



**Mills & Boon**

**858**

# THE MASTER OF TAWHAI

**Essie Summers**



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Rowena had the rich girl's problem: to find a man who would love her for herself and not for her fortune. At the moment, she didn't particularly want to find a man at all- she was still smarting from being jilted by a man who made it clear that it had been her money, never herself, that was the attraction. So Rowena took herself off to New Zealand, to nurse her wounds and earn her own living for a change. How ironic that in no time at all she should fall for a rich man who had a horror gold-diggers--and who took it for granted that Rowena must be one of them!

## CHAPTER I

As the bus left the city of Christchurch and headed south across the Canterbury Plains, Rowena Fotheringham felt that here, at last, she had severed the last link with her old life. Her new life's financial security was measured by the hundred pounds in the handbag on her lap.

When she had said to her brother before leaving England, "No, I'm not depositing any money with the Bank of New Zealand," he had thought she was mad and said so.

"Even if you want to go on with this crazy idea, Rowena, you ought to have something to fall back on in case of emergency."

She had shaken her head, not stubbornly, but with the conviction of having thought it out most carefully.

"Leicester, if I have money at the back of me, I'll behave as if I have, and people will see through me. I would buy expensive clothes when I needed them, commit extravagancies ... and I must, I *must* find out if people like me for what I am - not what I have.

"Besides, even if I didn't want to prove that, it's better if I go now. It will give Margot her proper place as your wife. The people in the village still come to me for everything, you know. If I'm thirteen thousand miles away, Margot will really become a Fotheringham."

Leicester had watched her go, not without serious misgivings.

Margot said wistfully, as they returned from seeing the ship sail from Southampton, "I suppose she's got to work out her own salvation, but ... I could kill Geoffrey. If he had told Rowena that he'd loved her once but been swept off his feet by this other girl it would have been bad enough - but to tell her that in the first place he had sought her because of her money is enough to make any girl doubt her own powers of attraction."

But that was all history now. Rowena had her hundred pounds, a trunk and two suitcases of extremely good, though not brand-new, clothes in the

luggage compartment of the bus, trundling off to a new job in a new country.

She hoped Mrs. Lance Beechington would be a kindred spirit. Rowena had answered an advertisement for a companion-help fond of reading aloud to someone with failing eyesight, on one of the pioneer homesteads of South Canterbury, the Tawhai Hills Estate.

In any case she'd have to stick it for a while. Mrs. Lance Beechington had finalized matters by phone and seemed frightfully vague, giving directions in the tone of one who felt everyone must know of Tawhai Hills. Probably the woman had never moved out of the district in all her life.

Rowena had endeavoured to put things on a more business-like footing by confirming her acceptance of the position and the time of her arrival by letter.

Now that the flame of high resolve had died down, Rowena felt apprehensive. It was somehow a little frightening, when you had always had a lovely home like Ainsley Dene for a background, to be quite on your own, journeying towards you knew not what, in a strange country.

She looked out of the window; perhaps it had a beauty all its own, if she was in the mood to appreciate it, this raw young land. Not that the cities were raw; she'd thought Wellington and Auckland quite lovely, and Christchurch could have been any English city, but the vastness of this appalled her.

The size of the paddocks, the shingle roads that led dustily off the macadam main road, eastwards to the sea, westwards to that great backbone of mountains, snow-capped and rugged, that someone said was called the Southern Alps, all had an immensity that made her feel lost and unimportant.

She hated flat country, anyway. These plains might mean wealth in grain and sheep, but how monotonous, mile after straight mile, with scarcely a dip or a winding turn ... relieved only by river-beds which seemed acres of shingle, scoured out by deep channels, and untidy with great uprooted willows flung against the piles of the bridges, mementoes of floods.

Suddenly they were beyond the Rangitata, and the road curved around past a homestead that could have been English. As they turned west from the main road, they were into the greener rolling country of South Canterbury. Now they were heading into wooded hills, to Rowena's relief.

People were put down, or picked up, at what seemed very isolated farms, or tiny townships, straggly and untidy- looking. Occasionally they passed a more attractive cluster of houses, with a little church roofed with wooden shingles, and a school with a bright garden. But there was something so haphazard and ungracious about the landscape.

The bus came to a grinding stop. The driver looked around at Rowena.

"This is where you said you wanted off."

She stared. Five shingle roads met in starfish formation, with dusty, hedge-high cocksfoot grass on the verges. Not a house or even a haystack in sight.

"It can't be," she said. "I wanted Beechington Crossroads. I'm to be met."

"This *is* the Crossroads, lady. There's the signpost: Tawhai Hills. They'll be along in a moment. Forrest is probably held up."

His tone was casual in the extreme. Rowena said stiffly: "Who is Forrest?"

"The bloke you're going to work for!" he said.

"I'm going to work for a Mrs. Lance Beechington. Is -"

"Forrest is her nephew. He'll be along soon. Don't you worry. You'll see a cloud of dust in a moment. That'll be him."

Uncertainly, Rowena got out, waited till he got out her baggage, and then was further mortified when he refused the tip she offered. Oh dear, she thought, one of the things that aren't done here, I suppose.

She gazed hopefully past the signpost for the cloud of dust. She had heard New Zealanders were casual, but this was the end.

Half an hour later she was still forlornly waiting. She had given herself that time limit. Now she would go in search of some dwelling, with a phone, and ring these extraordinary Beechingtons. She told herself not to be high-handed; perhaps the car had broken down, perhaps a puncture, or sud-den illness ... a hundred and one things.

Rowena picked up her trunk and staggered to the side of the road. There was a terrific Sort of ditch here, absolutely dry. Her trunk would be hidden there. She slid it in, and did the same with the two cases.

She gripped her overnight suitcase and her handbag and set off. Surely around the corner she would find a habitation nearer than Tawhai Hills, which, the signpost said, was seven miles away.

She was right. Here was a gateway, if you could call it that. The end of a rusty iron bedstead hung drunkenly from rope hinges in a straggly gorse hedge and gave access to a rutted drive leading up to an unpainted and derelict house smothered in creepers and vines.

Rowena's heart sank. No one would live here. But as she neared the front door, she saw it was propped open. She looked up and around. No telephone wires, or electric light!

Timidly, she knocked. She heard shuffling feet, and presently a figure came slowly into view ... unkempt, unlovely, certainly unwashed. Rowena couldn't guess at her age. She had bright glittering eyes under a tangle of hair, and half her teeth were missing.

Without hope Rowena began to explain.

The woman cackled, "Well, it looks like you gotta walk, don't it, dearie? But never mind, there's a track out of my place at the back. Not more than a coupla miles that way. There'll be someone about at Tawhai. Come on through. I'll show you."

She led Rowena through an incredibly filthy house that seemed inhabited by dozens of cats and kittens, then took her through an indescribable farmyard and through another rickety gate.

"You can't miss the track, dearie . . . past them willows and pigsties. It follows the creek all the way. It's a lovely walk. Ta-ta."

Rowena quite mechanically echoed the "ta-ta" and grimly set off. At the first and second fences at least there were stiles, wobbly and unsafe, so she negotiated them carefully, glad she had worn pleated tweeds.

Between sheep and the pigs that rooted everywhere, she was going to turn up with indescribable shoes, but it served the Beechingtons right. She plodded on.

Following the creek wasn't exactly the way to describe the track. Sometimes it went alongside, more often it crossed over and back again, by rotten planks and inadequate stepping-stones, one of which precipitated Rowena ankle-deep in mire when it turned over. She was hot, thirsty, and in a very bad temper.

The track suddenly left the stream and crossed a large paddock dotted with trees. Rowena looked at the fence. The last one had had no stile, merely an old sack hung over the prongs of the barbed wire. This one had nothing and the wire was tight and new. Rowena felt her skirt rip as she got over.

She was three parts of the way across when she heard a sound. Before she looked she knew what it meant, country born and bred as she was. The sound of hooves.

Normally the sight of a bull wouldn't have alarmed Rowena, but this one meant business. He was coming straight at her, though a good distance away.

She wasn't far from the corner and the willows. Rowena could run like a deer, and did. Thank heaven it wasn't uphill, but she was hot and tired ... and terrified. She daren't look round ... if only she could reach the trees, and dodge, then climb one. The bull was gaining ground.



Her lungs felt as if they were bursting. She reached the first tree, dodged behind it, saw the bull thunder past, stop, frustrated. She turned and flew to the next tree. It had low branches and was near the boundary fence.

Suddenly she was aware that hooves were thundering on the other side of the fence. She swung up, clutched at a branch, somehow scrambled up.

She was aware of other things happening, but remotely, as if they didn't matter to her. All she cared about was that she was above danger level, her heart racing, her lungs tortured, her ear-drums bursting. There was shouting, something whistling through the air, an angry bellow from the bull.

She decided to seek a higher, sturdier branch, stood up, swung herself to the next and looked down. It overhung the fence. With a bit of luck she could work her way along and drop down. But before she did she'd get her breath back, make quite sure that there was "no livestock in the next paddock, and pray hard that the bull wasn't a fence-jumper.

Then the voice spoke. "Treed, by heaven!" it said.

Rowena had to peer through the leaves. The voice continued :

"You ought to take a ticket in Tatt's. I've never known anyone luckier!"

Fury rose up and engulfed Rowena. Lucky!

The owner of the voice came into view. He was dark and tall, and he was astride a magnificent mare, if Rowena had been in the state to appreciate horseflesh. Perhaps she ought to thank him ... she had an idea he had thrown something and struck the bull in his charging ... however, she had done most of the saving herself, she'd just tell him what she thought about ... He spoke first, and his tone held sheer rage.

"When I get you down from there," he said grimly, "you're going to tell me what the devil you mean by meandering over paddocks with pedigree bulls in them. There are more pleasant ways of committing suicide than that!"

Rowena drew in her breath and let him have it.

"Believe me, I was not *meandering*. I was trying to find my way. Looking for my employer, who should have met me. I've taken a job with some vague creature who doesn't know enough to have met me where she told me I'd be met, even after I confirmed the time of my arrival by letter. I was dumped at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere by a casual bus-driver who assured me someone would be along any moment. After waiting half an hour, I dump my luggage in a dry ditch, find a house ... I suppose you could call it a house ... and out comes the village idiot! She tells me to take a short cut, I wander through pigsties, I climb barbed-wire fences, crawl under others, jump over creeks; I tear my skirt, soak my feet to the skin, ruin my shoes! I carefully ask the aforementioned idiot if I won't be trespassing, and she assures me, oh no, not in New Zealand, dearie. Everybody goes everywhere. No wonder you don't have notices up, you don't need them ... you keep savage bulls no one bothers to warn people about. And then - and *then* I meet up with a ... with an extremely rude and unfeeling yokel who swears at me, and thinks I've been out for a pleasant walk, and tells me I'm *lucky*!"

She stopped, out of breath. Then he laughed. Had there been anything around, Rowena would have thrown it at him; she had never felt so primitively savage before.

He edged his mount closer to the fence. He grinned in such a hateful way that Rowena would have liked to wipe it from his face. He peered up.

"Before we continue this argument, you'd better get down on the right side of the fence. Come on!"

There was nothing else for it. She edged along. He dismounted, said, "You'd better step on to my saddle ... or are you frightened?"

"Frightened! Good heavens, no." Rowena's voice was full of scorn. She must hang on to her anger, it was the only thing that was going to sustain her till this ridiculous interview was done. She'd have to rely on this ... yes, this yokel, to direct her to Tawhai Hills. It was going to be hard to be dignified with her hat gone, a rip in her skirt, and half the farmyard on her shoes, to say nothing of nylons that were mere tatters.

She got a leg down gingerly, felt her ankle guided to the saddle, and the next moment the man was swinging her against him and settling her on her feet. He held her by the elbows as if afraid she might fall, or faint.

"Now," he said, "what's your name, and where do you want to go?"

She spoke stiffly. "My name's Fotheringham, and I'm looking for Tawhai Hills.'

He stared at her from under the overhanging brows.

"For the lord's sake! You're not Miss Rowena M. A. Fotheringham?"

"Ye-e-es," said Rowena. "Why?"

He laughed again. The laughter maddened her.

"We thought you were at least sixty ... scraggy, and spinsterish..."

Rowena's turn to stare. "You thought ... I - you're not - not any relation to my future employer, are you?"

His face was mock grave. "I am, alas. Her nephew. Her *yokel* nephew, Forrest Beechington. And you were to come Thursday, not Tuesday."

"I said *Tuesday*. I even put the date. You couldn't possibly have misread both."

He groaned. "I didn't read the letter ... at least not the second one. I did read your application. Aunt Lavinia's eyes must be even worse than we think."

She expected an apology, but none was forthcoming. Instead he said, with the air of making the best of a bad job, "I'll take you up to the house, and we'll sort things out." He added, "Don't suppose you've ever ridden a horse in your life, but it's some distance, so you'll have to come up before me."

Rowena said in a carefully controlled voice, "I think I could manage to stick on."

He seemed determined to be unpleasant. "I only hope your skirt is wide enough and that it won't ruin it."

Rowena said shortly, "It *is* ruined." She pulled the back hem into view.

"More than your skirt is ruined," he pointed out, and she was dismayed to see trailing on the ground the full length of the frill on her once immaculate nylon petticoat. She bent down and savagely tore it off.

"Moreover -" he said sardonically, and surveyed the ground over the fence under the tree.

Rowena turned and her face flamed. She must hav'e hung on to her overnight satchel till she reached the tree, then let it go. Perhaps the bull had had a go at it while she was scrambling up. The contents were scattered far and wide.

A filmy yellow nightgown was spread-eagled, a black bra dangled in a dissipated fashion from a Californian thistle, a brush and comb were trodden into the ground, a sponge- bag andmake-up kit had lost their contents.

Rowena looked about for her handbag and discovered it still hung on her arm.

Forrest Beechington put a long leg over the fence.

Rowena said quickly, "Please don't bother! We'll write them off as a dead loss. Don't get into the field with that bull."

He shrugged. "Mephy's all right now." He gestured. The bull was back in the centre of the paddock lying down, his black coat glistening like satin in the sun.

"Meffy?" asked Rowena. "What a strange name for a bull."

"Short for Mephistopheles," he replied.

"How apt!"

She watched without comment as this beetling-browed man scooped up the flimsy garments, stuffed them into the bag and tried without success to do it up again.

Then she was up before him on the mare, feeling she should pinch herself to make sure this was not some prolonged nightmare. Would this man ever forget this foolish incident, so lacking in dignity and poise? Would he lose sight of it in the everyday service she would give his aunt, or would he always hold it against her? She had an idea he would not suffer fools gladly.

They had evidently wanted an elderly woman as the aunt's companion, someone with contemporary interests. Panic feathered Rowena's mind fleetingly. After all, she had only a hundred pounds and her ability to earn, between her and the humiliation of having to write home for money. She must stick to this job ... but what a start!

Mr. Beechington held the mare in, holding the reins with one hand, his other holding her against him in a carefully impersonal way.

Rowena found the silence trying.

"What made you think I was so old?" she asked.

"Your handwriting. Your way of putting things. Your name. I somehow associated the name Rowena with someone of Aunt Lavinia's vintage. It's old-fashioned. So was your writing."

That was true enough, Rowena knew. Her first years of schooling had been under a very old-fashioned governess who had taught her to write a precise, copper-plate hand. And perhaps her first letter had been stilted because she had never applied for a position before.

The hatefully amused voice at her shoulder continued:

"Lindsay, my niece, wondered what the M stood for. I said probably Methuselah ..."

Rowena laughed politely, said shortly, "It's Melisande."

"And the A?"

Rowena hesitated. It wasn't likely anyone here would connect a companion-help with Lord Ainsley, but she'd better play safe.

"Agatha," she lied.

He whistled. "Rowena Melisande Agatha Fotheringham! Yes, definitely early Victorian."

She felt a ripple of laughter go through him.

They turned a bend bordered by trees, came on to a narrow bitumen road, and Tawhai Hills Homestead lay before them.

It took Rowena so much by surprise that she grasped the reins over his hand, and halted the mare. To her surprise, once she realized what she had done, he did not object. Well, no doubt this was his weak spot... the loveliness of Tawhai.

It was two-storied and built of local red stone, festooned with Virginia creeper, bright in its autumn colouring.

The garden dipped down below the road level and then swept up towards the house. A shallow stream wandered through, reflecting red-hot pokers and purple iris in its waters. There were trees everywhere, many English ones Rowena could recognize, and beyond, as a solid green background, a belt of native bush.

Above all brooded Mount Tawhai, bush-clad on its lower slopes, then, above grey shoulders, white-capped with shining snow.

Rowena found her voice. "How truly beautiful!"

If she had expected warmth or appreciation in his tone she was mistaken.

"If only the inside matched the outside. It's very different, let me warn you!"

The mare jogged on. "What do you mean, Mr. Beechington?"^

"It's very ill-kept, Miss Fotheringham. Staff is very hard to get out here, and Aunt Lavinia has never been used to housekeeping. Never had to do it. The whole place is thick with dust, the carpets getting moth-eaten and mildewed. You'll be appalled. In fact, I shan't blame you if you cut and run back to town.

"Housekeepers won't stay without an adequate number of maids ... we've only one at present, little Nelly, who hasn't a clue. Aunt Lavinia is not the person to train her. I told my aunt she should tell you all this - most companions expect their duties to consist mainly of answering telephone and correspondence, and driving the car."

"This companion doesn't," said Rowena briskly. "I'll be quite glad to help with the housekeeping."

His tone was derisive. "Wait till you see it before you commit yourself. I don't know what you've been used to, but Tawhai is colossal."

Rowena thought of what she had been used to . . . no, the size of Tawhai would not appal her. She said nothing.

He tied up the mare at a sliprail, helped Rowena dismount, then together they came into the hall, large, dark- panelled, the dimness kind to the cobwebs and dinginess. Forrest Beechington snapped on the light so that she could see it all.

"See!" he said.

He certainly doesn't want me to stay, thought Rowena, and it was like a challenge to her. Her gaze swept up and around.

"Nothing here that a spot of hard work wouldn't put right," she said coolly, and saw his lips tighten.

"Well, come in here." He swung open the door into a morning-room and crossed to a cabinet. "I'll get you some brandy. It will restore you after your

shattering experience with Mephistopheles, and perhaps cushion the shock the rest of the house will give you."

As he stooped to the cabinet, Rowena's voice arrested him.

"Please don't bother. I'm not in any need of brandy. It takes more than a bull to put me in a flutter."

He paused and said, "Well, come into the kitchen and I'll get you a cup of tea. I presume you won't despise that."

"No. I'd enjoy a cup of tea, thank you. But shouldn't I meet your aunt first?"

"That's another thing that makes your arrival so ill-timed. She isn't here. She's in Christchurch, and coming home tomorrow. I'll have to see if I can park you out with one of the farmers' wives, or get one of them to come over for the night."

Rowena was conscious of niore dismay. What a welcome!

"I'm quite capable of making the tea myself. If you just show me which room will probably be mine, I'll settle in, and I'm sure you must have outside work you want to attend to."

It had no effect. He merely said, "Oh, I'll show you where things are. I'd like some tea myself."

Surrounded by an aura of hostility, they went together into the kitchen, an over-large untidy room with quite a good electric range.

Mr. Beechington seemed reasonably domesticated, which surprised Rowena; she was sure he'd have expected his household to wait on him hand and foot. He put out some china far too valuable to be stored in kitchen cupboards, got out bought biscuits, and cut slices of fruit cake.

Unexpectedly Rowena's spirits rose. Perhaps she had needed the tea. Perhaps it was the fact that suddenly this beautiful, unkempt house presented a challenge. She was needed here.



Forrest Beechington stubbed out his cigarette and rose.

"Well, seeing you're not Miss Methuselah, I'd better get cracking on securing a chaperone."

Rowena suddenly lost her temper at his tone.

"I don't wonder that you find it hard to keep staff here," she flashed. "Thus far I'm not impressed with your manner towards your employees. I think you'd better take me to where I left my cases, and if there is such a thing as a return bus to town in this God-forsaken spot in the back- blocks, I'll get it! I think you'll be much happier with an older woman ... what was it you said? - Scraggy and spin- sterish! Though why you would prefer someone older, in view «f all this house needs doing to it, is beyond me."

"Would you like to know why?"

"Not particularly. I'm through. It's the oddest set-up I've ever experienced. Would you set me on my way?"

The thought of the meagre hundred pounds in her purse rose up in Rowena's mind. It would mean a third-rate boardinghouse... it would mean taking any sort of a job.

"No," said the owner of Tawhai Hills. "I said I thought you would do us. My reason for preferring my aunt's companions to be old is purely personal and selfish."

Rowena thought the dark, hard face had a strange look.

He continued, "I'll put you wise to the situation at the start. Aunt Lavinia has had three companions in the last two years. One young, one in her mid-twenties, one rather thirtyish. But they had one thing in common ..."

Rowena said "Yes?" in the tone of one to whom it did not matter anyway.

"They all shared an ambition to become the mistress of Tawhai Hills."

"You - you mean they - they had designs on you as a husband!"

Her look was contemptuous. He interpreted it correctly, holding up his hand against whatever she was going to say.

"I know it sounds conceited, vain. I know it makes you furious. I'm not conceited. I'm well aware that if I was in a city job, in a wage-earning capacity, or a farm labourer, probably no woman would look at me twice, much less pursue me, but I fell heir to this estate, and all it entails... therefore. .."

"Therefore?" prompted Rowena.

"Therefore this time I've decided on devastating candour. You might as well know from the start that it's no go!"

Rowena's tone was withering. "I'm not devastated. You haven't scorched any ambitions in the bud for me. I can't imagine any amount of worldly possessions making you eligible in *my* eyes, Mr. Beechington."

"You're beyond temptation, are you, Miss Fotheringham? Not likely to succumb to the lure of either riches *or* love?"

"Love!" Rowena's voice held something that could have been scepticism, or pain, or scorn born of the thought that she could not imagine ever having any tender feelings towards this man. A little smile touched her lips. "Let me assure you, Mr. Beechington, that I'm quite immune to love!"

"What do you mean? Do you mean that you've burnt your fingers and think you're immune? Or that - or that you're already emotionally involved with someone?"

His last words triggered off something within Rowena. Some desperate need to armour herself against further insult ... because even now she felt that somehow her life and Tawhai Hills were to become entangled. It would safeguard her, wouldn't it, if he thought her affections were engaged elsewhere?

She said slowly, deliberately, "Your last stab at it was correct, Mr. Beechington. I'm not officially engaged, but near enough to it. Isn't it a pity I'm not staying ... since you would have felt so safe!"

They measured glances. His voice was soft, but determined.

"You are staying, you know. There isn't a bus back to town today. I'll go and get your cases. Just by the side of the road, are they?"

Rowena hesitated. Well, she'd have to stay here the night.

"They're in a large dry ditch. They contain every stitch I possess, so I didn't like to leave them in full view on a deserted country road."

The effect on Forrest Beechington was odd. "A ditch.. a large ditch ... the one at the crossroads?"

Rowena lifted her chin. "It was perfectly dry -"

She got no further.

"Dry, yes. But it's not a ditch - it's the water-race. It's dry because the water has been shut off for two days for cleaning purposes, but it'll be running full-bore right now. It was to be diverted back at three."

Before she had time to answer he had rushed out of the house, and in two minutes she heard the sound of a car being driven furiously away.

Rowena sat down. That's settled, she thought. My clothes, my trinkets, my personal papers, will all be ruined. I'll have to stay here till I get a wardrobe together again....

## CHAPTER II

ROWENA didn't sit still for long. Even if calamity, in the shape of ruined clothing, an uncongenial position, and appalling rudeness had come her way, inaction was not to be borne.

She saw a safety-pin on the dresser, pinned up the rent in her skirt, took off her jacket, rolled up her sleeves. There were dirty dishes in the sink in addition to the ones they had just used. She could at least cope with these.

The routine of the everyday job steadied her. She mustn't panic. Even if some things were ruined, many of the clothes could, no doubt, be dried out. If she had only enough to wear in the house it would be something, and since she had heard wages were good here, she would be able to replace gradually. She thought of clothes bought off the peg, and made a wry face, then checked herself. You're a working girl now, Rowena Fotheringham ... at least you've always worked, but have never before been dependent upon a pay packet.

She found a broom, tossed the mats out of the back door on to a long verandah picturesquely untidy with rubber boots, farm boots, halters, guns, pieces of rope and chain.

She felt she had made quite a difference to the kitchen, though even if Forrest Beechington noticed it, he probably wouldn't give her credit for it.

She heard a step, too light for a man's, and the next moment a gay voice yodelled out, following the call by a friendly: "Are you there, Miss Fotheringham?" and a laughing, hatless girl breezed into the kitchen. Now who?

Rowena soon found out.

"I'm Nancy Jerrold. Forrest told me I'd find you here.... I'm the minister's wife."

Rowena stared. What a country! Anyone less like a vicar's helpmeet couldn't be imagined. This girl had bright copper curls and laughing tawny eyes and

she wore a yellow checked gingham frock with a matching cardigan. The wind had tossed her hair to picturesque disorder, and she had a smudge of oil across her cheek.

The girl interpreted Rowena's expression correctly.

"Don't look much like a minister's wife, do I? Still, there are moments when I do. Forrest and Peter are tinkering with our car. But it's nothing they're hopeful of fixing. They told me to cut across to the house and ring the garage at the township. Forrest said I could probably help you rustle up some sort of scratch meal. I'd better ring right away."

She disappeared into the hall like a bright whirlwind and was back smartly.

"Forrest said not to bother with anything more than a snack, there's plenty of tinned stuff in the house."

Rowena lifted her chin and said, "There's also an abundance of provisions in the fridge. I'll cook a proper dinner."

Mrs. Jerrold looked approving. "A woman after my own heart! Peter and I are simply starving."

"How long do you think they would be? So we can time something tasty, yet have it ready when they come."

"Not under an hour."

"Good. Then what about salmon? There's an extremely large one sitting in the fridge."

She opened the door. "I don't know who caught this. It's nearly record size, I should say."

The minister's wife cast it an unimpressed glance. "Oh, it's not very big. Just about a fourteen-pounder. But I believe New Zealand salmon are large. Peter has often said so."

They began slicing onions, chopping parsley, and the delicious savour of baking salmon began to pervade the kitchen.

Rowena set the table in the dining-room, a lovely room, marred by dust. However, with the fire Mrs. Jerrold lit, and the beautiful floral decorations Aunt Lavinia must have done before going to Christchurch, the snowy tablecloth and bright silver, it passed muster, and even looked inviting.

They were adding the final touches to the table when they heard the two men come in at the verandah door and cross the kitchen. They stood at the dining-room entrance. Rowena looked up to encounter surprise - and could it be pleasure? - on Forrest Beechington's face. Both men were sniffing appreciatively. Peter Jerrold was stocky and sandy, with piercing blue eyes, and even before he spoke, Rowena knew he was a Scotsman.

"It's all right, lass," he said to his wife. "It's no' going to be half as expensive as we feared."

"Thank goodness!" She added, "Parish cars always impoverish a minister's bank balance. Another bill for thirty or forty pounds would have rocked our budget completely. We call that car 'The Millstone'."

The men washed and spent no time coming to the table. Mr. Beechington said as he pulled out Rowena's chair, "Your things were practically unharmed." She knew an instant relief, and was grateful that he forbore to tease her about it in front of the Jerrolds.

Rowena brought in the soup. Mr. Beechington took up his spoon, dipped it in, tasted.

"Is this tinned?" he asked doubtfully, looking at her.

Mrs. Jerrold answered for her. "I think Miss Fotheringham has a fine scorn of tins. I thought she'd just open one for dessert, but no, she achieved a pie. You're going to live in a civilized manner from now on, Forrest."

He grinned, uttered no word of praise, but took a second helping. As Rowena set the second course before them . . . the pink flaky cutlets of the

salmon artistically firm, yet melting at a touch, the delicious spicy sauce, the creamed tender peas and pumpkin, Peter groaned.

"If I'd known this was coming, I'd have had no second helping of soup," he said. He looked across at Mr. Beechington. "You'd better get your aunt to sack her as a companion and engage her as a cook, Forrest."

The enigmatic hazel eyes looked across at Rowena. "It's quite an idea . . . unless, of course, this is your sole achievement in the culinary line. Maybe you aren't fond of cooking, but merely wanted to show me what you can do!"

It was a challenge. Rowena's spirit rose to meet it. Her voice was cool.

"I trained in domestic science," she said. "I have a diploma in cooking and household management. Care to see it? It's in my trunk."

He was meant to be crushed. Instead he said, "I'd rather prove you out day by day."

"Am I to understand then that I'm engaged as cook?"

"You are *not* engaged as cook." Mr. Beechington wasn't giving her even the satisfaction of sounding impatient with her. "Aunt Lavinia has engaged you as her companion, and we all dance to Aunt Lavinia's piping."

Rowena rose, gathered the dishes together, and thought as she took them out ... so Aunt Lavinia was a martinet, was she? What a household! She brought in the pie.

Over its feathery crust Forrest Beechington suddenly smiled at her. "Much more convincing than any diploma," he said.

Rowena smiled back, but with her lips, not her eyes.

They sat around the fire with their coffee and biscuits and cheese. When they had finished, Rowena rose and picked up the cups.

Mr. Beechington rose as she did, took them from her.

"You and Nancy did the cooking, Peter and I will be the washers-up."

Rowena wouldn't deign to argue; she felt that in any encounter with this man she would come off second-best. When the men returned, she must ask what arrangements were for the night.

She didn't have to. Forrest Beechington said crisply as they came in again, "By the way, Nancy, if you're so minded, you could help us out of an awkward situation. Aunt Lavinia won't be back till tomorrow. I was going to park Miss Fotheringham with one of the men's wives. How about staying the night, you and Peter?"

They were delighted to agree. Forrest added, with that subtle inflection of amusement that Rowena resented, "We won't offer you one of Aunt Lavinia's nightgowns, Nancy. I imagine Miss Fotheringham will be able to supply you with something more modern and glamorous. Failing that, perhaps the girls will have left some pyjamas at home."

Rowena's face flamed scarlet. He took no notice, but said to her, "If you like to come out to the garage now, I'll give you your things."

She was amazed when he said to her at the car, "I didn't ask them to help, because I thought it might embarrass you ... they're all jumbled up. I got there just as the water reached the luggage. I scooped the suitcases out smartly, and nothing got wet there, but the trunk was a different matter. I had to get into the race to get a leverage on it. In the doing, the rush of water had tumbled it about rather, and water got in through the lid. It's not soaked though, because I opened it right away and threw the stuff in the car. Then I paddled along round the corner to make sure that none had got washed down."

She looked down and saw that his feet had certainly been wet, and the cuffs of his trousers.



She said stiffly, "Thank you for rescuing them, and also for sparing my feelings in front of the Jerrols." Her tone was as sarcastic as Forrest Beechington could himself achieve.

He ignored it. He leaned in and scooped out a great armful of clothes. His mouth twitched.

"It's bad enough to display these to the coarse gaze of a yokel ... worse by far if your minister helped sort them out!"

Rowena bit back an answering smile. She would *not* respond to any overture of friendliness. He was only thawing out because he felt safe with her.

"He isn't my minister ... I'm Anglican, not Presbyterian'.

"Makes no difference here at Tawhai Hills. The church is on the estate ... Anglican. Built by my great-grandfather not many moons after they came here. We have Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist services in turn. The vicar, the minister, and the parson all visit the homestead as well as the farms."

She would not allow herself to look approving, though in her heart she knew that this came as near the ideal as the Church on earth was likely to achieve. She stooped and picked up some clothing.

"I'll follow you. I don't know where my room is."

He shifted the bundle in his arms, freed a hand enough for him to grasp her wrist, not gently.

"Aren't you going to see the funny side of this, Rowena Melisande Agatha Fotheringham?" he demanded.

She stood stiffly. "Is there a funny side?"

"To anyone with a sense of humour - yes. Haven't you got one?"

"I have ... but not the same brand as yours apparently. I'm doing my laughing inwardly... but not at myself."

She hoped to have the pleasure of seeing that strike home, but she was disappointed.

"You *are* older than I thought at first," he chuckled. It was unexpected. "You've got a wit that stings. Very few young people have it. When I saw you scrambling up that tree, I thought you looked like a long-legged youngster about Lindsay's age."

Rowena said, "Well, I daresay most women look older and more dignified when they're *not* being chased by bulls gone berserk!"

He sighed. "Oh well, if you must continue to take me seriously, let's go."

Her room gave Rowena a pleasant surprise. It was delightful, furnished as a bed-sitting room, and someone had recently done it up. There was no trace here of the neglect of the other rooms. Evidently Aunt Lavinia had at least remembered to have it cleaned for her.

The windows were arched and sunny and looked out on a terraced garden, and there was a tiny wrought-iron balcony outside, with a gay sun-blind stretched over it. She exclaimed with pleasure as she walked towards it.

He shrugged. "You're romantically inclined, I see. Most girls fancy balconies. Serenades and all that. Pity there's no one to strum a guitar, though when we're shearing perhaps I could persuade the Maoris to do a haka in front of your window... it would scare the life out of you!"

He dropped the bundle of clothes on the bed, and a folder of photographs slid out. He picked up the folder.

"These were obviously all right, but one had slid out, and I'm afraid it's not much more than pulp. I slipped it in this magazine." He opened the magazine, and held it towards her.

Geoffrey's face stared up at her, water-stained and sodden.

"I'm afraid it's beyond drying out," said Forrest. They looked down on it. Scrawled across it at the bottom left-hand corner was the legend, "With all my love - Geoffrey."

"Does it matter very much?" His voice was quite kindly.

"No, it doesn't," she said, with more feeling than was warranted. "I'll dump it."

She threw it into the fireplace.

"Poor Geoffrey," said Forrest Beechington unforgivably. "I take it he's dumped too ... supplanted, perhaps, by this other man, who has so kindly immunized you against falling in love with anyone else."

She shrugged. "Well, it's as good a way of putting it as any." She didn't want this man's pity! Oh, no. Better he should think she had jilted Geoffrey, rather than that he had jilted her.

He went away to bring up the rest of her things. Rowena was glad to be able to examine the room without his sardonic glance upon her. This whole room had the appearance, of having been redecorated, not as recently as Rowena's engagement to become companion here, but it had certainly been modernized later than the rest of the house.

It was like a spring symphony, all primrose and green and sunshiny gold, with lovely mahogany furniture that somehow reminded one of dark boughs of trees shining through the gold-and-green of it.

When Mr. Beechington returned, she said, making conversation because even the silence was antagonistic, "These decorations are more recent vintage than the rest of the house, aren't they?"

He nodded, and for a fleeting instant she thought a shadow passed over his face, a shadow that could have been pain.

"I had it redecorated five years ago, when I found my niece kept coming in here, to keep an unhealthy tryst with the past. This was the room that

belonged to my brother and his wife. They were killed suddenly. Penny and Tony got over it, Lindsay didn't. She was older, it has made her more ... difficult."

Rowena said, "Was it wise to destroy the things she remembered her mother and father as surrounded by?"

She realized this would be the room where the little girl would have come for solace during all her childish troubles... would have come here when frightened by nightmare, to the matchless comfort of a double bed where she would cuddle down between father and mother ... she would remember perching on it with her brother and sister, during a whole cavalcade of Christmases, opening parcels, scattering cards and tinsel and seals about...

Forrest Beechington said, "I don't know if it was wise or not. Something had to be tried. Even children have to learn to accept death as part of life."

Rowena didn't know if he was sounding hard, or only sad. Was that a harsh creed, or a sensible one? He continued :

"But she still came, and has till now. We miss her, when she's home from vacations from Varsity, and I'll find her here in the dusk, sitting in the french window of the balcony. That's why I told Aunt Lavinia to give you this room. Better for it to be occupied."

"Poor Lindsay," said Rowena.

His fierce, challenging gaze encountered hers. "I'm not at all sure she needs sympathy. She needs bracing. It's long enough ago."

"How old was she when it happened?"

"Thirteen."

Thirteen! The vulnerable age. The age when a girl was on the threshold of womanhood, when she needed a mother more than before.

He said, "Penny is so different. She's so philosophical, so sunshiny, so completely uncomplex."

Rowena looked directly at him. "Life's not easy for complex people, Mr. Beechington. Besides, nothing creates or encourages a situation so much as parents or guardians having favourites. It's caused trouble from time immemorial. Remember Isaac preferring Esau, and Rebecca preferring Jacob ... something that drove the brothers apart, one to years of exile. Even then Jacob didn't learn the lesson, but in his own time and generation preferred Joseph, and set his brothers against him. I've no time for favouritism."

They measured glances. "You're determined to think the worst of me, aren't you?" he demanded, "Merely because I said Penny was so different, you assume I favour her. I assure you I don't. I've done more for Lindsay ... I've had to."

"And probably resented it," flashed Rowena. "Or felt she should be grateful for it! It's so easy to sense partisanship, and it completely destroys the unity of a family." As he made to speak she held a hand up.

"I know you're about to tell me to mind my own business, I know I ought not to talk like this, but you see, I don't care whether I stay or not ... and I've got the sort of nature that just can't help meddling, where I see relationships getting off on the wrong track. So if you feel you can't take the risk of having someone under your roof as outspoken as yourself, please say so now, and I'll go away tomorrow."

His eyes held hers steadily, searchingly. It seemed a while before he spoke.

"No. You must stay. Despite all that has passed between us, now that I know you aren't likely to entertain any false hopes ... about rising in status at Tawhai Hills,... I think you're just the person the homestead needs. You're astringent, bracing ... the children are home only in the holidays, but I have an idea you might be good for them."

"Very flattering," agreed Rowena. "I sound like a tonic ... bitter but beneficial!"

"Much better," said the mocking voice. "I believe it's got a sense of humour' after all.... Come along and I'll show you the-linen presses. Perhaps you and Nancy could make up the beds in one of the spare rooms."

Speechlessly, burning with all the things she would like to have said, Rowena followed him.

By the time the good nights had been exchanged, and Rowena was in the blessed sanctuary of her own room, she was too tired to worry over the situation. She must just be thankful that she had a job that would keep her comfortably, a job in beautiful surroundings, and not worry about personal reactions.

She went across to the french windows to draw the holland blinds, and found the outside world was bathed in moonlight. She stepped out on to the balcony.

With the unfamiliarity of mountains and trees blurred by sable shadows, the world without didn't seem so alien, or the other life she had known so far away. Sky and stars and moon were much the same whatever hemisphere you lived in.

