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Harlequin Presents..

ANNE
HAMPSON

the hawk and the dove



THE HAWK AND THE DOVE

Anne Hampson

When Janis married Perry Caton, after a very short acquaintance, she was in no doubt as to what she was doing.

It was a marriage of convenience. If he did not marry by a certain date, Perry would lose his inheritance and the family home he loved above everything else; Janis was alone in the world and penniless --so what, really, had she to lose? In any case, Perry had made it clear that in due course they would "do the obvious thing" about the situation -- and Janis understood what he meant by that.

As time went on, she began to feel that it would be no hardship to put her marriage on a normal footing -- until it began to dawn on her that perhaps that was not what Perry had meant at all .

CHAPTER ONE

JANIS never saw the car, for her head was bent as she stepped off the pavement. But she felt the searing pain of torn flesh and, only seconds later, heard herself being cursed by the wrathful driver before, with a glance of irritation at the rapidly gathering crowd, he lifted her into the car and drove away.

It was Chester's rush hour and they proceeded slowly, along Northgate Street, past the cathedral and into East-gate Street. Tremblingly Janis asked where they were going.

'To the hospital,' came the curt and brief reply.

She tried to examine his face, but all she saw was a dark forbidding profile and a jaw set in harsh and almost cruel lines. She wished to apologize, but her courage failed her, for he was obviously in a violent temper. Throughout the journey, whenever he had to apply his brakes, he cursed softly under his breath and Janis had the impression that there was something wrong with the car. However, they reached the hospital without mishap and she was soon being handed over to the nurse.

An hour later, with the wound dressed, she was told by the doctor that she could go home.

'Go home?' Panic seized her as she thought of this. 'I wonder if—' The doctor had already left the room and a few minutes later she heard his voice in the corridor.

'Shell be all right; the leg injury is not serious, though she must of course rest it for a while. I want to see her on Monday. In the meantime will you make sure she stays in bed and is kept quiet—?'

'It appears you are under a misapprehension.' The voice, though soft, held authority, and a definite hint of arrogance that brought a slight frown to Janis's brow.

'She's not seriously hurt, you say? - and you're not keeping her in ?'

'That won't be necessary. Her injury will soon heal and you have no need at all for anxiety. This, I may add, is fortunate because we're short of both beds and staff. Shall I bring her out to your car?'

'Certainly not! She's no concern of mine!'

'Then who are you?' The doctor's voice was puzzled.

'She stepped in front of my car. I stayed merely to make sure her injuries were not serious.'

'My mistake,' the doctor apologized. 'I took it for granted that you were some relation.'

There followed a small silence and Janis could almost sense the man's indignation at this assumption. He would not be flattered, she thought, glancing across at her faded coat, hanging on the hook where the nurse had put it. The cuffs were frayed, and there was a threadbare patch right down the front.

'I'll leave my card, just in case you do need to contact me.'

'Thank you.' A slight hesitation. 'Perhaps you would like to see the young lady?'

Another silence, and then, in tones of resignation, mingled with impatience,

'Very well.'

Janis waited as the footsteps drew nearer, her eyes on the door.

'In here.' With a word of apology the doctor turned away, saying he would be back in a few moments.

The man took a few steps into the room, then stopped, a frown of puzzlement on his face.

'I thought you were older.' He seemed unable to believe his eyes. 'You're only a child!'

A flush rose and her glance strayed again to her coat. It had belonged to her employer and she supposed she must have appeared almost middle-aged, walking as she had been with her head bent and her shoulders drooping.

'I'm so sorry to have caused you this inconvenience,' she said in low and trembling tones. 'It was all my fault; I wasn't looking where I was going - you see—' She stopped. He wouldn't be interested in the information that she'd been thoroughly dispirited, having spent several hours searching vainly for lodgings.

'Do you know how lucky you are?' he admonished. 'You could have been killed!' And, as she remained silent, 'Does the leg hurt badly?'

'Not now.' The large blue eyes were greatly troubled. 'What time is it?'

'Almost seven,' he informed her, glancing at his watch.

'Seven?' she gasped in dismay. 'It can't be?'

'Don't worry,' he said in a softer tone, 'you will soon be home. Where do you live?'

'I - oh, do you think they'll let me stay here for tonight?'

'There's not the slightest need for you to stay,' he frowned. 'You're to be taken home at once. And if you do as the doctor says and remain in bed for a day or two you'll be perfectly all right.'

She shook her head in a gesture of desperation.

'I must stay. They'll have to keep me in.'

'You want to stay here?' he asked in some perplexity.

'Yes, yes, I do.'

'Whatever for?'

She stared down at her hands, reluctant to speak.

'I have nowhere else to go,' she whispered convulsively at last, and saw the man's sceptical glance flicker slowly over her.

'Nonsense; you have a home - parents ?'

She shook her head.

'My parents are dead.'

'Then who do you live with?' he inquired, moving impatiently.

Again that reluctance to speak.

'No one ...'With a pronounced sigh of exasperation, he asked her where she was going when he knocked her down.

'I don't know,' she faltered.

'And I suppose,' he returned sarcastically, 'you don't know where you came from, either?'

Janis flushed hotly at his tone.

'You don't understand,' she began.

'Perhaps you will enlighten me?' His tones were strangely quiet now, his eyes intent.

About to explain, Janis noticed the perfect cut of his clothes, the proud, fine contours of his face and aristocratic bearing, and a rather wan smile appeared.

'You wouldn't be interested in my troubles,' she told him quietly.

He did not reply immediately, but stared down at her, a most curious expression on his face.

'You may tell me, nevertheless,' he invited at last, his gaze still fixed upon her with that intent and searching light.

For a moment she hesitated, and then told her tale, **as** simply and as briefly as she could. Her parents had died within six months of each other when she was eight years old. She had been brought up by an aunt and uncle who had sent her, at fifteen, to work as nanny to three young children. That very afternoon she had been dismissed from her post, and her sole assets were in the suitcase to which neither of them had paid the slightest attention after the accident. As she ended, her voice sank to **a** whisper and she had difficulty in suppressing the tears. During her narrative a peculiar glint entered his eyes - **a** glint of triumph, of exultation almost.

'Isn't it rather odd that this aunt and uncle, having considered it their duty to care for you when your parents died, should go abroad and leave you quite alone in this country?'

'Not really. You see, I'd been with Mrs. Poole for two and a half years, and we didn't think she would ever dismiss me. In any case, my aunt considered I was old enough to take care of myself.'

'I see. ..He stood there, still gazing down in that peculiar way, and she had the odd impression that some startling idea had suddenly crossed his mind. And then his expression changed and he was looking with faint disgust at her clothes. 'Is this true, that until your aunt emigrated six months ago you had to give up all you earned ?'

'It was to repay what she had spent on me during my childhood. It was only right that I should pay her back.'

'You think so?' He shrugged that off and asked her name.

'Janis - Janis Carter.'

'Why were you dismissed without notice ?'

Her lashes fluttered, masking her expression; she made no reply and he asked if it were for stealing.

'No!' she flashed, raising her head indignantly.

'Why, then ?' Still she refused to answer and for a while there was silence in the room and Janis found herself momentarily forgetting her troubles as she began to examine him more closely and with an odd interest. There was something almost overpowering about him - perhaps it was his height, or it could have been his nearness, for he stood very close to her chair. But she soon concluded that it was neither of these that gave him that quality of dominance, of superiority that seemed so out of place in the tiny white-walled hospital waiting-room to which the doctor himself had brought her after attending to her injury. No, it was that air of the aristocrat, spreading its influence, and she found herself wondering what sort of a job he had, and what sort of a home. In different attire, she mused, he could have been a person from another age, a medieval overlord regarding one of his serfs with a half bored, half contemptuous gaze. And, oddly, his next words strengthened the impression. 'Unfortunately we are living in times when employees no longer have respect for those who pay them. Were you dismissed for impertinence?'

