, Hester.” Garnet Mallory held out his hand palm upwards, and there reposed the most wonderful ring that the girl had ever seen, an immense solitaire diamond on a platinum circlet.

“Oh! It’s much too good.”

“Too good?” he echoed, laughing a little. “You don’t think I should give you anything that wasn’t the very best, do you?”

“I hope not.” She looked at him with her old frankness, fighting against the sweet dread that his presence now always awoke within her. “I hope we shall both give each other of the very best.”

He looked at her seriously.

“I mean to try, Hester. You make me feel as if nothing less than that would be right to offer to you. That’s why I hesitate . . .”

“Yes?” She looked at him questioningly. “What are you hesitating about?”

“When I bought this ring and thought about giving it to you, then it occurred to me that perhaps I was *not* offering you the most and the best that I was possible of offering. We’ve drawn up a kind of deed of partnership, but it’s a very cold and lifeless thing, don’t you think?”

She looked up at him from the corner of the couch to where he stood, one shoulder leaning against the mantel, gazing down at the ring which he still held in his hand.

“I don’t think I quite understand you.”

He came suddenly and sat beside her, and taking her left hand slipped the ring upon the third finger.

“With my love,” he said softly, pressing her hand, and then laying it back in her lap. “With all my love, Hester.”

She turned slowly and looked into his face.

“Still I don’t understand,” she said, very low.

“I have offered you my name, my house, all my possessions,” he went on, his deep voice growing deeper as he spoke. “But there’s one other thing I can give you, if you’ll accept it.”

“And that is?”

“My love.”

“But there wasn’t to be any question of love between us,” she whispered, breathlessly. “You said so yourself.”

“I know. That’s just where I was wrong.”

She waited for him to speak, but it seemed a long, long time before the pregnant silence between them was broken. He sat looking down at her hand as it lay on her lap, the firelight winking in the great diamond, and there was something in his attitude strangely humble, almost pleading.

“You see, Hester, it’s like this. I could take another woman simply because I desired her, but I can’t take you unless you love me, because I happen to—love you.”

“No, it can’t be that you love me.”

He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face towards him.

“I do. And you? There isn’t any hope that you could love me?”

The lashes drooped above her eyes as if she dared not show him their shining radiance, and for a moment he searched her face, and then with a sigh he let her go.

“It was much more than I ever dared to hope. But, you know, to everyone there comes in their lives one outstanding occasion, something that’s never to be forgotten, and that I could have with you but with no one else. Only you, Hester, could give me that one shining hour, and if you refuse it, then you must go free. I find I can’t marry you unless you love me as I love you.”

Then she gave him the glory of her eyes, with the love blazing in them that she could no longer hide, lifting her face towards him and no longer seeking to keep her secret from him.

“Oh, Garnet,” she breathed. “I do love you.”

For a moment they looked at each other, and then involuntarily she leant towards him as his arms came out and clasped her in an ever-tightening embrace.

“Hester, . . . my sweet.”

“Garnet . . . I never thought you would ever love me.”

“I shall love you for ever and ever,” he answered, gathering her closer to him with swift passion. “And we shall be happy together for the rest of our lives.”

He bent his mouth to hers and for them both that shining hour which is to many a dream for ever unattainable, gave them the promise of a lasting and lovely reality.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Shadow over the Plains* by Marjorie Huxtable (as Simon Dare)]