Certainly here you couldn't see the same constellations; here the Southern Cross marked the sky ... if you could distinguish it . . . but you had to look a long time. At home the northern stars would be shining above Ainsley Dene.

For a moment nostalgia, like a cruel grasp, restricted her heart, her breathing. It was like a physical thing, something she had never before experienced.

She took a grip of her feelings. This was foolishness... sentimentality over stars ... hadn't she, not so long ago, the night Geoffrey told her he was marrying Josie, looked up at the familiar stars, and longed for new places, and unknown territories, for a way of escape from all who might pity her, question her? Hadn't she said to herself then, for comfort and promise, "There will be other stars shining for me - somewhere."

Slowly, like a benediction, peace came to her. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the likeness to the Northern Hemisphere faded. No great mountain there, like Tawhai, ebony against the indigo sky, reared up from the ordered fields of Ainsley Dene ... no bush crouched, dark and impenetrable .. . even the soft sounds undergirding the silence were different.

At home, on a night like this, there just might have been a nightingale singing in the Home Wood, a little owl hunting in the hawthorn hedge.

Here she could hear occasionally the strange sound she had asked about earlier ... an owl, yes, but an odd one. The morepork, they had said, or the ruu. In the stillness it came repeatedly: "More pork - more pork!"

And every now and again, nearer at hand, the sharp heart- touching squeal as a stoat found the throat of a rabbit.; It seemed to remind her of something ruthless about this country... about the men this country bred.

Yet, down below, all the familiar scents rose to her from this southern garden ... lavender, mignonette, balsam, late roses ... and faintly, a drift of smoke that probably meant the gardener had been burning up today ... at that moment, beneath her, one of the shadows moved, and the glowing tip of a cigarette with it. It hadn't been smoke from a bonfire.

A mocking voice said, "On your balcony, Juliet? Romantic, don't you think?"

She swallowed. "Not really. I wasn't looking for a Romeo ... only fresh air. Goodnight again, Mr. Beechington."

She stepped back into the room, pulled down the blind. She was annoyed to find her knees were shaking just as much as after the encounter with the bull. How ridiculous! She mustn't be so vulnerable.

But why, oh, why must men think woman pursued romance? Geoffrey had said, trying to justify himself perhaps, "Oh, I know I'm to blame. I should never have gone as far as this. It only needed that little bit of encouragement

from you, and I persuaded myself I was in love with you. Till I met Josie, and found out how powerful real love was."

Rowena hadn't thought she had encouraged him. It had all happened so naturally. She'd thought it had been inevitable that they should love, become engaged, marry. Their interests had been identical ... the land ... horses ... the pleasant social life of rural England. It hadn't mattered that Geoffrey had so much less. Her brother would give them one of the farms on the property her father had managed so wisely that in the days when the stately homes of England were in such desperate straits, Ainsley Dene was a model of production.

Oh well, she must profit by the experience, never again wear her heart on her sleeve. Not that there was any danger of its happening. Geoffrey had immunized her against love....



### CHAPTER III

ROWENA was sorry to see the Jerrolds depart at morning- tea time, which, served at ten, equalled elevenses back Home. They had served as a buffer between herself and this aggressive New Zealander.

The mechanic who brought their car up was invited in to share it, and Rowena noticed he called Mr. Beechington by his Christian name, though he kept to a more formal address with the minister and his wife. Evidently there existed a respect for the cloth, but between landowners and labourers there was a certain democratic camaraderie. Rowena reserved judgement about it. That sort of thing could bring awkward moments in its train, she felt.

Nancy Jerrold said happily and ingenuously as they departed, "I've just loved meeting you like this. I feel you'll fit so well into the Beechington household. You talk their language. They're all so delightfully crazy. Goodbye."

Mr. Beechington and Rowena were left standing on the verandah. He cocked a glance at her, the glint she did not care for in the dark hazel eyes.

"She meant it as a compliment!" His mouth twitched. He added, "But don't bother to look pleased. I'm just as doubtful myself. Nancy said we talked the same language. Am I to take from that that my tongue is as shrewish as yours?"

Then he laughed at the outraged expression on her face. He said, with mock solemnity:

"I can see that, like Queen Victoria of beloved memory, and whom you admire so much ... we are not amused!"

Rowena looked at him directly. "No. Perhaps Mrs. Jerrold thinks we speak the same language. I don't know about that, but I'm quite sure we haven't the same sense of humour. However, work's the thing ... I feel I've had a late start with the house this morning, and I must strip those beds. I daresay you have more to do than exchange pleasantries like this, Mr. Beechington. I'll

serve dinner at one, if it suits you then, or at any other time you care to name. I'll make a meal at six-thirty for your aunt. No doubt, when she gets back, we can have a talk and sort out duties and whatnot. And maybe I could train this Nelly you seem to think is such raw material."

"I'm quite sure *you'll* manage to train her. Quite the school-ma'am type, aren't you? We'll all be organized within an inch of our lives. I can easily see it's goodbye to our easygoing ways at Tawhai."

"It will, at least, be goodbye to dust and cobwebs," she replied tartly. "Now I'll get on."

She turned away and was disconcerted to find him beside her as she re-entered the house.

"I can spare you half an hour before I go across to inspect the water-races. Tomorrow will be really busy. I've got shearers coming to finish crutching before we put the rams out to the ewes at the end of March." He stopped abruptly, said, "Oh, I beg your pardon. I must remember you aren't used to these coarse farming terms."

Rowena looked at him coldly. "You're mistaken. I'm not a city girl. I've li - worked in the country all my life. I probably know as much about tugging and crutching and lambing as you do. You needn't censor your conversations on my behalf, believe me."

He ought to have been set back, but he simply said, "Oh, good show! A greenhorn can complicate things sometimes. Aunt Lavinia was always amused at the shocked look her ' last companion used to wear at some of our after-dinner talk. I'll show you upstairs first."

Their subsequent conversation, for a pleasant change, lacked animosity till, downstairs again, they came to a side wing.

He said, "These are my quarters. My retreat. I was glad to have these rooms as a refuge, when these companions of my aunts became such pests. I spent most of my evenings in here."

Rowena ignored it. She said crisply, "Well, if that's all, **31**I'll do the beds, then get lunch. Do I beat that gong at the door when it's ready ? "

He assured her she did, and departed. Rowena got busy.

When the crumbed cutlets were done to a turn, she beat the gong, and Mr. Beechington appeared quite quickly. She heard him scrub up in the little wash-room off the back verandah, and enter the kitchen behind her.

He looked at the one place set on a small cloth on one corner of the kitchen table, then at her.

Before he could make any comment she said quickly, "I've set you a table in your own sitting-room. It's very sunny, so I didn't bother to light a fire."

She saw his mouth harden. "Don't be absurd. You must already be aware that this is a most democratic country, and that in any case I don't regard you as the maid. We have our midday meal here in the kitchen as most farming folk do. In fact, Nelly eats with us."

"I expect that gratifies you immensely ... the fact that everyone realizes you treat your staff well. To me it sounds like inverted snobbery. Besides, how do you know Nelly wouldn't enjoy her meal more in the privacy of her own kitchen? Rather than being condescended to!"

The line of his mouth was still hard. "Oddly, enough, Nelly likes me. She enjoys a bit of teasing. Why shouldn't she? I've known her since she was r. baby. I can see you're going to have to change your ideas radically, now you've come to this country. We don't have servants' halls here."

Rowena whipped the crumbed cutlets on to an oval Pyrex dish that fitted a silver salver, arranged grilled tomatoes topped with browned cheese around them, and a mound of tender spinach. She took a napkin, lifted it, and walked out of the door, towards Mr. Beechington's rooms, without a backward glance.

So ... she had won that round. She had half expected to have the dish taken from her, but he was meekly following.

She placed it on the small round table in the sunny window-bay, cast an eye over the table.

"I think you have everything there, Mr. Beechington." She indicated a small bell she had brought in from one of the upper rooms. "You can ring if you want anything else... more hot water, or bread and butter."

She turned to go, having successfully avoided his eyes.

"Wait!" It was more like a pistol shot than merely peremptory, and it halted her dead in her tracks.

His voice was silky with rage. "Would you kindly turn around and look at me?"

Slowly she turned, met his eyes, flushed.

He held out the covered dish. "Thank you ... return this to the kitchen, please."

He caught up the cutlery, the crockery, piled them most dangerously in his arms, gestured towards the kitchen. She went without a word.

He looked contemptuously at what she had set out for herself, the sliced bread and butter, the boiled egg, took them away, set out a knife and fork, transferred half the cutlets to her plate. They ate in silence.

As they rose, he said in a would-be casual tone, "Well, I don't expect that a meal eaten in that atmosphere will do anything for our digestions, or our blood-sugar - pity, really, for it was excellently cooked - but at least you know now that I expect to be obeyed in my own house."

Her eyes met his. They were as green as a witch's.

"Yes, Mr. Beechington. I also understand - now - that an employer may have privacy whenever he so desires it. But not an employee! If you were as erratic and temperamental with your aunt's former companions, I don't wonder that they gave you a wrong impression at times."

His mouth twitched. "Oh, it wasn't a wrong impression, believe me. However, at last we appear to understand each other. Good." His tone indicated that the argument was now at an end. He picked up a tea-towel. "I expect you're having a hectic day, I'll dry up for you."

Rowena swallowed. "I'm at a loss to know if that's a friendly offer, or a command to be obeyed. If it's the former, and you're in a hurry to get out again, may I turn it down? ... in just as friendly a manner? I'm not rushed. If it's an order ... well, I can't stop you."

She had him in a cleft stick, and knew it. He could hardly insist on it, put that way. He put the tea-towel down.

"Then if you're all right, yes. I want certain things ready for the shearers tomorrow." He went out.

She had just finished the drying when a step on the verandah made her turn. There was something odd about it. Forrest Beechington stood in the doorway, his face chalk-white, his left hand claspng his right wrist, and the fingers running red between.

"Rowena!" he said, and she hardly had time to realize how odd it was to hear her name on his lips before he slid down the door-frame and collapsed on the floor.

Rowena caught up the tea-towel, stooped to him, took up his wrist and made an exclamation of horror. How in the world could he have gashed it like that? It wasn't just bleeding steadily ... it was coming in spurts ... he'd cut the artery!

\ She wasted no time, anything that had to be done must be done right away. She tied the tea-towel tightly, caught up a fat cushion, propped the arm as high as she could.

Fortunately she had found where the first-aid cupboard was. She threw out, on the table, lint, cotton-wool, wide bandages. She moved with speed and efficiency, not wasting a movement.

A firm pad went on, the cotton-wool, and a bandage as tight as she could tie. It would have to be a tourniquet now. Well, she knew the technique, though it was one thing applying it to your fellow-student in first-aid classes in the village, and another to a man out to it like this.

She fled to the laundry, got a clothes-peg to twist the tourniquet, and in a few moments saw the stain on the bandage was not getting worse, and she could leave him to phone.

She was relieved to see at the head of the telephone list "Doctor", in large capitals, and the number, for she had no idea, what exchange Tawhai Hills would be on ... a small local one, or Geraldine . . . the phone had no dials, just a handle. She gave a furious ring and was rewarded with a voice from the exchange at once.

She was through to the doctor's house in double-quick time, and was immensely thankful he was at home. He could have been miles away in this vast area.

She explained quickly, was given further instructions, and was relieved to know he would be with her in next to no time.

She ran into one of the bedrooms, got rugs and pillows, managed to slide Forrest on to them. The pillows went under his knees, and an extra one under the arm. There was a squeal of brakes as the doctor's car pulled up and at the same moment Forrest Beechington's lids began to quiver.

Between them they soon had him on a bed. Forrest's eyes opened, his expression a blend of surprise and annoyance.

"Now, don't talk just now," commanded the doctor. "Leave this to us." Mr. Beechington's lids fluttered down.

"You made a damned good job of this," commented the doctor to Rowena. "Nurse?"

"No, but -" She was about to admit to the first-aid course, when she was interrupted most unexpectedly by the figure on the bed.

"- But she's probably got a diploma for it, in her trunk. Never knew such a paragon ... diplomas for this ... diplomas for that... "

"I said don't talk, Forrest. I meant it. Shut up, will you!" Then to Rowena: "When did he have a meal last . . . and how big?"

"Three-quarters of an hour ago . . . cutlets, tomatoes, spinach.. . bread etc., biscuits and cheese." "Well, it'll have to be a local."

Forrest's voice entered the conversation again. "Of course it'll be a local. If I hadn't eaten, it still would be. I've got to be on deck tomorrow. We're crutching."

The doctor snorted, "Don't worry - *you* won't be! You'll not get up till I say so. You're blasted lucky someone was around who knew what to do ... or it would have been hospital and blood transfusions and God knows what. Now keep still while we get busy." He looked at Rowena. "Squeamish? Won't faint on me, will you? If so beat the gong, and one of the men will come." "I'm not squeamish," she said indignantly. "No," said Forrest, lifting his head a little. "She probably won't even have a cigarette after it. She reserves the luxury of a smoke for major crises. Thus far I've not been able to discover just what she does regard as a major one." "Thus far," retorted the doctor, "I've not been able to discover how to make you hold your tongue. Hold his arm, would you?" and he jabbed in the hypodermic.

Forrest was quiet for the next few minutes till the wound was stitched and bandaged, but he was a little white about the gills when it was all over and an anti-tetanus injection given.

"Now coffee," said the doctor. "Strong. I'll have some too, and he can tell us exactly what happened."

Forrest Beechington had caught his foot in the flex of the electric shearing clippers as he prepared the wool-shed, put out a hand to save himself, and came down on a scythe that had recently been sharpened.

Rowena liked the bluff doctor, and the no-nonsense way he dealt with the formidable Mr. Beechington. He wandered out into the kitchen, and helped

her carry the coffee in. Rowena dared make no point of having hers alone. The colour began to come back into Forrest Beechington's face.

The doctor took the coffee cup from him, and said, "Now we'll get you undressed and right into bed. Miss Fotheringham has hot-water bottles in, and your pyjamas out." His tone was matter-of-fact.

Forrest said hastily, "I don't need help to get me undressed. It's only a wrist when all's said and done. You and I can manage, Doc. I'm feeling much better." He flung a leg over the bed, made an effort to stand up, and crumpled up again. The doctor caught him.

"These bachelors!" said the doctor good-humouredly. "It's only an *artery*\ Let's get him into his pyjamas while he's too weak to argue."

Rowena knew a quite unforgivable satisfaction that someone, at least, could handle Forrest Beechington, even if, perversely, it meant he would hold it against her ever after. Fortunately he did not regain consciousness this time till he was safely back in bed.

The doctor looked at him. "Now you'll stay there ... and obey Miss Fotheringham. She seems to have sense. I'll give you something to make you sleep, and she'll keep looking in on you. You're not to get up till I saw so, and if you show any signs of being intractable - I know what bad patients you big husky never-ill-in-your-life fellows are - I'll bung you into hospital."

He took out a capsule, punctured it to make it act quickly, made his patient take it, and before Forrest Beechington could give any instructions to Rowena, he was fast asleep.

Doctor Carew followed Rowena to the kitchen, rang his home to find out if there were any urgent messages, then prepared to depart on his afternoon round.

"If you want me - I don't think you will, but just in case - my wife will know where to contact me. I'll call on my way home. He'll be groggy enough



when he wakes to want to stay in bed, fortunately. When's Beechy due back ... his aunt?"

"Six tonight, on the bus."

"Good. She'll keep him in bed."

Which confirmed Rowena's suspicion that Aunt Lavinia was a martinet. What a family! Oh well, she had better get on with the dinner preparations. The martinet would no doubt expect a good meal whatever had happened. Pity they had given Nelly the two days off.

Mr. Beechington slept for two hours. Rowena kept tiptoeing in, listened to make sure he was breathing normally. By four the dinner was well under way, and she found the patient awake when she went in, though drowsy.

"Would you like some tea now?" she asked, pulling up the blinds.

"Yes, please, and bring yours in too." His voice, because of weakness, lacked the severity of former orders, but she didn't dare disobey. He winced as he shifted his position to take the tea.

"Sore?"

"No. It's my head. And I've got a foul taste in my mouth. These modern drugs are ghastly in their after-effects, aren't they?"

"Yes," agreed Rowena, but unsympathetically, "but most beneficial. You needed quietness and sleep."

He pulled a face. "You think I'll be a bad patient, don't you? Don't worry. I'm quite amenable under these circumstances."

"I'm not worrying. The doctor assures me your aunt will manage you. I expect you're two of a kind. She sounds the managing sort."

He laughed. "Wait till you meet her." It sounded ominous.

That reminded him. "I'll get you to ring Jock Saunders, one of my men. You'll get him on the party line. It's 'S.' Three sharp short rings. Ask him to meet Aunt Lavinia at the bus - at the crossroads at six."

Rowena said, "I can drive, if it wouldn't be convenient for him ... or wouldn't you trust me with the car?"

"Oh, I'd trust you. I daresay you've got a diploma - I mean a licence - but your duty is here. The doctor said I wasn't to be left!"

Rowena shot him a suspicious glance, but there was no twinkle in his eye.

"For anyone who was so terrified of his aunt's companions, this desire for my company is out of character!"

"Oh, but this is different, I spiked your guns from the outset -" He caught sight of her outraged face and said quickly, "Besides, I'm a helpless invalid at the moment, and due to get bored any time. I ought to be amused."

She said, "You've not had time to get bored yet, and in any case I'm prepared to look after you, but not to amuse you. Thus far, we've not found each other's conversation amusing. Our encounters have been more in the nature of pitched battles, and hardly suitable for a sick-room. And small talk, as we're strangers, wouldn't last long. We'd have nothing of interest to talk about."

She rose to go. His uninjured hand shot out, grasping her wrist.

"Have you no tender feelings for an injured man?"

"No. None." Her tone held no apology.

"A'm. Pity ... when you're the only female in this house I've ever felt safe with."

"Then what do you suggest we talk about?" asked Rowena, knowing nothing was ever more fatal towards conversation than asking or thinking: what shall we talk about next?

However, it didn't affect Forrest Beechington that way, evidently. His eyes lit up with a mocking light.

"You could tell me the story of your life. Where you were born, where you went to school . . . even all about your love-life! About this chap who's given you immunity to love! I feel it would be most entertaining, take my mind off my injuries!"

"Then it's a pity it's an entertainment you'll have to do without, Mr. Beechington. My love affairs are my own concern. All you need to know is the assurance that I have no designs on you. Now I have plenty to do. I can't cook a proper dinner for your aunt, and stay out of the kitchen talking to you. And I'm perfectly sure quietness, if not sleep, is what you need."

With an air of studied indifference, she adjusted the bedclothes, straightened the coverlet, crossed to the window, pulled down the blind and left the room. It afforded her a great deal of satisfaction.

She worked speedily and tried not to feel anxious. If Mrs. Beechington was as difficult as her nephew, then life at Tawhai Hills was going to be anything but a bed of roses. She could well imagine Aunt Lavinia ... the managing type. The sort that organized everyone else and did little of real value herself.

Her main interests would be outside the house. She would have a finger in every pie, and see to it that the estate was managed well, the income kept rolling in.

So it was that when a charmingly feminine voice said, "Are you really Miss Rowena Fotheringham?" and Rowena whirled around from beating potatoes to feathery lightness, she stared.

Aunt Lavinia was dressed in a lilac ensemble, and had the complexion of a schoolgirl, roses and cream. Her white hair was charmingly dressed, and her make-up, though unobtrusive, was perfect. She dropped a pearl-trimmed handbag on a chair and came across to the sink, holding out both hands to Rowena.

"I'm such a duffer ... fancy making a mistake in the day ... it's just like me! I'm helpless and hopeless. I hope you won't find me too exasperating. Forrest told me exactly what he thought of me on the phone. He rang me in Christ-church this morning, said it was no sort of welcome to anyone just come from Home. But it was nice the Jerrollds turned up ... aren't they lambs? Tell me, do you like crosswords?"

Rowena blinked, said yes.

"Well, how perfect. I can do only the ones in large print now. The newspaper ones are hopeless, and even with the others I get muddled. But perhaps it would bore you to do one every night? Especially having to read them out to me?"

Rowena said, "My father suffered from failing sight - we always did the crossword together. I read it out, but he did most of the solving. But -"

"And Jock told me Forrest had cut himself. An artery, he said, but you managed to cope. I told Forrest I'd an idea you would be just the One for Here. I had a feeling. I often have feelings, and they're almost always right. There's always something happening on an estate. You have to have someone cool and calm. Doesn't matter so much now, of course, in these days, with transport and telephone ... what a *delicious* smell, I love good food, but I'm no cook. Forrest would tell you. But you aren't here for that ... we'll just have to put up with Nelly. Trouble is she needs supervision, and I'm not the one to do it. Still. .."

In the little pause Rowena found herself saying, "I love cooking, I'd not mind a bit, and it's a lovely kitchen."

Mrs. Beechington beamed on her. "There now ... I had a feeling everything was working out right from the moment I got your letter!"

Rowena realized with an inward smile that even if Aunt Lavinia was vague and fluttery and helpless, she achieved things just the same. Could that have been what her nephew meant when he said they all danced to her piping?

Aunt Lavinia said, "I'll just go and see Forrest, poor boy, and then I'll put on an apron and help you, love."

She disappeared in an aura of lavender perfume and a jingle of necklaces and bracelets. She was true to her word, however, and appeared again with a wisp of frilly organdie tied about her waist, and helped to carry in the dishes.

She gazed around the dining-room. "Well, haven't you done wonders! I sort of suspected it was getting a bit dusty, but that's one thing about short sight, you're never really sure, and it doesn't bother you the same. Everything's going to be just lovely, no wonder Forrest's pleased."

Rowena stared. "Forrest's - I mean Mr. Beechington's - pleased! Why, he can't stand companions. He told me so."

Aunt Lavinia waved a plump, pretty hand. "He didn't mean a word of it, love. Like all men he likes good meals. The way to a man's heart, and all that . . . why," (triumphantly) "he told me I must give you a bigger wage!"

Rowena put her soup spoon down. "Exactly what did he say?" Her tone was disbelieving. "I mean, how did it crop up?"

"Goodness, dear, I couldn't tell you now ... *exactly*, I mean. I simply mentioned all you were going to do, and that you'd actually offered to do the cooking ... I felt you were just what we were looking for, that I could quite look on you as the daughter of the house ... and he said if you were adding cooking to everything else I'd cajole you to do... he's wrong there, I *don't* cajole . . . that we'd better combine two wages too. Men are quaint, aren't they? I mean they don't realize women take naturally to combining a dozen jobs ... wife, mother, financier, dressmaker....

"As I said to him, if you'd married Helen, you'd not worry if she took all those things over, and I somehow think Miss Fotheringham will do them even better than Helen. She's quite tiresomely lovely, you know, but I always have the feeling she'd pall quite quickly. Like drinking pineapple juice, heavenly at first, but for a regular thing give me ginger ale. No ginger about Helen, just sweet, oh, how sweet!"

"Helen?" asked Rowena, fascinated at the way Aunt Lavinia's dinner was disappearing, even though she never seemed to stop talking.

"Helen Dewmore. Nicholas's sister at Matuku Peak Homestead. She was engaged to Colin, Forrest's brother. She suited Colin. He was killed in a plane crash, and lately we've thought ... she's away in England just now, we're sure she's gone away to think things out. Perhaps when she comes back they'll - but I must tell Forrest I think you'll do better. .. what sort of sauce is this?"

"Dutch sauce," said Rowena absently. "It's nice with asparagus," thinking desperately: What does she mean? Does she mean anything? *I'd*. do better ... does she mean for Forrest ... oh, how ghastly if she started matchmaking! I expect she's tired of keeping house here, past it at her age, and would snatch at any opportunity. Perhaps she was to blame for those other companions pursuing her nephew--

She said out loud, firmly, because she sensed one had to be firm with Aunt Lavinia: "I think I'd better tell you that your nephew and I detested each other on sight. The less we have to do with each other the better. I'm here as your companion, and I'll do the cooking too."

A voice, weak but mocking, said from the open doorway, "You won't make any impression on Aunt Lavinia, you know. It's like trying to punch a feather pillow, or strike a match on a blancmange."

Forrest Beechington stood in the doorway, a glass of water in his hand. "You forgot to bring me this, Miss Fotheringham, so I got it myself."

Rowena felt her cheeks burn. How long had he been there? Aunt Lavinia didn't look in the least put out.

"Blancmange!" she said triumphantly. "You know I believe that's it!"

"That's what?" asked Rowena helplessly.

"The last line in yesterday's crossword. A dessert not much favoured by the modern generation. We thought of rice and tapioca and semolina custard...."

Forrest Beechington, leaning against the doorway, gave a helpless gesture. "You see?"

Rowena said, "Can you manage to get back to bed? I'll bring in the sweets when you're in. And please ring if I forget anything else!"

The next day was madly busy, but at least it gave her a breathing-space from personal conflicts. One of the men's wives helped Rowena and Nelly with the enormous meals and teas and snacks the crutchers wanted, and she rather enjoyed going down to the sheds with the trays, and watching for a few moments the incredibly quick hand shearing that was going on as well as the electric. Two Maoris, handsome men with dark eyes and golden-brown skins and fine features, were singing musically as they worked, and were on equal terms with the others, and most popular.

One of them, evidently often up here, came up to see Forrest. He remained a little while in the bedroom yarning. Rowena heard him call Mr. Beechington "Boss" once, but another time say "Forrest".

She took Mr. Beechington in a cup of tea. "What was the Maori's name?" she asked.

His eyes screwed up with laughter. "Fergus McLaren!" he said. "I'm sorry to disappoint you ... I'd like to have obliged with something more typical. I'm not taking a rise out of you, honestly. We're so intermarried half have British names, and as many of the pakehas have adopted Maori names, soft-sounding ones like Ngaio, and Huia and Tiaki. You can't go by names." He added, "I'm getting up. Can't stand this. Do you think you could fix me a sling? I want to wander down to the sheds. I'll not work."

"I think you're most foolish. I don't know if I ought to allow it."

He looked at her from under the dark brows. "*Allow...* might I remind you, Miss Fotheringham, of your words to my aunt last night? You came here merely as her companion ... not *my* supervisor."

Rowena turned and walked out of the room.

She didn't see him again till late that evening. Aunt Lavinia had seen him down at the sheds and had him out of there in a quarter of an hour. Rowena had heard her speaking softly into the phone, and guessed she had contacted the doctor, when he arrived soon after.

Aunt Lavinia had appeared out of the sick-room with a smug expression and said, "Doc thinks Forrest may have to go to hospital if he doesn't take care. He's to have tea in bed, and is allowed up for an hour later, provided he lies on the couch. He mustn't walk about."

"Then," said Rowena hastily, "should I light a fire in his own sitting-room?"

Aunt Lavinia looked surprised. "Of course not, the poor boy's bored with his own company. The doctor's just allowing him up for that." Despite the fact that she had performed all sorts of menial duties during the day, Rowena found herself treated exactly as a welcome guest at night, expected just to relax and enjoy herself, and Aunt Lavinia was so patently delighted to have someone to talk to that it was extremely hard to be guarded in answering. Particularly when her genuine interest in Rowena's former life was mixed up with her hunt for clues. It disarmed you.

Rowena decided she must remember exactly all she had admitted to ... her people, save one brother, were dead ... no, she'd never gone into business, or one of the professions, she'd been at home, housekeeping for her father, or on big estates as companion-help. That was the best line to take.

Aunt Lavinia was called to the phone by Nelly, and Forrest Beechington said, amused, "You can't shut Aunt Lavinia up the way you shut me up when I enquired about your past life, can you?"

"I didn't want to," said Rowena, looking up from some linen she was mending, purely a voluntary job.

"Didn't you?" His voice was disbelieving. "I thought you were rather cagey myself. In fact, almost uneasy. Aunt Lavinia, for all her vagueness, is very astute, you know. She's genuinely interested in what makes people tick, what their ambitions are, their dreams."



"And just why should that make me uneasy?" Despite her words Rowena felt a little sick at the pit of her stomach.

"I don't know, but *you* probably do." The hazel eyes were watching her closely.

Rowena allowed herself to look a little puzzled. She carelessly regarded her stitching, as if it mattered more than the conversation. She decided to carry the attack into the enemy's camp. Better than defence ... that sometimes suggest you had something to hide.

"Mr. Beechington, you seem to think I have some ulterior motive in coming here. What's in your mind?"

He didn't deny it. He said promptly, "You're not the companion type. How do you come to need this type of job?"

She was terse. "The usual reason ... money."

"You sound to me as if you've had a moneyed background."

She allowed herself to sound amused. "How *does* one sound moneyed?"

"How do you think? Your voice ... you speak with an ultra-English accent."

She uttered a sound that was pure scorn. "How do you do that? How does anyone do that? I mean I can understand anyone saying a person speaks English with a Yorkshire accent, or a Scots accent ... but how could anyone speak English with an English accent?" This might prove a red herring.

He laughed. "Point taken. It's a contradiction in terms, but I think you know what I mean just the same - you -"

She cut in, "Even the short time I've been in this country, I find you New Zealanders are ridiculously touchy about your own accent. No reason why you should be, either. I find it quite acceptable. It's not so clipped, that's all, and someone on the *Strathnevin* explained that. Said that while few pakehas speak Maori, you are so used to Maori place- names that you sound your

words completely. That the Maoris accentuate every syllable - therefore even your 'y'<sup>si</sup> become like 'ee'."

"That's probably correct. I've never thought about it. I was going to say that you speak as the upper ten speak. You must have moved in those circles."

"I did," she said calmly. A little smile touched her lips. "I've lived with the best families."

"I'd like to shake you!" he said.

"Better leave it till your wrist is healed. We mustn't risk another haemorrhage."

"Then don't provoke me."

She looked up, all innocence. "Have I been provoking? I've merely answered your questions."

"Have you?"

"You mean you don't think I've answered them truthfully, don't you, Mr. Beechington? I don't care to have my word doubted."

"I don't think you're lying. I think you're holding something back." "I could be," she admitted. "Possibly I don't care to lay my life bare to a stranger. Are you afraid I'll make off with the silver or the family jewels?"

She saw the colour rise in the dark cheeks and was glad. She had scored.

"I think, my dear Miss Fotheringham, you know perfectly well I don't think that. I feel there's something behind this. Are you running away from some intolerable situation?"

She felt the colour leave her cheeks. She had suffered enough humiliation back Home ... the wedding dress ordered, arrangements made with the Vicar ... the six bridesmaids ... living in a dream, Geoffrey dancing attendance on her--feeling loved, secure, even after Father died. Then the break, the

subsequent whispering, the sympathy, the hint of triumph in some eyes, eyes that had been jealous before ... the utter sense of loss, the bitterness of the knowledge that in the hours that she had found sweet, Geoffrey had been bored, calculating....

"If I was ... if I had come out to here for a very definite reason, do I have to tell someone I met only two days ago? Why should I?"

His answer was unexpected "Because you're alone and a long way from all that was known and familiar and dear to you, and it might - help."

The surprise of it took her breath away. She stared at him. He had turned his head and was gazing at his feet under the rug. His voice had been ... kind. His eyes had been compassionate. She was conscious of a melting at her heart, a heart that had been rimmed in ice so long; then, as she became aware of it, reason and caution took over. Geoffrey had been kind too. He had been wonderful when her father died; tender and understanding ... *So she had thought*. But she no longer trusted her own judgement, or kindness in men.

So her face hardened. "You have your own way of finding things out, haven't you, Mr. Beechington? If direct questioning doesn't bring results ... something I find is an intolerable intrusion, into my private affairs ... you try sympathy. It won't soften me up, believe me."

She didn't much like the look he gave her then. She hurried on, because though Aunt Lavinia could talk for hours on the phone, she might appear at any moment.

"Mr. Beechington, I hope you still don't think I came here and took this job with the same idea that the others had. How could I? I didn't even know you existed, incredible as it may seem. And - and I did tell you my affections were otherwise engaged." She wanted to reiterate that, it made her feel safe then, and more natural with him. It bolstered her pride.

"So you did." The expression in his eyes was beyond her to read. "Where is he? ... this man with whom you have this ... er . . . understanding. Where did you meet him? If he's an Englishman, what's he doing to let you come

thirteen thousand miles away? If he's a New Zealander, why didn't you take a job near him? This is miles from anywhere."

Rowena's mind cast about wildly for a credible explanation.

"I met him on the ship," she said firmly.

The eyebrows flew up. "Shipboard romance . . . moon and stars, tropical palms, cities of the east. ... Couldn't you bring him quite to the point ... to the engagement ring point, with a setting like that?"

"I didn't want to get married before I'd seen New Zealand," said Rowena steadily (oh, why in the world had she ever invented this romance . . . why hadn't she just said she was a man-hater ... but men never believed that, anyway, their inborn vanity prevented them from it). "I'd looked forward to this experience. Lots of girls from New Zealand take working holidays over Home. I thought I'd like a few months here. I'd always heard," her tone bit, "that New Zealanders were kindly, democratic, hospitable ... that they didn't bother much about people's backgrounds."

The shaft glanced off. He said, unperturbed, "But didn't falling in-love with this chap rank above the mere experience of being a companion-help? Did he come out here to work? And if so, didn't he want a wife to set up home with?"

"He's - he's travelling about," said Rowena lamely.

"How? What's he do?" She dared not seem to hesitate. Into her mind flashed the thought of the occupation of .a man she had found it hard to dodge on board ship. She had instinctively distrusted him, but he had the sort of calling that could account for not wanting to be saddled with a wife just now.

"He's an artist," she said desperately. "He's travelling all over New Zealand for six or seven montjis, painting. A - commission for a - for a travel agency. Well - we'll put our affairs in order after that. Now are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied isn't quite the word," said Forrest Beechington. "But I'm glad to get to the bottom of it ... but my conscience ! The men women fall for!"

There was a silence between them, heavy silence, that could only be broken by hot words. Aunt Lavinia came in.

Rowena said unsteadily, rising, "Would you mind if I went to bed early? I'm extremely tired, and I've planned quite a big day tomorrow. I've left the supper ready. Nelly could just make the tea for you."

"Certainly, dear. I'll have Nelly bring you up a tray. You've had such an eventful few days. I don't wonder you are tired. Off you go."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Beechington.^ Goodnight to you both."

Tonight Rowena didn't bother looking at the new, fair stars, there was no comfort even in the old familiar moon. She pulled down the blinds with no eyes for the beauty of the night, conscious that tears were pricking behind her eyelids, and climbed wearily into bed.

She put her face in the pillow. Oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey ... this would have been the month we would have returned from our honeymoon in Norway ... we would have had all sorts of loveliness to remember ... we would have been setting up house at Hollows . . . Hollows with its cunning gables and its tall chimney stacks, and the trees surrounding it would be stirring with the sap of spring,. No one would have questioned me ... I would have been protected, cherished--Ainsley Dene would not have been far away, and Leicester and Margot... but I'm here because of a crazy plan to try to prove to myself I can inspire love without the background of a wealthy home. Instead I inspire nothing but insult and curiosity, and for that I give back lie after lie, and lying leaves a nasty taste in my mouth ... oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey, this is what you've brought me to ... stranded in a bush homestead thirteen thousand miles from home, living in a house with a man who despises all women.... She turned her face to the wall.

## CHAPTER IV

ROWENA almost resented the beauty of the morning she awoke to. It would have seemed more fitting had the landscape been swept by storm. As it was, the homestead lay in a pool of sunshine, girdled by scarlet geraniums, and nestled graciously against a background of lovely autumn trees, English ones, with the perfect foil of native bush as a backdrop.

She also resented the fact that today she couldn't - quite - wholeheartedly hate all Beechingtons. Aunt Lavinia was such a pet. No one could possibly dislike her. She was so delighted Rowena was here, and approved her work continually. Rowena felt she had to be on her guard so that her affinity with the older woman didn't soften her feelings towards her nephew, her unbearable nephew.

Nelly wasn't as difficult as she had feared. Here was a type she knew - unable to assume any responsibility. She was a good worker under authority. Much easier, probably, than dealing with someone more efficient, who might also resent you. On the whole it was a pleasant situation, in beautiful, if neglected surroundings, and there was always some drawback ... in this case, Forrest Beechington.

It was quite evident, as the days went by, that he was prepared to admit she was useful about the house, and that since his aunt wanted her, that was all that mattered. All that needed to matter, since he had made it plain that any dealings he had with her were to be strictly impersonal.

Perhaps that was why he had permitted himself the kindness of the other night. As he had declared to her his attitude toward unattached females in the house, he expected her to observe the rules.

He need not worry - if Forrest Beechington were the last man on earth she would not - Rowena wrenched her mind away from personal reactions, and went on polishing the staircase, a beautiful, intricately carved kauri one, that would last for ever.

She looked up to see Aunt Lavinia coming down. The older woman stopped.

"Now you've finished that, Rowena, you must have a rest. Go into the sun-room and read. Tell Nelly to do the same. She's better working when you are, and resting when you rest."

"I think I'll go out on the back verandah, Mrs. Beechington, that's where Nelly usually sits and sews."

Aunt Lavinia looked puzzled. "It's not necessary to sit with Nelly. I know you're doing the cooking, and a terrific amount of the housework, but you mustn't feel I regard you as a sort of superior maid for all that."

Rowena laughed. "It's sweet of you to say that, Mrs. Beechington, but I've got ulterior motives. I think Nelly's lonely. That's what young girls miss. That's why they leave the country, and go to factories in town. No company of their own age. I hope we'll get another girl before long. Besides, I like Nelly. She's not very well read, and her education's been very sketchy, but there's something appealing about her, fundamentally wholesome."

"All right, Rowena, you know best. I'm going to lie down. Just make yourselves some afternoon tea, and relax as you want to. There are some new magazines in - I left them in the hall. Forrest and the men won't be in for afternoon tea. They're across the river, fencing, and Jock's wife is going over with tea in the Land Rover."

Nelly looked up from her embroidery as Rowena came on to the verandah. "Did you want me, Miss Fotheringham?"

Rowena shook her head. "No. I'm feeling a little lonely. Mind if I share your sunny corner? Oh, good. Mrs. Beechington told me to bring out the magazines. Like some?"

Nelly looked gratified. Rowena hesitated. There was something else she ought to offer. She had noticed how casual New Zealanders were about Christian names. She plunged.

"Don't you think Miss Fotheringham's a bit formal with just the two of us in the house, Nelly? Do make it Rowena."

The bright colour ran up Nelly's fair cheeks. She looked pleased but embarrassed. "Th-thanks all the same, Miss Fotheringham, but I'd ... I'd not feel just right doing that. None of those other companions would have done it. They expected me to fetch and carry for them. Of course they were different."