A small hesitation, and then, 'Yes, yes, that was it.'

The dark eyes narrowed shrewdly, but he did not enter into details. And as he spoke, slowly and with a vibrant note entering the curt metallic tones of his voice, she had the incredible impression that he had plans for her.

'Are you sure that you have no friends?^- no one at all who would be willing to take you in?' He seemed almost tensed, she thought, bewilderedly, but as she shook her head, telling him that she hadn't a single relative in this country, he relaxed and she actually sensed his inward sigh of relief. He stood looking down at her bandaged leg, deep in thought, and suddenly a sneer curved his mouth, and a glint of triumph sharpened his eyes. A tremor of fear shot through her and she shrank back in her chair. Surely her imagination must be running away with her! His next words only increased her bewilderment. 'As it's out of the question for you to remain here,' he said calmly, 'you'd better come home with me.'

Her glance registered her amazement.

'I couldn't do that. It wouldn't - oh—' Her eyes brightened. 'Your wife might want a maid ?'

'I have no wife,' he returned harshly, and then his lips actually twitched as he read her thoughts. 'But I have a very respectable housekeeper; she used to be my old nurse. You'll be quite safe with her.'

Confusion brought the colour to Janis's face; it tinted the high cheekbones, accentuating the slight upward lift at the corners of her eyes and contrasting attractively with the pale, almost peach-like quality of her skin. She saw his eyes flicker as he watched, saw them move to her hair, golden and falling on to her shoulders, and then to her dress and finally down to her feet. She stirred uncomfortably, acutely aware of her shabbiness. Then he moved with unconcealed impatience, awaiting her reply.

'I don't know what to say—I don't know you.'

'I don't know you, if it comes to that.'

True, but not the same thing at all.

'I would rather stay here,' she murmured, and saw a frown appear on his dark and furrowed brow.

'The doctor told you there's no room?'

She nodded dumbly. She had been told there were no beds, even before she heard the doctor talking about it in the corridor a few moments ago.

'Are you offering me work, Mr.— ?'

'Caton,' he returned. 'To offer you work at present would be useless. You must rest for a few days.'

'But afterwards?' she put in quickly, and wondered what had caused his amusement.

'We shall see,' came the cryptic reply, and although she looked up questioningly it was clear that he had no intention of giving her any explanation of his words.

She found herself clasping and unclasping her hands as she tried to think clearly. Her brain seemed filled with the memory of those terrible few hours when, vainly, she had searched for lodgings. So difficult when she possessed a little money; now it would be impossible.

'You'd better come with me,' he encouraged, and she thought there was a certain anxiety about her continued hesitation. 'You really have no alternative, have you?'

The alternative stood out, but it seemed he had no intention of offering to lend her money. Panic overcame her as she tried to think what she must do. It would be the height of folly to go home with this stranger, but she was so desolate and lost, so drained by the physical pain she had suffered, that nothing seemed to matter except having a pillow for her head and sinking into the sublime relief of sleep. He saw her wavering and that light of triumph again appeared in his eyes. What was he thinking about? she wondered. Whatever it was it brought a momentary smile to his face, softening the hardness there. It transformed his whole appearance and, blinking in surprise at the sudden and unexpected change, Janis completely forgot his former arrogant manner and contemptuous expression. That smile was so very reassuring.

'I'll come with you, Mr. Caton,' she said. 'And thank you for offering to help me.'

This brought a faintly sardonic curve to his lips, but any remark he had intended making was checked by the entry of the doctor.

'Now, young lady, if you'll tell me where you live, I'll arrange for you to be taken home.'

Janis cast an appealing glance at the man beside her; he said at once that he would be responsible for taking her home.

'Can you walk all right?' he asked on an anxious note as the doctor took down her coat and held it while she put it on. Janis nodded and began to move gingerly to the door.

'It hurts a little,' she said apologetically as she limped beside him down the corridor. He had to assist her down the steps and she had the impression that he hated the idea of touching her. But on reaching the car he almost lifted her into it and she concluded that once again she was allowing her imagination to run away with her.

They drove out of the city, leaving the familiar landmarks, the castle and the walls with its famous towers, they passed the fascinating and unique Rows and were soon out in the open country. The lights of the main road were left; they turned into a narrow winding lane - and then she heard those soft but emphatic curses again, for the headlights were apparently giving the driver some trouble. At times he appeared to have difficulty in seeing at all, for the moon repeatedly disappeared behind the clouds. Several times he had to swerve sharply in order to avoid landing in the ditch and the effort did nothing to improve his swiftly mounting temper. Janis frowned. It was so odd for him to have a car like this, for it was obviously very old and not at all in a roadworthy condition. She could not see him clearly, but the impression of a dark and angry countenance made her shrink away into the corner and caused her hands to tremble convulsively as they clutched her coat, drawing it more closely around her. They crossed the infant River Gowy and were soon skirting the great sandstone crags on which rose the ruins of Beeston Castle. The towering mass, with its turrets in the clouds, lent a sinister aspect to the already grim and frightening scene of darkness around her and suddenly, realizing the full extent of her folly, Janis found herself stifling the little scream of terror that rose in her throat. She turned pleadingly, and asked if he would take her back.

'I don't want to go with you, after all,' she added on a note of desperation.

He stopped the car.

'Take you back ? Where to ?'

'I don't know - anywhere. To the hospital,' she answered vaguely, 'or to the police station.'

He exploded, though Janis didn't think she had said anything to arouse his wrath to that extent.

'If you think I'm driving back to town in this blasted car then you're very much mistaken!'

Clearly he was shaken by the nerve-racking experience of driving the car in the blackness of the winding lanes. His temper was frayed to breaking point and Janis sensed his intolerance of what he would consider to be, her childish nonsense. Nevertheless she persevered.

'You can't make me go with you.' She drew her coat collar up to her chin, shivering with cold as well as fear. 'I w-want to go b-back. Please take me.'

He leant across her and opened the door.

'You're at liberty to go.'

Janis gasped at his heartlessness and her eyes filled up.

'You know I can't walk far,' she reminded him gently. During the little pause that followed she tried to read his face, but could only make out a shadowy figure, dim and, to her frightened imagination, almost evil.

'Make up your mind,' he said curtly at last.

That hard, unyielding tone convinced her that he had no intention of letting her go. It seemed to her that he had meant to take her to his home right from the start... and for some reason of his own. Had he meant to be kind, he could have lent her some money, have remained in Chester and helped her to find a place to stay. Her throat went dry, and she trembled with apprehension as she said, helplessly, 'I shall have to come with you.'

Closing the car door, he continued through the dimness of the night.

'There's no need for all this panic,' he said with some asperity. 'I won't eat you!'

Twenty minutes later they were running alongside a lake. There were three others in the vicinity, all dark but faintly gleaming. A church rose from the gloom, and then the Old Rectory, standing on a small rise above one of the lakes. The car turned into a long drive, crossed a moat, dark and green with slime and weeds, and came to a halt in front of the house which, it appeared to Janis, bore a gaunt and spectral aspect. A watery moon emerged from behind the clouds, revealing the gnarled and knotted shapes of the ancient yews and casting terrifying shadows over the weed-strewn expanse of what had obviously been a wide and well-kept lawn.

Janis was assisted up the steps; with an involuntary gasp of relief at the touch of a human hand she pressed closer to him. His grip tightened as he murmured reassuringly,

'You're quite safe, child. Stop trembling.'

The hall was large and brightly-lit, with a huge marble fireplace at one end flanked by suits of armour. On the walls hung ancient weapons, tapestries and paintings. Through one open door Janis glimpsed a library, and through another what appeared to be the dining-room with a black oak refectory table and chandeliers of gleaming glass and silver. For a few moments she was alone, then Mr. Caton came from the far end of the hall accompanied by his housekeeper.