Rowena couldn't help it. "How different, Nelly?"\*

The colour stayed in Nelly's cheeks, but she made a valiant effort to explain.

"Well, you see, they weren't ... weren't ... they didn't have - well, they weren't your *quality*, but that made them act more as if they wanted to be ... especially in front of Mr. Beechington."

Rowena was annoyed to find her own colour rise. It served her right, really. She achieved a laugh, and said, "Well, please yourself, Nelly, and if, when we've known each other longer, you want to call me Rowena, feel free to do so."

Rowena insisted on making the tea and bringing it out, and presently Nelly forsook her sewing for the magazines. She sighed prodigiously as she gazed at a hair shampoo advertisement. "I can never get my hair to look like that!" she said.

Rowena looked and decided to risk giving offence.

"Your hair could look like that, Nelly, but you spoil it by frizzing it."

"But, Miss Fotheringham, it's so straight - I have to curl it."

"Straight hair can look lovely, provided it's well groomed. Your hair is so golden, and could be shining if you didn't torture it every night with pins. When you curl it you can't brush it the same. If you had your hair shorter and brushed it madly every night and morning, I think it would turn up at the ends naturally and develop a wave of its own. I can tell."

Nelly looked wistful. "I wish I could do it right now, but my day off isn't till Tuesday, and -"



"But you're having time off now. Why don't you take a bicycle and go down to the township?"

"No hairdresser. None nearer than Geraldine."

Rowena was amazed. "Nelly.... I've had a little experience in trimming hair. I always trimmed my cousin's twins' hair. It's something I've got a flair for. I'd have liked to be a hairdresser if I'd had to -" She realized just in time she had been going to say: "had to earn my living," so she changed it to "if I'd had the opportunity to live in London."

Nelly turned cornflower-blue eyes on her. "You mean you'd cut it for me?"

"Gladly, if you'll risk it, Nelly?"

"I'd let you do anything, Miss Fotheringham."

Rowena smiled, here was hero-worship. "A rash statement, Nelly. I'll get some sharp scissors and something to put round you."

She brought out a mirror on a stand, draped a sheet about Nelly and, using a firmly bristled brush, endeavoured to smooth out the tangle of fussy curls.

Nelly was enchanted with the difference, even when Rowena was only halfway through.

Rowena said, "It will look a little sawn-off till it's shampooed. I'll do it right away. I'll slip up and get my shampoo."

They emerged again in the sunshine, to dry it. The difference the shorter cut made to Nelly's attractive face was amazing. They were so absorbed in styling the hair, and setting it, they did not hear a step on the verandah till Forrest Beechington spoke.

"Good heavens! A hairdressing salon! Aren't you versatile, Miss Fotheringham? I must suppose you have a diploma for hairdressing too!"

Rowena looked up from pressing in a wave with long cool fingers. "No, only a knack," she said easily. "Don't you think it looks nice?"

"Too nice..." Forrest flicked Nelly's cheek with a patronizing finger. "We'll be looking for another maid before we know where we are."

Nelly blushed again, pleased. It was only too evident Forrest Beechington could do no wrong in her eyes.

He looked at the tea-table, the plates under the crisp white organdie cover. "That looks good ... fresh scones ... I could do with some."

Rowena said coolly, "Mrs. Beechington said Jock's wife was providing you with afternoon tea on the fencing job."

"So she did. But that's an hour ago, long enough to raise a thirst again. Any tea in the pot?"

"It will be cold. I'll make you some more. Sit still, Nelly, **53**

I'll finish setting your hair when I've made Mr. Beechington his tea."

He followed her into the kitchen. "Mighty condescending of you when it's your time off."

She said stiffly, "I didn't mean to sound condescending. It's just that-"

"Just what?" He put out a hand and arrested hers as it went towards the kettle on the coal range.' He wanted her attention.

"Just that your remarks concerning your wariness with the other companions don't make for naturalness in our dealings. I can hardly sound eager for your company without you classing me with them, can I?"

He grinned, "Touche," then added, "What a tongue you've got, Katharina."

Rowena's lip curled. "I can't see you in the role of Petruchio!" she said.

"Why not?" The mobile eyebrows flew up.

"I can't see you minded to tame any woman. After all, even Petruchio had a certain need of Katharina, but you..."

He prompted her, "But I?"

"You wouldn't have any need ... of any woman. You despise them. You are completely self-sufficient."

She was disappointed if she hoped to see him resent that.

He chuckled maddeningly. "Lord, how you rise to every bait. Not completely, Katharina. Women have their uses. For instance, you were needed to bandage me the other day, and when I see how efficient you are at most things, I'm willing to admit we may come to depend upon you more and more.

"Just as well, that first day, that I warned you, isn't it? or you too might get ideas. And we are going to find you more and more useful. Aunt Lavinia won't need to go thirty miles to Ashburton to get her hair set ... and if I'm too busy come harvest to go to Geraldine to get mine done, you might even attempt to cut mine."

An extraordinary sensation assailed Rowena at his words. Involuntarily her fingers curled inwards at the thought of that dark head of crisp curls, springing back beneath her touch. It was such an odd, softening feeling that she said with some asperity, "You were quite safe ... from *me*... even without the warning."

"Really? I'm not your type?" He was quite imperturbable. He added, "Look out, you'll scald yourself in a moment, Miss Fotheringham."

She said, "I'll leave the tea to draw, and bring some of the cakes and sandwiches in here." He picked up the cup and saucer. "I'll have it out there in the sun. Go on with Nelly's hair. Don't let me rattle you."

"You couldn't rattle me," she said through tight lips.

It was a night or two later, in the dining-room, that Forrest Beechington put his paper down and said:

"Miss Fotheringham, I must teach you to ride."

She looked up from sewing new curtain rings on some chintz curtains she had laundered.

"*Must*, Mr. Beechington?"

She meant that to indicate it was not necessary, that she was an expert rider, but he missed the inflection.

"Yes, must. It's a necessity here. You might be needed to bring me an urgent message, and I could be miles away, across the paddocks and creeks, places where even the Land Rover is no use. Don't you like the idea? It's a fine accomplishment."

Aunt Lavinia intervened. "Forrest! Don't sound so dictatorial. Rowena might be nervous of horses. Some people are. She's not to do anything she doesn't want to."

It wasn't often Forrest crossed his aunt, but this time he set his mouth and said, "I've made up my mind about this. Besides, as you know, the youngsters live in the saddle in the holidays, and I'd feel easier about them if Miss Fotheringham learned to ride and could accompany them."

Aunt Lavinia gazed at him in amazement. "But ... but if she's a new chum at the game, *they'd* have to look after *her*."

His lips twitched. "Aunt Lavinia! How can you? Knowing Miss Fotheringham, can you imagine her not excelling at anything she takes up?"

Rowena hated the sarcasm in his tone, but resolved not to **55**

give him the satisfaction of showing it. She picked up another ring, slotted it on her thread.

Aunt Lavinia wavered. "Well, no ... she's so good at everything, but you're not to badger her, Forrest. I don't want her having to learn to ride just to please you!"

He gave a derisive snort. *'Would* you learn to ride, just to please me, Miss Fotheringham?"

Her voice was cool, unapologetic. "No, Mr. Beechington. If I learn to ride, it will be to amuse myself, not to please you." She added to herself: "And how!"

Aunt Lavinia made a sound of distress, and fluttered her hands. "There now, Forrest, you've upset her!"

"I haven't," he retorted. "You can't upset her. Wild horses wouldn't upset her. Not even wild bulls, would they, Miss Fotheringham?"

Quite unexpectedly Aunt Lavinia laughed. "You two are terrible, the way you argue ... just like Penny and Tony. Isn't it lovely?"

Rowena was betrayed into genuine feeling, but surprised this time, not resenting.

*"Lovely, Mrs. Beechington?"*

"Yes, sounds odd, but you know what I mean. All families quarrel, and to hear you two at it reminds me of our happy family days - before Linda and Darrell were killed."

Rowena felt her eyes mist and bent over her sewing. In spite of all the enmity between herself and the master of Tawhai Hills, there were times when the poignancy of their family story undermined your defences. Times when you felt as if Linda and Darrell and Colin weren't so very far away. She looked up to find Forrest Beechington regarding her sombrely. Their glances held, neither look giving anything away.

Mrs. Beechington's voice fell into the suddenly tense silence. She didn't look up from the headline she was peering at, but just said simply, "Rowena, why don't you call me Aunt Lavinia?"

Rowena caught her breath, aware that Forrest had looked at her sharply. This was another thing ... Aunt Lavinia was so gay, so inconsequential, no one would ever guess she carried with her, always, the threat of encroaching blindness. It was only headlines she could read now.

She had said to Rowena only yesterday how she had longed for children of her own, sons, she had said, and a darling daughter ... "a daughter like you, my dear." How could she repulse her?

Rowena said, "It's sweet of you, Mrs. Beechington, but..." her voice was a little unsteady, "but I - I - well, it would seem impertinent."

Aunt Lavinia wasn't at all put out. "I can't imagine you ever being impertinent, dear child, or presuming, but I know how hard it is to begin using a different name. But whenever you feel like it, just do."

Rowena's tone was warm. "Oh, thank you for understanding so well." She did not dare to look at Forrest.

He said, most unexpectedly, and with ... could it possibly be kindness in his tone? - "You could make it Beechy, you know. The children never say Great-aunt Lavinia, or even Aunt ... it's always Beechy. Beechington is such a mouthful for everyday use. Almost as much of a mouthful as - Fotheringham."

Rowena did not know how to reply. As she hesitated, Forrest Beechington said, the tone she hated back in his voice, "But of course, you're allergic to suggestions from me, aren't you?"

Rowena said quietly, "That would be childish, wouldn't it? I'm hoping I'm not that." She turned to Aunt Lavinia with a sudden smile, warm and loving. "I'd love to call you Beechy, if I may, when there are no outsiders about."

Just as Aunt Lavinia started to speak, the telephone at Forrest Beechington's elbow rang. He picked it up.

"A cablegram?" he said. "Right. I've a pencil here if you just read it now."

Telegrams and cables always came that way in the country, and they were delivered with the mail-man next morning.

He repeated it as it came to him. "Have secured berth on the *Queen Charlotte*. Leaving Southampton Monday. Love to all, Helen."

He said to his aunt unnecessarily as he replaced the receiver, "Helen is coming home. She should be here by...

let me see... May."

"How nice," said Aunt Lavinia, and Rowena couldn't help feeling there was warmth lacking in her tone. Her nephew seemed restless after that. Fidgeted with papers and magazines, smoked cigarette after cigarette instead of his usual pipe. Finally, he opened the glass doors into the drawing-room, and went to the grand piano.

Rowena and Aunt Lavinia sat in silence while he played piece after piece . . . "Where'er You Walk", "Westering Home", "The Eriskay Love Lilt" ... he didn't sing to his playing, but Rowena knew them all, and fitted the words in her mind. Finally he went into "The Bells of St. Mary's", and began to sing softly.

Aunt Lavinia had a frown between her brows.

"Isn't that odd ... he hasn't sung, or touched his piano since..."

She stopped. Even Aunt Lavinia had her reserves, or felt she must respect some on her nephew's behalf. But she hadn't needed to finish her sentence ... Forrest Beechington hadn't touched his piano since Helen Dewmore had gone from New Zealand!

Now Helen was coming back, and the forbidding master of Tawhai was singing with a lilt in his voice:

*The old love, the true love, from over the sea!*

Helen had been engaged to Colin Beechington, who had died ... had Forrest always loved her? ... did he think a decent interval had now elapsed? ... and his old love, his true love was returning home?

Perhaps that would mellow him, lessen his antagonism towards herself. He would never think of Helen as marrying him for money, because the Dewmores' estate was as large as this. .Yes, Forrest Beechington might easily be less cynical, less bitter, if his own love story had a happy ending ... all of which should have made Rowena Fotheringham easier in her mind, even glad . . . but it didn't, it didn't ... it was stupid, it was unaccountable, but she merely felt - bleak....



## CHAPTER V

FORREST BEECHINGTON lost no time in carrying out his promise - or was it a threat? - to teach Rowena to ride. His work kept him near the house next morning, and he came in at ten for morning tea.

"Now," he said, "I gather the dishes are washed, beds made, the dusting finished, all done to Miss Fotheringham's unrelenting time-table. Nelly can do the rest, can't you, Nelly? Run upstairs and get into some slacks, Miss Fotheringham."

Rowena looked at him across the kitchen table. "It wouldn't be the slightest use my protesting once more that I don't need riding lessons?"

"You're right. It wouldn't."

Nelly giggled. Forrest turned to her, the indulgent smile so often evident in his dealings with Nelly softening the severity of his expression.

"What are you laughing at, Nelly?"

"The way she - Miss Fotheringham - talks to you."

He grinned, shrugged, said to Rowena, "See! She's amazed at your temerity. Standing up to the boss like that!"

Rowena said, every bit as dryly as he could, "I think she admires it really. And she's got the great advantage of being brought up in awe of the name Beechington. Besides, it doesn't get me anywhere, does it? Even when I tell you I don't need to learn to ride, you still insist."

"Exactly," said Mr. Beechington, missing her meaning once more. "I've told you it's a necessity in a country like this."

"I suppose it doesn't matter that I speeded through the work this morning in an effort to preserve fruit? It's a disgrace to see that fruit rotting in the orchard. I wish I'd come a little earlier in the year."

"Oh, I haven't a doubt that you'll cope, riding lessons or not. Besides, I shan't give you very long this first lesson -

it finds out the tender places, you know. And to compensate, I'll peel all the pears you want me to, tonight. Go and get changed, Miss Fotheringham."

"Yes, Mr. Beechington," said Rowena meekly, and went slowly upstairs. Well, it was on his own head, since he would not be gainsaid. It served him right!

She looked longingly at her riding clothes, carefully stowed away. No, that would give the show away prematurely. She'd have her fun first, and the self-willed Mr. Beechington would learn that it didn't always pay to foist your pet ideas upon other people. Taking it for granted she couldn't ride!

She could have laughed madly when she saw Forrest Beechington leading out old Dandy. Dandy, who was fat and lazy and good-natured. He'd been the children's school pony, and had been show-class once, but had long since been pensioned off, ridden only occasionally now when the children were home, merely for exercise.

It was easy to pretend to amateur nervousness and mistakes. Rowena asked if he was quite sure the saddle wouldn't slip, when she put one foot in the stirrup ... and was assured not when *he* saddled up. She held the reins wrong, first too tightly, then too loosely. Since she had taught many youngsters to ride, she even remembered the question: "Are you sure one stirrup isn't longer than the other?"

He was surprisingly patient, though she hated to admit that, even to herself, and allowed her to take no risks. Rowena wondered what he would say if she urged Dandy to a gallop and took the fence ... but Dandy wasn't the mount to show her paces. No ... she would wait - sweeter the revenge then.

"Keep your knees in," said her instructor. "Later on I'll put pennies between your knees and Dandy, and not call you proficient till you can keep the pennies there. Actually you're not doing badly."

"Thank you," said Rowena, with exaggerated and suspicious meekness.

Mr. Beechington looked at her sharply. "I'm not being sarcastic -I mean it."

The suspicion of a dimple dented Rowena's cheek for a 60

moment. "Well ... you see, I'm not used to praise from you ... only criticism."

He halted, his hand on Dandy's bridle, looked at her squarely.

"Miss Fotheringham, I'm not critical ... *of your work*. Anything else I may have said has been purely personal... more to do with women's motives and emotions. How could I be critical of your work? Tawhai Hills is more efficiently run than in Linda's day. Even more than in my mother's, and I thought she was all a housekeeper could be. And you're making my aunt happy. You read to her so tirelessly. You're not in the least embarrassed whatever you have to read out of the news.

"Those other companions were quite impossible. Aunt Lavinia loves the little gossip bits ... they used to go. ..

'Er - well - that's not very interesting after all...I'll go on to something else,' and leave Aunt Lavinia so frustrated. Even when I wasn't there, listening, they couldn't take it. Reading aloud is a talent as well as any other. And we can again talk farming without a trace of self-consciousness."

Rowena felt a glow of gladness sweep up from her heart. How odd when she had started out with ... well, less than generous motives, to take these lessons. To hide her pleasure, she bent her head so that the chestnut hair fell across her cheek. She ran a hand caressingly over Dandy's mane. Then, despising herself for the feeling, she said with some asperity, "I can't imagine you ever feeling self-conscious, or sparing anyone's feelings, either."

There was a pause, then Forrest Beechington gave a short, unamused laugh. "You certainly believe in taking the foils off, don't you?"

Rowena retorted, "One has to, with some men. How odd that blunt people never relish a matching bluntness."

There was a pause, a much more noticeable one. Rowena lifted her head, and found him regarding her with an unfathomable expression. She bit her lip. She felt she needn't have said just that. She moistened her lips, she must say she was sorry.

Before she could, he said matter-of-factly, "In spite of the fact that you're hot-tempered, Rowena ... and I suppose that glint of red in your hair could excuse that... I thought you'd have been fairer in your opinion of me. Prepared to give the devil his due, in fact!"

His eyes danced, mocking her. "Do you want to come down now? Had enough?" He didn't wait for her answer but put out his hand.

She came down neatly enough, for she'd forgotten for the moment she was supposed to be a novice, and it earned his praise.

He grasped her by the wrist. "Do you really think I trample on people's feelings quite regardless of their own reactions, Miss Fotheringham?"

She fiddled with the stirrup. She was annoyed to find herself a little breathless, and she didn't want to feel that way about Forrest Beechington. She preferred to show him indifference.

"I - I - my dealings with you haven't led me to expect anything else, I'm afraid. I can certainly imagine you displaying a fine scorn of anything approaching prudery with regard to farming terms, and being most impatient with anyone not brought up to it."

"Because we've been so outspoken in front of you? But then you said you'd lived in the country all your life. Tell me, have we offended you at all?"

Rowena made an impatient gesture, looking up at last. "Of course not. I'm impatient myself with any hint of that. Life is as it was created, and the Creator can't be wrong. It's only our interpretation of things that makes us embarrassed. Only I just can't imagine you being understanding of a city woman's reaction ... a reaction you would probably dub as being old-maidish."

"Then you're wrong." His grip of her wrist tightened. "I really did feel sorry for Miss Braithwaite the day Tony rushed *-in* and said, 'I say, Uncle Forrest, how good did the tester say the ram was?' I very hurriedly said: 'Oh, good for years, he should live to a ripe old age,' but Tony brushed that aside, and said scornfully: \*I mean how many ewes is he good for?' Poor Miss Braithwaite went all colours of the rainbow, and I took Tony outside and told him to censor his farming gen in future in front of her."

It was too much for Rowena, she put her head back and laughed. Forrest Beechington laughed with her.

"That's better," he said. There was something in the hazel eyes with their flecks of green that disturbed Rowena ... or was it something in her own feelings? When this man forgot to be deliberately deriding and cynical, he ... oh, it was foolish to relax one's guard at all, but given a different start and a different set-up ... if he were not so distrustful of women, and had she not carried a scar because of Geoffrey, they might have met on common ground.

"Much better," he repeated. "I think, you know, that we could deal well together. This estate needs someone like you. And, since we understand each other, no complications are likely to arise."

His qualification, *since we understand each other*, was like the amber light on a Belisha beacon to Rowena. The warmth at her heart cooled. Even in Forrest Beechington's genial moments, he was careful to remind her that friendliness meant just that and no more.

"Now," she said evenly, "I'll go up to the house and get on with the preserving."

She and Nelly bottled fruit all the afternoon, washing, peeling, slicing, using both the big coal range and the electric one. By the time they had had dinner and washed up, she was almost too ti/ed to move.

She sat down in front of the fire with Aunt Lavinia in obedience to her request, and read her the paper. Forrest Beechington was looking through the *Weekly News*, but he put it down and listened.

"I'm getting quite attached to having my news read to me," he remarked lazily. "I read once that the test of an actress's voice was whether or not she could make the multiplication table sound fascinating. I've never heard you recite that, Rowena, but you can make the Births, Marriages, and Deaths sound like poetry."

Rowena kept the paper well up. It wasn't the compliment that had heightened her colour ... he had called her Rowena. The first time, when he gashed his wrist, hadn't meant a thing, that had been born out of urgency. This had been said quite naturally. She read on.

When she had finished, she rose. "Would you excuse me, Beechy? I've a few things to do."

Aunt Lavinia thought she meant things of her own, up in her room, so made no protest. Rowena went out to the kitchen, pulled out the damper of the stove, switched the electric range on. She didn't feel like it, but if she could get this lot of peaches and pears done, the decks would be cleared for more tomorrow. And there were all the discards to be chopped up for jam, and pear ginger.

She'd been at it about half an hour when Forrest Beechington appeared.

"So this is where you are. Haven't you had enough of it for one day?"

As she began to protest he held up a hand. "Now don't say you're not tired. You must be. If you aren't, then you must be a robot... without any human weaknesses at all."

"I am tired, Mr. Beechington, but time, tide, and ripening fruit wait for no man, and it would be such a relief to get this done tonight."

"I can understand that. I'll help."

He over-rode her protests. "Now, not any silly business about it being beneath my dig, or some such rot. The sooner you get used to our ways the better. We all pitch in and help."

"I wasn't going to protest. I think you've got a quaint idea of conditions in England today. An outmoded idea. Our stately homes have gone, mainly, save those whose owners have managed to make them pay."

"You mean opening them to sightseers?"

"That, and making the best use of the land. Farming it."

She thought with a nostalgic pang of Ainsley Dene, with its huge team of workers, its progressive agricultural and pastoml programme.

She said hastily, "I'll get a basin of salted water for you to put the pear quarters into."

"How about each of us taking a separate job? Makes for more speed and efficiency, Miss Fotheringham. If I peel, you could core and slice."

"Better reverse it, I think. I doubt if you could keep up with me, if you do the peeling."

He sighed. Handed her the peeler, picked up the knife.

"Why don't you sit down to this job?" he asked.

"Table's too high," she said impatiently. "I like to be well above the fruit. What you save in standing fatigue you make up in wrist fatigue."

He turned away, went into the pantry, brought out a high stool. "This could be the complete answer."

She knew she was being unreasonably stubborn, but said, "I still prefer to stand, thank you."

He laughed suddenly. "I get it." His eyes twinkled.

She looked a question.

"Sitting doesn't come so easy tonight, does it? Maybe all the chestnut jokes about taking your dinner off the mantelpiece are true after all... eh?"

"You mean - you mean because of the riding lessons?"

He nodded, still twinkling.

"I'm not in the least stiff and sore, thank you," said Rowena, suddenly making use of the stool.

He laughed so loudly and derisively that Aunt Lavinia heard and came to see what it was about.

Her nephew looked at her solemnly. "Just that I've discovered that the superior Miss Rowena Melisande Agatha Fotheringham can even go one better than us in the matter of skin ... she's not common clay at all!"

"I've no idea what you're talking about, Forrest, but I think I'll bring my knitting out here, this looks so homely."

She went off to get it.

Forrest said, "I dread the day when she can no longer knit. How will she fill the hours?"

Rowena looked up. "I think she'll always be able to do it. Lots of folk knit and read. You don't need to look, if you keep to plain knitting."

"You're a great comfort," he said, mock solemnly. Then, with more sincerity: "I was wondering what lay ahead of us as a family. Don't marry your artist too soon, will you?"

Rowena didn't deign to answer. She picked up some jars, put them on a tray, and went into the store-room. He did likewise.



"I'm glad you had the sense to do all these the quick way **65** when there was such a back-log of them ... simply stew them and fill the hot jars. I thought you'd not have been able to resist doing them according to the Institute of Good Housekeeping."

As he finished speaking, his eye fell on a set of jars put aside on a small table. They were perfectly done; late apricots arranged beautifully in what almost looked like a pattern, quartered pears with their Outer curves symmetrically piled against the glass, sliced Golden Queen peaches that looked as if they'd been perfectly matched for size.

He looked at her questioningly.

"Those were made from perfect fruit. You may not go in for such things, perhaps, but I thought there would probably be pastoral and agricultural shows, and you might want the produce of the Tawhai Hills Estate competing with the others. I didn't do many."

There was a warm note in his voice. "There are shows ... the biggest of them the Christchurch A. & P. Show. We've managed to hold our own in the stock parades, and so on, but this side has had to lapse till now."

It was the first time Rowena had felt his praise was unqualified, not mocking. She wondered, as she went up to bed, if she should tell him tomorrow that she was an expert rider, and hadn't been able to resist taking a rise out of him.

It was a pity, then, that as she went in search of him, for she'd deemed it best not to humiliate him in front of the others, she should overhear something that reconfirmed her in the opinion that, except in his rare mellow moments, Forrest Beechington was an overbearing, self-willed man.

She knew Forrest was working beyond the gums, tightening wires. It was a magnificent patch of gum trees, their sunlit bark displaying a great variety of colour from palest grey to a vivid rust, and the track was delightful, leading along-'the fences, through copsy clumps of native trees, ngaios and tree fuchsias and ribbon woods.

The gums were close to the lower, more gentle slopes of Mount Tawhai, which rose from this end in a long, sloping shoulder, deceptively gentle in appearance, and the track Rowena took finally joined up with another that led up from the road. She'd often rambled along here, with Nelly.

She had thought she would hear sounds of activity on the fence-line long before she got this far. She caught a sight of Forrest's Dapple Lass through the trees, and turned towards where the horse was tethered. A narrow leafy track led to it. She wasn't halfway along it when the sound of voices, angry voices, reached her. She listened. The voice she heard first was unmistakably English ... in fact Yorkshire.

"... We were told the landowners here didn't worry about trespass laws. We're not likely to light any fires or leave any stock gates open."

Then Forrest's voice: "I've told you why you're not going up the mountain. It's nothing to do with fires or gates or anything else - though God knows we've suffered enough in the past from both - but it's the hazard of the weather. No one is going up this mountain today."

"But look at the sky ... the wind's nor'west. I've been in the country long enough to recognize the signs."

Forrest's voice was scornful. "Ever hear that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing? You've been here long enough to recognize the signs of a nor'west, yes, I grant you that, but maybe not long enough to mark the signs of coming change. See how the clouds have parted ..."

Rowena, unseen by the others, looked up too.

Forrest's voice went on: "See how they're being blown northwards. They're scudding before a sou'wester that you can't sense yet otherwise."

The pleasant Yorkshire voice took up. "Have you any real authority to turn us off the mountain if we can get to it some other way than through your property? "

"No, I haven't - in theory. But you'd have to walk a damned long way to get to it by any other way than through this estate. But in any case, knowing this mountain as I do, and the weather ... I'll turn you off by force if you attempt it!"

His contempt for the letter of the law was unmitigated. Rowena hoped the young fellow realized that. Forrest was lean, but broad-shouldered and whipcord tough, and the young Yorkshireman was slight and boyish. He shrugged and turned to the girl beside him. "Come on, Angela, apparently this isn't the stronghold of democracy we're led to believe. And there are other mountains and other holidays."

"Very sensible." Forrest Beechington's tone was dry, but Rowena thought she detected a note of relief! "And if you take my advice - which you probably won't - when you do attempt other mountains, remember they're on a large scale in this country and do go suitably clad and shod, ready for blizzards. Carry provisions, and one of those tiny emergency stoves. There've been too many lives lost on oilr ranges."

Rowena heard no further answer, so thought they'd taken their way back. Which was exactly what she was going to do. Forrest Beechington would be in no mood to be confronted with what she had hoped last night he might be disposed to regard as a minor and amusing deception. In any case, why tell him? He was so fond of putting other people in the wrong, it wouldn't hurt him to be made a fool of in turn. Silently she threaded her way back through the cool green bush.

At lunch-time Forrest announced his intention of going to Christchurch, and asked if anyone wanted to go. Aunt Lavinia couldn't be bothered, and Rowena, though she would have dearly loved a visit to the city, decided she must get on with the bottling, and pleaded that as an excuse, though, in truth, it was because she was seething at Forrest Beechington's high-handed ways, and it would take only a chance word from him to trigger off an outburst.

They had their evening meal in a peaceful atmosphere, and afterwards Rowena followed the pattern of most of the evenings at Tawhai ... reading

aloud, helping with the crossword, listening to the radio. Forrest's storm had not eventuated. Rowena was rather pleased about that. It confirmed her in her suspicion that it was mostly ill-nature that had made him forbid the mountain to the young couple from Yorkshire.

Aunt Lavinia announced her intention of retiring early, and though she didn't feel in the least sleepy, Rowena determined not to be long after her. She would just leave a flask of coffee and some sandwiches out for his high-and-mightiness! She had no intention whatever of giving him any chance of thinking she sought time alone with him.

She was washing up the supper dishes when she heard him sweep up the drive into the garage. She snatched a tea-towel, sketchily dried the things, and was going into the hall when he came through the kitchen door. He saw the whisk of her pleated skirt vanishing round the door, and said, "Oh, Rowena?"

She hesitated, wondered if she'd pretend not to hear, then came back. "I was just going off to bed, Mr. Beechington. Beechy turned in early, and I thought I'd do the same."

"Must you? It's a poor show when a man gets back from town to find all the womenfolk in bed."

Her tone was purposely indifferent. "Oh, I left sandwiches under a cover, and a flask of coffee."

He pulled a face. "Cold comfort. I was looking forward to something more substantial. I didn't have time for dinner. Had a lot to do. And something else cropped up. I thought you might have rustled me up 'a snack, but never mind. I'll fry some bacon and eggs. You get off to bed if you're tired. You're doing too much. Better let the rest of the fruit rot."

Rowena wanted no favours from this man. "Oh, I'll make you a decent meal. There's nothing solid about bacon and egg. I'll grill you some steak if you like."

"And have some with me?"

She looked doubtful. His look was boyishly beseeching. "I hate solitary meals."

"Very well."

"You don't sound at all enthusiastic, Miss Rowena etc. etc. etc. Fotheringham!"

She shrugged. "Maybe it isn't the easiest to sound enthusiastic at this time of night."

He looked at his watch. "It's only ten, my dear girl, you do sound like 'Miss Methuselah' tonight. Why, at your age the night should be young at midnight!"

Rowena switched on the stove, opened the refrigerator.

"It could be, given different circumstances, I suppose."

"You mean, to feel that way you need a dance floor . ,» soft music ... light romance ...?"

She wouldn't succumb to sudden charm or to the heady sweetness of this. After all, didn't she detest the man? So her voice was cool.

"I'm not yearning after the flesh-pots, if that's what you mean."

"I didn't. If you had, you'd have come to town ... though I have an idea that, fruit notwithstanding, given other company you might have gone." His glance was shrewd.

So ... even though he'd made it so plain he had no time for marriage, he could still feel piqued at women disliking his company. Rowena smiled inwardly, and merely said, "What would you like with the steak? Tomatoes? Eggs?"

"Both, please ... and chips ... where are the potatoes? I'll peel 'em."

She indicated a basket by the sink.

He continued, "Well, if a dance floor and soft music is out, what about moonlight? It's a lovely night. You sound as if you've been sitting indoors too much with Aunt Lavinia. You don't take enough time off. Perhaps you feel our New Zealand moons don't compare with English ones, but to see the moon above Tawhai is something to remember. We can't supply a nightingale, of course, and I suppose you think nothing can compare with a nightingale? "

His assumption that she was homesick and didn't like the southern scene made Rowena's hackles rise.

"You always seem to assume you can read my feelings, Mr. Beechington! Let me assure you I'm far from homesick. I think this is a very lovely country. At first, coming across the plains, I thought it was too vast; it appalled me, dwarfed me. Now I feel there's a spaciousness and freedom about it that has a charm all its own.

"When first I heard a bell-bird sing, I didn't compare it with a nightingale. I was down by the Little Tawhai stream and it was in a totara across the water. It sounded like a faery bell chiming. I wondered if there could be anything more beautiful. No, I wasn't homesick for a nightingale!"

He faughed, and dropped a hand upon her shoulder as she turned the steak.

"My Lady Firebrand!" he teased.

Rowena twisted away from his touch. "Must you always jeer?" she asked.

He set the table, there in the kitchen, while outside in the bush a little more pork called unceasingly: "More pork? More pork?"

"Do you like pork?" he asked. "We're hoping to have a pig-hunt soon. They're doing a fair bit of damage up in the bush."

*"Pig-hunt!"* She sounded amazed.

He laughed again. "The only pigs you've met up with are the tame ones in sties, I suppose? Pigs and deer are a menace here. Responsible for a lot of erosion. We have to keep them down. Captain Cook did it, you know ... released pigs because there was so little animal life here. The Maoris lived mostly on fish, they had to. And wood-pigeons ... no big stuff."

Rowena looked at him curiously as she put the plates on the table. "You sounded - well, almost reluctant when you said 'we have to keep them down'. Am I right?"

"You are." He looked rather shamefaced, the first time Rowena had seen him out of countenance. He added, "Most of the men around here love it. I don't enjoy killing anything for the fun of it. And some of these old boars are so gallant. The way they keep the dogs at bay always gets me. Then sometimes the dogs get ripped by the tusks, and have to be stitched.

"I go deer-hunting too, when they become too much of a pest about here. They're such noble animals, full of the joy of living and poetry of movement. I'd rather observe any animal, same as bird-watching, which you know I'm keen on, but to bring a bird down on the wing ... no, I couldn't do it." He looked across at her, unapologetically. "But I daresay you will find that odd in a man. Rather sissyish!"

Her eyes met his, candidly. "I don't. I find it rather..."

She sought for a word. He prompted her : "Rather... ?"

"Rather endearing," and was annoyed to feel herself flush.

His mouth twitched. "Goes against the grain, doesn't it, Rowena, to find I have qualities with which you're in sympathy ... and therefore have to approve?" He patted her hand as it lay on the table.

She withdrew it immediately. Forrest Beechington should have no grounds on which to say this particular companion encouraged him. She rose, opened the oven, drew out a wedge of apricot pie that had been a left-over and which she had re-heated. She put cream and sugar before him, set out coffee and biscuits.

"Forgive me if I don't join you in this. I'm just not hungry enough, though I enjoyed the grill."

She began to wash up. He picked up a tea-towel when he had finished, dried the dishes, stacked them neatly away.

She had said goodnight and was turning away when he caught her arm.

"Come on out on to the verandah while I have a last pipe. I want to discuss something with you. I'd like your advice."

"Not pigs, surely, at this time of night?" she asked, preceding him.

"Pigs...? Oh, you mean about your idea of keeping them up in the oak wood to use up the skim milk? No, I think it's a good idea, though. I've mentioned it to Jock. This is about Lindsay - I saw her today."

They leaned their elbows on the back verandah rail. He seemed loth to begin.

"Did you know this back part is part of the pioneer homestead? The first wee shelter was wattle-and-daub, but this was put up soon after. This rail is kauri, that's why it's lasted so well. My great-grandfather and his wife used to tie their horses to it. It wasn't much more than a shack to start with, kitchen and bedroom, raupo - thatched - you know, swamp-reeds."

Rowena's hand caressed the smooth hard wood. "It sometimes seems incredible to me that your history, in spite of the long-established appearance of your cities, is really so recent. It's almost within living memory, isn't it? I mean you could remember your grandfather? Yes. Listened to his tales of your great-grandfather? Of the very earliest days?"

He nodded, watching her face. "I expect it seems incredibly raw and crude because of that, doesn't it?"

She was surprised. Turned sharply to look up at him.



"Oh, no. How can you think so? I think it's thrilling. Not to have the beginnings of white civilization lost in antiquity but to have it as vivid in people's memories as yesterday!"

"I was talking to old Jamie the other day when he was hoeing the onions. He told me he was brought up in Poverty Bay, and can actually remember the Maori Wars. That he once saw the Maoris on the warpath. It was in the time of Te Kooti.

"Imagine it, Forrest, being able to remember back to that. I wonder will we ever see such changes in our lifetime, or does that belong just to one generation? I mean, during his lifetime he's seen us come up from nothing faster than horse transport, to motor-cars, to aircraft, to jets, faster than sound ... to the atomic age!"

Rowena suddenly realized something - she had called him Forrest. She hoped he'd not noticed it.

She said crisply, aware that for a few moments she had let down the barriers, "But you wanted to tell me something."

She thought he returned to it reluctantly. "Yes--" He knocked out the dottle of his pipe on to the bed of nasturtiums below them. "It's Lindsay. I had a cup of tea at a little place in Regent Street. Quiet, cosy sort of atmosphere. She was there, with a frightful outsider. You could pick it immediately."

"How do you mean? An outsider? Someone not in her class? A labourer?"

"No!" His tone was impatient. "Some of our farm labourers are thoroughly decent chaps. Don't be so snobbish. Many of them start that way, get married, take a married couple's job, live for a time on the proceeds of their cows and poultry, save their wages, and finally own their own farms. Or go share-milking. Extremely profitable and needing no capital. Some of our farm labourers are the salt of the earth. They keep the country economically sound."

Rowena felt angry. She'd meant *he* was being snobbish, now he'd accused her of it. If ever anyone had the knack of putting people in the wrong this man had it!

She resolved to sound patient. "What did you mean, then?"

"He's oily ... cheap .. . improvident . . . has an eye to the main chance. I guarantee he knows all about the Beechingtons."

Rowena said, "I think you've got a thing about that, see everybody as fortune-hunting."

Even as she said it, she was uncomfortably aware that he had justification for thinking that ... even as she had herself.

Forrest said, "This was obvious. I summed him up as a complete bounder."

"Are you as omniscient as that? I mean, could anyone make up their minds at a first impression, quite so decidedly?"

"Yes."

You couldn't argue with a positive tone like that, really, but for the sake of the Lindsay she had never met, she persisted.

"But it might have been just a friend. I hope you didn't take it too seriously. Wrong psychological approach."

"Psychology ... a much overdone subject!" snorted Forrest.

She allowed no hint of resentment to creep into her tone.

"I agree - it is overdone, but it has something. I'm quite sure our grandmothers used it in bringing up their families, only they called it common sense, or gumption, or just mothering instinct."

"Rowena." His voice held appeal, an appeal which stirred her against her will. "This isn't just an abstract problem we're discussing. It's Lindsay, my

brother's darling daughter, and he isn't here to guide her. She's, fresh and unspoiled, and horribly difficult to understand. I asked you to help. Aunt Lavinia is too vague, lives in a little world of her own. You're somewhere between Lindsay's age and mine, and a woman."

"I'm sorry," she said, and meant it. "Tell me, did Lindsay introduce you?"

"Yes. With an air of bravado, expecting my frown of disapproval. Partly because she was evidently playing the wag from a lecture, partly because she knew I'd have no time for his type."