All her fears vanishing at the sight of the homely face and twinkling eyes, Janis went forward, stifling the cry of pain that rose to her lips as she put her weight on her injured leg.

'This is Miss Bebbington, Janis,' he said, and turned to his housekeeper who was regarding him curiously as if expecting an explanation. 'Bebby, will you make Miss Carter comfortable for the night. She has met with an accident.'

The old woman's eyes held his; she had an air of familiarity, and Janis remembered that she had been Mr. Caton's nurse. Even so, it surprised Janis that she should adopt such a manner with her employer, for he seemed the last person to sanction any latitude in his relationship with his servants.

'I will, Perry,' she said quietly, though her tone clearly indicated the desire for a full explanation later on. This brought a rather arrogant lift of his brows, which the housekeeper ignored. 'Come along, child, I'll soon make you a warm drink and put you to bed.'

Miss Bebbington had shown so little surprise that Janis wondered vaguely if the master of the house made a practice of bringing strange young ladies home. She dismissed the idea, however, realizing just how grossly she had misjudged him, for during the past twenty minutes she had convinced herself that the 'very respectable housekeeper' would prove non-existent.

She followed her to the kitchen; Bebbie took her coat, then led her over to the fire.

'Now just sit there while I get you some supper.'

Janis warmed her hands, gazing around. The spotless, homely kitchen, so very reassuring, so different from the grim picture envisaged by her tortured mind during the latter part of the journey, gave her a feeling of security and peace which she had not known since the death of her parents.

Bebbie handed her a glass of milk and some biscuits; she sipped the milk gratefully, but although she had not eaten since lunch time, she had no appetite for food.

'Never mind, dear. Drink your milk while I see to the bed.' The old lady paused. 'You haven't anything to sleep in?'

'No.' Janis flushed, expecting to see at least a hint of suspicion in Bebbie's eyes, but they were expressionless as she said, 'You didn't expect to be spending the night away from home, of course....' She went out, returning with a large flannelette nightdress which she placed on the hearth to warm.

Janis was almost asleep when, some fifteen minutes later, Bebbby announced that the bed had now been made up.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, the old lady frowned.

'Can you manage them?' she asked doubtfully.

'I managed to walk down the steps at the hospital,' Janis replied. 'But Mr. Caton helped me.' At that moment Perry's voice came from the kitchen.

'Are you there, Bebbby?'

'Yes.'

'When you're ready, get me something to eat, will you?'

'Can you come here a minute first?' He came at once. 'Miss Carter can't possibly walk upstairs, you'll have to carry her.'

A brief hesitation, then he lifted Janis off her feet, and a moment later, placed her, very carefully, on the landing.

Bebby helped her undress; the nightgown, though far too large, felt warm and aired and Janis drew it snugly about her as she glanced round the room. Small and neat, with the same mellow cosiness that pervaded the hall and kitchen, it glowed red in the light of pine logs burning in the grate. 'Hurry up and go - because I shall soon be crying,' she thought, deeply moved in the face of so much kindness.

'In you get.' The bedclothes being turned back for her, Janis slid between them. 'Don't be afraid of the electric blanket, dear, it's an over-blanket, and quite safe. However, should you prefer to switch it off, just press the little knob. ...' This, and the anxious, sympathetic face above her, proved too much - and all the unnatural restraint of the past few hours was released in a flood of tears.

'My child,' said Bebbby in gentle soothing tones, 'I'm in complete ignorance of the circumstances which have brought you here, but I do know these tears

aren't merely the aftermath of shock. Would you like to tell me what's troubling you ?' Janis could not speak and Bebby did not press her, but drew her head against her breast - and time leapt back twenty years. A very dark head had rested where now lay the fair one, and Perry, inconsolable at the death of his young mother, had sobbed just as bitterly as the girl she now held close. After a long while Bebby said with infinite gentleness, 'Feeling better?'

Somewhat ashamed, Janis drew away, brushing the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

'Yes, thank you,' she nodded, managing a smile. Bebby tucked the bedclothes firmly round her.

'Good night. If you want anything just knock on the wall; I sleep next door.' As she put out the light a log slipped, showering the room with a comforting glow. Janis sighed, snuggled her head into the pillow and fell at once into a restful, dreamless slumber.

The little clock on the table by the bed happened to be the first thing Janis saw on opening her eyes and, with a gasp of fear, she sat up. Half past eight! Then, her eyes meeting the unfamiliar objects in the room, she sank back with a sigh of relief. No Mrs. Poole to bully her this morning!

Before she had time to recall much of what happened last night Bebby entered and, seeing her awake, opened the curtains. Early spring sunshine flooded the room. The old lady came over to the bed and asked, 'Did you sleep well ?'

'Yes, thank you. Is it really half past eight?'

Bebby nodded and inquired about her leg.

'It's much better, in fact, it doesn't hurt at all now.' About to get out of bed, Janis found herself being ordered back. 'But I'm perfectly able to get up,' she protested. 'I can't let you wait on me—'

'Two days in bed - Mr. Caton's orders. Lie down; your breakfast will be up directly.'

Janis gasped at the contents of the tray which Bebbie placed before her.

'And eat it all, remember. Don't let me find anything left when I return!'

She needn't have worried; Janis tackled the bacon and eggs with relish, not having tasted such food while in the employ of the Pooles. Although she had done all the cooking - a task in no way connected with her duties as a nanny - she had not been allowed the same food as her employers.

Home-cured bacon, freshly made butter.... Janis wondered if Mr. Caton kept a farm. Shyly she questioned Bebbie on her return.

'A very extensive farm is attached to Dene Royal Manor,' replied the old lady, glancing at the tray with satisfaction.

Dene Royal Manor ... ? Janis had heard of it, of course. There had been an article in the *Cheshire World*, with pictures of the grounds. Parts of the interior had also been illustrated, to show the beautiful carving and antique furniture. But Janis wrinkled her forehead in an effort to recall something else, something more recent.

Her face cleared; she remembered now. A few months back she had been laying the table and Mrs. Poole's niece, passing the latest copy of the magazine to her aunt, had remarked on the county's most eligible bachelor's being caught at last. 'Some people have all the luck,' she said. 'Imagine being mistress of Dene Royal Manor!'

The book had eventually reached the kitchen to be thrown away, and Janis had glanced through it. Right at the front was a photograph of a very beautiful girl, the caption announcing her engagement to Mr. Peregrine Caton of Dene Royal Manor. And, further on, a photograph of the engaged couple at the hunt ball. Janis had considered them an extraordinarily handsome couple - and Mr. Caton the tallest and most attractive man present. No wonder Vera had thought the girl lucky!

Something very different about his features now, mused Janis. The photograph had pleased her, given the impression of someone chivalrous and kind. But he was just the opposite - harsh of expression, arrogant and overbearing, his lips at times curving into so thin a line as to give the impression of cruelty.

Janis shuddered, not in the least envious of the future mistress of Dene Royal Manor!

For the next two days Bebby fussed over her like a hen with a newly-hatched brood, forcing her to take nourishing drinks, insisting she finish every meal set before her, and remaining beside her if she saw any sign of anxiety or depression.

Moments of foreboding were inevitable but on the whole Janis relaxed into a feeling of security. No one had ever considered her comfort since her mother died, and the dainty, tempting meals which Bebby produced were a delight. After two and a half years of what could only be described as drudgery, Janis almost enjoyed the luxury of being waited upon. Bebby's meticulous care often brought a lump to her throat; her heart - starved of love for so long - became filled with a great affection for the older woman, whom she called 'Bebby' as easily as if she had known her all her life.

On the third day Bebby made her stay in bed until lunch time. When she presented herself in the kitchen the old lady grunted with satisfaction.

'You look much better,' she declared. 'Be quick with your lunch; Mr. Caton wishes to see you.'