"And I suppose she got what she expected - your frown of disapproval?"

"Yes, of course. You could hardly expect me to fall on his neck! I wasn't rude."

"No." She said it with a touch of exasperation. "Men! You wouldn't be rude ... only distant and chilling. Putting Lindsay on the defensive, and showing up this man, probably, as rather more gracious than you. Enough to push her over the brink of falling in love, if, at the moment, she's only attracted."

He wasn't offended. He was too genuinely worried for that.

"She's in love all right. I've never seen Lindsay like it before. That's what worries me. What would you have done?"

"Ignored the fact that you were dismayed, been as cordial as you would have been had you found her with a fresh-faced young student, and *asked him up here to visit during the May holidays.*"

"Asked him up *here*? What the devil for?"

"Because possibly up here, against a solid background, all that Lindsay has known and loved, he would appear shoddy, cheap, second-rate." If he *is* any, or all, of these things, she added mentally. She told herself it could act two ways ... the other being that if he was at all likeable, Forrest might relent a little.

He considered it, while Rowena watched the three-quarter moon climbing high above Tawhai, clouds scudding before it, sometimes catching it up from behind and obscuring it. There was a coldness and bleakness about the sky that probably meant autumn was ending and winter coming.

He spoke. "I think you've got something there. How shall I wangle it?"

"Write her a friendly, avuncular letter; I daresay you do from time to time? And suggest he may like to come up for a week-end. I suppose he's working in the city? Will have only week-ends free?"

"I gather he'll be free most of the vacation. He's doing sort of free-lance art lectures to schools and colleges. Doing the whole of New Zealand on that basis, or so he told me when I asked him what he did for a crust. Says he's English. I should say it's a mixed parentage .. . good dash of South American there."

Rowena had gone rigid. She moistened her lips. She must *7*/know... she must - it couldn't be...

Her tone was carefully casual. "What did you say his name was?"

"Dirk Sargison. Sounds like a film star, doesn't it? He looks like one too ... moustache, long eyelashes, curly hair, very well manicured finger-nails."

Dirk Sargison! So it was ... and Forrest had been right. He *was* oily, cheap, improvident ... and quite irresistible to women, women far more experienced than a Varsity student. How long would it be before the astute Forrest Beechington would connect him with the artist she had met on the ship ... and ... oh, unlucky choice ... had pretended to have an understanding with?

## CHAPTER VI

AND she, Rowena Melisande Ainsley Fotheringham, had actually suggested he be invited down here! Her brain seemed paralysed ... she must be careful . . . don't let him suspect, come morning wiser counsels may prevail, and you'll think of something. Meanwhile she must try to sound ordinary. She looked down.

"Those nasturtiums are wonderful, aren't they? They make such a gay splash of colour against the house."

"Mmmm." His tone was absent. "But come morning they'll have had it."

"What do you mean?"

"They'll be frosted. Tawhai will be white when day breaks."

If Rowena hadn't been so perturbed inwardly she might have permitted herself an inward chuckle over that - he was still stubbornly predicting a storm, to justify to himself the way he had turned that young couple off the property.

Rowena did not sleep well that night. Her mind tossed and turned with her body, and by the time morning came she was no nearer a solution. In any case she didn't think anyone would have had much sleep. Every window had rattled, the trees in the garden had sounded, as they bent before the wind, like giant waves of the sea. There had been rain on the roof, and hail spattering against the windows, and she didn't need to pull up her blind to find Tawhai capped with the first snow of the season, or go downstairs and out on to the verandah to know the nasturtiums were black and shrivelled.

Morning might have brought snow to Tawhai, but it had brought no wiser counsel to Rowena. She could only hope that if Forrest Beechington did write, Lindsay might turn it down, or Dirk Sargison himself find it impossible to come. That last hope was a very faint one. If he had any idea of the solidity and wealth of Lindsay's background, he would certainly come.

If he did, and Forrest Beechington guessed, would he hold his tongue? From her dealings with him thus far she doubted it. Would it be better to say to him before Dirk came, "I'd better tell you, Mr. Beechington, that there's nothing between Dirk Sargison and myself. I merely used him as a smokescreen when you were sure all companions at Tawhai had designs on you."

Rowena tried that out loud in the' privacy of her own room, and was appalled to find how it sounded. It sounded scheming. He could quite easily take from it that she had used the artist, and the supposed bond between them, merely to cloak her own ambitions.

Another idea presented itself. Given time, she could perhaps mention that the understanding had come to nothing, that it hadn't stood the test of separation, that it had been nothing more than a shipboard romance, so she had broken it off ... the faint warmth of relief about Rowena's heart chilled again. That would only make Forrest think she had made up her mind there were better fish in the sea ... a wealthy landowner for instance, rather than an itinerant artist. She groaned. How complicated could things get?

In the days that followed Rowena tried to harden her heart against Forrest Beechington. If only you don't soften towards him, she told herself fiercely, it won't matter quite so much when you're unmasked.

So, when the events of the week confirmed her first impression that he was harsh, domineering, bigoted, she told herself with more vigour than conviction that she was glad, very glad.

A man was dismissed summarily, he turned more young people off the property, seeking their way to the mountain, and she heard disjointed echoes of a fierce argument he had with the son of one of his men. The young fellow, on holiday with his parents, and evidently a keen sportsman, had brought down a harrier hawk. From what Rowena overheard in a scrappy conversation between Nelly and one of the men, Forrest Beechington had given the lad the tongue-thrashing of his life.

It seemed most unjust. Rowena might earlier have found his reluctance to take life rather endearing, but she doubted if that gave him the necessary authority to put a veto on all shooting around the district.

Even if he could forbid it at Tawhai, did it give him the right, ethically, to forbid another man's sport? Besides, these hawks were so cruel, and evidently did damage among poultry, and sometimes even young lambs. New Zealand was extremely lucky in having no foxes, but she imagined the hawks had to be kept down ... she believed the acclimatization societies had a price on their heads, so they must regard them as a menace. This attitude of Forrest Beechington's, as a landowner, was absolutely ridiculous, another instance of his forcing his ideas on other people.

So remember that, Rowena Fotheringham, and don't weaken. Whatever attraction he has for you is merely the magnetism most women sense in masterful men - but they're ill to live with! This man has persistently humiliated you, he has a contemptuous attitude towards all women, all because a few lonely spinsters fell for him. He doesn't matter to you really - he's only your own employer's nephew!

There came the morning when Aunt Lavinia came back from the mail-box at the foot of the drive with a night-letter telegram for Forrest, something which wasn't telephoned like more urgent ones.

"There's evidently no real urgency about it, Rowena, but I wonder if you would saddle up Dandy and take it to Forrest. He's up in Miro Gully, diverting the stream there into one of our private irrigation races. It's low just now, and he wanted to do it in case we get a late nor'wester, and it thaws the snow on Tawhai and we get a fresh."

Rowena took the telegram and went upstairs to get into slacks. Her eye fell on her jodhpurs. Oh, yes ... why not? There were dozens of fences between here and the Gully. What an opportunity! At the thought of Forrest Beechington's reaction to his erstwhile pupil taking fence after fence, she knew a quickening of the pulses, an inner tremor of fear, but she stilled that. She'd planned to do just that, hadn't she?

She slipped into the jodhpurs and a cream silk shirt, and picked up the dun-coloured jacket. She'd leave it open - it was gloriously hot. She went quietly down the back stairs; she didn't want to run into anyone.

It wasn't Dandy she saddled, but Queen of Mars, who belonged to Tony.

"Why Queen of Mars?" she had once asked of Mr. Beechington.

He had grinned. "Perhaps because she's by Sirius, out of Venus ... but in reality because when she really goes, she hardly touches the ground, like a creature out of space. As you'd know if you were ever on her ... not that that's likely!"

Queen of Mars whinnied softly as Rowena fondled the velvet nose, and produced a lump of sugar for her. She saddled up and was away like the wind. The mare lacked exercise in term-time.

Rowena felt her spirits rise and doubts leave her. The paddocks were rising here, towards the foothills, and the track was winding, over irrigation ditches, and across shallow streams. They were mostly wire fences, a few gorse, and Queen of Mars took them like a bird in flight. The country was open enough here; there was little to fear in the way of hazards.

She couldn't see Forrest Beechington working, he must be amongst the trees. Pity, she'd have liked to have had him watch her approach, wondering, amazed.

She saw a curl of smoke where he must have boiled his billy. She hoped some of the men were with him, for he'd take it in more restrained fashion probably, not wanting to appear scored-off in front of them, and lash out at her later, when they were alone. When she was still three vast paddocks from the gully, she saw him emerge from the nearer trees into the open. He evidently heard the hoof-beats, for he stopped, looked about him ... stood stock-still.

Rowena put her mare at the first fence ... it took only a few minutes to reach the second, and the third was all she could have desired for her to show Forrest Beechington what she could do ... on the far side of the fence ran the



stream, the banks broken and crumbling ... as Rowena came down, neatly, and well on the far side of the bank, she was very close to the man who stood there.

She slowed the mare down, came up to him. She dismounted, dropped the reins over the mare's head, put up a nonchalant hand, and ran it over the glistening neck, then out of her breast pocket brought the yellow paper.

"Letter-telegram for you, Mr. Beechington," she said demurely. "Your aunt thought you ought to have it." He took it. Their eyes met. Rowena felt her heart lurch. She would not drop her eyes, look in any way ashamed.

"So," he said, and the control in his voice showed how deep his anger had gone, more than if he had shouted.

"So ... you're a first-class ... *show*-class horsewoman. I must suppose you learned to ride as soon as you learned to walk, Miss Fotheringham. They don't give diplomas for that, do they? But I expect you have a row of cups! Would you mind telling me *why* you let me give you those lessons?"

Her green eyes, had she but known it, held a spark of sheer malice.

"I did tell you two or three times," she reminded him, "that I didn't *need* riding lessons. Also . . . that my brand of humour was different from yours!"

"You did ... and by heaven you're right!"

His fingers were steel grips biting into her shoulders through the thin gaberdine, his eyes were blazing into hers. She would not allow herself to show the panic she felt.

"Go on!" she taunted. "Shake me! It's the sort of thing I ought to have expected from you!"

Something unfathomable leapt into the hazel eyes so near hers. Despite all her resistance she was inexorably drawn against him, her body as taut as a bow against his. He kissed her, his lips hard against hers, seeking, mastering.

She didn't know how long it took, it was not a moment to be measured in time.

He took his mouth from hers, holding her still in that remorseless grip, and looked down at her. This time the fury was in *her* eyes. She sought for words, found none adequate.

His lips twitched. "First time I've really seen you at a loss. Don't bottle things up. You could always slap my face! They do it in the best films."

He let her go. She almost fell, she was so rigid with resistance. He put a hand to her elbow, steadied her.

She swallowed, found words rising to her tongue, icy, biting words, anything to disguise ... to disguise ... to disguise *what?*

"You ought to be more careful, you know, Mr. Beechington. Careful how you choose the punishment for impertinence ... it *is* impertinence, isn't it? Daring to laugh at the great Forrest Beechington! You've been at pains to inform me that women pursue you - especially companions. These things are likely to be misunderstood. You're' fortunate that I do understand. Some might think you did - after all - have a need of women, but I realize it was meant for nothing more than an insult."

She could have struck him when he laughed. Her hands clenched at her sides in the effort not to.

His tone was amused. "Like all women, you exaggerate ... make the situation more dramatic than it deserves. It wasn't meant for an insult. Or for punishment. Despite the fact that you're a vixen, you're a very personable young woman, especially when you're in one of your rages. If you don't want to be kissed, you shouldn't be so provocative. I found the temptation irresistible, that's all. Besides, think how safe I feel. I'm in no danger from you at all, am I?"

"None whatever!" said Rowena between her teeth. "You were always safe from me ... even if you hadn't warned me off!"

He nodded, with maddening nonchalance. "Yes, of course. The shipboard romance."

Rowena said, "I didn't need that immunity. Believe me, if I'd been completely heartwhole, you would have been just as safe. After all, most women want some basic qualities in their husbands."

"Such as?" His tone was one of polite interest, no more.

"Kindness . . . patience ... a controlled temper ... all of which you lack, Mr. Beechington. What woman would want a husband, no matter how wealthy, so harsh, so overbearing, so unjust - forcing his pet ideas on the people on his estate, ordering trampers away from a mountain that doesn't belong to him, in a land that's supposed to stand for freedom and liberty?

"You're nothing but a hidebound autocrat, in a land which, from thirteen thousand miles away, I believed to be truly democratic. You won't be able to take my straight speaking, I know. You'll finish this argument by dismissing me at the same short notice you gave that man the other day - but I couldn't care less!"

He said, in a level tone that stilled the rest of the hot- words leaping to her tongue, "Let's get this straight. You mean I dismissed young Bradshaw?"

"I'm aware that it's none of my business, but -"

"You've made it your business by introducing the subject - and even an autocrat in a land where the working man is top dog is entitled to state his own case! If a man gives an employee two chances, and warns him at the second time of offence that the third time will mean dismissal, isn't that fair enough? Isn't it?"

"Yes -I -"

"Did you know what he was dismissed for?"

"No."

"As you know, on farms, sometimes animals have to be destroyed. This is too large an estate for me to attend to all these matters myself. I have to have men I can trust. I like to think animals are despatched as quickly and painlessly as possible. I'm a member, an active member, of the S.P.C.A. The first time Bradshaw failed to do this - and left a badly injured cow in agony all night - I thought possibly he had been brought up to be callous towards animals, and would profit by a little training on those lines. Better to educate a chap to consideration for animals than to condemn him. So I told him what our policy was ... to save the animal if veterinary skill could do it, if not, to destroy it quickly and as painlessly as possible. When I give an order for an animal to be put out of its misery I expect it done at once.

"The second time he was told to do something similar and failed, I made a statement that I would overlook it this time, but next time, if he disobeyed specific orders, it would be a case of take a month's wages and go. Was that unreasonable?"

"No, Mr. Beechington." Rowena moistened her lips and added: "I'm sorry." Her tone was stiff.

"And then," he said, maddeningly gentle, "you said I foisted my pet ideas on to the people on my estate ... what did you mean by that ? "

Rowena spoke with scorn, relieved to have something to accuse him of that couldn't be excused. "I thought it rather nice of you the other day when you spoke of your dislike of killing things. You would rather watch birds than take out a licence to shoot them ... but do you have to block the enjoyment of other men, who enjoy that kind of sport?"

He looked puzzled. "But do I? Jock goes duck-shooting ... not here of course, our lakes are sanctuaries. He goes over to Ellesmere... what do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. I heard about you not allowing young Fenmore to shoot hawks. Why, they *need* killing; there's a price on their heads. It's ridiculous, in fact, it's sheer sentimental stupidity."

He looked at her, shook his head. "So you've got the same prejudice many of our farmers have against our harrier hawks. Yes, they're cruel things, I hate to see them coming down to strike, but the thing is that they're fulfilling their true purpose ... being scavengers, they do untold good for the sheep-farmer."

Rowena stared, anger momentarily forgotten. "What do you mean? They do attack young weak lambs sometimes, don't they? And get at the chickens?"

"Yes, the odd lamb. They save thousands more from pulpy kidney."

"What? How?"

"I believe that if I were giving a lecture on the subject I would say that New Zealand fauna is deficient in natural undertakers. We have far too few scavengers. In the early days some visitor from Home once said that nowhere else in the world does death wear such an ugly look as in Enzed. Rotting carcasses take so long to vanish, and on the large sheep-runs it's not possible to deal with them at all.

"Our only eagle became extinct ... before white colonization, I think. In the case of pulpy kidney, which takes thousands of lambs per year, we need more scavengers. We've grown so used to looking on the hawk as our enemy, he still has a price on his head. I look to the day when it is acknowledged as a mistake, and it is removed.

"Our rotting carcasses, due to pulpy kidney, are allowed to lie till the soil where they decay becomes contaminated by the bacteria, and the next season any lambs that graze over it will probably get the disease.

"Down here in South Canterbury, we're more aware of what the hawk does for us than anywhere, because the late T. D. Burnett, Member of Parliament, warned all his neighbours from earliest days what indiscriminate shooting of the hawk was going to do for us. He really used to go for people who shot them. It's a rule on Tawhai that none shall be shot, and I see it's carried out."

"Again I'm proved wrong," admitted Rowena reluctantly, "but what about turning people away from the mountain? You've no good reason for that,

have you? Beyond disliking them going through your property?" She was longing for something to justify her attack on him.

She saw a strange look sweep over his face, a bleak, desolate look. It passed so quickly she almost thought she had imagined it.

His voice was quite level when he spoke. "There's a very good reason why I don't allow them to. I didn't realize anyone could live at Tawhai and not know it. I don't want to discuss it, Miss Fotheringham. I'd better look at my wire."

He drew the paper out of the pocket in which he had thrust it, read it.

"Not very urgent. A request from Lincoln College - the agricultural college near Christchurch. I'll come back and give them a ring. I have experimental paddocks here they work on. They want a report. If you wait a moment I'll douse the ashes and come with you."

He was treating her with contempt, being punctiliously polite, like ignoring a child's outburst. In silence they rode home together.

As they dismounted he said, "I'll be very glad if you'll exercise all the children's mounts in turn. When they come home for the May holidays I'll borrow Helen's hack from Nicholas Dewmore for you."

"Thank you," said Rowena in a tone that conspicuously lacked gratitude, and preceded him to the house. He was being magnanimous, heaping coals of fire - how she hated him! And how she hated herself for the traitorous instinct to return his kiss, for acknowledging to herself in one revealing moment, stark in its honesty, that ... well, that /Geoffrey had never kissed quite like that! Rowena Fotheringham ..., you utter fool!

Two days later New Zealand celebrated Anzac Day, the day when the whole country remembered the gallant Australian and New Zealand forces who had landed at Gallipoli in the grey dawn of an April day, in 1915, and had fought against fearful odds with unforgettable valour.

In all the cities and towns there would be parades, and services, and at every tiny monument at country crossroads, there would be dawn services to remember those who had ploughed these fields, fished these streams, climbed these mountains.

Tawhai Flat township held their service of remembrance in the afternoon, in the little chapel on the estate. The three ministers of the district took part, Peter Jerrold, the Vicar, and the Methodist man.

Afterwards, when they had come out for the wreath-laying, and the Last Post and Reveille had sounded, she didn't feel like indulging in small talk . . . too swift a descent from the poignancy of the day, though the address had touched on a high, hopeful note, good to meet with in these days of world tension ... a note of peace worth working for, and a belief in the power of Almighty God to change the hearts of men.

The church was dim; there were white chrysanthemums in the brass vases, blood-red poppies, and a laurel wreath.

Rowena looked at the stained-glass windows and recognized them for good examples of the art. She liked the memorial window to the fallen. The script beneath it was fine; she read it: "On holy mountains, out of the lap of the dawn, the dew of Thy young soldiery offers itself to Thee."

The next window was a memorial to Linda and Darrell Beechington. The artist had caught the spirit of the place ... the mountain in it was Tawhai, unmistakably Tawhai. Beneath was the Good Shepherd, with a lamb in His arms. "Seeking to save that which was lost."

Above it was another text. Rowena read it with a puzzled crease between her brows. What did it mean? ... "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

That was surely more suitable for the tribute to the fallen in warfare ... for the window that kept in green memory the lads of the estate, including Colin Beechington.

There was a sound beside her. It was Peter Jerrold.

"Mr. Jerrold, why that text over this memorial window to Mr. Beechington's brother and sister-in-law? I thought they'd been killed in a car accident."

Peter Jerrold said simply, "They were killed on the mountain, saving two thoughtless people who had been caught in a snow-storm. They were expert mountaineers, both of them, but Linda went over the edge on an icy ledge, after lowering the other two to safety. Darrell tried to break her fall. They fell two hundred feet. The others got to the homestead then ... the rest of the way wasn't so formidable. They - the men at Tawhai - organized a rescue party on a bigger scale... we reached them too late."

The colour had drained from Rowena's face. The minister looked at her curiously.

"My God!" she said, and it was a prayer, not a blasphemy, "and I taunted him ... said he was ill-natured not to let people go up the mountain!"

Peter Jerrold took one look at her stricken face and left her. Rowena sank to the blue-carpeted floor, put her face in her hands, and wept.

Presently other hands took her wet fingers away. She looked up into Forrest Beechington's face.

He said gently, "Peter told me to come to you." He held her hands in his, kneeling beside her on the floor. "It's all right, Rowena, you didn't know."

A shuddering sob shook her. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked piteously. "Couldn't you bear to?"

She saw the colour come up into the lean tanned cheeks.

"I felt I'd humiliated you enough that day. It would have been hitting below the belt to have been too self-righteous."

She put her head down, ashamed.



"I almost think," he said whimsically, "I like you better like this. You're so formidable, Rowena Melisande Agatha, when you're all efficiency and clockwork precision. This makes you more human."

Rowena couldn't believe it, but he actually gathered her close, holding her as if she was a child, producing a comfortingly large handkerchief for her, to replace her sodden scrap of lawn and lace.

He peered into her face, smiled. "All right now? Good." He drew her to her feet. "I was on the way back to fetch you down to the woolshed when Peter met me. The ladies' committee of the local R.S.A. are putting afternoon tea on down there for the men and the official party, and they've sent an invitation to you. Do come, they'll like it."

Rowena hastily took a mirror out of her handbag ... "Oh dear, you can tell I've been crying. I don't like to use makeup here ... could I go into the vestry to do it?"

He went with her, watched her gravely, took her arm to lead her through the tiny church again. They came out on to the steps and halted by mutual consent to look at the scene below.

Bright gorse hedges cut the plain into a checker-board, and willows and poplars were everywhere. Beyond and back of Tawhai reared the dazzling peaks of the Alps.

Emotions she could not name flooded into Rowena's heart. Here, today, with this new understanding between herself and Forrest Beechington, she was conscious of peace, of an acceptance of this country as hers, not separate from England, but part of the Commonwealth. She felt suddenly freed from all nostalgic thoughts of Ainsley Dene ... of Geoffrey.

Forrest Beechington said, looking down on her, "Let's call a truce, Rowena Fotheringham. I no longer resent you at Tawhai; you've proved your worth long since. Tawhai has never been so well looked after. We're neither of us likely to entertain romantic notions of each other, but we could be good friends."

She smiled up at him. "Thank you, Mr. Beechington."

His lips twitched. "You could make it Forrest. Everybody else does. People who have fought as much as we have shouldn't be on formal terms."

They walked off together through the golden sunlight spilling across the plains, and Rowena was conscious of a warmth at her heart that had nothing whatever to do with sunshine.

As Forrest shut the churchyard gate in the neat pale green hedge of matipo, he said, "And perhaps, together, we'll be able to work out Lindsay's salvation. When you meet this chap you'll realize what a bounder he is. I wrote to Lindsay as you suggested, and he's coming down for a few days in the May holidays. Varsity breaks up in ten days' time."

What answer she made, Rowena knew not. She supposed she agreed to help. Ten days! -Ten short, all-too-quickly flying days. Surely in that time she could think of some way to avert it. .. but what?

How unthinkingly she had set sail on this adventure. .. how fate must have laughed, catching her up into these coils ... it was getting more and more involved, and whichever way she worked it out, she was going to show up as a liar and a cheat.

She had an idea, after this afternoon, that Forrest Beechington would show forgiveness and understanding of things said in the heat of temper, he was quick-tempered himself and the first to admit it - but he wouldn't understand, ever, the odd, complicated things a woman's heart forced her to do when she had been betrayed by love itself.

A shadow passed across the sun as they walked down to the woolshed. How cruel for this to happen just when they had called a truce, a truce fraught with all sorts of dangerous, heady sweetness, thrown together in the intimacy of life at Tawhai Hills. Ten days.... Rowena wondered if she could make those ten days something to remember, when her own folly, revealed at last, would force her to leave Tawhai....

## CHAPTER VII

THEY were pleasant enough, the first four days, spent in the routine work at Tawhai, if only Rowena could have forgotten the nagging fear of discovery.

Aunt Lavinia said artlessly one night when she and Rowena were alone: "Forrest is amazingly accommodating at the moment - he's like he used to be before ..."

Rowena looked up sharply. Was Aunt Lavinia going to say "before Heelen went away"?

"Before what, Beechy?"

"Before Jan turned him down."

"Jan? Who was - but perhaps I shouldn't ask?"

"Oh, it's not a family skeleton, or any secret . . . Jan was the girl he was engaged to. She had looks, not much else, and was looking for the sort of setting to supply all her wants. Forrest was very young, and he took it hard. She'd been brought up a very foolish, improvident mother, and taught to be acquisitive. - Oh, Rowena, that's it!"

"That's what?" Aunt Lavinia's practice of hopping from one subject to another still sometimes bewildered her. Forrest was the only one who seemed to be able to fathom her conversations without frequent interruptions to elucidate her meaning.

"Seven down ... last night's crossword. You know ... 'eye to the main chance' was the clue. Yes, acquisitive. We were all worried about Forrest's choice, he was so idealistic, so vulnerable ... We felt he was bound to find her out. The surface charm wouldn't have stood up to the wear of the everyday, and marriage is a twenty-four-hour-a-day affair, isn't it? You know what I mean. Anyone can be all sweetness and light for an hour or two, but perhaps not before breakfast, or when things go wrong, as they so often do on farms.

"But there wasn't a slow disillusionment. They were at a dance. Forrest was smoking behind a clump of greenery, Jan was talking to a friend she had met. He heard her say, 'Oh, yes, pots of money ... why else do you think I'd resign myself to living in the waybacks? I'm not exactly the farmer's wife type!' "

Rowena was appalled. Perhaps after all there was excuse for Forrest's attitude; she could match it up with her own experience. The irony of the situation struck her with full force. SJie had purposely striven to conceal the fact she had a private income, and was, in fact, living rather cheesepar-ingly, compared to former days, on what she earned as something between a cook and a companion. Yet, if she hadn't, she and Forrest Beechington would have met on equal terms, with no basis for misunderstanding.

Now, if she did confess all, he would know her for a rotten little cheat and a liar. It was no basis for any sort of emotional bond. She was rather sorry she knew so much about him, that her heart kept finding excuses for what he had said and done. In any case what was the use? The whole thing would blow up when the university vacation started! Even if, in some miraculous way, it was averted, the family seemed to think that Helen Dewmore, who should have been Mrs. Colin Beechington, who should have been mistress of this Jovely southern estate, would one day soon rule here, finding in Forrest Beechington some echo of her first love.

On Sunday evening Forrest looked up from his book to say across the room to the open porch, "You've been out there a long time, Aunt Lavinia, at your age you shouldn't be moonstruck!"

"Not moonstruck, Forrest, seastruck! The wind is in the right quarter, there's a tang of salt in it. Come on out - you too, Rowena."

As they got up, he said to Rowena, "It's hard to believe you can smell it as many leagues inland as this, but sometimes when her nostalgia for the sea gets her, she vows she can. It gets all of us, of course."

Rowena knew by now what he meant. There had always been a Beechington on the sea. A family tradition. And Colin had been the sailor in this generation...

Forrest placed an affectionate arm on his aunt's shoulders and sniffed obediently.

"I believe you're right, angel. All right, let's have a day off tomorrow - pack up some provisions and the three of us will go to the Bay." He turned to Rowena. "It's been all work, no play - hardly fair really. I don't think we've told you about the Admiral's House. It's in a little bay in Lyttel- ton Harbour, the other side of the Cashmere Hills from Christchurch. Father bought it for the school holidays when an old retired Admiral he knew died. When Aunt Lavinia's longing for the sea gets too much for her, \*I scoop her off there for the day."

Rowena made no demur. She said, "Oh, how lovely," and her voice was warm. "I've missed the sea so much ... even these mountains can't quite make up for it. At home we were never beyond sight and sound of it."

She closed her eyes for a second, shutting out moonlit plains and silver-threading river, and saw the broad sweep of the English channel on a fair day, craft coming up the harbour ... English skies....

She opened her eyes as she heard Forrest say, "Home? ... but I thought you worked away from home most of the time."

Rowena said hastily, "I meant Home with a capital H. The way New Zealanders use the word. In any case, most of my jobs were around Hampshire, and within easy reach of the coast."

It was a day to remember. They started early. Rowena had never seen Forrest in a mood like this; gay, light- hearted, teasing. Regret twisted her heart. It wasn't making it any easier ... she'd rather have gone on seeing only his grim side, since time was rushing her to a showdown.

He wouldn't allow them to put up sandwiches, or bake pies. He impatiently opened cupboards, the fridge, tossed into the baskets the remains of a cold chicken, lettuce, tomatoes, dressing, the cake-tins, bread, butter, milk, cream.

"That'll do. If we need anything else there's always plenty of tinned stuff at the cottage. Now into something that will stand a bit of seaspray, and let's away."

He was wearing a checked shirt and sports trousers, and had an old yachting cap pulled over his brow. It did all sorts of things for his profile ... and to Rowena's heart.

"We'll go right into town," said Forrest, "and up the hills 92

by the Takahe and the Kiwi - stone rest-houses for the hikers, named after native birds, and the nearest you'll ever see here to English inns, Rowena. A great memorial to the man who first dreamed of building them ... H. G. Ell, who loved the hills. The Takahe is the finest of them all, finished after Ell's death. Yet I always think the most stirring memory of him is to be found in the little paths for trampers that wind all over the hills ... some of the stone steps he set with his own hands, working in all weathers."

It was then that Aunt Lavinia said, "Oh! Good heavens! It's what? The twenty-ninth? Oh, I'm sure it must be."

"Must be what?" Forrest asked patiently.

"The day I'm supposed to see the dentist."

"You sure?"

She scrabbled through her bag. "Should be an appointment card here."

He chuckled. "You'll never find it if it is there, Aunt Lavinia! You'll have to ring the dentist up and find out, and offer him your apologies."

She said quickly, "I can't do that, Forrest. Last time I turned up on Wednesday for an appointment I'd made for the Tuesday, and the time before I forgot altogether ... he wasn't pleased, I'm afraid. It's no good. You'll have to drop me in town, and the two of you go on, have your day, and pick me up about half-past four."

Rowena glanced sideways at her. Aunt Lavinia didn't look a bit disappointed at missing her day at the Bay. What was more, she had an air of overdone innocence about her. Now what? Rowena's eyes narrowed.

She said, "I think you'd better stop at the next telephone booth, Mr. Beechington, and I'll ring the dentist. What's his name, Beechy? I'd better make sure - too bad if you had to spend all day in town while we enjoyed the harbour, if the appointment was for next Monday."

She sensed, rather than saw, the quick look Forrest gave her. Did he too realize Aunt Lavinia could be trying to throw them together?

Aunt Lavinia said hastily, "I'm quite sure. I know my memory is shocking, but this time I'm right."

"It would ease my mind if I rang," persisted Rowena.

"Well, let me do the ringing," said Aunt Lavinia, quite crossly for her. "If you do it, he'll think I'm in my dotage."

Forrest, with a note of something - was it amusement? - in his voice, said, "I'll do the ringing. Anybody got two pennies? I'll stop at Riccarton Post Office. Here we are."

He was back shortly, grinning. "Aunt Lavinia's right... for once. Eleven-fifteen it is, my sweet aunt. Where would you like to be dropped?"

Rowena realized her suspicions had been unfounded. Had Aunt Lavinia gone to the phone, she would still have doubted the validity of the excuse.

As they headed up the steep Dyer's Pass Road, Forrest said with a sidelong twinkle, "Thought Aunt Lavinia was matchmaking, didn't you?"

She grinned back. "Yes. Ghastly, isn't it? You'd better tell her, Mr. Beechington, that we're in one mind about that - both immune."

The drawl was back in his voice. "Did I ever say I was just that... immune?"

She felt her heart quicken, but said coolly enough, "Not quite that, but that's what it adds up to, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. Before he could say more he had to brake suddenly as a motor-cycle skidded out of a side street and had to take too wide a bend. It was only lightning action on Forrest's part that saved a nasty accident. Rowena expected Forrest to bawl the boy out, but he just put his head out of the window, said pleasantly, "Be more careful on these hills, lad," and drove on.

Rowena was dying for him to continue with whatever he had been going to say, but dared not let him think she was eager to hear it, so nervously burst into a spate of small talk till they came to the Takahe.

It was entirely Gothic in character and design, and the stone used was quarried from the hills close by, most of the wood was totara or kauri, and the roofs were covered with good Welsh slates.

The stained-glass windows, the heraldry, the perfect attention to period detail, made it almost impossible to believe that this had been built as recently as the present century, and was the dream of a man who had never seen at first hand the wonders of the period he desired to bring to the sight of young people born in this distant corner of the Commonwealth.

Forrest took Rowena round to the west face to show her the Arms of Christchurch Priory in Hampshire depicted on the parapet, and they had their coffee and scones sitting at a table next to a fireplace that was almost a replica of one in Haddon Hall, Dorothy Vernon's old home.

As they came out and took the highway over the bare brown tussocky hills, she resolved that since Nemesis would descend upon her this week-end, she would endeavour, if possible, to have one sweet day to remember.

At the summit they left the plains behind and swept down to the flooded volcano crater that was Lyttelton Harbour, with the sheltered, productive valleys of the Peninsula lying on the far side, and a multitude of graciously curving bays ringing the harbour. The port itself was at the far end, but here,



at the base of the U, was nothing but peace locked up in lazy little backwaters.

"Some day we'll take you to Akaroa ... the French settlement. The French landed there, not knowing England had already claimed New Zealand for colonization, but they settled very happily, and the place has a charm of its own - still full of Le Comtes and Dubarrys and Boleyns." He laughed. "Good heavens! Don't I sound royalty-minded ... I daresay there are some plebeian names too ... Duponts and Dubois. Perhaps I'm an unconscious snob, Rowena."

It lulled Rowena pleasantly into a sense of false security. They came to a little bay where only three houses perched on the bush-covered hillside. They were all holiday beaches, and here, sheltered by the watershed of the Cashmeres, their gardens were a riot of colour, and each had its own small netted group of cherry trees.

There was no great air of luxury about the Admiral's House. It was bare and austere, well polished, and with so much teak and brass about that Rowena could understand its charm for the sea-loving Beechingtons. It was single-storied save for a quaint little lookout built like a square turret on top, reached by an outside staircase, that looked right out to the Heads. It was equipped with a very fine telescope and nautical instruments, all of which had belonged to the late Admiral, and about which Rowena knew nothing, to Forrest's gratification. He explained them to her in detail.

'But come on down, Rowena. We'll have lunch later. I want to take you out in the launch. This side loses the sun later in the day.'

There was an ease and grace about Forrest as he stood at the wheel, Rowena thought, watching him unobserved, something that wasn't so apparent at Tawhai. There, sometimes, he appeared taut and hard. Here, he had left all his cares behind him. This was his true element.

"In the holidays," he promised her, "if we can get away for a few days, we'll all come here. The kids love it. Tony is a sea cadet. He's going into the Navy later. I hoped he might have fancied the farming. He likes it well enough, but he'll never be happy till he goes to sea. I thought he'd better have his

chance, life has a habit of catching up with us later .. he's better to go now while he has no personal responsibilities. When we come down in May we'll head out for the open sea and cruise around the Peninsula to Akaroa. It's a magnificent trip. You have the sense of nothing between you and Antarctica. Would you like it?"

"I'd love it, Mr. Beechington."

May ... would she still be with the Beechingtons in May ... or exposed as a liar?

"By the way, Heather Richardson - you've met her mother in the village, I suppose? Yes, well, she's coming home. She's been working in Wellington, but wants to have six months at home. She's engaged to one of Nicholas Dewmore's men. I've written to her and offered her a position at Tawhai for that time. You work too hard, Rowena, and with another girl, you'll have more free time, like today."

He put out a hand, drew her nearer to where he stood.

"You'd appreciate more free time, I imagine?"

Rowena nodded, acutely conscious of his eyes on her face. "Yes - although the surroundings at Tawhai are so beautiful, I never want to get away, Mr. Beechington."

He frowned. "I thought it was going to be Forrest?"

He saw the colour stain upwards from her throat and flush the apricot skin, and added, "You can forget all I said the first day we met. I no longer credit all women with being ... acquisitive... since I've come to know you better."

His eyes were warm. Rowena couldn't meet them. Bitterness washed over her. So he'd come to trust her. Her heart said silently: You won't for long, my dear, my very dearest dear.

She mustn't let this conversation lead anywhere. It would make the final disillusion too poignant. She said, clutching at something to get the talk away from the personal and emotional:

"When is Helen Dewmore arriving?"

"Last week in the holidays. I'm glad for Nicholas' sake. He's had a succession of housekeepers, none of them very marvellous. He needs his sister at home."

"He's not married, or engaged?"

"No. Not exactly engaged."

"An understanding?"

"No. Nothing as indefinite or exasperating as an 'understanding' " (she knew he was scornful of that sort of thing). "He's merely waiting for his love to grow up. Nicholas is one of the few people who can make me believe in love ... the sort of love you read about..." He laughed at his own fancy. "Like a knight of old."

"And this young girl - will she -"

"Yes. She will. She admires him, always has. I'll leave you to fathom it out for yourself. It's most romantic."

For once he had not jeered at romance. But she must keep the conversation going on the level of other people's affairs.

"Everyone seems to think the world of Helen. What is she like, Forrest?"

"Extremely striking. Like the description in the fairytale ... Snow-White, wasn't it? ... 'Red as blood, white as snow, •black as this ebony frame.' She always makes me think of that. Her hair shines like ebony in the sun, her mouth is very red - naturally - she has the bluest of eyes, and a complexion like an English rose. Much more like an English rose than you are, Rowena."

"I know." She sounded mock-mournful. The teasing friendly note in Forrest's voice was doing all sorts of things to her heart, and even his glowing description of Helen had sounded, well ... academic, somehow, not personal. She laughed. "You can't be an English rose with freckles over your nose. And Beechy once likened me to - ginger beer! I ask you!"

She wrinkled the nose at him.

"Do you want to know what you're like?" he asked her.

She held up a hand. "Better not. You're, noted for plain speaking. You've called me a vixen before now. That could easily mean foxy ... doesn't sound like a compliment to me!"

He said deliberately, "Last night you were watching the sunset, standing under that rowan tree with the particularly glorious foliage in autumn. That's what you looked like.. . with your chestnut hair, and the scattering of freckles over your pert nose ... a rowan tree. They named you well, Rowena, even if they treated you shabbily with - Agatha!"