This caused Janis to eat her lunch with more haste than was necessary. She must please him, for should he not employ her she would never see Bebby again. The prospect filled her with dismay. But if Mr. Caton was soon to be married he would surely need more servants. He seemed at present to have Bebby, a butler, and no one else! Yes, he would employ her, she felt sure. ... Her spirits were dashed as she realized that he would now leave the domestic arrangements to his new wife.

These and other troubled thoughts running through her mind, Janis followed Bebbly down a maze of passages.

'Mr. Caton's study. Knock before you go in.' Staring after Bebbly's retreating figure, Janis swallowed convulsively, feeling that her only support had deserted her. Timidly she knocked, then entered the room as Mr. Caton's curt voice bade her 'Come in'.

He continued to write, sitting at a large desk. She looked over his shoulder. Oil paintings against oak panelling; old weapons on a shelf. On the other wall a great bookcase with beautiful leather-bound contents....

Janis moved uncertainly into the room and stood by his desk, waiting in silence for him to speak.

'Bring a chair over. I want to talk to you.' Still he continued writing.

Placing the chair on the opposite side of the desk, she sat on the edge, straight and prim, her hands folded nervously in her lap. Then his eyes were scrutinizing her dispassionately; they met hers for a moment before he inquired if her leg were better.

'Yes, thank you, Mr. Caton,' she replied, endeavouring to hide her agitation.

His further inquiries sounded perfunctory, though he obviously noted an improvement in her appearance, for he said, 'I see Bebbly has been caring for you with her usual efficiency.'

'Yes, indeed; she's so very kind.' Then she added, as an afterthought, 'You're kind, too, letting me stay here.'

Her reference to his kindness appeared to amuse him, though his eyes were narrowed and coldly devoid of emotion.

'I shall ask you a few-questions,' he told her curtly. 'They will be answered truthfully, understand ?'

'Yes, yes, of course.'

'Have you not heard anything from this aunt and uncle who went out to Canada ?'

'No, but I suppose they're too busy—' She broke off. The real explanation was that they could not be bothered to write.

'How long do they intend staying there ?'

'If they like it they won't come back at all.'

'I see.' He paused, toying with a pen on the blotter. 'I still don't understand why this couple, your only relatives, should have left you alone here. You say they didn't expect you to leave your employment, but the possibility shouldn't have been overlooked.'

'I think,' returned Janis after a slight hesitation, 'that they considered they'd done enough for me. After all, they did take me when I was only eight, so they've spent a great deal of money on me.' She tried to sound loyal to her benefactors, yet she somehow felt they had in fact been glad to shelve their responsibility.

'Tell me why you were dismissed?' The question took her by surprise; she flushed and hung her head. But he awaited her answer and she said, evasively, that she had already told him.

'You told me you were dismissed for impertinence.' He spoke softly, watching her bent head. 'May I have the truth, please?'

It would be practically impossible to deceive him, she concluded, nervously twisting her fingers. And yet if he knew the truth he would never employ her. No matter how she tried to explain he would take the same view as Mrs. Poole.

'It was the truth,' she quivered, wretchedly aware that nothing could sound less convincing.

He rose and moved to the fire; she watched his changing expression, trying to fathom it. He was not convinced of her innocence, and that seemed to be

causing him some concern. But all at once his head lifted as if he had resolutely come to a decision.

'I have a proposition to put to you, Janis.' He walked over to her chair and stood close, looking down at her with a cool, unemotional stare. 'You will think it exceedingly strange, but it will solve your problem, and mine too. I want you to marry me.'

Had he struck her a blow she could not have been more stunned. With a sensation of the chair slipping from under her, she put out her hands to grasp the arms which, to her overwhelming relief, were still there!

'M-marry you!' As she tried to rise, looking almost comical in her bewilderment, Perry's sense of humour could not be suppressed and a smile of sheer amusement broke the hard line of his mouth. 'You needn't make fun of me!' she flashed, her eyes sparkling.

'I'm not,' he assured her, suddenly grave. 'Never have I been more serious in my life.'

Could he have lost his senses? It didn't seem possible, and yet he couldn't be in full possession of them!

'You're going to be married quite soon,' she reminded him, adopting a rather soothing tone. 'I saw it in the paper.'

'One can't believe everything one reads in the paper.' The voice took on its familiar hardness. 'I don't intend to enter into any explanations or arguments, Janis. It's enough to say that I do want to marry you, and that it will be a purely business arrangement.'

Vaguely, through the turmoil, it registered that for some reason his engagement had been broken.

'But you can't want to marry *me*!' The whole situation became more and more unreal with every word he uttered.

'I've just told you that I do.'

'Oh, but—' she spread her hands - 'why?'

A frown of impatience crossed his brow.

'The reason need not concern you,' he told her shortly. 'I've already said that it will solve both our problems. You shall have security for the rest of your life, and as I, too, shall benefit from the marriage, that is reason enough.' Dazed, Janis sat there, wondering if she would soon awake from this ridiculous dream. 'Have you made up your mind?' he urged, jerking her back to the realization that this was no dream, but stark reality.

'I can't make up my mind so soon,' she faltered.

'We must marry the day after tomorrow.'

'*What!*' she gasped, rising to her feet.

'So you see,' he remarked, calmly ignoring her confusion, 'there isn't much time.'

Janis put trembling hands to her temples.

'I can't think. ...' One fact emerged from the confusion of her mind. This man was in earnest; he did want to marry her.

And slowly, as her brain cleared, she knew why he had forced her to come here, why he had not lent her money or helped her to find a place to stay in Chester. For some reason he had to be married by Wednesday.

'So it's no use my asking for employment?' she said, and an astounded little exclamation left his lips.

'Are you telling me you would rather be a maid here, than the mistress?' came the sardonic inquiry, and Janis remained silent.

No doubt as to the answer to that question. A maid could keep out of his way, whereas a wife. ... She shuddered and felt, rather than saw, him stiffen.

'I said it would be a business arrangement,' he reminded her coldly. 'Don't be afraid, I shall expect nothing from you.'

A vivid flush spread across her face.

'I wish I could have worked with Bebby,' she murmured, and his dark eyes narrowed. Plainly he didn't believe in her sincerity about that.

'It's altogether out of the question. Unless you agree to marry me you'll have to leave.' He glanced at his watch. 'You should be on your way to the hospital. I've made an appointment for three o'clock. Ask for Dr. Evans. A car from the village is waiting, and Bebby will go with you.' Then, deliberately, 'I shall expect your answer when you return.'

Leaning back in the car, Janis closed her eyes, trying to marshal her confused thoughts. In five minutes' time she would be confronting Mr. Caton with her answer - and she hadn't the faintest idea what that answer would be.

Bebby had chatted a good deal on the way to Chester, had chatted, too, while the doctor had re-dressed her leg. Janis had felt a strange twinge of pain, but, her thoughts being so far removed from her physical troubles, she had considered it too unimportant to mention.

The car purred along the country road, eating up the miles, and the time. The Old Rectory came into view; then they were in the lane, and the whole majestic pile of Dene Royal dominated the scene. The site, occupied initially by the de Farrabys who came over with the Conqueror, had been chosen with care; the fields and lakes, the wooded slopes and distant scarps, all combined to enhance the spot. The house itself, dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century, had been added to throughout the ages, and reflected the noble aims and tastes of a succession of lords of the manor.

As the car turned into the tall wrought iron gateway Janis turned impulsively to her companion.

'Bebby, do you know why Mr. Caton wants to marry me?'

'Marry you?' An incredulous silence and then, 'Of course! Why didn't I guess? And there he told me just the bare facts, about the accident and your having nowhere to go. He never mentioned his real intention.' The last couple of sentences were spoken to herself, in rather plaintive tones. It would almost seem, thought Janis vaguely, that Mr. Caton was in the habit of confiding in his old nurse. But he hadn't done so this time, obviously. 'How stupid of me,' she added and, noticing the uncertainty in Janis's eyes, 'It's an excellent idea. We'll all be saved - oh, it's wonderful! Providence must have sent you!'

'I haven't said I'll marry him—'

'You're not going to refuse him?' Bebbie exclaimed in disbelief. 'You can't!'

'Please answer my question,' begged Janis desperately as the car came to a halt outside the front porch. 'There isn't much time - I have to give him my answer, and I don't know what to do!'

'You can't refuse him, Janis,' Bebbie repeated in quieter but persuasive tones. 'It's most important for you both. Besides, you're just right for him.' She added, again almost to herself. 'Yes,' she nodded sagely, 'you're just right for him.'

Janis ignored that.

'He frightens me,' she whispered distractedly. 'If I don't accept his offer I've nowhere to go. I can't get a proper job without a testimonial, and I've no money. He knows all this and is forcing me to marry him.' Her voice sank even lower; she buried her face in her hands, utterly defeated.

'My dear—' Bebbie gathered her into her arms, 'what a silly child you are. Mr. Caton would never hurt you.'

'Well, he isn't very kind; he could let me work for him.'

The driver opened the car door and Bebby waved him away, closing the door again.

'That would be impossible, dear. You asked me why he wants to marry you. Had he wanted you to know everything he would have told you himself, therefore I mustn't do so. This much I shall tell you, though - if he's not married by Wednesday he loses his home. This house, everything, is up for sale. Did you notice those people we passed on our way out?' And, when Janis nodded, 'They were here to view the property. Gregson, the butler, was showing them over. There will be another party in the house now.'

Moving out of Bebby's arms, Janis gazed around her, at the neglected state of the grounds, and of the house itself; she also remembered the dreadful car in which Mr. Caton had brought her to the Manor.

'I don't understand anything,' she cried, still in those distracted tones, and there followed a long moment of indecision before Bebby said, although with some reluctance,

'We'll go inside, dear, and I will explain a little to you. But you must never breathe a word to Mr. Caton. He has a high regard for me - indeed, I'm more one of the family than a servant - but I believe he wouldn't hesitate to dismiss me were he to discover I had divulged something which he himself is so obviously reluctant to discuss with you.'

'I'll never say a word about it,' came the solemn promise, and a few minutes later Janis became absorbed in Perry's story, as Bebby began to talk about the events leading up to his staggering proposal of marriage.

The tragedy of it all began, Bebby went on to explain,

when, at twenty-two, Perry found himself with a stepmother whom he hated. He was managing the estate at this time, but his stepmother was addicted to gambling and this caused so much trouble that Perry left home.

'He loved this place - it's been in the family for three hundred years,' Bebby continued, a sad edge to her voice. 'And this having to leave affected him in

a strange way. His experience with his stepmother seemed to give him a distaste for all women. He swore never to marry—'

'But that was wrong of him,' Janis declared indignantly. 'All women are not the same!'

'No, dear, but as I've said, that was the way it affected Perry. This aversion to marriage troubled Perry's uncle, James, who also loved the Manor, and wanted to feel sure that Perry would have a son. He had a large fortune and Perry was his sole heir. As the years passed and Perry still remained single James became more and more concerned that the Manor would some day pass out of the family. About two and a half years ago James learned that he had only six months to live. By this time his fear that the Manor would pass to strangers had become an obsession and he altered his will, naming another nephew, Richard, as his heir should Perry not be married on or before his thirtieth birthday.'

'That was blackmail!' exclaimed Janis, again indignant, but for another reason.

'That's just what Mr. Hannings, their solicitor, said, and James actually agreed. Richard is something of a rake, the black sheep, and James felt sure that Perry would do anything rather than let his cousin have the fortune which was rightly his.'

'Wasn't that a risk to take?' Obviously James hadn't wanted Richard to have any money at all, otherwise he would have shared his fortune between the two. 'The plan could so easily have misfired.'

'It was a risk, but James was convinced that this would force Perry's hand. As for the plan misfiring,' she went on significantly, 'it has misfired ... unless Perry is married by Wednesday.'

Janis let that pass and stared through the window, puzzled by the apparent neglect. It was not only that the grounds were overgrown with weeds, but in the distance fields appeared to be untitled and a row of farm cottages, even from here, looked to be greatly in need of repair. She mentioned her

puzzlement over this neglect to Bebby and learned that when Perry's father died, six months ago, he had been practically bankrupt.

'He caught the gambling habit from his wife and between them they got through the entire family fortune.'

This piece of information brought a gleam of comprehension to Janis's eyes - as she recollected what Bebby had said about Perry's love for his home.

'So Mr. Caton decided to marry, after all?' Bebby looked surprised and Janis added, 'I saw the announcement of his engagement in the *Cheshire World*.'

'Yes, as soon as he realized he would lose everything unless he married he began looking round for a wife.' Janis had to smile at Bebby's way of putting it and a slight flush came to the old woman's cheeks. 'We all knew, of course, because Perry was back at home. He returned immediately after his father's death and, incidentally, sent his stepmother packing.' No doubt about the satisfaction that statement gave to Bebby and again Janis had to smile, her own troubles momentarily forgotten as the story was gradually being unfolded to her.

'His engagement,' Janis ventured as Bebby paused in her narrative. 'Why was it broken?' There was a hesitation now and, sensing Bebby's reluctance to continue, Janis apologized and admitted that it was none of her business.

'Well ... I do understand your curiosity, dear.' Another pause, and then Bebby spoke with firm decision. 'I think you should know the rest. It's ugly, I'll tell you that for a start.' And as she revealed the story of the invidious plot to rob Perry of his inheritance Janis's eyes widened in almost horrified disbelief.

Perry was twenty-eight when his uncle died, and although the alteration in the will must have come as a shock he was not unduly perturbed, for at that time he believed his father to be a rich man. But on his father's death, Perry knew, as Bebby had already said, that he must either marry or lose his home.

'I don't think it ever crossed his mind, as he looked around, that he would fall in love,' said Bebby. 'Marriages of convenience are common in his circle.

They often prove successful and Perry probably believed his wealth would compensate for any lack of affection on his part.' But Glenda Forbes, beautiful, elegant and very clever, had apparently captivated him from the start and Bebby was convinced he would have asked her to marry him even had his inheritance not been at stake. 'Contrary to his expectations, he was in love for the first time in his life,' Bebby added. 'But it so happened that she was really engaged to his cousin—'

'To Richard?' Janis waited, unbelievably, for what was coming next.

'Yes, to Richard. He knew what he stood to gain if he could keep Perry single, and I don't expect he had much difficulty in persuading Glenda to fall in with his plan. I don't know how the first meeting was manoeuvred, but I don't suppose there was much difficulty, because Glenda would naturally belong to the same social set as Perry.' Bebby went on to describe Glenda, and Janis soon surmised that a man would have difficulty in resisting her charms if she once set out to ensnare him. As for Glenda herself, whatever her feelings for Richard, she did not sound the sort of woman who could be happy as the wife of a poor man. 'I suppose they thought it all very simple once Glenda had persuaded Perry that, as preparations for such a fashionable wedding could not be made in a hurry, their marriage could not take place until the week before his birthday. The plan was for Glenda to jilt him on the eve of the wedding—'

'Oh, *no!*' Janis broke in, appalled. 'No one would be so wicked!'

'You wouldn't think so, I agree, but there was a very large fortune at stake, remember.' Bebby went on to say that, after all, things did not go according to plan. Through their own carelessness Glenda and Richard were seen together and the fact casually mentioned to Perry. By sheer coercion he had dragged the truth from her. 'They must have had a very anxious few days after that,' Bebby said, her eyes darkening reflectively, 'because there was still a month to go. But their anxiety didn't last, for Perry immediately instructed his solicitors to sell the estate.'

'That must have been more than three weeks ago,' Janis reckoned, calculating mentally.

'That's right; and they must be feeling quite safe by now - exultant, in fact.'

Janis was still perplexed, for when Mr. Caton put up the property for sale he obviously had no intention of marrying.