She laughed, keeping it light. "There's a compliment with a difference. Most girls get compared with roses, with modest violets, with orchids, or have eyes like speedwells or delphiniums. I'm only a mountain ash."

"*Your* eyes are as green as this sea. I've never seen really green eyes before.... I've read of them, in fact -"

"I'm simply starving, Forrest, when are we going to eat?"

He laughed. "We'll turn back now, and attack that cold chicken. Afterwards I'd like to mow the lawns. It will be the last time before winter, no growth after this. Would you care to weed the flowerbeds? Or is it a bit thick asking you to do that on a day off ? "

"I'd love to."

Yes, it was a day to remember. Rowena sat back on her heels and watched Forrest piling the last of the clippings on to a compost heap. Suddenly her

problems didn't seem so overwhelming. This Forrest wasn't formidable at all ... he would understand. Here, in the peace of this little bay, with the scent of mignonette and thyme drifting up to her, she felt she had found the courage to say to him:

"There's something I must tell you. Since you no longer regard me as acquisitive, I must tell you that I came out here to prove something to myself. I was like you, sought after for my possessions, and it's led me into all sorts of complications. Would you let me tell you about it?"

Yes, she would say just that... now--

His voice cut across her thoughts just as she rose to her feet, dusted her fingers down.

"I say, Rowena, we'll have to fly. I've not noticed the time. I said we'd pick Aunt Lavinia up at four-thirty. She'll be just filling in time as it is. Let's scam."

Oh, well, it didn't matter ... and it couldn't now be crammed into a few impatient seconds. There would be tonight. When Forrest went out for his last smoke on the back verandah at the homestead, she would follow him out, it would be easier still to tell him in the dark. He might be angry, but not very, she thought; not this new, softened Forrest. Then, with all things cleared up, and he with the knowledge that they met on equal terms, this thing that was beginning to bud between them might flower. ... She was ready to leave in five minutes.

The drive back to the city was too short to say anything - short and steep. As they coasted down the other side, Rowena sighed as she looked out over the vast plain.

"Why the sigh?" Forrest asked.

"I don't know quite ... contentment, I suppose. It's been a lovely day, and across there, lost in the distance, is Tawhai."

Their eyes met. It was a strange look, a look that held promise.

"You've grown . . . fond of Tawhai, haven't you, Rowan?"

*Rowan.* It recalled the compliment. She contented herself with nodding.

He began to whistle. He whistled the same thing two or three times.

"Forrest, what is that? I've heard you trying it over and over in the drawing-room on the piano. It's very beautiful. But you've never gone right through it as now. You've always stopped so far, as if you couldn't quite remember it. It was so tantalizing."

He smiled. "It wasn't that I couldn't remember it, but that it wouldn't quite come. It's one of my own compositions. I used to do a lot of it. Not for years, though. I had a fancy to take a stab at it again lately."

He whistled the tune through again. Suddenly they were on the flat.

As they came into the D.I.C. lounge, a girl from the cash- desk came to them.

"Are you Mr. Forrest Beechington?"

He nodded.

"Well, Mrs. Beechington left this for you."

It was a note: "I have something else to do ... meet me 5.15 by the west door of Cathedral."

Forrest groaned. "This always happens. Fancy me thinking she might be filling in time! She's had all day, and I'll never get a parking place in the Square at this time. We'd better put some more cash in the meter outside here, and walk to the Cathedral."

They still had half an hour to wait, even though they had dawdled. The tide of busy traffic flowed about the green island of turf surrounding the Cathedral.

Forrest said, "She's never been known to be on time in any case. Would you like to see over the Cathedral?"

He took her elbow, and the next moment a gay, laughing voice said: "Oh, Uncle Forrest!" and they both swung about.

Rowena knew it was Lindsay, even before Forrest said the name. She knew it was Lindsay because the man beside her was oily... cheap ... a bounder ... Dirk Sargison!

Even in the midst of her sickening dismay, Rowena could be sorry for Lindsay . .. sorry that she had fallen for Dirk. She was tall and had nut-brown hair and grey candid eyes, and the way her colour ebbed and flowed was enchanting.

But the next few moments were going to be crucial.. so much would depend on the way Dirk greeted her. Perhaps if she herself had said, "Oh, hullo, this is different from on board ship," it wouldn't look as if she'd tried to conceal it ... but Forrest would tumble to things quickly, and a casual recognition like that would puzzle him when Rowena had claimed that an understanding had existed between herself and an artist travelling on the *Strathnevin*. Before she could say, anything, Lindsay said it for her.

"What do you think, Uncle Forrest? Dirk knows your Miss Fotheringham. They met on the ship coming out. I was telling him of the set-up at Tawhai, and mentioned her name, isn't it odd?"

Forrest said casually, "Oh, I don't know, Lindsay ... let's descend to platitudes and say: 'Isn't it a small world?' "

He paused, and Rowena, watching him, knew the exact moment when he realized that here was the artist she had spoken of. The hazel eyes suddenly narrowed, then widened in shock. Rowena could see the realization flooding into them. She bit her lip, hard. Now what?

Forrest's eyes met hers, and in her eyes, she knew, he read guilt, dismay. As his lips tightened into control, she realized that what Forrest Beechington was going to say, he was reserving for later, when they were alone.

Lindsay said, rather shyly, "Uncle Forrest . . . may I speak with you alone, for a few moments? Would you two excuse us?"

Perhaps it was relief Rowena read on Forrest's face, that seemed to gentle it, but she was surprised to see a most indulgent smile break up the severity of his mouth as he looked at his niece. She'd expected him to be stern with Lindsay.

"Yes, Lindsay, I'm sure the others will excuse us," and the two of them turned away a little. Rowena heard Forrest say, diving his hand into his pocket, "How much do you want, Lin?" and realized he was often touched for extra cash when he met his nieces or nephew in town.

She saw Lindsay's pony-tail shake indignantly. "Oh, not this time, Uncle Forrest - not always," and the rest of what the girl wanted to say was lost as Dirk Sargison said to her urgently and thankfully, "Rowena, be a sport - don't give me away."

She looked at him with distaste, a distaste that was even more pronounced because she had put herself into such a position that she couldn't be too scathing with him. She might even - in an endeavour to put things right with the Beechington family - have to ask favours of him.

She was in no state for thinking things out clearly, so she said, in a low voice, "If you mean about the way you carried on, aboard ship, I shan't," and felt cheap herself.

Lindsay looked at her watch. "I'd love to linger, and to get to know Miss Fotheringham, but I've an appointment to get my hair done. Come on, Dirk. Cheerio, everybody," and she was gone, young, eager, laughing, vulnerable.

Forrest and Rowena were left alone. Slowly Rowena raised her eyes to his. She didn't like what she read there.

He said, with suppressed violence, because people were passing to and fro: "You don't have to look like that. You wouldn't expect fidelity from a rotter like that, would you? Here - come round the corner of the Cathedral. I don't



feel like going in now. My language - or my thoughts - won't be suited to holy precincts!"

They took the few paces around the walls, and stood there, backs to the flow of traffic. He waited till she was forced to look up. His face was grim, and he was oddly pale under his tan.

"Odd, isn't it? I distrusted all women for a time. Then, gradually, you disarmed me. I could have sworn by your integrity. And ever since I talked to you on the back verandah that night, you've known that this fellow with whom you have - or rather had - an understanding was the chap Lindsay has fallen for. I thought next morning you looked as if you hadn't slept ... I expect you spent the night crying your eyes out for him ... pah! Why couldn't you have told me? At least that would have been honest!"

He paused. Rowena couldn't speak. He went on, and now there was a sneer in his voice.

"When did you decide to cut your losses, Miss Fotheringham?"

She moistened her lips, said uncertainly, "What do you mean?"

There was utter contempt in his eyes. "Oh, come, don't pretend you don't know. When did you decide there were better in the sea than a mere itinerant artist? When did you decide that perhaps the break was for the best, seeing he had fallen for someone else? It saved *you* giving *him* the brush-off, didn't it? When? ... Well, if you won't tell me, I'll tell you - ever since Anzac Day, wasn't it? When I first ... oh, let it go - but *this* fish is the one that got away!"

Rowena's face had been white, but now colour, carnation bright, sprang up in it.

"You're wrong, you're quite wrong. I thought you were just being friendly; so was I. I told you once you were safe from me, remember? And you said, in your usual hateful tones, 'Not your type, am I?' It still holds good. You aren't my type, money or not."

The hazel eyes were almost black with rage. His lips had thinned out to a straight line.

"What is your type, Miss Fotheringham? A type like that dago Lindsay is with? My God! The men women fall for!"

Those last words did something to Rowena. The fact that she had never fallen for Dirk Sargison, that he was all she most detested in men, and the humiliating knowledge that her own folly had brought her to this merely pushed the geyser of emotion that was in her up to boiling-over point.

"Well," she said, her voice trembling, "you're nothing but a hypocrite ... how discriminating were *you* when you fell for Jan - a fortune-hunter? "

The hot words fell into a silence that was like an icy pool. You could almost hear the splintering of the fragments. Rowena was aghast. What had she said?

Forrest said in a controlled tone, little above a whisper:

"Keep out of my affairs, will you, Miss Fotheringham? And I'll keep out of yours!"

"Excellent!" said Rowena, and knew relief. Now he would not probe further. "Of course I'll leave Tawhai Hills. I'll give Mrs. Beechington notice tonight."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. In your dealings with my aunt, at least, you're quite - dependable. I don't want to deprive her of your services. Only the less we see of each other the better."

He turned his head. "I think I see her crossing over from the Safety Zone. For her peace of mind, which I value, value above my own, would it be possible - much as I hate asking a favour of you - to act as if - as if we did *not* hate each other?"

Rowena's voice was under control again, though her heart was hammering and her knees shaking.

"Oh, I think I have enough poise to behave like a reasonable human being ... if you. have." Her tone left that in doubt.

"Oh, hullo, Aunt Lavinia," said Forrest. "I've just been showing Rowena the outside of the Cathedral. We haven't found time to explore within."

Rowena closed her eyes against the sound, of her name on his lips in such a mock-friendly fashion. She understood - Aunt Lavinia wasn't to be upset. She would wonder if, after a supposedly friendly day at the Bay, they suddenly returned to their former formality.

"Hullo, children," said Aunt Lavinia gaily. "Had a wonderful day?"

"It exceeded all expectations," said Forrest cryptically, relieved his aunt of her basket, took her elbow and turned her in the direction of Cashel Street.

Fortunately Aunt Lavinia was such a chatterer that she ably bridged the gulf that yawned between them, and if they were somewhat quiet on the way home, she innocently supposed the sea air had made them tired. She asked endless questions about how Rowena had liked the Admiral's House, and as Rowena could answer questions like that quite naturally, it wasn't the nightmare it might have been, and stopped her thinking.

Into a sudden silence Forrest said, "We met Lindsay in town - with that fellow."

"Oh, how did she seem, Forrest? And were your second impressions of him just as bad as the first?"

"Worse," he said, "much worse!"

Aunt Lavinia turned to Rowena. "What did you think of him, dear? Is he as bad as Forrest makes out? Forrest is frightfully conservative, of course, and anyone in the least odd - or arty - bohemian - would be outside the pale!"

Rowena swallowed. "I think Mr. Beechington's impression of him is right."

"Then I expect he really is a bounder!" If Rowena had been in the mood, she might have found this funny. Aunt Lavinia was backing her opinion against her nephew's. Forrest was going to love this! Aunt Lavinia continued: "But goodness . . . you're back to full titles again, are you, Rowena? It makes us more like a family if you and Forrest are informal."

Rowena said, "I - er - it just slipped out."

"Oh, well -" Aunt Lavinia was maddeningly philosophical - "I really feel Rowena's idea is good. If he comes to Tawhai he may show up as quite, quite impossible. Then perhaps Lindsay would realize John Macrae is worth half a dozen of him."

"John Macrae?"

"Yes. Haven't you met him? He's over the river. Is president of the Young Farmers' Club. Trouble is, Lindsay has known him all her life, and doesn't see him clearly. No glamour because he's too familiar. He's so right for her, too."

Rowena sighed.

Forrest said, with the drawl Rowena so disliked, "Rowena is sighing because she doesn't think you can love to order."

Rowena looked up, met his glance briefly. "Aren't you omniscient? You can even interpret other people's sighs!"

Aunt Lavinia chuckled. "I do enjoy this give-and-take," she said. The two beside her said nothing.

Aunt Lavinia went into the house first, while Rowena deliberately hung back. She looked up at Forrest, this time with antagonism, not guilt, in her eyes.

"You're the one who's decided I stay here," she said. "I would much prefer to go. I'm staying for Mrs. Beechington's sake. It looks as if I've got to go on calling you Forrest in front of her - pity we started it a few days ago, but do

remember it doesn't mean a thing. And when we're alone, it will be Mr. Beechington."

His jaw was grim. "The only thing I'm concerned about is Aunt Lavinia's happiness. I won't have her upset. She's grown fond of you - strange to say; Aunt Lavinia is usually more discriminating, despite her vagueness. The specialist tells me she may be quite blind by the end of the year. She'll come to depend upon you more and more. I don't feel like destroying her faith in you. I'd like these few months she has left for seeing things, to be as happy as possible. So — outwardly we'll go on as before. You ought to be able to do it - you're certainly some actress. I'd never have guessed these few weeks that you knew who Lindsay's attraction was. It's up to you - if you have a spark of decency in you at all, you'll put on a good act now. Will you?"

"For Beechy's sake, yes." Rowena turned on her heel and left him. She went into the house. Here were duties, known and familiar, and demanding, to steady her, to stem back the tears that threatened, to dull the edge of pain that was well-nigh unbearable, because a day that had begun with such promise had ended in disillusion and misunderstanding.

Two days later Nicholas Dewmore appeared, leading a jet- black mare. He had met Rowena before, so greeted her easily.

"Forrest asked me on Anzac Day if I would let you exercise Ebony Lass while the children are home and you're short of mounts. He tells me you're a crack rider."

Rowena fondled the mare's nuzzle. "Isn't she a beauty? Are you sure your sister won't mind?"

Nicholas's eyes crinkled at the corners. "She's so often over here when Helen's home, it wouldn't make much difference ... she was foaled over here - she's a half-sister to Forrest's Dapple Lass, you know. I've tried to exercise her a little, Rowena ... I don't have to keep saying Miss Fotheringham, do I? ... but I prefer my own hack. I'll turn her into the home paddock."

"Are you coming in for a cup of tea, Nicholas?"

"Too right. Is Forrest round?"

"He is," said a voice behind them, and Forrest appeared, a saddle dangling from one hand. He dropped it on the verandah as they went in.

After they had tea, Nicholas said, his eyes resting appreciatively on Rowena, "Want to try out Ebony Lass? You can ride back to the boundary with me, if you wish." Rowena saw Forrest's eye on her, and for no reason, blushed. Before she could plead busyness as an excuse, he said, "Good idea. I'll come with you. I want to look at the water-race over there."

## CHAPTER VIII

ROWENA was in slacks because she had been gardening, so went with them right away. Ebony Lass was a mount worth riding, and with Nicholas there to act as buffer between herself and Forrest, she quite enjoyed the ride, her chestnut hair streaming out behind her, her cotton blouse open to the cool fresh breeze. She hoped that when they reached the boundary, Forrest's examination of the water-race would take him some time, and she could plead gardening duties and return alone.

Not so; Nicholas inspected it with Forrest, opened the gate in the boundary fencing and said goodbye.

Forrest put out his hand for Rowena's foot.

"Thank you, I can manage easily without, Mr. Beechington," and she swung into the saddle. She looked across at him. "I could also have done without your company this morning. It's one thing having to suffer it when your aunt is round - to pretend we find common interests, but quite another to have you round when Beechy isn't about."

"I'm quite aware that you'd rather I'd not come this morning," and there was that in his voice that made her look sharply at him.

"Do I sense a hidden meaning there? If so, what? I'm at a loss."

The hazel eyes looked mockingly into hers. "You really don't know?"

"No. Hints are no good to me. I have to have the i's dotted and the t's crossed, otherwise misunderstandings are apt to occur."

"All right, I'll cross the t's. You're no longer immune to love since Dirk let you down."

Rowena felt the hateful betraying colour come up, but managed to hold his gaze.

"I'm still at a loss. How about dotting the i's?"

His attitude was careless, the reins lying loosely on the dapple's neck, but his eyes were intent upon her.

"Very well. I hold a watching brief for Penny as far as Nicholas is concerned."

She gazed at him uncomprehendingly. A watching brief for Penny ... What was it he'd said about Nicholas once? Nicholas was waiting for someone to grow up....

*"Penny!"* she said.

He nodded.

Rowena felt fury wash over her. He was insufferable. A friendly suggestion from Nicholas that she try Ebony Lass out and Forrest Beechington was suggesting that she had designs on him. Rowena wheeled Ebony Lass about, dug her heels in, and was away, racing over the hard paddocks that so badly needed the winter rains, taking fences and water-races and hedges with reckless abandon. Even so, as she took the last fence, Forrest Beechington rose with her.

As they turned the horses into the home paddock he said, "That ought to have done something for your temper, but," his voice tightened, "when the youngsters are home, don't be quite so foolhardy. They might be tempted to do the same, and the ground is dangerous."

It Was better when the three came home. Rowena had dreaded their coming lest they should appear to resent her, a stranger who had entrance to the family circle, and especially Lindsay, who might have a natural grievance that Rowena had been given their mother's room; but she soon realized that for Lindsay the wonder of falling in love had eclipsed all other things.

There was an incandescent look about her as if candles had been lit behind the clear grey eyes, an unmistakable look. Any woman, looking at Lindsay, would have read the signs.



Penny and Tony, the seventeen-year-old twins, were delightful. At first, Rowena, seeing Penny, had thought: How odd, about Nicholas, for Penny looked just a child, with dark Hair, like Forrest's cut slantingly across her winged brows, and the same hazel eyes that occasionally showed a glint of green, but in less than twenty-four hours Rowena reversed that opinion.

She forgot the antagonistic atmosphere that prevailed between herself and Forrest when nobody was near, enough to remark one day, as he came to where she was leaning on the verandah: "Penny's oddly mature, isn't she?"

He looked at her sideways. "So you've noticed that, have you? No longer think it strange that she and Nicholas should be all in all to each other?"

"No, I think it's quite ideal." Her voice shook on the word because she was afraid he could laugh at her, or twist her remark into a barb to turn back on her. "I hope nothing ever happens to overthrow anything so idyllic. Penny has planned her life around marrying Nicholas, hasn't she? Taking that Home Science course, learning household and estate management. When do you think they'll...?"

"Nicholas won't marry her till she's twenty. Says she must get out and about, have the chance of meeting other men. Penny wants to marry him at eighteen. I'd have given my consent, but he won't hear of it."

Rowena said slowly, "It might be as well to wait a little ... it won't be easy at any time taking on being mistress in a house that a sister has managed so well, evidently. But it would be extra hard if you were only eighteen. Not easy for Helen either, I should imagine, to relinquish the reins."

Forrest tapped out his pipe. "That won't be a problem," he said. "I've reason to hope that Helen will be in a home of her own long before then."

Rowena was annoyed to find she was holding her breath. *Reason to hope ...* a home of her own ... and that place -Tawhai?

She said matter-of-factly, "She arrives very soon, doesn't she?"

"No. I got a letter yesterday from her. She's staying in Australia for a little while. Not long."

Rowena said, "I must go and switch on the stove, I've promised them sausage rolls and hot scones, and heaven help their digestion."

It was the most friendly conversation they'd had for some time, but she was surprised when he followed her into the kitchen. He avoided being alone with her these days.

He said abruptly, "Lindsay tells me Sargison is coming on Friday till Tuesday. He can't stay longer, seemingly. Perhaps that's all he can take of the country."

109Rowena said nothing, but continued chopping butter into the flour.

Forrest said, "How will you feel about that?" His tone gave nothing away. She looked up.

"How will I feel? Perhaps you mean how will I behave?" She gave a wry smile, added, "You needn't worry - Lindsay will have nothing to fear from me."

He said (she thought gloatingly), "It won't be easy for you, will it, watching him and Lindsay. Tell me, did you write to him and finalize things? I heard him ask you not to give him away!" He uttered a sound of pure scorn.

Rowena bent over the mixing-bowl. How she hated the thought that through her own stupidity this man thought she had once fallen prey to Dirk's doubtful charms.

She said, because from now on she was going to tell no more lies, "Forrest, that day by the Cathedral, we agreed not to meddle with each other's private lives."

Something flashed into his eyes, something unreadable.

"Yes, but -" He stopped abruptly. She had an almost irresistible impulse to say, "Go on, Forrest, *go on!* But ... what?" Even if it was only something to hurt her, anything would be better than the icy disdain with which they had treated each other lately. But she dared not. She said, instead :

"Sticky, isn't it? I mean - he *is* too old for her." She stopped abruptly too. Conversation about this was difficult when she was so involved.

Forrest's voice was hard. "Wishful thinking, Miss Fotheringham? Want him back?"

Her voice was as hard as his. "I do not want him back. I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean then?"

"Just what I said. He's too old for her."

The hazel eyes had a quizzical gleam in them. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

His tone was dry. "H'mm. Three years older than Lindsay. Not a great difference."

Her head was still bent as she marked out oblongs of pastry.

"One gains a lot of experience in those three years. Twenty is pitifully vulnerable. Young love is so open to hurt. Not that it is love ... it's only being in love with love."

She could have bitten her tongue out when she had said that, for he always believed the worst of her, and would probably think she wanted to believe it wasn't the real thing with Lindsay.

But he didn't take her up on it, said instead, curiously, "Were *you* vulnerable at twenty, Miss Fotheringham?"

She said, bitterness in her voice, "Vulnerable ... yes, and oh, so trusting and foolish where men were concerned."

He was silent, so she looked up, their eyes meeting. It was the first time since that day in Cathedral Square that the distrust was gone from his, or so she imagined.

"Then ... is there some reason for your. . . behaviour?"

For one moment she was tempted to tell him. Then the memory of his voice came back to her . . . "When did you decide there were better fish in the sea than a mere itinerant artist . . . this is the fish that got away" . . . Oh, no, she'd too much pride ever to let him think she looked in his direction. And what chance had she of ever making him believe what lay behind this coil?

She said stiffly, "We agreed to keep out of each other's private lives. I want no excuses made for me, thanks. I can bear your antagonism, your mistrust of me. I couldn't bear you being tolerant, magnanimous."

He shrugged. "All right, let it go, but none of this helps Lindsay. I'd hate to see her link up her fresh young life with a man like that. It's not just his age, I don't suppose he's much older than I am, I'm thirty-one, but it's what his life has been that's worrying me. There won't be much he's not experienced. I know the type, my years at sea left me few illusions."

Rowena said, hesitatingly, "That's just what *is* attracting Lindsay, I'm afraid. It's fascinating to a young girl, you know, that air of a man of the world, and the heady knowledge that he finds her, in spite of her own lack of experience - attractive."

"Well, you should know. Since you found it so."

Rowena said softly, "If you haven't anything better to do than to jibe at me, I wish you'd go away. I'm willing to help Lindsay out of this mess, help you to untangle it, if it is possible, and - even if you *won't* believe it - my motives are disinterested. But I can't help when you believe that everything I say or do is in my own interests."

He pursed his lips up, watching her intently. "You mean Dirk Sargison doesn't mean a thing to you now? That it was merely a passing infatuation?"

Rowena didn't answer that last bit. She was trying to keep to the truth.

"I can safely promise you that he means nothing to me now, and that if I can wean Lindsay from him, I will."

She slid the rolls into the oven, turned to face him.

"Very well," he said. "I believe you have got over it. I can't trust you as I did once, can't see why you deceived me over it, but ... well, let's give the youngsters as good a holiday as we can before they go back for the winter term. And perhaps when Dirk Sargison comes, you'll be proved right, and he'll be revealed in his true colours."

Rowena dusted the flour off her hands as one who has rid herself of a problem.

"I see," she said, a subtle inflection in her voice. "I'm to thank you, it seems, for the chance to reinstate myself in the Beechington favour!" She left the kitchen.

At times, when, for a brief spell, Rowena could forget the shadow that lay on her heart, she rejoiced in the family life of Tawhai in holiday-time. The house was full of the sound of young voices, of laughter, of teasing, of hot, silly arguments. Against her will, for now she caught at anything that might bolster up her indignation against the master of Tawhai, she noticed that Forrest himself was good with the youngsters, neither too strict with them nor too indulgent, and he' and young Tony were more like brothers than nephew and uncle.

They had excursions to Timaru, to the lakes, miles away, riding in the luxurious car, through mountain passes and river flats to the turquoise gem that was Lake Tekapo, ringed about with icy remote mountains; and to

Pukaki, with the glorious height of Mount Cook, over thirteen thousand feet, at the end of the pewter-smooth water.

They even went climbing up Mout Tawhai. The family were so casual about it Rowena could scarcely credit that this was the mountain that had brought tragedy into their lives. But she did realize, when they were climbing, how careful Forrest was of them, that even though they'd lived with the mountain all their lives, he still instilled into them, at every turn, reminders of safe mountain-lore.

Rowena, mindful that she must always show this man that the less she had of his company the better, often pleaded tasks to excuse her from going, but the children simply wouldn't hear of it.

"We'll help you when we come back. We've been brought up to do our share inside ... it's no fun without you, Rowena," and she would look up to find Forrest's dark, sardonic gaze upon her, as if he was thinking: She casts a spell upon them all ... I'm the only one who knows she's such a schemer. On the first occasion he said, as she came downstairs in tramping kit, "We'll take the easy slopes today, till Rowena gets limbered up."

She raised her eyes to his. Not now, for her, the small triumph of letting him find out her accomplishments for himself.

"I've climbed before."

"In England? Our mountains are tougher."

"In Switzerland."

He looked at her swiftly, suspiciously. She could have bitten her tongue out.

"I accompanied people out there," she said lamely.

He nodded. "Of course." His voice was suave. "One of your Upper Ten families."

Back of it all, she dreaded the day Dirk would arrive, dreaded it as Lindsay longed for it, Lindsay who went about with stars in her eyes the night before, who prepared his room herself, sang softly as she went about the house.

Rowena prayed Forrest would keep his temper, that he wouldn't succumb to the temptation to taunt her, to lash out at Dirk. She even went as far as to say to him, "I think it would be a good idea not to make Lindsay's disillusionment too sudden. To let it come about gradually. I can't see him showing up well here. She might realize quite quickly that they have nothing lasting in common, but if you try to speed it, you'll only succeed in antagonizing her. I - I mean if you hint that he and I were - were -"

"Were once romantically interested in each other," he prompted her. <sup>1</sup>

She swallowed. How distasteful it was! "yes, if that happened it would only strengthen the attraction - at this stage she's bound to take his part, and it would be a pity to spoil -" She stopped again.

"Spoil what? Oh, I think I have it ... you find Lindsay rather likes you ..." The tone of his voice derided Lindsay's discrimination. He might just as well have said, "Lindsay fell for Dirk, and so she fell for you." He repeated his last words. "You find Lindsay rather likes you, and you don't want her to find you out."

Rowena lifted her head with something of her old spirit.

"I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say: If you were the one to disillusion her about Dirk, it might spoil the relationship between *you and her*. After all, I shan't be at Tawhai for ever, I'll soon be forgotten when I go, when you get a more suitable companion for your aunt, or when Lindsay finishes at Varsity and comes home for good."

For once Forrest Beechington looked set back. "So you're willing to admit I'm not too difficult with Lindsay - not quite an ogre?"

"I'm always willing to admit things ... things that are obviously true."

"Yet you're never quite ... open, are you, Rowena Fotheringham?"

She didn't reply to that, but said, "I've admitted you're good with Lindsay. Isn't that enough?"

He didn't reply directly either. Simply sighed and said, "My trouble has always been the reverse. I've had to struggle time and again against spoiling Lindsay. It's not easy to refuse her anything when she looks at me with Darrell's eyes."

He turned and went out of the kitchen, and there was such pain in his voice that Rowena wanted to run after him, to slip her arm through his, comfortingly, to walk with him, saying nothing, but she couldn't. Between them lay the unbridgeable gulf of distrust, suspicion ... lies.

Dirk Sargison's visit didn't turn out quite as they had planned. Rowena certainly felt as she knew she would ... as if she walked on the edge of a volcanic crater, and it might crumble at any moment, but Dirk didn't appear out of his element as they had thought.

For one thing, he was a tolerably good rider. They had hoped he would show to poor advantage there, be nervous. For another, the artist in him was so charmed with Tawhai that he disarmed them a little. He took endless sketches, of corners of the house, the garden, the mountain, the stables, ivy-wreathed, with the clock-tower, the gums.

They were aware that Dirk Sargison was impressed with the wealth and solidity of Tawhai, looking on the plains and foothills covered with sheep as evidence of a substantial income, and he obviously enjoyed the ease and elegance of the homestead, accepting with lazy charm the way Lindsay waited on him, repaying her in his own coin of meaningless compliments and endearments.

Rowena had said to Forrest, feeling the less time she spent in Dirk's company, the less dangerous it would be, "I'll not come out so much. With a guest in the house there's more to do."

He had said no, very much the master of Tawhai. "I can't always go with them, the outside work must be done and I don't trust Dirk. I wouldn't put it



past him to get Lindsay away from the others, to compromise her in some way to force us to accept him."

Rowena looked startled. "Do you really think he'd go as far as that? I didn't think he'd even sensed our — your disapproval."

"I think he's definitely a wrong 'un. He fits better into this circle than I anticipated, yet it's only a chameleon kind of adjustment, I think. He's all things to all people. There's a kind of nervousness in him - not quite that perhaps, rather a lack of confidence that makes me wonder if he's got anything in his life to hide. I do like people to be open and above board."

That last sentence flicked Rowena on the raw. She ignored it, repeated, "I didn't think he'd realized you disapproved. You've acted the genial host very well."

She couldn't make anything out of his expression. "So have you," he said. "To give you your due, you've taken this fairly well, shown no resentment towards Lindsay, or to him. But it makes me realize what a complete rotter he is, to so ignore you, when there had been this understanding between you. I suppose he thinks Lindsay is the better catch? Or else he thought you were better off than you are - due to your travelling on a luxury liner."

Rowena felt as if the edge of the crater crumbled a little. But much as she detested Dirk, this was hardly fair to him. He wasn't quite the cad Forrest thought him.

She said, desperately, "Mr. Beechington - don't hold that against him. It - it was more on my side than his ... he's not really to blame - I feel I read more into it than I should have."

He looked at her with dislike. "I don't understand you at all, Rowena Fotheringham. You're the oddest mixture - at times you seem so fair, so candid ... at others, scheming and underhand. I rather wish you were one thing or the other. At times, against my better judgement, I'm almost inclined to trust you." He turned away.

His words lightened something in Rowena's heart. If only Lindsay would drop Dirk, perhaps this could be forgotten, overlooked ... or if not forgotten, not so vividly present with them. Perhaps this visit wasn't quite the disaster she had anticipated. Forrest was showing her a glimmering of respect for the way she had - presumably - got over her infatuation for Dirk. She hoped desperately nothing would occur to revive his suspicions and distrust of her. Rowena continued to avoid Dirk as much as possible.

A pity then that he should come into her kitchen at tea- time when she was alone there.

Rowena was wearing a rather severe-looking grey woollen dress with a full gathered skirt, and prim white collar and cuffs. About her waist was a gilt girdle, made Of links, that clipped about her and fell to one side in a dangling end.

She was crushing some herbs between her fingers, her face intent. Beside her were scales, and little muslin bags, and above her head, on hooks, some rolls of home-cured bacon. She looked up, wondered at the look on Dirk's face.

"Stay just like that, will you? Till I come back."

Slightly bewildered, Rowena did exactly as he had commanded, a small crease between her fine tawny brows. Dirk reappeared, pad and pencil in his hand. He sketched rapidly. Then he paused, looked at what he had done, back at her.

"I don't think I realized, on the ship, how good a subject you are for painting ... your figure, your colouring, I did take a few lightning impressions ... that day in the tropics ... the lights in your hair. In shadow it looks almost black, but in the fierce sun it was burnished copper. And your eyes - so mysteriously green.

"But today, it's not mere beauty - you've given me a subject and a title. On board ship you were just one pretty girl among many. Here, doing what you were doing just now, you were in your right element. You could have been in another century ... the mistress of the house, in her still- room. That dress

could have been early nineteenth century, if it were a little longer, and your girdle, a chain with keys dangling from it ... I shall call my picture 'The Chatelaine'. We won't have much time ... you must sit for me. I'd like your hair a little looser, though." He stepped forward quickly, put his hands to her hair, fluffed out the chestnut waves.

Rowena knew he wasn't conscious of anything but the inspiration of his muse, that it didn't mean a thing personally, but she looked over Dirk's shoulder straight into Forrest's eyes. His eyes looked black, his nostrils were slightly flared.

She said, hastily, hoping it didn't sound guilty, "Well, Dirk, I certainly can't sit for you now. It's nearly time for tea. Penny said she would help me with the mixing of these herbs afterwards. And we've got to bag them too. I was in the middle of weighing them out. Your picture will have to wait. Anyway, perhaps you could just paint it from your sketch, when you're back in the city."

Dirk uttered a snort of derision. "Good heavens! What a Philistine! I'll do it here, of course."

Rowena said weakly, "I may not be able to spare the time. After all, I'm not a free agent. I draw a salary from Mr. Beechington. I have to earn it."

Forrest's voice was decisive. It made Dirk spin round.

"But who am I to stand in the way of ... art? Of course you may have time to sit for Dirk. You ought to be flattered ... though I'm not at all sure Lindsay will be pleased."

"Why won't I?" said Lindsay's fresh young voice behind him, making Forrest start in turn. "Why won't I be pleased about what?"

Forrest said - and Rowena knew she didn't only imagine the triumph in his voice - he was glad to be showing Lindsay that Dirk's eyes could stray: "Dirk is dying to paint Rowena."

Lindsay's surprise seemed genuine. "Why should I mind, Uncle Forrest? He's already painted me. You should see it -" Her tone was laughingly rueful. "I'm the picture of innocence - like a cherub in an Italian painting . . . looking As if I thought babies were found under gooseberry bushes!"

Rowena thought Forrest winced. She caught the look Dirk gave Lindsay, and for a moment knew fear for the girl. No one at twenty likes to be thought either innocent or ignorant. How far would Lindsay's desire to appear knowledgeable and experienced take her? Dirk's look at the girl held appraisal, desire...

She gathered up the scales with one swift movement, dropped the herbs into a bowl, pushed them aside, said crisply, "Well, pictures or no pictures, I must get tea."

After the meal, she met Forrest alone in the hall. She said to him, "I didn't want Dirk to paint me. You ought to have had the sense to say we're too busy. And it was all to no avail. Lindsay doesn't care a brass sou."

He looked at her impatiently. "You do impute all sorts of mojjves to me. And while I wouldn't trust him as far as I can see him - with women - I've got to admit he can paint! None of this obscure modern stuff either, but darned good stuff. Let him paint you - at least when he's doing that he's not making love to Lindsay."

Dirk Sargison became so interested in the picture that he stayed on two days extra, and departed on the Thursday night. The twins went back to school on the Monday; their May holidays were just over two weeks, they would have three in August and seven in December, but Lindsay had another week yet. She spent most of her time swotting, though John Macrae did his best to get her outside with him.

Rowena approved of John. He was sandy-haired and blue-eyed, with massive shoulders and a magnificent physique. She said so to Lindsay, once.

Lindsay shrugged. "Yes, but so obvious. And a bit slow. Very stodgy."

Rowena said mildly, "Oddly enough he doesn't strike me as stodgy. I should think there was fire in him, well controlled."

Lindsay looked amazed.

Rowena continued. "He's interesting ... always gives me the impression he's got inner resources you wouldn't exhaust in a hurry. Know what I mean? That he'd always have something in reserve. Surprise you now and again. The sort to make a member of parliament in later life. I should think he's quite irresistible to women."

The amazement in Lindsay's voice was ludicrous. "John! John Macrae!"

Rowena laughed. "Yes, John Macrae. You've known him too long to even know what he's like, Lindsay. How he appears to other women. It's said that when you meet a person for the first time you should look at them closely, because it's the only time you'll ever really see them. After that familiarity blurs the image. So you've never really had the chance of seeing John Macrae as he is."

She glanced at Lindsay. The girl was bending over the table chopping parsley; perhaps that was what had brought the colour up into her cheeks. Lindsay was sweet, too sweet to be smirched in any way by a man of Dirk's standards.

Lindsay looked up. "I say, Rowena, what do you think Uncle Forrest promised me last night? . . . That we can have an old-time ball here on Queen's Birthday night. We'll all be home that weekend."

Rowena looked puzzled ... the Queen's Birthday was in April, though at home the Trooping the Colour came in June...

Lindsay said, in answer to the look, "It's a public holiday here, and since George the Fifth - he was the one who had his birthday on the third of June, wasn't he? - we've always celebrated it on the Monday nearest the third. A winter sport holiday. They have trains running up from Christ- church to Arthur's Pass, and people go tramping or tobogganing up there. Sometimes if there's been the cold weather, we all go to Lake Ida for the skating. It's

marvellous. But Forrest says he'll see you about opening up the old ballroom. It's not been used for a dance since the New Year's Eve before Mummy and Daddy were killed." Her voice trembled a little.

Rowena said, not looking at her, "I expect your mother and father would like to think it was used now and then - that you all had fun. Are you going to get a new dress for it, Lindsay?"

"Yes. Uncle Forrest said he'd buy me a new one, as long as I didn't go for something sophisticated and slinky!" Lindsay's voice was disgusted.

Rowena laughed. "Aren't men conservative about women's clothes! He's a bit out of date, isn't he? It's only girls of seventeen who want sophisticated, slinky things. Not a woman your age."

Lindsay sounded gratified. "Yes, aren't men stuffy? I don't intend to appear in unrelieved black, or - or olive green, but -"

"But you don't want to wear white, like a debutante?" Rowena believed in steering a middle course.

Lindsay pressed her arm gratefully. "Bless you, Rowena, you do understand, don't you? How about helping me choose it? I daren't ask Beechy. She'd think white flounces, with rosebuds trailing over it, or pale pink with puffed sleeves, or a fichu. Would you?"

"Yes. I think your uncle would probably lend us the car for a day in Christchurch."

"He would," said the uncle's voice.

Lindsay yelped. "Really, Uncle Forrest! For a great hulking brute you do creep about quietly. How long have you been there?"

It was something Rowena wanted to know herself.

"Right from the time Rowena was scathing about men being conservative."