'Something must have happened to make him change his mind?' Janis spoke almost to herself, scarcely aware that she was asking a question.

'It did,' Bebbly snapped, startling Janis by the sudden gleam of anger in her eyes. 'Not satisfied with robbing Perry of his money, those two want to buy the house. Richard came, last Friday, to look around!'

'He - he came when Mr. Caton was here?' gasped Janis unable to believe anyone could be so shameless.

'Perry was away, meaning to stay with friends until after the sale. But he just had to come back - I told you how he loves the place - and Gregson, the butler, explained what had happened.' Bebbly went on to say that Perry had taken the old car which was used for carrying things around on the estate, and gone into Chester to see his solicitor. 'I've seen him in a temper, but never so furious as that,' Bebbly continued. 'I wouldn't have been a bit surprised if he'd married the first girl he set eyes on—' She stopped and Janis looked away, trying to spare the old woman any further discomfiture. In the silence which followed she found herself endeavouring to fill in the gaps. It wasn't difficult. Glenda, having taken a liking to the manor during her engagement to Perry, had decided she wanted it ... and Richard intended buying it with the money that should by rights be his cousin's. Perhaps there was some excuse for Perry's harshness, for the fact that he appeared so different from the attractive person she had seen in the photograph. As if reading her thoughts, Bebbly remarked, 'It's ironical that after that stepmother of his had given him an acute distaste for her sex, he should eventually fall in love with a girl like Glenda, who could be so ruthless as to join with his cousin in hatching that dreadful plot to rob him. It's no wonder he hates all—' Again Bebbly broke off, but her words could not be taken back.

'Does he hate all women?' murmured Janis, suddenly recalling, for no apparent reason, what Bebbby had said earlier about her, Janis, being 'just right for him'. She shuddered, and all her uncertainty flooded over her again.

'No, of course not, dear. I don't know what made me say it. He has a most wonderful friend - you'll soon be meeting her,' she added optimistically. 'They've grown up together - the same age, they are. You'll like Avril; she lives at the Old Rectory - perhaps you noticed it as we came up this afternoon?'

'Yes, I did.' A slight pause and then, 'If they're such good friends, why— ? Is this Avril married ?'

'No, and I expect Perry did ask her to marry him, but she's - well - I suppose you'd call it engaged,' and as Janis naturally looked puzzled, 'John - that's her friend - is separated from his wife. No one knows quite what'sgoing to happen, but I expect they're hoping John's wife will divorce him eventually.'

Absorbed once more with her own problems, Janis did not give her full attention to what Bebbby was saying, but she did think, vaguely, that Avril would be far better off married to Perry than wasting her time with a married man.

'I must go and give him my answer,' she said at last, wondering if he would tell her to leave the house at once.

'Are you going to say yes?' Bebbby spoke hesitantly, her faded eyes anxious yet hopeful. 'It will solve both your problems.'

Just what Mr. Caton had said, mused Janis, as, without giving Bebbby an answer, she left the room and made her way along the maze of passages to the study, her lips trying to frame the answer she intended to give.

Afterwards, Janis never could recollect how she came to change her mind. She did remember that as she entered the hall another party of viewers came down the great staircase, preceded by a reluctant butler. A curious resentment flooded over her as, with careless indifference, they tramped through the hall and out to the garden.

She also remembered the look of intense pain on Perry's face as he watched them from the library door, and her own inexplicable desire to ease that pain....

His voice seemed incredibly gentle as he said, a few moments later,

'Thank you, Janis, I'm sure you will never regret it.'

CHAPTER TWO

Two pairs of critical eyes observing her made Janis extremely nervous at tea, yet she contrived to appear at ease. Having expected to eat in the kitchen with her adored Bebbie, she was thrown into confusion on learning that 'Perry's orders' were that she must take her tea in the cosy little room - termed the playroom - in which Perry and his friend were already waiting.

Chilled by his cool indifference, and by the older girl's frigid politeness, Janis stammered each time she had to speak which, mercifully, was not often. The other two chatted all the time, often seeming to forget her presence altogether. Appalled at her own inferiority, Janis felt terrified at the prospect of a future in which everyone she met would be like this confident girl who so clearly despised her. Dared she tell him she had changed her mind? Janis shivered as she pictured his reaction. She cast him a guarded glance as he laughed with Avril. Even with his face relaxed, he gave the impression of a stern, strong personality, a man who would never brook the slightest defiance to his wishes.

He looked across at her, and the amused twinkle faded. Janis lowered her eyes. Why on earth had he insisted on her coming here at all ?

When at last the meal was over, she breathed a sigh of relief, watching Bebbie as she cleared away the tea things and carried out the tray. Interrupting the conversation, Janis asked timidly if she might go.

Perry surveyed her coolly from the armchair in which he now sat.

'I want to talk to you,' he said. 'Avril has made out a list of your immediate requirements, and you will go into Chester tomorrow to get them. Avril will choose everything.'

'Everything?'

'That's what I said.'

Janis passed her tongue nervously over her lips.

'I would like to choose my own wedding clothes,' she ventured, 'if you don't mind.'

'I do mind; Avril will choose everything. Is that clear?'

'Yes,' she whispered submissively. 'Yes, Mr. Cat— Perry.' Would she ever get used to calling him by that name ? Janis wondered miserably. He had told her to do so, but several times during tea she had addressed him as Mr. Caton, much to Avril's amusement. There had been nothing amusing, however, in Perry's dark glances, and she found herself trembling, and even thankful at times, for the other girl's protective presence.

At last he told her to go, and as she closed the door behind her she heard Avril say, somewhat anxiously,

'Are you sure she's old enough to be married ?'

The following morning they set off early, in the car which Perry had hired for them. It was a silent, miserable journey, for Avril made no attempt to open a conversation.

They bought all that was required and, Janis feared, much more besides. Then Avril explained that they would be having lunch with a friend of hers.

'We're to meet him at the Grosvenor,' she added curtly.

Janis flushed, all confusion. She had no wish to meet Avril's friend who, she felt sure, would be another one of these arrogant people who would treat her with undisguised contempt.

'I— Have you made arrangements?' she faltered.

'I rang him last evening, telling him we'd be in Chester today. He insisted on taking us both to lunch.' Something in Avril's tone gave Janis the impression that she regretted ringing up her friend, that his invitation had come as a surprise to her. Perhaps, thought Janis, glancing down at her shabby attire, Avril did not relish the idea of taking her into an hotel.

'I'd rather not come - I can have my lunch and meet you afterwards,' she said. Avril made no attempt to hide her relief.

'That would be a good idea. Have you any money?' They had reached the hotel and, glancing at her watch., Avril said they were late and that her friend would be inside, waiting at their table. 'If you haven't any money I can give you—'

'Hello, darling, am I late? So sorry, but I was kept at the office.'

'John!' Avril was clearly put out, but she managed to say calmly, 'John, meet Janis. Janis, my fiancée— A friend of mine.'

Janis held out her hand.

'I'm just going,' she said, making to move away.

'Going? Where to?' His frank blue eyes met Avril's, then flickered over Janis's slender figure. 'I believe I'm taking you both to lunch. Didn't Avril tell you?'

'Janis is having lunch and then meeting me afterwards,' Avril hastily put in, flushing under John's intense stare.

'Whose suggestion was that?' he inquired, taking in the situation at a glance.

'Mine,' said Janis quietly.

'I'm glad to hear it. There's a small restaurant round the corner,' he went on. 'Shall we go there?'

'I don't want to intrude—'

'How can you be intruding when I've offered to take you?' He smiled, and Janis suddenly knew that he would not be like the others. Smiling in response, she thanked him, hoping she had not displeased Avril too much.

Over the meal John, gay, blond and thirty-five - but looking much younger than Perry - immediately charmed his way into her heart, treating her from the first as an equal, and obviously deriving much satisfaction from the smiles he brought to her childish lips.

'I shall call you Cinders,' he said as they rose to go. 'For you are a little Cinderella, aren't you ?'

'I'm very lucky,' she returned gravely. 'Perry is so generous, and it was kind of Avril to bring me here today.'

'Go on being kind to her, Avril.' Although gentle enough, John's tones held a hint of reproach and Avril lowered her eyes uncomfortably. Clearly John was not pleased by the way in which Avril was treating her, and Janis felt suddenly guilty and hoped Avril would not blame her for John's attitude.

'I will,' Avril promised, and was rewarded by the sudden pressure of John's hand on her arm.

'I know you will, darling.' Then, turning to Janis, 'I shall see you tomorrow, Cinders ... your wedding day.'

It seemed astonishingly simple to become Perry's wife. A few words spoken by a politely impersonal registrar; a few good wishes from Avril and John ... and they were in the car, on their way back to the Manor.

Janis looked first at the thin gold band on her finger, then at Perry, sitting as far away from her as possible. He stared from the window, a bored expression on his face. She did not expect conversation, so allowed her thoughts to wander back over the events of the past twenty-four hours.

First, the sudden change in Avril's manner towards her, immediately after they had left John. Almost imperceptible at first - a slight intonation of the voice, a softening of the eyes, a few puzzled, searching glances. In less than half an hour Avril had put Janis completely at her ease.

Avril had left her at the beauty salon, insisting that she have a manicure while her hair dried. Perry happened to be such a fuss-pot over hands and hair, she warned, telling Janis she would return in about an hour.

'No, Yvonne,' said Avril after a critical survey.

'Comb it out a little - the style is slightly old, don't you think?'

'I tried to advise madam, but she wanted to look older.'

Avril laughed.

'You won't when you're my age!'

Yvonne combed out her hair, to Janis's disgust, though she had to admit she felt more comfortable.

As they reached the gates of the Manor Janis asked anxiously,

'Will Perry think I've been extravagant, Avril?'

'Why should he?' She seemed amused. 'You've bought only necessities. In any case, I made out the list.'

'Did he look at it?' And, when Avril shook her head, 'I didn't need six sets of underwear!'

Avril ignored that.

'I shall tell Perry that you chose your own wedding outfit.'

'No!' exclaimed Janis fearfully. 'He said you must choose it. You were kind to let me take the other one back and change it, but—'

'The one you've picked is far nicer,' Avril smiled. 'You have excellent taste,' Janis.'

Janis flushed with pleasure at the compliment. The exclusive little suit in dusty pink was, indeed, a model of perfection. Avril had put it down to her own account for the time being - a circumstance which puzzled Janis somewhat.

'It wasn't more than the one you chose?'

'Just a little.' But Avril's tone had a curious ring which troubled Janis a good deal.

Tea was already laid, in the playroom, as before. Perry told Janis to change her dress, and he and Avril were waiting when she came down in a smart afternoon dress of Avril's choosing. Flushed and excited, in spite of a sudden pain in her leg, Janis stood hesitantly in the doorway, not hearing the other girl's whistle of surprise. But Perry did and, glancing up from the roll of bills Avril had given him, he surveyed her coolly, without passing any comment.

When the table had been cleared again he handed her a long, narrow box.

'For me ?' Janis stared at him in surprise.

'Your wedding present.'

'Oh ... thank you. I never expected. ...' She opened the box, gasping with pleasure as she withdrew the pearls. To Perry's utter astonishment her eyes filled with tears. 'No one has ever given me such a beautiful present - I don't know what to say.' She held them in her fingers so long that Avril at last took them from her, fastening them round her neck, and looking at Perry over Janis's head. Glancing at him suddenly, Janis surprised a look which puzzled her greatly. He seemed both angry and ashamed.

As soon as Avril left them she turned to Perry.

'May I go now?' She didn't tell him she wanted to lie down, that her leg ached abominably.

'Not yet, I have something to say to you. Sit down.' She obeyed, casting him a glance of inquiry. 'There are one or two details regarding our marriage that

I haven't mentioned.' He might have been discussing the weather, Janis thought, so unemotional did he sound. 'I think I made it quite clear that you'll be well paid for what you're doing; but you appear to be a sensible girl, and must realize that we couldn't go on living in the same house with nothing between us. It would be degrading for us both, don't you agree?'

Seeing the startled look that crossed her face, Perry wondered at it; he also wondered why she blushed so hotly as she murmured,

'I quite understand.'

'I suggest we carry on for a month or two and then come to the only arrangement possible— You do fully understand me?'

'Yes, of course.'

Perry frowned at her deepening colour.

'There's nothing to be so embarrassed about. When that time comes I shall, of course, substantially increase your allowance—' He stopped abruptly. 'What *is* the matter with you ?'

'N-nothing.' Janis could not meet his gaze. He might be a gentleman, she thought, but it was extremely indelicate of him to mention payment in connection with what was, after all, only a wifely duty. Why had he changed his mind ? She felt sure that at the time of making his first offer he had meant what he said about not wanting anything from her. His suggestion made her tremble at the prospect, but she supposed she would feel differently about it when she knew him better. In any case, she would be his wife, and although innocent and inexperienced, Janis knew what he had a right to expect of her.

Now, sitting beside him in the car, she began to wonder when that dreaded time would come.

They turned into the long drive, with its wide grass verges and avenues of limes, and rounded the bend. The house came into view, mellow and inviting in the warm spring sunshine. Gigantic sycamores raised their stately heads behind it; the long terraced garden, even though untidy and

overgrown, blazed with all the colours of spring. Nothing could be more beautiful, and quite unexpectedly Janis felt the thrill of coming *home!* For, no matter what the circumstances of her marriage, she was now Perry's wife, and this lovely house was her home.

John and Avril came back to the delightful lunch prepared by Bebbby, and at least one person seemed determined to make the occasion as lighthearted as possible under the circumstances. Only twice was John serious; the first time he raised his glass and, holding Janis's gaze, said softly,

'To a charming Cinderella.'

This brought a quick laugh from Perry.

'It would appear that both you and Avril have decided Janis is an object for pity—' He turned to his wife. 'That's not so, is it? You are perfectly satisfied with your bargain?'

'Yes, of course,' she answered in a low voice. This was not the dream she had cherished of her wedding day, and yet she didn't think she would have minded so very much if Perry had only kissed her after the ceremony, just lightly, for she did not expect more. Even had he touched her, patted her arm reassuringly, looked at her kindly ... but his cold indifference hurt, in a way which as yet she could not understand.

'I'm not thinking she needs pity,' John said, and then, as Perry shrugged, 'But she's just a little girl, badly in need of affection and care.'

'My dear John, all women are able to take care of themselves, and I am sure Janis is no exception,' replied Perry mockingly. 'Isn't that so, Janis?' No answer. 'Isn't it?'

'Yes,' she murmured at last, avoiding his eyes.

John became serious again as he and Avril were leaving.

'May I kiss the bride?' he asked Perry, who nodded, watching in some amusement as John took her face in his hands and kissed her gently on the cheek. Janis blushed adorably, and thanked him.

'What for ?' he laughed. 'For kissing you ?'

'Certainly not,' she retorted, her colour deepening as they all laughed. 'For coming today and making everything s-so n-nice. ...' Her lip trembled and John, with gentle understanding, patted her cheek.

'At least I made you laugh. I shall be back soon to make you laugh again.'

She and Perry accompanied them to the door, and Janis saw John's arm encircle Avril's waist as she reached the path through the orchard - a short cut across the fields to the Old Rectory.

Then they returned to the library, a charming room with red damask-covered chairs and beautiful carving everywhere. The ceiling was high and gilded, and-over the magnificent Adam fireplace hung a large portrait of Perry's grandfather. Janis sat on the couch, feeling shy and awkward now that they were alone. But Perry did not intend staying with her; having put away some papers that had lain on a small side table, he said that she must find her own amusement, as he had an appointment with his lawyer.