Lindsay peeped up at him and chuckled. "And you don't mind, do you, pet?"

"No," He put his arm around his niece's shoulders. "You're probably right. We are stuffy. We like our women looking nice, not startling. And it will be a change to see you out of those ghastly tight pants and loose tops and duffle coats. I don't know what students are coming to these days. It's practically a uniform with them. I don't mind slacks and breeches for necessary purposes, but to wear them all the time! They do nothing for your figure, Lindsay. Make you top-heavy. I like women in full skirts. But you can get what you like for the ball if you allow yourself to be guided by our Miss Fotheringham."

Lindsay opened her eyes wide. "Goodness, Rowena, doesn't he trust you!" She flung her arms about her uncle, kissed his cheek, ran away laughing.

Rowena raised her eyes to meet Forrest's. "Yes ... *don't* you trust me!" she said bitterly.

"The more fool I," he said, and went away.

The shopping was a success. Forrest had told Rowena to spare no expense. Rowena felt no one could possibly find anything to cavil at in her choice for Lindsay. It was a model and had been called "Sea-foam", and its filmy draperies were iridescent like the sea itself. Silver and blue and green.

Rowena waxed lyrical over it when she met Forrest at the end of the day. He had driven her up, having had business at Addington Saleyards that Wednesday. Lindsay had gone back to her boarding-house.

"It's the perfect colouring for Lindsay," she said, forgetting for the time that she was careful these days to show no- emotion in front of him, but was cool, indifferent. "Her eyes are that blend of grey and blue and green that pick up their colour from what she wears, and change with her mood. The saleswoman was quite enchanted. She said it was so satisfying to sell a gown to a girl obviously designed to wear it." She hesitated and said, "I don't know what jewellery Lindsay has, of course, but I did think, if you wanted

to make her a gift ... one of those beautiful paua shell necklaces, set in silver, would be ideal. So right, coming from the sea. They're more lovely than turquoise, and so individually Maoriland."

She saw that, for once, she had pleased him.

"Right, we'll go into the first jeweller's we see."

The necklaces were beautiful, not over-costly, though he bought the best the shop could offer. They lay on their cottonwool beds, opalescent and shot with all the colours of the changing tides, beautifully buffed.

"Fit for a mermaid," said Forrest Beechington, holding up a bracelet to catch the light. "Good. We'll have the bracelet too, and earrings to match. And some Chinese amber for Penny."

Chinese amber, in its lovely ruby colouring, would be ideal for Penny, who was wearing a floral dress as gay as a poppy.

The assistant moved away. Forrest Beechington picked up another paua necklace.

"You've been very good -" His voice was stiff - "and taken the interest in Lindsay that Linda would have gone. Would you allow us - Aunt Lavinia and myself, to buy you this?"

Rowena shook her head. Her tone was low, but final. "No, thank you. It's nice of you to offer. But I do it for Lindsay's sake."

He didn't press it. It had been a conventional offer, made because, although he might detest her, he appreciated what she did for the household at Tawhai. It was irrational to know such a pang of regret as the assistant took the necklaces away. It would have been something to keep, when, as some day she would, she went back home, and the Beechingtons jaded out of her life.

He didn't show resentment, but said in an off-hand manner, "What are you wearing yourself in the dress line?"



"Yellow," said Rowena laconically.

"And in jewellery... pearl beads?"

It sounded so ordinary, something in Rowena revolted.

"No," she said, and hesitated. "I'm wearing - green brilliants. The dress is sewn over with them. I've a necklace to match."

They began their eighty-mile drive home, a drive that should have been lovely through the winter landscape of a country where there were so many evergreen trees: with the wonder of a sunset crimsoning and paling above snows that were amethyst and rose and mother-of-pearl at this hour... instead they rode in a silence that was neither friendly nor companionable, but fraught with distrust of each other.

Rowena looked at Forrest's lean brown hands on the wheel, and the desire to touch them, even fleetingly, was almost a physical pain. She wondered what it would have been like to have been loved by this man, to have met him with clear candid eyes, no foolishness to hide....

He spoke only once on the journey.

"Could you face another day in town before the holiday weekend?"

"If I have to. Why?"

"Because I'd like to stand Nelly a dress too. You've done wonders for her. She even speaks better than she used to. She's such a grand kid . .. always slaved for that big family of her mother's. They're not a bad family on the whole, only feckless, but Nelly's the pick of the bunch. Maybe you've noticed it yourself, but the Dutchman is looking her way. I should think he comes from a better background. I found her poring over fashions the other day. She hopes to make one herself. I'd like her to have something that didn't mean hours of work beforehand, and had some finish. Get her a really good one. Let her be Cinderella-at-the-ball for once."

"I'd love to." Rowena's voice was warm. But she wished, oh, how she wished, Forrest Beechington wouldn't show her this side of his nature ... much better if she could keep on detesting him, finding faults in him that made her tell herself that it was just as well things had fallen out as they had.

All Tawhai township was coming to the ball, if they so desired it. A general invitation had gone out. Forest had had an army of workmen out from Timaru to do up the ballroom and polish the really fine flooring that had been laid down in his great-grandfather's time.

It was a magic weekend. The weather had been icy, Mount Tawhai was clothed in glistening splendour, and the whole magnitude of the Alps glittered like sugar crystals in the sun. Forrest went up and collected the twins and Lindsay in Town and brought them home on Friday night.

"And everyone is to be early to bed," he said, as he brought them into the dining-room where a huge fixe was lit in the massive fireplace that was of West Coast stone, with flakes of mica in it, that glittered and danced in the firelight.

"Why early tonight?" asked Penny. "Why not Sunday night, with the ball in the offing?"

He pinched her chin. "Because Nicholas and I have planned a surprise, poppet. You might as well know now. Skating conditions are perfect at Lake Ida. We're setting off at seven."

"All except me," said Aunt Lavinia complacently, busy with her knitting. "There are great compensations in age. To go to a lake where the sun never shines ... Brrrrrr! Not me. My idea of a holiday is an outrigger canoe among coral reefs. I shall stay by the fire and pity you all."

Tony didn't look in need of pity. He'd turned a somersault in the big room out of sheer exuberance of spirits. Only Lindsay seemed to take it calmly. Perhaps she didn't care for skating as much as the rest.

She went out with Rowena to get the early supper. Rowena had bacon-and-egg pies for them, and potatoes baked in their jackets, scooped

out, refilled with a savoury mixture, and topped with cheese. There was coffee, piping hot and delicious.

There was a slight droop to Lindsay's shoulders.

"What is it, Lindsay?"

Tears came to the grey eyes. "Dirk isn't coming to the ball. He - he got a new, more flattering invitation. He was invitee} to Queenstown with a group of lecturers. He's going to paint the Remarkables while the snow holds ... their reflections in Lake Wakatipu, and so on. Oh, I know I've got to understand his painting comes first, but he *had* accepted our invitation."

Rowena felt a mixture of emotions ... glad for her own sake that Dirk wasn't to be there, sorry Lindsay was wounded, but a little relieved that Lindsay obviously didn't approve of anyone's being quite so casual about manners. Lindsay was as casual as most students, but she'd been brought up in a different tradition from Dirk. It just wasn't done.

Rowena turned, put an arm about Lindsay's shoulders. "Lin, this means a lot to your uncle. He's put so much into it. It's for the sake of you three. He wants Tawhai to be as it used to be. Put on an act, will you, don't let him see how you feel."

Lindsay returned the hug. "I know. I've felt a pig to care so much because Dirk won't be there. I won't let Uncle Forrest down. It's never been easy for him - he's not really so much older than we are - and he has tried to do his best for our family. I've realized that lately."

"Good for you!" Rowena thought Lindsay had matured a lot, even between these holidays and the May ones. But then growing-up was never measured in time, but in leaps and bounds - by heart-beats rather than minutes. But oh, how much of this new maturity could they put down to Dirk Sargison?

The day at the Lake was all it was meant to be in the fun and laughter of it all, for there were hundreds there, from Christchurch and Ashburton, and all the surrounding countryside. Rowena could even forget that she played a part, had fears and anxieties.

The sombre lake, surrounded by snow-clad giants, the laughter and comradeship echoing in the clear wine-like air, the gay costumes of the skaters, the tumbles and mishaps of the beginners, the sheer perfection of the experts.

When Rowena went to bed that night, tired and aching, but drowsy with delicious sleep, she thought, with a sense of wonder, that there had been no cross word spoken, no shadow had fallen.

## CHAPTER IX

THE service at St. John-in-the-Wilderness was in the morning that Sunday, and was this time a Presbyterian one, taken by the Jerrolds, who stayed to dinner, then left for another service eighteen miles away directly after.

In the afternoon they all took to the bush to gather the greenery for the next day. The pongas had been brought out by the men on the Saturday, and potted, but there were great armfuls of vines and creepers to be brought, carried in aching arms down gullies and hillsides, and piled into a horse-drawn dray taken as far into the bush as it could go.

At night Forrest Beechington lit a fire in the big drawing-room, a room they hardly ever used, it was so large. There was a fireplace at each end.

"We'll have some music tonight. Aunt Lavinia said just the other night, so wistfully, how long it was since we had gathered about the piano. And it means so much to her - now. It's one thing she can still enjoy fully."

Rowena hadn't realized what a family of singers they were, all harmonizing naturally. Even Aunt Lavinia joined in. None of them, oddly enough, had a taste for very modern music, only for old favourites. Rowena sat entranced.

During a lull, when Lindsay was sitting at the piano, playing dreamily and softly an old waltz tune, Rowena found Forrest beside her.

"Don't you sing? Don't let the family crowd you out."

She looked up, her eyes frank. Of late there had been little of real frankness between them. Her voice held honest regret.

"I'm no singer. I love music, and I play, but I've no singing voice. You won't be able to understand that. You appear to be a gifted family in that respect."

His expression for once was not hostile. He twinkled.

"Do you know I'm quite grateful to think there's something you don't excel at. You're so shockingly efficient at most things, it's enough to give everybody an inferiority complex."

Rowena looked up at him. She wanted to say - if only you knew ... if only you could guess how I felt when Geoffrey said he had never loved me! How unsure of myself I became. To her horror she felt tears pricking her lids. She looked down quickly - she mustn't cry, just because his voice had - for once - been kind. She mustn't lower her defences. She had, one or twice, hoped the breach between them might have healed, but always there had been swift sarcasm, stabbing words, heat that scorched and withered. As far as this man was concerned her heart was made of rose-petals, easily bruised.

So she said, in as sarcastic a tone as he had ever used to her, "How nice to know you regard me as so efficient. Efficient - but not trustworthy! Isn't that it?"

He didn't reply. Lindsay stopped playing. He looked across. "Play 'Galway Bay', Lindsay. We'll all join in," and he made it an excuse to leave her.

Rowena picked up her neglected tapestry. They went on into rollicking Irish tunes. She felt she was being ignored, as grown-ups ignore a rather rude child. But better that, Forrest Beechington, than that you should think me softening towards you.

Rowena realized that she couldn't go on like this, living here, with barbed antagonism between herself and the man she loved. She hoped desperately that Lindsay would get over her infatuation, that at the end of the Varsity year she would come home to take her place as the daughter of the house. Then she could look after Aunt Lavinia.

Rowena would be free to go ... it wouldn't matter now, if she went back to England, for she was free of the old ties that had once bound her to Geoffrey, and it wouldn't hurt to meet him. He would be married by now. There she would forget Forrest Beechington, and all her foolish mistakes, learn to live her life without him. Forget the tui whistling in the gorge, the bell-bird chiming over the waters of the pass, the new stars in a new sky....

Penny finished her song, came across to her, dropping down on the couch. Forrest stayed at the piano playing small snatches of well-known songs.

Suddenly Rowena was aware that he was playing the tune he had hummed that disastrous day they had gone to the Admiral's House, a day that still, in the remembrance of its earlier hours, held the quality of an idyll.

Penny looked up. "What is that, Uncle Forrest? It's quite fascinating."

He bowed his head to her, smiled. "Thank you, Penny - a small thing, but my own. Glad you like it."

Lindsay, delighted, said, "Oh, you've been composing again lately?"

"Not very lately. Some weeks ago - I composed the tune to fit the words of a poem I thought was rather good... at least I thought it was good then. I don't know since."

Penny said, "Then if there are words, let's hear them, Uncle Forrest."

They pestered him, till, suddenly, he seemed to come to a decision, swept his fingers along the keys, sang in his fine baritone the words of an Australian poet, Jane East:

*I have loved green - the green of lovely things; The pale, flat discs of  
new nasturtium leaves,  
The feathers of a mountain-parrot's wings,  
The first frail grass that Spring, new-awakened, weaves;  
And depthless pools where tides have ceased to run,  
And winter apples hanging in the sun!  
I have loved green - bright-dropping beads of jade,  
Soft pussy-willow silk with silvery folds,  
Books with green covers carelessly arrayed,  
And emerald bottles capped with tinselled golds!*

Rowena thought the setting quite lovely, and the words unusual. She sat up, lost in the charm of it, her eyes fixed on the singer. She was quite unprepared for the last two lines.

*But the green wonder of your laughing eyes  
Stirs me each time, O Love,  
to new surprise!*

As he finished the song, Forrest's eyes held hers deliberately, the mocking light in them all too evident.

The young ones begged him to sing it again.

"No," he said. "It isn't worth it. I composed it in a weak moment. I imagine most love-songs are composed in weak moments. Better forgotten. It doesn't last."

Penny was horrified. "Uncle Forrest!"

He looked across at her. "It's all right, Penny," he said. "Your kind of love lasts, but one meets up with it all too seldom."

Rowena dropped her tapestry down, went out of the room. She would have loved to flee to the comfort of the out-of-doors, even if it was freezingly cold, to find somewhere to weep, to weep alone. But she couldn't. She wouldn't give Forrest Beechington the chance to think he had wounded her. He might just as well have said: See what you missed!

And she, poor fool, taunted and mocked, couldn't even hate him. The poignancy of it swept over her. If they hadn't met Dirk that day, he might have sung it to her, with sincerity ... with love: "But the green wonder of your laughing eyes stirs me each time, O Love, to new surprise."

Rowena began to cut sandwiches.

The next night the old house burgeoned out into all the glory of the old days when people had come further and by less comfortable transport to meet each other, to dance, to talk, perhaps to flirt a little, exchange news from Home.



"Let's all go down together, Rowena," said Lindsay, breathtakingly beautiful in her sea-foam gown. Rowena loved her; she had been so gallant and gay for her uncle's sake, and underneath it all she must be fretting for Dirk, because whatever he was or had been, Lindsay loved him, or thought she did.

So they came down together to where Forrest and Aunt Lavinia waited for them at the foot of the lovely old staircase. Rowena might have been an older sister, Lindsay on one side of her in her floating iridescent draperies and necklace, Penny in her poppy-bright gown and Chinese amber, Rowena in primrose yellow taffeta, beautifully embroidered and crusted with gleaming green brilliants.

Above it her hair shone like a burnished chestnut, and curled softly at the base of her neck. Against her creamy brown throat shimmered the necklace.

At the last she had hesitated about wearing it, then had succumbed. It was so long since she had worn it. And no one here was likely to guess how valuable it was. It was so elaborate it would be taken for costume jewellery, no more.

Aunt Lavinia was enchanted. "Oh, Forrest, do look at the three of them. Isn't it like old times? I mean old times you wouldn't remember."

Her nephew dropped his eyes from the trio on the stairs to his aunt. "You look like a million dollars yourself."

She did, gowned in palest lilac, a colour that suited her so well, with pearls, and an ostrich feather fan, delicately tinted. Her snowy hair was piled high, and she wore a pearl-ornamented comb in it.

The evening went with a swing. There weren't any wallflowers, not likely to be, here in the country, with so many single male immigrants working on the farms, and it was a colonial ball in the best sense of the word, truly democratic, everyone having fun with everyone else. Aunt Lavinia went by on the arm of the Chinese fruiterer, one of the most popular men in the township. Nelly came past, a transformed Nelly, weaned away from the bright blues and pinks she used to wear, looking sweet in a misty grey with

gleams of coral showing through, Nelly on the arm of her Dutchman, dreams in her eyes.

The ballroom couldn't compare with some Rowena had known, but then Forrest's great-grandfather hadn't tried to compete with the stately homes of England, but had provided as best he could a place for the early colonists to foregather in. Most of the woodwork was kauri or totara, and each window had a New Zealand motif in the carving about the frame: bush clematis, kowhai, rata, wood-pigeon, a kiwi, a tui, a fantail.

She wondered as she danced with Jock, and saw Forrest go by with Heather, if any ghosts accompanied him ... the memories of Colin, Linda, Darrell, his mother and father ... or did he think of Helen, nearing the shores of Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud ... oh, what changes the years had brought to Tawhai.

She realized Lindsay had danced more with John Macrae than anyone, and she wasn't looking as if she carried an ache in her heart either ... Rowena smiled. When you were only twenty it was hard to resist the lure of gaiety, easy to forget when fiddles were busy, and piano accordions merry. Was Dirk Sargison's star waning?

Penny passed them in Nicholas's arms. Dear little Penny, looking as if the world owed her nothing in this moment. Rowena admired Nicholas. You were always aware that for him, the world centred in Penelope Beechington. But he was so restrained, so controlled, and so blind ... at eighteen Penny would be ready for wifehood.

The dances were varied, modern and old-fashioned, though she noticed that even the youngsters could waltz well. That was because out in the country like this, all the family went to the local dances in the township community centre. Nancy Jerrold, looking ravishing in a green gown she had made herself, was dancing with her Peter and looked as radiant as a girl newly in love. How lucky they were in each other. How safe, how secure.

It was eleven o'clock before the master of Tawhai claimed her for a dance, a waltz. She was standing a little from the others, beside a huge ponga set in half a barrel.

She said, without animosity, "You don't have to, you know. There are plenty of other girls here whom you don't despise at all."

He had her into the throng before she finished speaking.

"Don't be absurd," he said to the top of her head. "Wouldn't the family think it odd if we didn't ... wouldn't Aunt Lavinia go for me! Besides, I wanted to find out if you dance as well as you do everything else, bar singing." He added a moment later, "And you do."

Steady, said Rowena's reason to Rowena's heart. You'll get hurt, if you soften. Just make the most of this ... his arms about you ... music hauntingly lovely, and the knowledge that without is a lovely world ... a world just as lovely as your English world, though in a different way.

As the music ended, Forrest swept her out on to a little porch, screened by vines. It wasn't part of a duty dance to find a secluded corner! They came to the rail, rested their hands on it. They looked out over the moonlight-silvered paddocks, towards the height of Tawhai, whitely crowned, chill and remote. Somewhere a sheep coughed, a familiar domestic noise. Further away, from the mountain marshes, a bittern boomed, that eerie, lonely sound. Rowena shivered. She felt Forrest's eyes on her and looked up.

He put a finger under the pendant of her necklace, looked at it. She was acutely aware of the feel of his finger against her flesh, and schooled herself not to show it by quickened breath, or faster beating heart. His glance into her eyes was penetrating, calculating.

"No wonder you wouldn't let me buy you a mere paua shell necklace!" he said, and there was contempt in his tone.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Oh, don't try to dissemble ... a dress sewn with green brilliants, you said, and a necklace to match. Then if the embroidery on your dress matches the necklace, it must be sewn with *emeralds* ... I imagine the dress is by a

leading dressmaker, but I don't suppose even Hartnell himself embroiders his gown with emeralds ... unless for the Queen!"

He let the emeralds fall back against her breast, shrugged. "Glad you didn't bother to deny it. Cold here, isn't it? Not the time of year for sitting out ... let's get back to the ballroom."

Rowena hoped she made as good a showing as Lindsay, after that, of enjoying herself.

She was rather glad when it was all over, the caterers gone, and the house their own again. They said their good nights, went to move to the stairs. Forrest's voice arrested Rowena.

"I should like to see you in my office for a few moments, please."

Rowelia didn't want to show how startled she felt. She waved a hand to the girls. "I'll pop into your room for a little chat when I've seen your uncle," she said, as if it didn't matter a scrap. She followed him with shaking knees.

He gestured her in, came to stand in front of her. She looked up at him watchfully. He held out his hand.

"All right. Take them off. I'm going to put them in the safe and tomorrow they'll go to the bank at Timaru."

She put her hands round, unfastened the necklace carefully, and without a word put it in his outstretched hand.

He looked down on the emeralds, absently weighing them.

"Have you anything else as valuable in your bedroom?"

"No."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. Perhaps you won't believe me, but I am."

He locked them in his safe, came back to her. She stood quite still waiting for him to speak. He took her by the shoulders in a light grasp.

"Rowena, what lies behind all this? Would you please answer truthfully the questions I'm going to ask you?"

"Yes."

"Are they family emeralds?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever worked for anyone ... other than your own family?"

"No."

"I see."

"What do you see, Forrest Beechington?"

"I can see it all. I know to what straits taxation has brought the stately homes of England ... was yours in that category?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had my reasons."

"Were they good reasons?"

"They seemed so to me ... yes ... but they were private reasons. I don't care to reveal them, so since I've promised to give you truthful answers, please don't ask me for them."

He said curiously, "I realized some time ago that you came out on a luxury liner. What was the idea? Why not as an immigrant? Or, if that was going to take too long, why not a cheaper passenger ship?"

Rowena said stonily, "I can see what this is working round to - you think I staked my last penny on a desperate throw - that I took a passage on a luxury liner to secure a rich husband, don't you?"

She had lost the indifference of the last few weeks, the control of the last few moments, her green eyes were beginning to blaze.

His grip tightened. "I'm asking questions because I'd like to get to the bottom of it - and you've promised me the truth."

She bit her lip to prevent the furious words spilling out. At all costs she must preserve the secret that she loved him. Then she lifted her head, looked him straight in the eye, for she was in control again, and must prevent him from probing into things she didn't want to reveal.

"If I make a plain statement, Mr. Beechington, will you accept it, and ask me nothing more?"

"Yes."

She drew in a deep breath. "I would like to tell you that never in my life have I sought for, or even wished for, a wealthy husband. Do you believe me?"

She wasn't prepared for the change in him. She'd looked for scorn, for disbelief. She saw a softening of the lips, a gleam in the hazel eyes.

"Rowena," he said, and she thought his voice was unsteady. "When you look at me like that I've got to believe you. There's the deuce of a lot I don't understand, but..." He grinned suddenly, quite boyishly, but still Rowena didn't have a glimmering of his intention ... he bent his head, put his mouth on hers. With the promptness of a stage cue the phone rang.

He lifted his head, still holding her with one arm, and reached for the instrument, saying, "Now, who the devil at this time? Hullo, there."

Rowena could hear the voice quite plainly. Nicholas's.

"Hullo, Forrest. I knew you wouldn't have gone to bed yet. Just had a ring from Helen. She couldn't get one through earlier. She's in Auckland, as we expected, but instead of coming by the Limited and the ferry steamer, she's flying down by the four-forty plane. She wants to know if you'll meet her at Harewood Airport. You're going to Christ-church with the youngsters, aren't you? I've got to go to that sale at Oamaru. You will? Good. And listen, Forrest ..

*Helen.* The one for whom Forrest had sung "the old love, the true love, from over the sea". What a good thing to be reminded of Helen. Be careful, Rowena, you once let a man trample on your heart. She twisted free from Forrest's relaxed grip. The kiss didn't mean a thing; just an overcharged moment, quite usual in the male life. These things meant more to women than to men.

She heard Forrest bang the receiver down, start after her. She took the stairs quickly, ran silently when she reached the turn of the stairs, tapped hurriedly on the girls' door.

"May I come in, Lin?" she called clearly enough for him to hear. "I'm dying to talk it all over with you."

She heard him go down again.

It was an early start next morning, for Forrest had to get the youngsters to school for the last period of the morning. They had breakfast in the big kitchen, sleepily and rather grumpily, because they'd not had a full ration of sleep, and Aunt Lavinia was given hers in bed.

Penny and Lindsay and Tony all kissed Rowena goodbye much as they might have saluted an older sister, and Forrest watched with the hint of a smile on his lips.

He said, going out the door, "I won't be coming straight home, Rowena, I'll be taking Helen over to Matuku Peak, and it's quite likely I'll stay to dinner. Did you want anything in the city?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Well, Nelly and Heather and I will be glad of a quiet day tidying up. Cheerio, everyone."

She told herself that her sense of flatness, of anti-climax, was only the natural result of being tired after the ball. But Nelly and Heather didn't seem to be affected that way.

Perhaps she had been foolish to cut and run last night... the mood was gone now, and whatever had been sweet and warm between them had been fleeting, and would be overlaid by the ordinariness of everyday things ... and probably totally eclipsed by Helen's homecoming. Helen who had shared all the Beechington memories ... childhood bonds, fishing, climbing, bird-watching, gymkhanas, shows ... school holidays with Darrell and Colin and Forrest, all carefree, knowing nothing of cynicism or distrust. It was quite evident by ten that night that Forrest hadn't been able to tear himself away from Matuku Homestead, so Rowena and Aunt Lavinia, yawning, went to bed.

The next morning when Rowena heard hoof-beats in the back paddock, she knew it would be Helen, for she had taken Ebony Lass over to Matuku while Forrest was in Christ- church. She felt herself stiffen slightly, told herself not to be prejudiced.

She came on to the verandah, but Forrest had emerged from the stables before her and was assisting Helen down. She heard him say eagerly, "Oh, good show, Helen. I thought you'd lose no time coming over. Do come in and see what our Miss Fotheringham has done for Tawhai."

Our Miss Fotheringham ... she might have been a paid secretary!

Forrest introduced them informally. "You'd better make it Helen and Rowena from the start - Nicholas and she are on Christian name terms. You'll see a lot of each other."

Helen had her hand tucked in the crook of Forrest's elbow. She *was* quite tiresomely lovely, as Aunt Lavinia had said. Rowena rather wished she had removed her apron and powdered her nose. Her face felt hot and shiny from bending over the big stove.



Forrest's description of Helen had been quite correct... ebony, roses-and-cream, startlingly blue eyes, eyes that even at night would need no hint of eye-shadow; had it been Colin's death that had circled her eyes like that? It was appealing, giving her an air of fragility - something that would appeal immensely to anyone as aggressively male as Forrest.

Rowena had to admit to herself that Helen Dewmore wasn't only lovely to look at, but had a generous, ungrudging nature too, for she showed no boredom at the way Forrest, and soon Aunt Lavinia, heaped praise upon Rowena for the \tfay she had restored Tawhai.

Forrest said, with a twinkle, "Of course, in the matter of the house she rules us with a rod of iron, you understand. I thought she might find it too much, keeping up to her own standards in a country so short of domestic help, and I made a humble suggestion that was turned down in a most withering fashion."

He got a spark from the green eyes. "Humble? I've yet to see the master of Tawhai being humble."

Helen laughed. "She's right, you know. I've never seen you humble yet." ,

Forrest shook his head at them. He was in great spirits now Helen had returned.

"I have to throw my weight around. The only man in the household! I'd be henpecked otherwise. I merely suggested it might be labour-saving if I got an expert out to clear-varnish all the woodwork and furniture to save this constant polishing. It took me about two days to get over Rowena's horrified reaction. 'And destroy generations of elbow grease? All the lovely patina of faithful polishing?' quoth she."

Helen said, laughing, "You're as mad as ever, Forrest, and my sympathies are with Rowena. It would be vandalism."

Rowena found herself wishing it was possible to dislike Helen, but it wasn't.

The next few weeks seemed full of Helen. They were invited to Matuku Peak, a lovely mellow old homestead, to see all the souvenirs she had brought home. Helen was asked to speak on her trip at the Women's Institute and the Women's Division, all of which Rowena duly attended, and the Dewmore brother and sister spent evening after evening at Tawhai showing the movies and coloured slides Helen had taken of her trip.

Rowena knew a regret, rather an unworthy one, for the old, more intimate days. She made up for these ungenerous thoughts by going out of her way to be nice to Helen. Not that it was hard.

Helen said to her one day when she had called and was having afternoon tea with her alone - Forrest and Aunt Lavinia were in Geraldine, visiting - "I'm so glad you're at Tawhai, Rowena. It's been a problem with Aunt Lavinia's eyesight steadily failing. You've made this house come alive again. It used to be haunted with ghosts. We missed Linda and Darrell at every turn. They were so fun-loving, so devoted to each other. I miss Linda terribly. She was older than I was, quite a lot, but I'd known her all my life, and when my mother died, I used to come over here to her. You'll stay on, won't you, when \_"

It was a pity that Nelly came in just then, with a phone message for Helen. Someone had arrived to see her at the homestead, and Nicholas wanted to know if he should send the visitor over, or would Helen come home. Helen decided she'd better go. Rowena knew an almost overwhelming desire to ask her to finish the sentence.

Afterwards Rowena stood at the window, looking up at the summit of Tawhai where little clouds hung lovingly. Had Helen been going to say: "I hope you'll stay on when Forrest and I get married?" She must have been thinking of Aunt Lavinia - a blind person would be a liability unless she had a constant companion. And, of course, Aunt Lavinia did not find Helen a kindred spirit. Rowena told herself she must have a nasty nature to feel glad about that.

Forrest had been friendly enough ever since the incident the night of the ball, but there had been nothing approaching the slightest intimacy. Perhaps he had been glad she had run away from him. Perhaps in the sober light of

early morning, when all things seem slightly jaundiced, something of his distrust had returned. She ought to be thankful that of late there hadn't been such antagonism between them ... but she wasn't - at times she almost yearned for the sparks to fly.

Rowena shook herself impatiently. Time to go to prepare tea. She left the sunshine, the unbelievable sunshine for late \* July in the Southern Hemisphere, and went to the kitchen.

The next day some snow was prophesied on the forecast.

"Doesn't that seem odd, Forrest, when yesterday was so definitely nor'west, a really warm wind?"

"Oh, it often happens here. A sudden change. Not that I anticipate much. It just said heavy snow in the ranges, but only light falls at low levels. The heavy stuff will be right back ill the big fellows. We often have it dry and sunny here when that's happening back in. Some winters we don't have snow at all. We start lambing next month. We do a full crutch two or three weeks before. Odd that it's been such a mild winter, the berries were so red. The Maoris always say that is the sign of a severe one. There are plenty of lambs already, near the coast. We daren't start so soon, here by the mountains." He put down his napkin and rose. "I must get out. Big day ahead."

Rowena had a busy day, and it was late afternoon when she slipped up, as she often did, to the Turret Room, a little four-square turret, with windows in its four walls, that gave a wonderful view of the mountain. There were field-glasses up there, and Rowena swept the mountain and foothills with them.

Strange how attached to this country she had become. At first the mountains had dwarfed her, they had made her feel insignificant, she had resented their arrogance and hostility, just as she had resented the arrogance and hostility of the master of Tawhai, but now...

But now she loved the ranges, could pick out the peaks by name, Mount Peel, Mount Somers, Mount Hutt, and from a certain point of the estate,

between other mountains, you could glimpse the tiny-seeming jagged peaks of the Tom Thumb Range.

Rowena brought the glasses down to the foothills, their lower slopes dark with bush, sweet with ferns and mosses, and threaded by hundreds of sheep-tracks. Wonderful how here the stock wintered outside, different farming altogether.

She stopped ranging suddenly and concentrated on a particular area. How odd ... the sheep were on the move! Why? There was no mustering being done ... could there be a dog loose on the hillside? But they weren't moving as they would if one of the dogs was unofficially working them. She moved her gaze to a more open foothill ... the sheep were definitely on the move, coming single file, steadily, from all the gullies and ravines, down to the flat... a long procession of ewes and lambs winding down from the hills, a threat of storm to come - and what a storm!

Rowena didn't hesitate. Even if Forrest laughed at her and reminded her the forecast was for light falls, she must warn him. He and Jock were up in one of the gullies, clearing out a drain that had been blocked.

She saddled up Queen of Mars and rode off. The men were boiling the billy when she got there and the air seemed so mild that she almost changed her mind. She could pretend she was out for a canter and would like a cup of tea. They'd think nothing of it, scarcely a day passed that she wasn't in the saddle.

Jock saw her coming and hailed her. "Hoi there ... cup of tea going... want one?"

"Rather," she said, and dismounted, tied her horse to the fence and came to them. She dodged the issue till they had had their tea, hot and strong, and then, when Jock moved off to get the billy refilled with water from the creek to douse the ashes, she said nervously to Forrest:

"Perhaps you'll think I'm crazy, but I was up in the Turret Room and took a look through the glasses. The sheep are on the move. Winding down from the passes, not stopping to graze at all. What does it mean? I feel rather a

fool. I'm a new chum to New Zealand farming, and I don't know mountain farming at all. I've never been on a Highland farm, or a Welsh one. But I thought I ought to tell you."

"Thank you, Rowena," he said gravely. "I can well imagine you hesitated in case you made a fool of yourself - especially as we've not always been very patient with you. Give me the glasses, I'm glad you brought them. I'll not say anything to Jock yet . . . come on up that spur with me, it cuts off the view from here." He called to Jock, "I'm going up the hill a bit for a view."

Forrest gave her his hand, though she didn't really need it. However, she thought as she scrambled up, I'm unashamedly grateful for crumbs, and the clasp of his hard calloused hand was very comforting.

They gained the spur, paused a moment, panting, and Rowena unslung the glasses from her shoulder. Forrest swept the more distant hills of his property first, concentrated on certain areas, brought the nearer hills within range.

He brought the glasses away from his eyes, turned and looked at Rowena, his eyes appreciative.

"Good lass! There's certainly something brewing. We'll get back and alert the homesteads and farms. The exchange will co-operate there. I'll have a word with the postmaster, and I'll ring the broadcasting people. I think it warrants that. A few hours' preparation could mean all the difference to stock losses. Come on, Rowena."" They rode off.

"Even if we look fools later, it won't matter," he told her. "You can help too, if you will. I want the woolsheds cleared, and the men can load hay bales to take round to some of the shelter belts. We'll drive the sheep in there. The stud stuff can go in the sheds. Would you drive one of the trucks? Then we can have a man each side of the tray of the truck pitching off. And, if you could get your pigs penned up, we'll drive some of the sheep into the oak wood, it's very sheltered. And when you've done that, put the horses into the stables and see to their feed, will you?"

They worked with a will, Jock driving the other truck. Aunt Lavinia sat in the kitchen, tending the dinner and listening to the radio, while Nelly and Heather looked after the poultry, filling up water troughs, leaving out extra feed, and getting them all in from free range.

Presently Aunt Lavinia called Nelly. "Go up to the big hay-shelter and tell my nephew that word has just come through that a snowstorm is sweeping Otago and Southland and is travelling up from the sou'west. It's expected to be severe."

When the hay was distributed, the men got their horses, took the dogs, and made for the foothills to hurry the sheep along. Forrest said briefly, gathering up the reins:

"Thanks, Rowena. Due to you, the district has a two-hour start. It will make all the difference. Go and make yourself a cup of tea and have a rest."

She shook her head. "We're well stocked up, but I'm going to take the car to the township and get some yeast in. It may not be needed, but if there are no deliveries of bread for a few days, I'll have to bake it."

He nodded, laughter in his eyes. "Got a diploma for bread-making, Rowena?" and there was no sarcasm in his voice.

He whistled the dogs, wheeled, and was off. The men worked on till past nightfall, and just before they came in the first flakes began to fall, powdering the scarlet berries, outlining the curves of larch and spruce.

As soon as Rowena heard the men come in, she went out with meat for the dogs. They were moving the kennels into one of the outbuildings. The air was full of the bleating of distressed sheep. The huge sheds and barns were full, and they were in the hay-shelters too, the huge affairs with only a roof and the south walls closed in. Every clump of trees held its quota of sheep.

"You couldn't have got them all, Forrest?"

"No. Quite impossible, with the size of our mobs, but at least the ones that are still moving down will find shelter in the bush now that we've got these

ones out of the bush. We managed to spread hay under the scrub. Most of the ewes are close to the homestead. I'll be up at the crack of dawn. Now for a hot bath and a good meal."

As they came on to the verandah, lit by a shaft of light from the door, she looked up at him. He had an indescribable cap pulled over his head, bedraggled and running rivulets of water down his cheeks, but he looked the picture of health, rugged and strong, and - she loved him. Was there any hope of a fresh start? Would all that had been said between them ever be wiped out? Or was she cherishing a hopeless dream, and when he sought a mistress for Tawhai, would it be Helen? Helen with her sapphire eyes, her air of fragility, the eternally feminine. Oddly enough, though Helen had been brought up here, she wasn't the outdoor type at all.

Forrest looked down on her as he scraped the mud off his boots. She was wearing an old bottle-green coat over her mud-soaked slacks, and it had a hood, lined with flame- coloured silk, that had fallen back and left her chestnut hair powdered with snow. He noticed the high cheekbones, the short patrician nose with its spattering of freckles, the tawny brows, the green eyes. Her feet were thrust into farm boots, and a pair of men's socks pulled up over the cuffs of the slacks.

He grinned, and put a hand on her shoulder. "You make a good -fouseabout, Rowena. I'll give you a reference for one anytime."

*A good rouseabout* ... the odd job man on a New Zealand farm. Yes, that was about it, and she had thought to compete with Helen!

In spite of the gale that swooped and screamed about the homestead that night, she slept soundly, tired out by the extra work. She was awakened while it was still dark, by an impatient hammering at her door. Forrest.

"Rowena, come and see your snowstorm."

She stumbled out, fumbled for the switch, clicked it on, no result. He heard her.

"The power's off. I've got a torch. Just grab a dressing- gown."

She couldn't help a smile. A snowstorm could be a disaster to farming folk. There would be heavy stock losses, setbacks, and a power of hard work ahead, but there was always something magical about snow... till it turned to slush...

She caught up a thick turquoise dressing-gown collared and cuffed in matching velvet, tied it about her slim waist, and opened the door. Everything seemed pitch-black.

"What time is it?"

"Half-past five, but the moon is setting over Tawhai, and I want you to see it. I've roused Aunt Lavinia - she grumbled madly, and said she was too old for moon-risings or moon- settings now, that she much preferred an electric blanket and dozens of pillows at this ungodly hour, but she's getting up. Heather is escorting her with another torch. I'll light the lamps for you in a moment. I want to go over to the sheds then. Sheep are so stupid, they've probably overlain each other by crowding."

He took her arm, guided her down. The cold air rushed to meet them as they opened the back door.

"Look!" he cried exultantly. "Is it worth coming down for?"

He lifted her on to a box on the verandah to keep her slippers dry, came up beside her, slipped an arm about her to save her from falling off; there was barely room for the two of them.

Rowena gasped. There wasn't a fence in sight, and even the huge macrocarpa hedges had terrific drifts against them. Nearly all the verandah, save a circle where they were standing, was white, where the snow had blown in. The foothills and Tawhai looked like one huge mountain, all the gullies in between filled up with soft white smothering snow.

"It's all right," he said. "If the sheep from away up reached the bush they'll be O.K. They can live for days, their breathing keeps a space cleared around them, even if they are drifted under; they live in a sort of igloo, and they'll nibble each other's wool for the grease in it. We did leave plenty of feed too,



thanks to you. If we'd not heard till the teatime news, it would have been too late to do much. We've got thousands under cover."

"We'll get cracking digging out paths to the fowls and the horses while the snow is soft. It'll be milking by hand, and the cattle aren't going to like any of it - they aren't used to being cooped up."

Rowena thought she would never forget it, the paling, tired moon setting above Tawhai, the unbelievable expanse of unbroken snow, stars fading like diamonds in a velvet sky, the air clear and cold, and the warmth of Forrest's arm about her, his thigh against her thigh, his foot against hers.

They heard the others coming, turned, got off their perch. The magic fled, there were things to do.

When the others came in, Aunt Lavinia and Heather and Rowena went up to get dressed, leaving Nelly and Forrest to light the lamps and start breakfast.

They came down and gasped at the way their plates were piled ... bacon, eggs, bottled tomatoes, piles of toast. It was amazing how it disappeared.

The kitchen had slipped back a century. There was a lamp on the table and one on the sink, and a rosy glow from the open door of the big double-oven coal range.

"The telephone wires must be down," said the master of Tawhai. "We're cut off. I'll put new batteries in the portable radio and see what's happening in the rest of the province. We had a snowstorm like this about ten years ago. In some places the power was off for six weeks. Tough on the new all-electric farms."

"Six weeks!" gasped Rowena.

"Yes. The distances are terrific, leagues of power lines, and they were down everywhere. That was the time they lost track of the South Express, but it turned up, hours late. There were whole plantations blown out between Rakaia and Christchurch."

Rowena wasn't proud of the thought, but at least Helen wouldn't be over here, or even ringing up, for a few days. She had an idea that, right or wrong, she was going to enjoy this isolation!

She did; it was great fun, if exhausting. The men were out in the woolsheds and shelter belts, looking over the sheep, getting them on to their feet when they were cast, loosening up the crowding. They couldn't attempt going higher up yet, it was too soft. Besides, the sheep could make out for a time.

Forrest got the portable going. Things were bad in Canterbury and Otago. Losses were terrific where lambing had already started. Transport was at a standstill in the cities, many business houses too understaffed to keep open. The authorities were trying to get news of isolated farms; many were far more remote than Tawhai, and in case of shortage of food, when conditions were good enough, there would be parachute drops of supplies, and an air-lift of hay to some areas. Down swirled the snow again.

On the third morning, when they woke, they knew by the intense cold it had frozen. Downstairs was warm enough because they had banked the big fire in the kitchen where they had taken up living quarters for the time being.

Rowena watched Forrest gird himself into a massive cocoon of garments and step on to the hard surface of the snow to go across to Jock's place.

"You'll be careful, won't you? The drifts are gigantic, and some might be soft under the hard crust."

She was glad he didn't laugh at her, or sound cross. He said briefly, "I'm going to keep to the fences and low hedges. See, you can see the mark of them ... a faint sinking of the snow where they are. I'll plot my course by them."

She was glad to see him back.

He said, "Jock and the two single men are going up the gully to the gums to see how the sheep are faring there. I've told them to take no risks and stick together."

Rowena said hesitantly, "I read a book about a terrific snowstorm about a hundred years ago. It said that the sheep naturally took shelter under the overhanging banks of the creeks and rivers and so survived the snow, but the thaw set in too quickly and while they saved hundreds, working frantically, many thousands were swept downstream and drowned. Will that happen again?"

"Very likely. I looked it up myself this morning. That's where I'm going now - to Miro Gully. That would be the one to give them most shelter."

"Not by yourself?"

He grinned. "Well, who've I got to take> If young Tony were here now ... but Jock and the lads will have gone."

"How about me? I'll probably be a nuisance, but I feel it's safer to have company of some sort."

He considered it unhurriedly. "All right. I believe it's foolhardy to go alone, and you've done a lot of climbing. We'll take alpenstocks. There are some up in the Turret Room with the skis and skates."

Rowena got her climbing boots. Forrest brought her some waterproof trousers to put on over her slacks. They had legs that were laced like leggings. He knelt and laced them for her. She had an almost irresistible urge to run her fingers through the crisp black hair. She buttoned the flame-lined hood beneath her chin, grasped her alpenstock.

Their progress was slow and irksome till they reached the lower slopes of the gully, where, sheltered by trees, they found occasional firm footing. They splashed in and out of the creek as they sought for less snowy places to put their feet. The gully narrowed and darkened, and here the banks began to overhang.

"Are your feet freezing, Rowena? Mine are!"

"Can't feel them," she gasped. "And my hands!" She slapped her furry-mittened hands smartly together, and stamped her feet.

They groped under the snow-crust that overhung the banks.

"Ah!" said Forrest, encountering wool. "There are some here." He straightened up, looked up the rising line of the banks. "Look, Rowena, do you see what I see?"

She narrowed her eyes against the blinding white snow. "Yes ... steam rising. Are they under there all the way up?"

There were little holes in a regular pattern, where the breath of the sheep had thawed the snow, and through each vent rose a tiny smudge of steam.

"I think we can get them out. Or will it be too much for you? If we can, we could get them over the hard surface today. If it starts to thaw we'll never do it, and it would sweep them down the creek if it sets in in real earnest."

"I'll give it a go."

It was amazing how hard the snow was to shift, and how sharp the particles were. They kept their gloves on. After the first few it became easier, and the sheep began to move along after each other. The warmth they had generated was amazing. Forrest and Rowena worked till every muscle ached, grimly determined to get them all out.

Forrest looked upwards and said, "I believe the end's in sight." He went on burrowing, said, "That's odd - they've stopped coming." He looked up the hollowed-out bank, but what with overhanging trees and the misty breath of the sheep he could see nothing.

He took his alpenstock up a little way, thrust it into the next breathing-hole, said, "Ah, what I feared - one is down. I'll get it on to its feet, and get them going again."

As Rowena came up to assist he uttered a still more dismayed exclamation. "Oh - the rest of these are wethers. This is a ewe, prematurely lambing." He bent to the distressed animal. She knelt beside him, then looked up at Forrest. "She's got no strength left to help it along, has she?"

He pulled off his gloves. "The lamb's head's here. I think I can help." He was gentle and efficient, and in a moment the wet, slithery little creature was beside Rowena. She unwound her scarf, wrapped it around the lamb, heard Forrest give an exclamation that she thought none of the worse of him for uttering, and realized why.

"Not another?" she demanded. "Not twins?" They were kneeling in such a confined space. No room for working in.

"Yes. And this one's nearly had it - too long in the birth." It didn't take him long, but the lamb was very weak. He gave Rowena his scarf. "Hardly worth saving, but we'll give it a go." He looked down at the ewe and then up at Rowena.

"I'm sorry, it's too far gone. Rowena, I'll have to put it out of its misery. Look the other way, will you?" He drew a thin-bladed knife out of its sheath at his belt. Rowena averted her eyes. Forrest waited a few moments, then flung the carcase into the stream, and coaxed the next wether out. Soon they were all on the move, slowly and steadily.

Rowena had the first lamb buttoned inside her coat, Forrest had the puny one in his. It took them even longer to go down than to come up, for the sheep kept straying apart. Forrest was cursing the fact he'd not brought a dog.

"Though with the snow as hard as this, they'd not have done too well. It packs up between their pads and gives them hell." They were almost to the point of dropping when at last they got the sheep into the frozen yard.

"Where now?" asked Rowena, stumbling a little. "Every place is full, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm going to put them in the big laundry and on the back verandah - though it will make a fearful mess to clean up. I'll put one of the chaps on to it when this is all over."

"As if that mattered!"

They brought the lambs into the kitchen. Forrest disappeared, then came back looking crestfallen. "I'm crazy," he said. "Can't get used to the idea of no power on. I started to rustle out the boxes with the heat-lamps above them. Nelly, get out the tin bath - it's in the store-room. We'll have to bath them."

They kept adding hot water, rubbing and rubbing, then took them out on to sacks laid on the big rag rug in front of the fire, and with old towels rubbed them dry. Aunt Lavinia, to Rowena's amazement, took over then, warming milk, feeding the lambs with it, betraying infinite patience.

Then, and only then, did Forrest and Rowena scrub up preparatory to having the hot coffee that was ready.

As they shared a sinkful of scalding water, and they washed the mud and blood off themselves, Forrest said:

"Good scout, Rowena."

She felt a glow of satisfaction as at a hard , job well done, but sighed a little for glamour. Geoffrey had appreciated her efficiency too, as well as her money ... had thought she would run his place as well as she had done Ainsley Dene. Not for her the colourful, emotional moments; what was it Forrest had once said? ... "Soft music, palm-strewn shores."

Any love anyone would feel for her was commonsense love indeed.

After that, the men all got busy, scouring the gullies in pairs for sheep under the banks, and though, inevitably, there were some losses, Tawhai's would be lighter than many.

Rowena found the days more than filled, for all the bread had to be baked, the kitchen was full of bleating lambs, for they had quite a few premature births, and the time spent in preparing bottles and teaching lambs to drink seemed never-ending.

Then a nor'wester sprang up, softening the crust and setting the thaw in, and the mud in the house had to be seen to be believed. Tawhai was

re-connected by phone, for that break was local, but they didn't have the power for weeks.

Rowena began to develop a tremendous respect for pioneer women who coped with filling so many lamps, and even made candles. The store ran out of candles, there was a shortage all over the province, and when she found some candle-moulds in the Turret Room she elected to try making them, and produced such inferior specimens that Forrest laughed at her.

## CHAPTER X

SUDDENLY the roads were free again, and around the homestead the waterlogged grass showed a yellowish-green. The snow would lie in the gullies and hollows for weeks, but at least the work of the farms could go on. It wasn't all work. Out came the toboggans and sledges, and they spent hours on the hillsides flying down the slopes in an enchanting world.

Aunt Lavinia said to Rowena, "Now I expect we'll have Helen over here all the time again."

The remark was so obviously disapproving, and so unlike Aunt Lavinia's sunny nature, that Rowena stared.

Aunt Lavinia chuckled. "Oh, I suppose like everyone else, Rowena, you think Helen is just sweet ... well, I'm a rebel where she's concerned. I never did like people everybody likes ... bound to be something wrong somewhere. If ever anyone enjoyed nursing a broken heart she did!"

Rowena couldn't help chuckling. "Oh, Beechy, you bad scamp. You shouldn't. Helen is very accommodating, she fits into any company."

"I know, I know, my dear. Spare me a list of her virtues. I'd like her better if she had a few vices. It's no good, Rowena, she rubs me up the wrong way, always has."

Rowena's voice was pure affection. "Oh, Beechy ... you are a pet. No wonder you like me, I'm full of original sin."

"Yes, you're quick-tempered and witty to the point of being sharp - at least as far as Forrest is concerned, but all the Beechingtons are, and I can get along with it. But if things had turned out differently and Colin and Helen had set up fiousse here, I'd never have stayed. I'd have gone back to Summer."

Rowena said reflectively, "But, Beechy, at least you must give Helen credit for constancy. She's remained very faithful to Colin's memory."



Aunt Lavinia sighed. "I expect she has. But often I wonder. I always felt she was more in love with Tawhai itself ...sort of grew up expecting to marry and come here. She's not got the courage to break away from the sort of life she's always lived. I hope Forrest steers clear of her."

Rowena felt her cheeks grow warm and bent over her tapestry. "Why, Beechy, wouldn't it be rather ideal? Heal any permanent sense of loss Helen may know, and ... and Forrest would never feel that *she* sought him for his money as his former fiancée did."

There was something in Rowena's tone that caught Aunt Lavinia's attention. She smiled to herself, unnoticed.

"Forrest would tire of her in less than a month. He doesn't like women all sweetness and light. He needs variety. In fact, he needs someone like you!"

Rowena gasped. "Beechy! You mustn't! You mustn't matchmake. You'll embarrass me horribly if you do. Forrest and I could never come together. We quarrelled on that score right from the start ... you weren't home ... he made it most plain that all your other companions had been - very tiresome. But he and Helen could meet on equal terms. He would never suspect her of -"

"Feathering her nest," completed Aunt Lavinia complacently. She patted Rowena's hand. "Don't worry, child, I've got plans - it will work out all right."

Rowena panicked. Hadn't Forrest once said they all danced to Aunt Lavinia's piping? It was right enough, they all found themselves going her way, yet anyone less like a dictator or a martinet couldn't be imagined.

"Beechy! You're not to interfere. If you do I'll cut and run. You mustn't - promise me, promise me ?"

Aunt Lavinia laughed in the most maddening way. Rowena said desperately, "It's all so ridiculous, it's just wishful thinking on your part, Beechy. You can see for yourself how incompatible we are, how we've quarrelled."

Beechy laughed again. "What are your quarrels but the undertones of love?"

Rowena, aghast that, in some way, she should have betrayed herself so, was silent. She must watch her every word, her every look, for if she had given herself away to Aunt Lavinia she might to others, even to Forrest - oh, no, she couldn't bear that.

Aunt Lavinia said, "Don't upset yourself, dear. I'll promise you this, I'll never embarrass you, in any way, with Forrest."

Rowena had to be content with that, though she was conscious of deep uneasiness whenever she recalled it. It had the effect of making her stiff with Forrest, something that was strange after their comradeship during the \_snow. It was a pity, just when the menace of Dirk Sargison seemed to be fading.

Not that Forrest seemed to notice her withdrawal. Ever since the night of the ball he had been more friendly, more at ease with her. Rowena put that down to the fact that he and Helen were drawing together, and he felt safer, more off his guard, with his aunt's companion. There was no doubt that Forrest Beechington was a happier man since Helen had returned.

She said to him one day, "Lindsay doesn't seem to have mentioned Dirk in her letters lately. Is the affair petering out?"

He looked up from some harness he was mending in the kitchen. "He's away in Dunedin. They probably write, but knowing his type, he'll most likely find someone else quite soon and drop Lindsay."

Rowena flushed. Forrest thought *she* was one of Dirk's passing fancies, to be picked up on board ship and dropped casually when their ways parted ... and it was her own fault!

Forrest continued: "He was offered a part-time job lecturing down there round the various schools, and it suited him all right. Otago has the scenery - it's on the grand, grim scale down there - and he's free to paint all round the lake district and fiordland, yet keep earning."

"How lucky, for Lindsay's sake - and ours - that a job like that just came along."

Forrest said dryly, "It didn't just come. I pulled strings to wangle it. Mentioned what a darned good artist he was to a friend in academic circles down there."

Rowena gazed at him with new respect. "How clever of you - far more clever than my paltry little idea of having him here, thinking he'd show up badly against a family background. That was a complete flop. Yours is much more effective."

He looked at her across the kitchen table, his eyes still friendly, his fingers busy.

"Whenever you give me praise for anything, Rowena, the reluctance in your voice is quite amusing. It goes against the grain with you, doesn't it, to have to admit, even to yourself, that the crabbed Forrest Beechington has his good points?"

She went scarlet, said indignantly, "I never called you crabbed!"

His tone was still teasing, but his eyes watchful.

"Didn't you, sweetheart? It was about the only adjective you didn't use, then. Let me think of the others - rude, overbearing, vain, insufferable, unjust, self-willed, insulting, self-opinionated, harsh ... oh, there's no show of remembering them all!"

Rowena picked up a large basin. "I must get some potatoes," and as she bent over the vegetable bin in the storeroom she was annoyed to find herself trembling. It doesn't mean a thing, she told herself, sternly ... that he called you sweetheart. He does it to Lindsay and Penny and Aunt Lavinia, even to Nelly. You mustn't read anything into it, he only uses it to the others when he's teasing. Don't be such a fool, Rowena Fotheringham!

She came back, telling herself she hoped he would be gone. He looked up as she went to the sink and turned the tap on.

"Of course I admit I deserved them all," he said conversationally,-as if no interruption had occurred.

Rowena pretended she had forgotten what they had been talking about.

"What was that, Forrest?"

He laughed. "You know what I'm talking about all right."

She went on peeling.

He came and stood behind her at the sink, cupped his hands about her elbows, his face over her shoulder.

"But even if I did deserve them all, I hope some day you'll take them all back, even -" He cut off, then said savagely, "Oh, blast, can you beat it? The interruptions in this place are legion. If it's not Nelly or Heather it's Aunt Lavinia... and if it's none of them it's the Vicar - of all the times to call!"

Rowena looked up sharply, which brought her cheek for a moment against his. There, out of the kitchen window, they could see the Vicar helping his wife out of the car. Forrest went out to greet them.

The Vicar and his wife stayed for tea, and after that Forrest had to go to a farmers' meeting in Geraldine. Aunt Lavinia was across visiting Jock's wife. Rowena was going over later to collect her, and she was quite glad, for once, to be alone, and to sit by the fire and dream.

She was still apprehensive about the future, the Beeching-tons were so unpredictable; if Forrest did follow this up, there would have to be some explaining done - or was it just wishful thinking on her part that he meant anything by this softening towards her? It mightn't mean a thing!

She heard a car draw up. It couldn't be Forrest yet - unless he had cut the meeting short ... her pulses stirred at the thought, a sweetness took possession of her ... here tonight, because of a few laughing words this afternoon, she was ready to dream again . . .

Quick footsteps, a light knock, and the door handle was turned. Helen walked in. She looked different - something that had little or nothing to do with the fact that she was wearing a new dress, not the pale blues and greys she usually affected, but a glowing ruby-red. No, it was to do with the spirit.

Helen looked alive for once. There was a deeper colour in the matt white cheeks, a sparkle in the eyes; but she was obviously disappointed that Forrest wasn't there.

"I didn't realize he was going to be out." She laughed. "Oh, well, it will keep. I've thought it out for long enough. Only I know Forrest will be happy about it."

Rowena knew a deep unrest. *Forrest will be happy* - she didn't speak, couldn't.

Helen said. "He's told me time and again that I must get over Colin. That it's not getting to terms with life, living with a memory. Only I couldn't forget. He made me take this trip away. Said he was convinced that half the time I'd been in love with Tawhai ... yet even when I came back I still couldn't make up my mind. He pressed the point the other day. I said no, I still felt the same - but suddenly I don't. So I wanted to tell him. Forrest's always right, isn't he, knows exactly where he's going?"

"Yes," said Rowena. "He knows where he's going all right. He's certainly very downright." She kept her head close above her tapestry.

Helen looked at her curiously. "For some reason you don't like him much, do you, Rowena? You clash. Yet I don't know anyone finer."

Something within Rowena jeered at that. You don't like him - oh, well, *like* didn't describe what she felt for Forrest!

But she must be careful, she mustn't say anything to dim Helen's happiness. Helen deserved it. She had known sudden bereavement, years of loneliness, and latterly evidently had had a big decision to make. But oh, fancy having to think your way through that one ... fancy having Forrest Beechington's love offered to you, and not taking it with both hands! Fancy not knowing ...

didn't love come with a sunburst any more ... a fanfare .. didn't you hear trumpets sounding on the wind? Something that could be revealed to you even in the midst of fury and resentment!

Aloud, crushing these thoughts down, with some measure" of sincerity she said, "He *is* fine, Helen, I know that. It's just that we rub each other up the wrong way. But thank you for telling me. I wish you all happiness."

They talked of other things, had supper, and it wasn't till Rowena was driving the Land Rover over the frost-rimed paddocks to collect Aunt Lavinia that other thoughts came to plague her.

Forrest and Helen. Aunt Lavinia was right. He'd be bored to death in a year. Why hadn't he picked someone with more vitality, someone to respond to the power and feeling Rowena was sure were locked up in his heart? Oh, Forrest, why?

Rowena thought back with regret to this afternoon and the interruption, then decided she shouldn't regret it. It might have meant nothing - or it might have meant that Forrest, tired of years of Helen's shilly-shallying, and knowing that Tawhai needed a mistress, that Aunt Lavinia and the children loved Rowena Fotheringham with all her faults, had decided she would make a good second-best!

She wouldn't tell Aunt Lavinia yet. It would only disturb her. What would Aunt Lavinia do ... take on a flat in Summer again? If so, would she want Rowena with her? For Rowena knew that she could not stay on at Tawhai when Forrest and Helen married, to watch their happiness - or their unhappiness. But perhaps she would be better to cut adrift from the Beechingtons altogether for her own peace of mind.

Rowena lay awake a long time. She heard Forrest come in, make the rounds of the house, go to his own room. Daylight greyed the darkness before she slept.

She woke an hour or two later, resenting the alarm clock, the cold, the need to get up and cook meals and be ordinary. It seemed odd, looking at Forrest across the breakfast table, that he didn't know yet that his love had

capitulated. Only a few hours ago she had read into a careless word or two a new promise, a new hope.

Forrest said, "Soon as I see Jock, I'm for Timaru. I've got to see the Chairman of the County Council urgently, on behalf of the meeting last night, and I'm told he's leaving for Dunedin at midday."

Rowena hesitated. Should she say Helen had wanted to see him last night? No, better not. Helen wouldn't want to sandwich news like that in between breakfast and an urgent meeting ... it needed time, solitude ... time to kiss, to know the ecstasy of at last resolving things ..

It was a long, joyless day. At four the phone rang. "Toll call from Timaru," the local operator said.

It seemed ages coming through. It wouldn't be anything, she told herself impatiently. There'd be nothing wrong, he was a good driver, not in the least reckless, handled his car beautifully.

Then his voice, "Oh, Rowena ... listen, there's a good picture on. How about getting the four-forty-five bus and seeing it with me? There wouldn't be time for me to come home and come back. You'd have to get it at the crossroads. It comes down through Geraldine. Could you make it?"

The first overture of any kind from Forrest Beechington, and it had to come now, when - his voice came again... "Are you there, Rowena? Were we cut off? Can you make it?"

She knew she should say no, but instead she said, "I'd love to. Where shall I meet you? I don't know Timaru. Oh, you'll be at the bus depot. Very well, I shall have to fly."

She ran upstairs. Aunt Lavinia was resting. She looked in.

"Beechy, Forrest rang up, there's a film he wants to see in Timaru. I'm to get the bus at the crossroads. Will it be all right with you? There's a veal and ham pie for tea. Nelly could cope."

Aunt Lavinia was delighted. "Of course, of course, I'll be only too happy, dear child. Oh dear, you've not got much time. How are you getting to the crossroads?"

"I'll use Heather's bike. I'll hide it behind the hedge."

"Oh, no, you won't. I'll ring Jock. He can take you. Now fly . . . titivate yourself, wear your new dress. I'll fix it."

She did too. Jock was in the yard waiting when Rowena came down.

She'd put on her new turquoise floral cotton frock, and with her coat over it, it wouldn't look too dressed-up for the bus. If only she'd had time to set the burnished chestnut hair that was a little longer than usual, owing to lack of time to go to the hairdresser, but she'd combed it out until it hung in a shining bell.

It was an ordinary outing compared to some Rowena had known. Timaru was only just big enough to be given the status of a city, so you wouldn't compare it with London's West End, but it was going to mean a lot. It didn't mean a thing to Forrest - just a kind gesture to a girl who'd worked hard during the snowstorm, and didn't get many breaks, stuck away in the country. But it was something to remember. After tomorrow there would be no outings like this. After tomorrow there would be Helen! Something twisted Rowena's heart. But she would make the most of tonight. She wouldn't remember how disappointed Helen had sounded when she rang up this morning to find Forrest was away.

The hills and dales of South' Canterbury lay in rich green pastureland, there were daffodils bursting fat buds in every garden, and willows trailing pale green fronds in stream and river. Timaru came into view over the brow of the hill, quaint as an English seaside town with its winding hilly streets and the blue sweep of Caroline Bay down below.

And there was Forrest, pipe in mouth, his lean jaw prominent, debonair in a rugged way, every inch a farmer. It seemed incredible that they should ever have said to each other such stinging things ...



Over their leisurely dinner at one of the hotels, Forrest said, "Do you mind being very late tonight?"

She shook her head. The later they were, the longer to remember.

"Because I know the captain of one of the ships in port. I wandered down to the quays this afternoon, filling in time. He wants us down for supper."

Rowena said, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a yarn on your own? I wouldn't mind waiting in the car."

"Good lord! What an idea. I told Mac I'd bring you."

His eyes dropped to her throat. "You're not wearing a necklace!"

"No. I didn't have time. I started to put one on, but couldn't fasten the catch. I couldn't wait. Jock took me to the crossroads - Beechy's idea."

He grinned. "She'd approve, all right."

Rowena felt the colour come up in her face. Forrest looked amused. He felt in his pocket, brought out a tissue-wrapped packet.

"I've an idea that *now* you *would* accept this from me."

She opened it on the white tablecloth. She caught her breath as she saw it, a paua shell necklace, linked delicately with silver. Oh, knowing what she knew, this was bittersweet ... but she was going to take it. Helen would have the rest, and Forrest and Tawhai too, but when Rowena was back in England, sometimes she would take this out, and fondle it, and remember the giant pauas lying like bowls of opal on New Zealand beaches.

"Oh, Forrest," she said, "it's beautiful. I so love the jewels of the sea."

"So do I," he said. "Not that this is really jewellery, only shell, but it appeals to me. Beautiful, if not rare."

"Yes, I know," she said softly. "Just as I'd rather have a rose from a garden wall than an orchid."

Their eyes met. Rowena had to look away quickly, to remember - Helen.

It was a sparkling night, with a hint of frost, and the shipping was vividly lit. Rowena knew a pang or two for Forrest when she saw how at home he was on board. He was glad to have her with him, she could see; his eyes held pride, making her aware she was looking her best.

"Paua shell," the Commander said, looking closely at her necklace. "That's an idea. I'll take one home for my wife." He picked up a photograph, handed it to Rowena, followed it by one of three children.

The cabin was overheated. Rowena had removed her coat for supper. Forrest picked it up, held it for her, buttoned her into it, pulled her scarf up, all with an unembarrassed air. His friend watched him with an indulgent smile. It was evident what his thoughts were. He'd given a quick glance at Rowena's left hand earlier in the evening.

Then they were heading north. It was late and the highway almost deserted. They were both content to drive in silence.

"Sleepy?" he asked her once.

"No."

Five miles from Tawhai Forest Road, Forrest took his left hand from the wheel, slid it under hers where it lay on her lap, curled her fingers into his. Rowena thought she should do something about it. This silence was dangerous ... too understanding, too intimate a silence.

There was a blinding flash of light over the far ranges, an unearthly white, violet, faint green.

Rowena jumped, her fingers tightening on his. "Oh, what was that?"

Forrest peered out. "An electrical storm, far over on the ranges, nearly to the West Coast I should say. Hasn't there been one since you've been with us?"

"No. I've seen lightning playing around the peaks, but always when it's stormy, not on a still, lovely night like this. And I've seen the Aurora Australis, raying up over the night sky from the South Pole."

Forrest drove on, humming under his breath something hauntingly lovely ... the song he had set to music, the song she'd not been able to bear to hear when his eyes had looked so mockingly into hers. But somehow, miraculously, he'd come to trust her again. Her heart remembered the last line:

*But the green wonder of your laughing eyes  
Stirs me each time, O Love, to  
new surprise.*

She felt her green eyes mist over. This had come too late. Forrest had loved Helen a long time, he had been patient and undemanding, merely advising her to go abroad to sort out her feelings, and now Helen had decided, and Forrest was unaware that what he had wanted was within his reach at last.

A pity that he'd made - evidently - another decision of his own ... to make do with second-best, seeing Helen wouldn't have him.

She, Rowena, was his second choice. Oh, gladly, gladly, would she have accepted the role, for the joy of being with him, day in, year out, as his wife ... but there was Helen. It would be sly, underhand, to snatch at this chance of happiness, and if ever he got to know, as he quite conceivably might, he would despise her. Rowena, you've got to head him off, stop him declaring himself.

They turned into the drive, came into the garage. Forrest switched the lights off, leaving just the dashboard lit, turned, peered down at her, put a finger under her chin, tried to turn her face up.

His voice held a whimsical note. "Where has all our old enmity gone, Rowena?"

She didn't reply. Her other hand was feeling for the door handle. She must get out.

He said, his head coming closer, "It's been washed away by something else, hasn't it? Something bigger than ourselves ..."

It must have been then that he felt the tear drop on his hand. His fingers instantly came up to her cheek, feeling the runnels of silent tears. He gathered her close.

"Why, Rowena, darling, sweetheart ... you're crying. What is it? Tell me? Tell me instantly!"

Tell him! The one thing she couldn't, mustn't do!

She tried to release herself, but he held her in a grip that was unbreakable, yet infinitely\* gentle. She finally put her head down against him. His hand came up to press her head against him, immeasurably comforting.

His voice sounded remorseful. Could this be Forrest? She had once said, "I've never heard him humble." Well, she was hearing it now.

"Rowena, I'm sorry. Have I rushed you? I thought you were feeling as I was. Our silence in the car, I thought it was oneness. That we were as close as breathing ... what is it?"

She was beyond words, and he sensed it.

"Perhaps I've not realized how much it's meant to you - the break with England - the change in your conditions - from knowing plenty to having to work for your living.. . and we can be a trying family, I know. What is it, love... homesickness, a sudden longing for other days? Tell me it's that, Rowan. Tell me it's not that you still love somebody else."

When she didn't answer, he stiffened a little. "Well,, all right, I'd hoped you'd got over it. But given time I think you will. It's all right, I won't rush you. Here, let me mop you up." He pulled out a handkerchief, gently dried her eyes. "We've plenty of time ahead of us - time to get it all straightened

out. I'll just lock up." He went round, opened the door for her, locked the garage doors, put a hand under her elbow.

He took her up the stairs to her room. A dim light was burning on the landing. He stood looking down on her, a smile softening his mouth.

"Good night, my dear," he said. "It's a new day tomorrow, we all get a fresh start."

He didn't kiss her, so she wouldn't even have that to remember about tonight. She opened her door, and heard him going down to his own room.

Rowena crossed to her window, drew down the blinds, wearily tossed off her coat, looked at herself in the mirror.

Everyone gets a fresh start tomorrow, he had said. By tomorrow, in spite of what he had said tonight, Forrest Beechington might well find himself engaged to Helen Dewmore. A man couldn't pester a girl for years, send her off on an expensive trip to the other side of the world to help her make up her mind, then reject her decision when she made it. Rowena took off the paua shell necklace, tossed it into a drawer.

She had thought she wouldn't sleep, and was most surprised when she heard blinds being pulled up, and saw Heather, in a lilac overall, picking up a tray from near the window.

"Good morning, Miss Fotheringham," she said. "Mr. Beechington said you were to have breakfast in bed."

Rowena peered at her watch. "Heavens! Nine o'clock! You'll have finished breakfast long ago."

Heather was laughing at the guilt on Rowena's face. "The milking's done, the pigs and fowls fed, and Mr. Beechington has gone over to Matuku Homestead. They rang up for him. Something about fencing, I think."

Rowena picked up her grapefruit spoon. Oh, no, not *fencing*.

Nelly and Heather, later in the morning, had taken morning tea up to the men in one of the far paddocks. Heather was a good driver, and often used the Land Rover. Aunt Lavinia kindly told them to have their own morning tea with the men. It was a glorious day, full of birdsong and ethereal blossom, with cottonwood clouds in a washing-blue sky.

Rowena and Aunt Lavinia sat down to their tea break. They heard Forrest's step on the verandah. Rowena felt a pulse starting beating in her throat. He was back sooner than she'd thought, she must school herself, be ready to add her felicitations to Aunt Lavinia's. To pretend the scene in the car last night meant nothing.

He looked happy, really happy, as he came in, bronzed and carefree . . .

"I've got news for you," he said. "What do you think, Aunt Lavinia? Helen's engaged. To a chap she met coming home, an Australian."

Rowena didn't take it in. She sat staring at him, with a face from which all colour had fled. She suddenly realized that Aunt Lavinia, was making all the usual responses, sounding quite rapturous, because she had never wanted Helen here . . . but also that Forrest was aware this news had been a complete shock to Rowena. She couldn't pull herself together.

She put her hands on the table to steady herself, stood up. "Engaged . . . *to an Australian*." she gasped. "But I thought ... I thought..."

She managed to stop the tumbling, revealing words, but she'd gone too far to thwart their curiosity, and she didn't know how to divert the sentence. Rowena lost her poise and rushed out of the room.

Up the stairs she fled, conscious that steps were coming behind her. She gained the landing, saw the little stairs at the end that led to the Turret Room. The door had a key on the inside, she knew.

She reached it, flung open the door, tried to shut it, but the thrust Forrest gave it sent her flying to the far window. She stood against it, her back to it, a hand on the sill either side of it.

He laughed, a triumphant laugh.

"Oh, Rowena, did you think you could run away from me? That I'd let locks or anything else stop me from making you finish what you were saying?" He had her by the shoulders now and his mouth was tender, laughing. "Come on, I'll keep you here till doomsday if you don't tell me."

She couldn't look away from the flecked hazel eyes, and by the look in them she needn't prevaricate any more.

"I thought she was going to get engaged - to *you*!"

He laughed. "I knew that was what you were going to say, but, before I go on with the business in hand - the business that really matters - tell me why you thought that."

"Oh, there were things said, hints dropped, Aunt Lavinia hoping desperately you wouldn't... they added up .. ."

"Yes, two by two, till they made five. Go on, Rowan."

"And - and then Helen came over the night you were at that meeting. She said she had something to tell you that would make you happy - that you had told her time after time she must get over Colin. That sometimes you thought it was her love of Tawhai, more than love of him ... that you'd sent her away to make up her mind. Oh, Forrest, what else was I to think?"

He nodded. "Trust Helen. That girl just can't make a plain statement. Completely woolly-minded. I got so sick of her getting around here like a tragedy queen, hollow-eyed and brave, that I told her for heaven's sake get away from Tawhai, and face up to the fact that we were meant for life - not grief. I asked her when she came back. She confessed she'd fallen for this chap, but didn't know if she'd like city life in Sydney.

"I told her what I thought ... you know what I am, Rowena. I don't mince matters. Now, that's cleared up. But I'm afraid, sweetheart, you've got a hell of a lot pf explaining to do yourself. Every time I've felt we've got to terms, something has cropped up to make me distrust you. Now,. don't get mad, you can explain later. Right from the time you were so sweet the day I worked a slinter with Aunt Lavinia and she pretended she'd a dental appointment so I could get you to myself ... and you nearly spiked the guns *that* day, by wanting to phone the dentist ... Then Dirk cropped up that night. I'm hoping, now you'll tell me he didn't ever mean - very much. But this is wasting time. Tell me, if you hadn't thought last night that Helen and I - would you have -" As he went to draw her closer he paused, jerked his head up, listened. There were footsteps rushing upwards, sounding loud on the uncarpeted stairs.

"Now what the hell - surely to goodness Aunt Lavinia can give us a few moments to ourselves for me to -"

Aunt Lavinia was calling out before she reached the door and befean to hammer on it. "Forrest, Forrest, quick! The river has burst its banks . . . some of the cottages have gone further up ... quick, quick!"

He unlocked the door, flung it open. "But how - why - there's been no nor'wester to melt the snow and flush the gorges!"

"That electrical storm last night ... phenomenal rainfall at the river sources, fifteen inches of rain, it's just reached here, the news. The postmaster is alerting everyone - you've got to go to the township, it's all on that side. A shepherd up in the hills saw the volume of water in the pass - managed to get to one of the farms and phone a warning to evacuate that side. What do we do ? "

Forrest said to his aunt, "Go out and beat the firebell, beat it and beat it, that will bring all the men. Ring all the cottages across the creek. The creek will get it too if it floods into it ... tell the women to come here, fast as they can, Tawhai is high. Round up all the children. The township is the worst danger. They'll all have to come here. Keep the fires stoked, and get Nelly and Heather to stock up the cake- tins. We'll have to feed them. Rowena, you get Queen, and come with me. Dapple Lass is just outside."



He had Queen saddled like a flash, and away they went. Rowena was glad she'd not been ordered to stay behind. Her place was with him, now, virtually mistress of Tawhai.

There were plenty of fences, but that was nothing to Queen and Lass. As they came into the township, people were spilling out of the houses into the streets. Forrest immediately and naturally assumed control.

"We'll hope it won't be as bad as reported, but we'll take no chances. There hasn't been a big flood for fifty years, and the stop-banks have been strengthened since then, but all the children are to go to the homestead. Take the c< rs, and put all the little ones in.

"The schoolmaster can organize the older children. But ' no one is to delay. Go into your houses, put everything up on beds and tables you can, but the minute you hear tne fire siren, get out." They all took on duties, the bank manager, the postmaster, the storekeepers.

"And now," said Forrest, coming back to where Rowena was holding the two horses, "you and I are going on over the bridge, and up the flat. There's a fault in the telephone service up there, and we must let them know. Devilish luck. We may not be able to get back this way; if it cuts through where it cut through fifty years ago, it will reach here before it reaches the flat. Come on."

As they thundered over the two bridges, over the little Tawhai and the greater Tawhai, Rowena looked down, and saw there was no more water in than usual, only the shallow streams interspersing the shingly beds. It was hard to believe that in a little while there would be more water in them than they could hold. It made one realize how far away the source of the storm must have been for it to take so long to reach here.

The cottages and farms this side were poor and the land itself swampy and tussocky and low-lying. The occupiers were bewildered, hardly able to believe it. They even took some convincing, but Forrest was adamant. They might turn out for nothing - they might feel fools, but there must be no risk to life.

"There's time to move your stock, to get it on to high ground, but get your families down to Five Forks in the cars."

At last all were warned and they decided to turn and see if the bridge was still passable. If not it meant a terrific detour. They heard a shout, and turned. Here was a man riding after them for dear life.

"I suppose you've been up Irishman's Gully? To Silve- son's?"

Forrest stared. "No one up there, is there?"

"Yes, young chap, a wife and two children, one a baby. He's taken over that derelict cottage, and is doing it up."

"My God!" said Forrest. "It'll reach there first. It's in a triangle between the two Tawhais ... right ... let's go. Look, Stevens, I'll try to get them down through Middle Road, and over the dry ford. But it may not be dry by the time I get there. Have a tractor or something there by the time I arrive - if you can." He turned and looked at Rowena. "You go back with Stevens."

She looked at him. "I won't, Forrest."

Surprisingly he did not argue. "All right. You could help. He'll have a car, but if the water's over the road, two horses would be better than one. Come on."

They rode madly into the valley, a dark, frowning one. Rowena gasped as they rode, "If the water's reached here, couldn't we get them up the hillsides? They'd be safe there, so would we." ^

Forrest's mouth was grim. "The rivers cut in at each side , - narrow, steep river-beds like miniature gorges, and the bluffs above are sheer. No, this way back is the only way."

They thundered around a corner, then reined in at a most ludicrous sight. A young woman was running madly down the stony road, pushing a lurching pram, and on a seat across the pram was perched a toddler, clinging desperately to the handles.

The woman looked incredulous as she saw them. "Thank God!" she said. "My husband is away with the car. There's no other transport. I heard the warning on the radio. Thought I'd take the pram as far as I could. The wee chap can't run fast."

Forrest handed his reins to Rowena, lifted the little boy, put him up before Rowena.

"You can manage?" His eyes were confident.

He snatched the baby from the pram, wound it tightly in its shawl, placed it in the woman's arms, swung her up before him.

As they rode he looked on the side towards Tawhai. He couldn't get much of a view, but said, "Oh, good . . . it's breaking its banks over there ... if it spreads out over the flat it will lessen the force, and we may get to the ford before it does. Not much further. Press on. Every minute could count."

They turned the corner, and the road dipped down steeply to the ford. They reined in, dismayed. The water was swirling along; there were logs coming down, tossed like corks. It was twice as wide as usual, and widening every moment.

"We can't go back," said Forrest. "Rowena ...?"

She smiled. "It's all right with me."

"Nothing else for it," he said, and his face was set. "That water from the paddocks will swirl down behind us soon. Let your horse take its own way, it will feel its feet ... I'll go just a little ahead of you, you go on the downstream side ... we'll make it." He bent to the child on Rowena's saddle. "You've got to hang on with all your might and main, sonny. She needs both hands."

## CHAPTER XI

THE woman clutched her baby tightly to her, gave a look at her little boy that had all the poignancy of farewell in it. Forrest gave a swift look behind ... down the incline he saw the water coming, though hot fast, these were the heralds of the flood, the first muddy waters.

They urged their horses into the swirling torrent. It didn't last long, but seemed like hours. The bed was scoured out, there were boulders coming down with the water, tumbling along, and the noise was frightening. The horses slipped and stumbled. They were aware that above the far bank people had suddenly appeared, shouting, people who fell silent as they watched.

Forrest was urging the horses along with all he could put into his voice. The water was up to their knees, the suction and force unbelievable ... but - the bank was surely getting nearer. Rowena saw Forrest's horse almost there, hers close behind. She saw Lass scrambling, trying desperately with slipping hoofs to get a grip on the road above the water.

Forrest's face was turned to her; he was holding his reins with one hand, the other held out to her. "We've nearly made it. Come on, Lass, come on, Queen... come on..."

Lass was up. Forrest slipped off her back, gave the reins to the woman, turned to urge Queen on, but suddenly, losing the shelter of the other horse, Queen slipped.

Rowena lost her stirrup, gripped with her knees, knew she was going, kicked her other foot free, said, "The child, the child!" and thrust him towards Forrest.

Forrest scooped the child from her, waist-deep in the waters made a desperate clutch for her, but missed. Rowena felt the horse go from under her, slip sideways. She flung herself away from the weight of the mare, surrendered for a moment to the drag of the water, struck out blindly, brought her arm up against a gigantic root that stuck out from the bank, grasped it, knew the sudden horrible thud as something struck against her

side, clung desperately, and the next moment felt Forrest against her, one arm each side of her. He was grasping the root, his body braced against hers, taking the force of the current that threatened to tear her from the bank.

"Rowena, I've got you . . . you've got to scramble up . . . do you hear, up you go!" He was exerting all his strength to lever her up. "Get your other arm up, grab that other root."

"I can't, Forrest," she heard herself say, "I can't lift that arm. It's broken."

Suddenly the woman was above them, on her knees, and her hands came under Rowena's armpits. "I've got you," she said fiercely. "You can't let go now ... and the others will reach here in a moment."

They did. Desperate, strong arms pulled Rowena and Forrest from the water, an effort that made a blinding pain go through her side till she cried out.

They put her down. Forrest knelt beside her. His face was grey with fear. "What is it, Rowena? The arm?"

"Ribs," she said, with tight lips. "A tree struck me. But I'll be all right... now ..."

Stevens was most apologetic. "I tried to get the tractor here ... didn't make it quite in time, sir."

"I know you did your best," Forrest said, "and anyway the tractor wouldn't have been any good, only the horses could make it."

Rowena said: "Queen ... is she all right?"

He nodded. "Yes, she scrambled out further down."

A car arrived, and carefully, on a board, for Forrest was afraid the split ribs might do internal damage, they lifted Rowena on to the back seat. This side of the ford was high, they were quite safe here, and they would take Rowena straight down to Ashburton Hospital.

Forrest was thinking: And please God may the Rangitata not have burst its banks.

It hadn't, and the main south road was thick with cars rushing to offer assistance. They had to stop for petrol and learned that the water was through Tawhai, into the houses, but there was no loss of life. The older bridge of the two had gone.

The next few days were most unpleasant for Rowena. She narrowly escaped pneumonia, and she had to fight it alone. At Tawhai they were frantically busy, though they kept in touch with the hospital by phone.

Then, just when she might have expected more frequent visiting, she was sent by ambulance to Christchurch Hospital. The youngsters came in to see her, Penny and Lindsay quite horrified at what she had been through, Tony deeply regretful that he'd missed all the fun.

Rowena fretted ... had there ever been such an ill-fated moment for a proposal? Before Forrest had left her in the four-bed ward, he'd bent down, brushed her lips with his own, said: "Get better soon ... we've a few things to tidy up."

Some girls got moonlight and roses for their proposals. She only had a dusty little Turret Room, full of old skis and toboggans ... and Aunt Lavinia pounding up the stairs ... and she didn't know how long they were going to keep her.

The reporters took her mind off it. "You're really a godsend," one told her frankly. "We didn't want anyone to lose their lives just to provide a story, but you so nearly did that it's been marvellous. But I rather wish your head was bandaged too ... be better for the photos."

Rowena felt alarmed. She wanted no publicity. But the reporter said, "Give us a break ... we've got a living to make," so she succumbed.

The outcome of that was that it brought to her bedside one morning, accompanied by the matron, a tall, familiar figure. Sir Guy Chennings. Her father's eye specialist.

"Didn't expect to see me, did you, Rowena? I'm here on tour, and saw this to-do in the papers. Jolly good show. But what in the world are you doing here?"

She laughed. "Working for my living. And enjoying it." She quite enjoyed seeing him, and didn't fear he might give her away, for he was leaving for Dunedin for the medical school that afternoon.

Forrest, she knew, was busy on endless flood relief committees. They were working frantically at Tawhai Township to get the silt out of the houses, and when he did get to see her, someone was always with him.

There came a day when Aunt Lavinia came in alone. Rowena was touched by that, for she knew Beechy hated travelling by bus.

Aunt Lavinia said, practically, "Oh, well, dear, I can't expect to be driven about just now, with everyone flat to the boards trying to restore things at Tawhai. I don't like to think of you here, without visitors. And anyway I've worked in one or two other things. I saw my lawyers again this morning." Aunt Lavinia was smiling to herself. She had quite the air of a conspirator.

Rowena was out on a chair on the balcony. "Why, what have you been up to, Beechy?"

Aunt Lavinia smiled a Jove-like smile. "I've been making a new will. At least I made it out some weeks ago, really, but this morning they drew up a deed of gift... to you."

Rowena blinked. "What did you say?"

"A deed of gift ... so that you can have some money now. The rest will come to you when I pass on."

Rowena sat up straight. "No, you mustn't. Beechington money must stay in the Beechington family. I couldn't. I don't need it."

Aunt Lavinia patted her hand. "Don't excite yourself, my dear. It isn't Beechington money. My husband's money goes to the children. This was my mother's. You've been more than a daughter to me, so don't do me out of this. And you never know - a tidy little sum now might come in handy for a trousseau."

"Trousseau!" gasped Rowena. "Oh, Beechy, you're going too fast!"

She smiled.

"I don't know - quite - what was going on the morning of the flood, but even if my sight is dim, I do know I interrupted something most important ... but ... well, Forrest sent away for some ring catalogues, I've discovered. And this has straightened everything out, this idea of mine ... you meet on an even keel now. I thought it was the complete answer to this bee Forrest has had in his bonnet ever since Jan turned him down."

Rowena closed her eyes against the impact of the truth striking home. Aunt Lavinia said negotiations had been going on for weeks ... weeks .. those lovely weeks when Forrest had - seemingly - forgotten all that lay between them.

She opened her eyes, said : "Tell me, Beechy, have you told Forrest about this... about your will?"

Aunt Lavinia looked surprised. "Of course I have. What would be the point otherwise? It was the only thing to convince him completely that you were the one .to love him for himself alone. I thought he'd never get over thinking women had an eye to the main chance. But if my money came to you, he'd not be able to think it."

Rowena laughed suddenly, a laugh she checked, because she could detect in it a note of rising hysteria. She mustn't hurt Aunt Lavinia. Mercifully the bell went, and the visitors rose to go.

Rowena sat on, with unseeing eyes, not heeding the beauty of the botanical gardens below, sweet with spring blossom, where the Avon meandered between daffodil-crowded banks. No wonder Forrest's attitude towards her



had changed ... even if it was money that had belonged to Aunt Lavinia's mother, he wasn't going to let it pass out of Beechington coffers. It would be considerable; Forrest had once said Aunt Lavinia's people had been in shipping, that they could have bought the Beechingtons up a dozen times over. And of course, wool prices were not quite as princely as they were ... and the snow had set Tawhai back ... would she never learn a lesson, would she always want to trust again, and again to be made a fool of? But oh, Forrest, Forrest, it may have hurt when I found out about Geoffrey, but it was nothing to this ...

Next morning they told her she could go home.

"Would you like us to send for someone to fetch you?"

No. She wouldn't. Forrest would come, and until she thought her way through it, she didn't think she could bear the ride alone with him. Her arm was in plaster, and a sling.

"I'll just take a taxi to the bus depot, and walk in on them for a surprise," she said.

By the time she got home, she had arrived at a decision. As soon as she and Forrest had a talk, she would make it plain to him that she had changed her mind. She wouldn't go in for any dramatics. Simply tell him she had been swayed by a mood of the moment, and that she had realized she didn't care for him, after all. She hoped Forrest would be there, so she could get it over.

He couldn't have been much further away. He was over the Strait, in the North Island, with a deputation to the Government, on the question of flood relief. He was away some time. The deputation was flown up North to flood-devastated areas up near Auckland, to see for themselves how rehabilitation was being tackled up there.

Rowena's arm was mending nicely, though Aunt Lavinia thought she seemed very depressed. Probably because Forrest wasn't here. Never mind, another two days, and he would be.

On the Friday, sorting the mail, Rowena saw a familiar handwriting that gave her quite a shock. She stared, unable to believe it. Geoffrey's!

She opened it with fingers that trembled. She read it, read it again, then dropped it to the table shaken by more fury than she had ever known in her life.

Geoffrey wasn't married after all ... he said: "I've come to my senses, Rowena, and realized all I lost when I lost you. It was nothing but infatuation, it swept me off my feet. And it couldn't last, those affairs never do. Suddenly, it was all over, and I knew you were the only one for me. Someone I'd known all my life, someone I could trust. I made Margot give me your address. She wouldn't at first, but I've haunted Ainsley Dene for weeks, and she finally gave in. Come home, Rowena, or shall I fly out? I could be with you in a week - just say the word."

Rowena sprang to her feet, listlessness gone. Here was something she could deal with ... and how! The key to this lay in those words "all I lost when I lost you". Oh, yes. Not perhaps a fortune, but a wife with private means. Geoffrey was certainly going to be jolted right out of his complacency. She wouldn't spare him anything.

In her room, sitting at the little writing-desk by the french windows, she covered page after page as the hot words sprang to her pen.

She came to the foot of the page, scanned the last words she had written: "You see, Geoffrey, I've learned a lot since I fell in love with you ... I dropped into your hands like a ripe plum, didn't I? No hard-to-get tactics about me. I was so vulnerable, so trusting, so sure of you."

She ripped out the page, started another. "No, I won't marry you ... don't you remember my telling you, that fateful night we broke our engagement, that for reasons you would understand, if ever in the future I .got married, it would be to a man as rich as Croesus!"

Rowena read it all over then, and suddenly all the righteous indignation she had felt deserted her. She would not send it. It was too undignified, too full of emotion. It would be better to be cooler, to be final, in a more controlled

way. She didn't feel like this about Geoffrey any more . . . into the letter she had really written all her bitterness that Forrest was of the same kind ...

She sat for a while, spent, heedless, while the breeze through the open window rustled the pages of the letter. She wouldn't write another letter. Merely send a cable. She tore off the last page she had started, and began to compose a cable. It would have to be definite, but yet give nothing away to the post-office staff at Tawhai. When she had written it out to her satisfaction, she took the pad and went downstairs to phone the overseas telegraph branch. It merely said: "Sorry. Proposition arrived too late. Rowena." He would conclude she had married someone else.

She had left her door open, and the little breeze, thus encouraged, became more frolicsome. It lifted the page she had started, whirled it about, parachuted it through the window to fall to the lawn below, and finally blew it up against the garage doors.

Spent with emotion, she was quietly reading in the dining-room in the early evening, and heard the door open. Forrest walked in.

She looked up and knew instantly something had happened. She had seen him angry before, but never like this, his lips a thin line, his eyes black. In his hands he held a sheet of paper.

Rowena rose to meet whatever he was going to say. This was all wrong . . . she had missed a cue somewhere. It was *she* who had been going to denounce *him*, but -

His eyes held a contempt that made her flinch. "So... once again I've been played for a sucker. What a fool I've been ... believed in you against all evidence to the contrary, trusted where there was no trust to be found, told myself there would be a good explanation for everything that had ever made me doubt you ... that when you came from hospital you would explain all."

He laughed, a short unamused laugh. "Aunt Lavinia wired me you were home. I managed to get a seat on an earlier plane ... I counted every mile, every minute coming home. Then, two minutes ago in the garage, I picked up this..." He thrust it at her.

She took it wondering, and her heart turned to a cold hard lump. There it was, in her own black positive writing ... a statement that, taken out of the context of the letter, was completely damning.

"No, I won't marry you. Don't you remember my telling you, that fateful night we broke our engagement, that for reasons you would understand, if ever in the future I got married, it would be to a man as rich as Croesus!"

And the rest of the letter, not knowing this page had blown away, she had consigned to the depths of the big black range!

She looked up. "There's nothing I can say, is there?"

"No. You can't lie your way out of this one. It's there, in black and white."

There was a pause, a pause filled with accusation and distrust, and quite unbelievable pain.

She said in a voice just above a whisper, "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you that when you came home tonight, I was going to tell you I'd decided not to marry you?"

He laughed again. Was there ever a harsher sound than a laugh with no mirth in it?

"Oh, I could believe that, Miss Fotheringham. Tell me, was this a decision you came to when you knew Aunt Lavinia was leaving you all her money?"

So he thought she no longer needed to make a wealthy marriage ... this should have been the moment when she told him that his own plans had been acquisitive ... grasping, but she'd had enough. If she stayed any longer, if she said any more, she would break down. So she stood silent, condemned.

The remorseless voice continued: "Lindsay will be home at the end of October. She can look after my aunt then... understand?"

"Yes, thank you. I understand perfectly.'" She turned to go. At the door his voice halted her. A hateful postscript to this humiliating scene..."And if you're interested, I'm *not* as rich as Croseus. *He* didn't have ill-thrift in his flocks, or flood-silt all over his pastures. Too bad for you, wasn't it, Miss Fotheringham, that a chance breeze blew this to my feet? Or was it my guardian angel? God, how low and scheming can women get?"

Rowena turned to the door, and only then did the tears start to come in to her eyes. White-faced, clutching the paper, she ran up to her room, passing Aunt Lavinia on the stairs.

She heard Aunt Lavinia demand of Forrest as she flung the door open, "Forrest, you and Rowena haven't had *another* misunderstanding, have you?"

Rowena hesitated. She heard Forrest's voice, silky with ultimate rage, say, "Oh, no, not a misunderstanding. We understand each other perfectly - for the first time. And let me make this clear for once and all, Aunt Lavinia, you're not to interfere."

Rowena sat in the privacy of her own room, and found, now that she had reached it, that she was beyond even the solace of tears.

Somehow the days passed, but there was no joy in anything. Aunt Lavinia had said to her wistfully, "Forrest insists I'm to keep out of this, but if there's anything I can do, tell me, won't you?"

Forrest was forbidding and silent these days, and kept to his own quarters in the evenings. He hardly spoke to Rowena at all, merely passed on necessary messages to her through Nelly and Heather.

Aunt Lavinia went to Christchurch for a couple of days. While she was away, Rowena wrote to Sir Guy Chennings at Dunedin, and asked that if it was possible, when he returned to Christchurch, he should examine Aunt Lavinia's eyes.

Rowena was glad to have the place to herself. Forrest was in Oamaru at the Waiareka stock sale. She had given the girls the day off, and drove to Geraldine in the early afternoon to have her hair trimmed.

Driving the Land Rover, on the way home, she noticed a car waiting at the side of the road, facing the way she was coming. There was a bus stop here, the driver was probably waiting for someone. Her reflections were quite idle. As she passed, the man at the wheel looked up, and their eyes locked in recognition. Dirk Sargison!

Silly to be startled; why shouldn't he be here? And even if he was in the district, that needn't disturb her now. After all, she and Forrest were estranged beyond any making-up, so there could be no further complications.

She'd been inside only long enough to make herself a cup of tea when she had a toll call from Christchurch and expected it to be Aunt Lavinia.

It wasn't. It was a stranger's voice, rather high-pitched and agitated. It asked if that was Lindsay's mother. Rowena's heart gave an odd little jerk. Now why should she feel alarmed?

She said, with a query in her voice, "Lindsay's mother has been dead for years. Her aunt is usually here, but she's away."

"Who are you ... her sister?"

"I'm - the housekeeper." That was easiest. "Can I do anything to help you?"

"That depends. That girl is heading right for trouble. She's run away with a married man. She's eloping. She thinks he's single."

"What?" Rowena was incredulous ... but Lindsay was in love with Dirk ... Lindsay wouldn't - "How do you know?"

"Because I'm his wife."

Rowena's head was spinning. "What's your name? Who is your husband? Tell me quickly where you think they've gone. I'll stop it."

The voice said: "I'm Mrs. Dirk Sargison. I've just arrived in New Zealand. I've had detectives tracing him, but he's given them the slip. This girl Lindsay left her boarding- house today. The landlady let me look in her room. She'd told the landlady she was going home for the week-end, but we found a note from him saying to meet him off the bus at half-past three, and he'd have a special licence ready. I've been ringing and ringing, but could get no answer."

Rowena said, "I've just got in." Everything fell horribly into place. Dirk waiting at the bus stop ... how long ago? ... no wonder she had thought he looked startled ... could she hope to catch up with them? If they got as far as Timaru or Dunedin she'd never find them. ...

Rowena went into action, told the woman she thought she had a chance of catching up with them. Asked her address, copied it down, rushed out to the Land Rover.

She didn't usually drive fast, but she pushed it along now, trying to calculate how far she would be behind them. If only something would happen to delay them. He'd have to go through Geraldine if he wanted good roads to travel on ... if he stopped for petrol there she might find them.

What would he have told Lindsay? Lindsay knew she was a minor, that she couldn't marry without her uncle's consent, so she must be falsifying her age. Would they try to get married passing through some town or township? She'd try Geraldine first, try the manse, the vicarage. ... Rowena trod hard on the accelerator. For the first time for weeks she wished Forrest was there. He'd know how to handle it. Men could think these things out more ... would he be on his way home? She must keep a look-out for his car - a big green Chevrolet. On her own, she daren't call in the police. Forrest might be furious at the publicity.

Every grey car that looked like Dirk's that she overtook she hoped against hope. If she saw it she'd stick on their tail till they stopped. And then - Rowena couldn't think past that moment, but in some way she'd get Lindsay

away. Once Lindsay knew he was married she wouldn't go on with it. But oh, the horror of it, if she didn't find them tonight, if Lindsay contracted a bigamous marriage.

Geraldine! It was small enough to scout round and assure herself that Dirk's car was not at any garage or tea-room. She drove madly round in circles, but saw nothing. She'd have to try the manse. She knew where it was, right next to the kirk, opposite the back entrance to the rose-gardens; an entrance that was a leafy lane walled in by a copse of magnificent trees ... but Rowena had no eye for their beauty today.

She braked to a stop, leapt out. This was going to be the very devil. Fancy dashing breathlessly up to a manse and asking the minister's wife, "Has your husband had a wedding by special licence this afternoon?" and if the answer was no, saying, "Well, may I ring the vicarage from here?"

Never mind, no matter how embarrassing, it's got to be done - and quickly. It's getting late-ish in the afternoon. She knew Forrest might go by while she was here. If she didn't get them she'd ring Tawhai from Timaru, praying he might be home. Forrest might risk the publicity and have it put over the radio to stop the car.

As Rowena leapt out, she caught the corner of her coat in the car and was brought up short by it. She turned impatiently to free it, and faced the copse again ... and there, unbelievably, was Lindsay! Lindsay, alone, carrying an overnight bag, looking wildly dishevelled and terribly distressed, coming through the lane.

Wasn't it odd? All the time you prayed for a miracle, and when it happened you wouldn't believe it *had* happened.

She sprang across the road, said "Lindsay!"

Lindsay jumped, then looked relieved, then horribly embarrassed.

Rowena had no time to sort her feelings, to wonder. She went right up to her. "Lindsay, where are you going? Where is Dirk?"



There was something in Lindsay's eyes that Rowena couldn't read ... shock, she thought.

The girl said, "How did you know I was with Dirk? "

Rowena was too upset to be careful. "His wife rang. She rang me from Christchurch. I've been looking for you."

Lindsay's face went grey. She said urgently, "Rowena, I'm going to be sick."

She was. Rowena led her to the trees. When she had recovered, Rowena said, "Now ... tell me."

Lindsay gave a hunted glance around. "Let's get away from here. I'm running away from him."

*"From him?"*

"Yes." Lindsay shivered. "And he's in a towering rage. He may catch up with me at any moment."

Rowena said, "He can't do anything when you're with me. But come on, into the Land Rover, and we'll go like mad for home."

Lindsay seemed to feel safer in the Land Rover. She said, "I thought we were eloping. I thought I was getting one back on Uncle Forrest... he arranged to get Dirk away from Christchurch.... I thought it was romantic, exciting. Then I found he didn't have any intention of marrying me. First, I think he must have found it too hard to get the licence. He said that if Forrest found I'd spent a night with him, he'd be glad enough to let me marry him ... then there'd be no fuss about marrying a minor. Oh, it was horrible, Rowena. I suddenly realized he didn't mean to marry me at all ... only wanted to have me ... it was so tawdry, and frightening.

"I told him to stop at Geraldine and I'd get a bus home. He only laughed and drove on. I was desperate, I thought if we got too far on our way, I'll never get away from him ... if I jumped out in lonely country, he'd pick me up again. So I - so I -" She shivered again.

"So you what, Lindsay?"

"So I pulled the wheel round and ditched the car about a mile up the road."

"Lindsay!" There was admiration as well as horror in Rowena's voice, and Lindsay warmed to it. "You might have been killed."

"Well, I wasn't. But I broke his axle. And while he was still swearing I got out and ran."

"Good for you!"

The girl, fearing censure, and hearing only admiration, began to cry. Rowena let her cry it out. It was relief from tension. Lindsay said, on a sob, "I thought you'd have been furious, though I was horribly glad to see you. I left my bag in the car, and grabbed this instead, I had no money. I've been hiding in the little camp-kitchen in the camping- grounds, wondering what to do. I was terrified he might start looking for me. It's only a little distance up the road. He'll have to get it towed into one of the garages here."

As she uttered the words a breakdown truck came out of a side street, towing a grey Humber, and stopped at the next garage.

"Oh," said Lindsay.

Rowena made a decision. She went past the garage, pulled into the kerb.

"You can sit here, Lindsay. What I've got to say to Dirk Sargison won't take long."

Lindsay looked alarmed. Rowena continued, "I'm going to make quite sure he never comes near you again," and before Lindsay could make further protest, she was gone.

To say Dirk Sargison was startled when Rowena tapped him on the arm would have been an understatement.

"How do you do, Mr. Sargison," she said sweetly. The garage man was standing near. "I saw you just as I was passing. I'm taking Lindsay home. But I've got a message for you first."

He moistened the full red lips under the dashing moustache. She had never seen Dirk Sargison lose his poise before. He went pale. "A message?" he said.

"Yes. From your wife."

Rowena knew satisfaction at the sickly tinge his face took on.

"Yes, she rang from Christchurch. To tell me about Lindsay. She had your note." Rowena could have laughed madly at his expression. "She told me, if I caught up with you, to give you her address. It's the Hotel Rialto, Christchurch."

He said nothing. Rowena said, "I don't expect we'll be seeing you again. Goodbye." And she turned on her heel. She was too concerned with her own busy thoughts, wondering what was the best thing to do with Lindsay, to see the big green Chevrolet pulling in for petrol.

As she climbed into the Land Rover again Lindsay said, "Rowena, where's my uncle?"

"He's in Oamaru. He may not be back till tonight."

Lindsay's voice held a plea. "Does he have to know?"

Rowena considered it. "No, I don't see why he should.

And for another thing, I'd like to think you were safely returned to your boarding-house' tonight. Otherwise your reputation is going to suffer. I could put you on the express at Orari. I've money with me and I could ring your landlady from there, save you making any explanations yourself, and I'll ask her to say nothing to anyone. I'll wire Mrs. Sargison. Could you pull yourself together enough, and simply brave anything your landlady says?"

Lindsay nodded. "I can take it. I've got to. And she's a nice person, not gossipy."

Rowena managed to tidy Lindsay up, to lend her a handbag, get her ticket, and to buy her some coffee and sandwiches. She heaved a sigh of relief when Lindsay had gone. She would be in Christchurch at half-past seven, and this experience would do a lot for her. She wouldn't be minded to play the fool again. Rowena thought she would drop a hint to John Macrae that if he liked to go up to the city this weekend, and take Lindsay to the theatre, he'd find her willing.

It was a great relief to get home, for her arm and her ribs were aching now, and she had a terrific headache. It was a greater relief to find she had beaten Forrest home. Better for Lindsay that he should not know. You never knew how men would react.

When he did come in, he caught her alone. She didn't expect him to speak. He did. He said: "Had the Land Rover out?"

She nodded. "Yes. I went in to get my hair cut, but was back by three, though."

"Were you?" His lip curled. "How odd. I saw you in a garage in Geraldine with Dirk Sargison at half-past four."

Rowena looked up. She felt sick, but since she hadn't had to call on Forrest, she wasn't going to give Lindsay away now.

"Oh, well," she said without a trace of emotion. "You don't expect anything but lies from me, do you?" and walked away.

October came in trailing plumes of lilac and laburnum, the fishing season opened, and suddenly the saturated pastures of Tawhai looked a little less hopeless. Rowena felt her term at Tawhai was running out. She had a note from Sir Guy to say he would see Aunt Lavinia next week.

Forrest was polite to her about it, formally grateful, nothing more.

"I'll be away, but there'll be another car in the garage. It's arriving Monday. A present for Lindsay for finishing her education, and for being so sensible about Dirk Sargison. It will do for her to run Aunt Lavinia about in when you are gone. You can take Aunt Lavinia up to Christchurch in that. I'll be up in the Waikato after cattle."

"Cattle?" Rowena had been schooling herself to show no interest in Tawhai affairs of late, but this was so surprising the word was jerked out of her. Tawhai was purely a sheep run; the cows they had just supplied the house and the pigs with milk.

He said stiffly, "I want to cash in on this new scheme of shipping cattle to U.S.A. I'm going to try it out as they do away down south, winter the cattle in the bush. The flood has ruined the flat pastures .. . dry cattle, of course. You cut a bit of bush down for them, and they keep going. An experiment. Have you looked out for another job? I mean, would you like me to write you out a reference?"

Rowena said, "I need no reference from you. What good would it be? You might say I was efficient, you certainly couldn't say I was to be trusted. By the way, I'm not telling Aunt Lavinia right till the last. I don't want to upset her before this examination of Sir Guy's. I'm going back Home. And - for your peace of mind - I've seen her lawyers. Her will is back to what it was, and the deed of gift rescinded."

Forrest turned on his heel and left the room. It had afforded Rowena some empty satisfaction.

Rowena laid her plans. Forrest was to be away ten days. She would be gone before he came back. There would be a gap of a week or so before the end of the Varsity year, but Nelly and Heather could manage for that length of time.

The visit to the specialist would be over, for Sir Guy himself was going to Wellington for a conference at the end of the week, and his report would come later.

She did her packing unobtrusively, paid visits on Queen of Mars to all her favourite spots, spent a brief time, one evening, just as the stars came out, in the Turret Room, trying to keep a tryst with memory, trying to recapture the moments she had spent here with Forrest - those few heavenly seconds before the flood. But it was no good. Subsequent events had ruined the magic.

Now it was Tuesday. Tomorrow she would tell Beechy that she was leaving. The next day she would go. The day after that the master of Tawhai would be home, and would be glad to find her gone from his household.

It was late afternoon. Lengthening shadows lay across the sunlit turf, the perfume of lilac was heavy on the air. Rowena was reading aloud to Aunt Lavinia in the dining-room. Preparations for dinner were well ahead, and Nelly and Heather were going to serve it. Later, when she was gone from sight and sound of here, she would remember quiet peaceful hours like these...

There were the sounds of cars drawing up. Two, it seemed. Aunt Lavinia broke into the reading with, "Who will that be?"

Rowena said casually, "Oh, the men. Jock had the truck, Gerhard the Land Rover. They're about due back."

She went on reading unhurriedly. Suddenly a shadow fell across the french windows, darkening the page. There were two men framed in the doorway when she looked up.... Forrest and Sir Guy Chennings.

Rowena felt her heart turn over. She didn't know what unlucky chance had brought them here together, but... Forrest was going to know her for even more of a deceiver in a few moments. Sir Guy had known her family so well.

As if she had asked how it had happened, Forrest answered it. "I flew home early. Sir Guy was on the plane. We got into conversation and I found out who he was. He's on his way back to the Medical School. So he kept on my tail all the way down from the airport. He's been kind enough to stop off for a short time to give us his report in person." He smiled at Aunt Lavinia. "He

definitely thinks the trouble can be arrested, dear. Only he wants you to fly home to his own clinic. I'll get Rowena to go with you. She knows the ropes."

Rowena wasn't capable of saying anything. These Beechingtons! Whatever they thought of you, they still used you as they needed you. She couldn't say anything now, in front of Sir Guy, but she would say plenty - later. But for now she must appear natural, at ease, to save her face.

Forrest continued. "Sir Guy can't stay for dinner, Rowena; he's due at Dr. Gloucester's in Oamaru for that, he's staying the night there, but I asked Heather to bring in some tea."

Then, if he wasn't staying, perhaps she could get him away before Forrest found out she had been playing a part all along at Tawhai. Not that it really mattered. He already had such a bad opinion of her, a little extra disdain wouldn't matter.

Forrest certainly had the floor. "While we're having the tea, Sir Guy is going to get all technical about Aunt Lav- inia's eyes." It was all done very much in the pleasant, affable manner. Rowena felt bewildered. Perhaps Forrest was no more desirous than she of letting Sir Guy know that all was less than well between them.

The only piece of Rowena's heart that wasn't frozen was the bit that loved Aunt Lavinia ... Aunt Lavinia, who now, it appeared, would probably be able to preserve the sight still left to her. It would never get worse, and might possibly improve.

Rowena poured out, handed the tea. She was finding small talk a little difficult. Her eyes landed on a small table behind Forrest.

"Your mail is all there," she said. He gave it a brief glance, then looked again.

"Haven't you opened this week's *Weekly News* yet?" he asked.

Aunt Lavinia answered. "No, Rowena's going to read it to me tonight. We were just finishing our library book."

Forrest's lips twitched. "There's something in it you'll be interested in." He picked up the rolled magazine, slit the wrapper, opened up the big illustrated paper, spread it out at the middle pages. His eyes were on Rowena.

Her eyes widened. About eight large pictures were sprawled across the centre-spread, farming pictures ... but not New Zealand farming. English farming ... Hampshire ... Ainsley Dene! Its smiling acres stared up at her, and the caption at the top ran: "One of the few of the stately homes of England that is a paying concern." There was a lot more ... reports of the experiments carried out on a large scale over many years at Ainsley, the estimated income of the place, the plans for the future. Leicester's and Margot's photos were there too.

She caught her breath. Aunt Lavinia leaned forward to peer at it in her shortsighted way, but Forrest said, "It's a part of England Rowena knows well, Aunt Lavinia. I'll read all about it to you after tea."

Rowena thought bitterly, He's enjoying this, enjoying my discomfiture. Is there no end to the humiliations heaped upon me? If only I'd been gone when he came ... if only I can appear unperturbed till Sir Guy gets away.

Forrest said conversationally, "It was that write-up that made Sir Guy speak to me on the plane. He looked over my shoulder and said, 'That's odd ... I know that place well. The whole family.' Then we found each other's names."

Mercifully, it wasn't long before Sir Guy rose.

"Well, I'm sorry not to be able to see over the estate, but I'll be back. Mr. Beechington has asked me to spend a weekend here, Rowena. Be like old times, eh? He tells me the salmon are wonderful."

She smiled faintly. "Oh, they are ... larger than life... larger than any fisherman's dreams."



They stood in the doorway waving good-bye as the big black car swept down the drive. Then Rowena turned swiftly, thankful to let the smile fade from her face. She was going to escape to her own room. She was through the door before Forrest noticed her. She heard him say something to <sup>unt</sup> Lavinia, laughingly, and she ran up the stairs. In her room she examined herself in the mirror. Heavens, but she was pale. She looked frightened, all eyes.

Rowena squared her shoulders, walked across to her dressing-table, picked up lipstick, rouge, powder. She brushed the shining chestnut hair, straightened the gold belt of her soft green woollen frock. There was a knock on her door.

"Yes?" she called.

Forrest's voice, stern, implacable.

"I want to see you, please, right away."

She opened the door to stand before him, quiet, unquestioning. His face had the controlled look that was worse than temper.

"Down in my office," he said.

So she was to be on the carpet once more, like a delinquent employee. But what did it matter? In two days she would be gone.

He opened the office door, gestured her in. His office had a bare look from being unused for a few days. Usually it was quite a friendly room, with an untidy fireplace scattered with pipe-ash, and a litter of fishing rods and riding crops, but Heather had cleaned it out yesterday, and everything was in mathematical precision, the two big wing chairs turned squarely to the fireplace. But this wasn't going to be a sitting interview....

Forrest came past her, crossed to the window, stood there, back towards her, looking out at the darkening landscape.

Rowena was past wondering why. Her spirit felt bruised, forsaken. It didn't matter what happened next.

He said, jerkily, in a voice quite unlike his own, "I wrote to Lindsay when I was up north, asking her if she would be prepared to stay home to look after Aunt Lavinia when you were gone. I told her that I'd found you completely untrustworthy, that you'd lied and deceived me about many things."

Rowena said nothing.

He continued, "I told her that I thought it was high time she knew that there had been something between you and Dirk Sargison, that there probably still was. I told her that I had seen the two of you, talking most intimately quite recently in a Geraldine garage."

He paused again.

"Yes, Forrest?" said Rowena.

He didn't speak for so long, she felt herself swaying.

Then he said, "Lindsay wrote me a long letter. Said it was high time I knew what you had saved her from. Told me why you were in that garage with Dirk ..."

He swung round, came across to her ... took her hands ...

"Oh, Rowan . . . sweetheart. I rushed home on the next plane ... I met Sir Guy ... I was gazing blankly at that write-up in the *Weekly*. He told me about you ... about that chap giving you up . . . the one who had courted you for your money . . . how you'd come out here to prove you could be loved for yourself alone....Oh, Rowan, Rowan, the anguish I've caused you!"

He drew her towards him. She was still frozen, unbelieving, looking up into his face, still afraid ... afraid to hope that all misunderstandings could be wiped out.

"Then, while you were in hospital, Aunt Lavinia told me what she'd done. And when I found that letter and confronted you with it ... I can see now what it meant ..., and you said you'd already decided not to marry me, I thought it was because you now had the money without me!"

Rowena came alive. "Forrest ... Forrest ... Aunt Lavinia didn't tell you till I was in hospital?"

He nodded.

A change came over Rowena's face, a light into her eyes.

"Oh, Forrest ... then, when you were proposing to me in the Turret Room, you didn't know she'd done it?"

"No, of course not.... Oh, darling, did you think... Look, Rowena, there are dozens of things to be ironed out. Let's skip them all till later, till we come down to earth again. Nothing matters, sweetheart, nothing except that I love you!"

As he bent his head towards her, looking into the green eyes, into the stillness came an unmistakable sigh ... a sigh of relief, a happy sigh, from one of the wing chairs.

Forrest lifted his head, said, "What the - who the - *Aunt Lavinia*,! What the devil are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to keep out of the way for a few moments? Didn't I tell you I wanted Rowena to myself?"

She was quite unperturbed. "But you didn't tell me *where*, dear boy, so I scuttled in here, out of the way. I thought you'd take her on to one of the balconies. Your office is no place to propose in. But don't let me stop you ... go on ... kiss her!"

Forrest let out a great burst of laughter. "Aunt Lavinia! You're the giddy limit! Out you go ... this isn't the sort of kiss that can stand being witnessed ... out you go!"

He took his aunt by the plump shoulders, propelled her through the doorway, turned the key.

Then he turned and looked at Rowena. "No place to propose, she said. Out on the balcony, Rowena. It's got everything ... wistaria, a view of the mountain ... the new moon coming up over it..." He was pushing the french windows open as he spoke.

He turned, put out a hand, drew her out.

Rowena looked over his shoulder, saw it all - the mountain, the moon, and pale stars glimmering out into the evening sky ... fairer stars than she had ever known.

She held out her hands to him, a light in the green eyes he had never seen before.

"I don't need any of it, Forrest," she said. "You are my sun, my moon, my stars ..."