'I shall arrange for your allowance at the same time,' he went on. 'It will be paid to you once a month, and what you do with it is your own affair. But when you've spent it there will be no more until the next is due.'

'Thank you very much.' She looked up at him timidly. 'As long as you're going out, I think I'll lie down in my room.'

'Do anything you like—' He frowned suddenly, noticing her pallor. 'Are you all right?'

'My leg - it hurts dreadfully.'

'How long has it been hurting?'

'It started again an hour ago.'

His frown deepened.

'Again ? Has it troubled you before ?'

'Once or twice.'

'When?' He sounded anxious, she thought. 'You said Dr. Evans was perfectly satisfied with it.'

'He did say so, but it started to ache the first time I went to see him, and several times since.'

'Why didn't you mention it before you came away?'

'I forgot,' was the lame reply and, as his eyes narrowed sceptically, Janis hurried on, 'It didn't hurt very much - not like it does now.'

'Nevertheless, you should have told the doctor. Is the pain very bad, then ?'

'Yes, but it will go when I've rested it, it always does.'

'Go and get into bed and I'll send for my own doctor,' Perry said, after a thoughtful pause. 'He will soon find out what's wrong. I wish you'd told me immediately it began to trouble you,' he ended, with a sudden flash of anger.

Limping to the door, Janis wondered how she would get upstairs. Perry came behind her.

'I'll take you.' He picked her up, and she had a strange sensation of helplessness, and comfort, as her cheek rested against his coat.

Not to the back stairs this time, nor to the modest little room next to Bebbey's, but to the large-windowed, high-ceilinged room adjoining his. He set her down gently on the bed; watched with narrowed eyes as she stared round disbelievingly; heard the gasp of astonishment - and distaste - which escaped her.

'Don't you like it?' His voice was harsh.

Janis shivered.

'It's so different from the rest of the house ... at least, from the rooms I've seen.'

The furniture, the curtains, the covers and even the carpet emanated the disagreeable odour of newness. They *were* new, all in the palest shade of green. Expensive, ultra-modern, and totally without character. Janis had the impression of something grotesque, hideous, suppressing the natural warmth of what had once been a beautiful room.

Who could have committed such - sacrilege? Not Perry. ... Then who? The other girl! The one he should have married. Janis caught her breath; Perry must have loved her very much to have allowed this change, even in her own room.

'It's nice, though,' Janis added, her lack of enthusiasm bringing-an astonished exclamation from her husband.

'I believe you actually dislike it!'

'No.' She feared she had given the impression of ingratitude. 'It doesn't match the rest of the house, that's all. But it's nice,' she repeated, 'and must have cost a lot of money—' Janis broke off, convinced that there was little, if any, sincerity in her voice.

'It did,' replied Perry in grim tones, 'and that's-most important, isn't it?'

She stared up at his hard face with grave, apologetic eyes.

'I sounded ungrateful, I know. Please forgive me, I'm really very grateful to you. I haven't thanked you enough for all those lovely clothes, and—' she fingered the pearls she had worn for her wedding - 'I would like to thank you again for these—'

'There's no need,' he cut in shortly. 'Your suitcase is over there, by the dressing table. Bebbie must have brought it up for you.'

'My case ? Where did it come from ?'

'The police station. I telephoned yesterday to inquire about it. They sent it over this morning.'

Slipping off the bed, Janis limped to the dressing table.

'It's a wonder you didn't have to describe the contents - or something.'

Perry smiled faintly.

'They know me well enough.'

Putting her case on the bed, Janis opened it.

'I thought I'd nothing to give you, but I have now.' She found what she wanted, and looked shyly up at him. 'It isn't very valuable, but I hope you'll like it.' She held out a gold signet ring, her mother's gift to her father on *their* wedding day - and Janis's most treasured possession. 'Will you have it?' She asked the question humbly, and a little desperately too, for so much seemed to depend on his acceptance of her gift. But if he noticed the pleading in her voice he chose to ignore it. His tone resumed its former hardness as he said,

'You and I made an agreement for our mutual benefit, Janis. There was nothing sentimental about it, I want you to remember that - always. The pearls were Avril's idea, not mine. She rang me while you were at the hairdressers, and I allowed her to get them against my better judgment. Under the circumstances, it would not be fair for me to take your ring which, I presume, once belonged to your father.'

'Avril bought the pearls. ...?' Janis looked away in quick confusion. 'I'm sorry, I wouldn't have offered you the ring if I'd known.' Then she managed a wan little smile. 'You think me silly and sentimental, but I'm not really. I shall remember in future.'

'Good girl; now lie down and rest. Would you like me to send Bebby up to you?'

Janis was tying the ring up in the corner of a handkerchief from which she had taken it. She spoke almost to herself, seeming to miss Perry's question.

'It would have been a birthday present, too.'

Perry moved impatiently.

'Shall I send Bebby up to you?' he repeated in a brusque voice.

'Bebby? Oh, yes, please, I should like that very much.'

Dr. Grant came later in the afternoon, and made a thorough examination. Then, as he gazed at the white, childish face, his anger rose. The girl required immediate attention - and her husband was out. Out on his wedding day!

An intimate friend of Perry's late uncle, Dr. Grant had known all about the will, so was not ignorant of the reason for this hasty marriage. Nevertheless, he had been utterly taken aback when Perry had telephoned asking him to attend his wife, for he had seen him in London only last week, where he had intended staying until after the sale. He had no intention of marrying then, but the doctor had suspected that Perry was desperately homesick, and his return had not surprised him. But to find him married!

'When do you expect him back?' he inquired impatiently of Bebby.

'Not until late. He's dining out.'

'On his wedding day?' The doctor's heavy grey brows met, giving him a ferocious appearance. 'Have you any idea where he is now?'

'Gone to see Mr. Hannings,' she returned tartly, for, although far from excusing Perry's conduct herself, she resented Dr. Grant's high-handed manner. 'Show me the telephone,' he ordered curtly. There was one in

Perry's room and within a few minutes Janis heard the doctor talking to her husband.

'—you wilfully neglect having her properly attended to—' An interruption, and then, 'They were satisfied? Well, I can't see why! You should have sent for me immediately.' There was another pause and then Janis heard Dr. Grant's voice again, but it was now much quieter and all she heard was, '—it will have to be amputated.'

CHAPTER THREE

It was a week later when Janis, her face as white as the pillow, clutched Perry's hand tightly and said, in an agonized little voice,

'When are they going - when are they going to take my leg off?'

He gave a sudden start, his expression one of astonishment and deep concern.

'They're not. What in heaven's name gave you that idea?'

'Not...?' Janis drew a deep breath; her hand relaxed and dropped on to the bed cover. 'I heard Dr. Grant telling you.' She went on to explain, but she hadn't gone far when he interrupted her.

'Good lord, child, why didn't you mention it sooner? What Dr. Grant actually said was that, fortunately, it had been caught in time, otherwise there'd have been a *possibility* of having your leg amputated.'

'Was that it? Oh, Perry, I've been so frightened—' A shudder passed through her at the recollection of the long, dragging week during which she had waited, every moment one of agony as she expected to be told of the coming operation. And she remembered also, her eyes flickering over him as he sat by the bed, his shoulders so broad and erect, his body so perfect, that her most terrible misery had resulted from the sure knowledge that he would never be happy with a cripple for a wife.

'Why didn't you mention it sooner?' he repeated, a note of irritation entering his voice. 'There was no need for you to suffer all this anxiety.'

She did not reply, for an explanation was too difficult. How could she tell him that it was his own attitude which prevented her from broaching the subject? - that his cold indifference, and what had appeared to be a complete lack of concern, had frozen her into silence. Today was the first time he had softened towards her; it was an almost imperceptible change, but he had smiled and touched her forehead and she had shyly taken his hand and managed at last to speak, telling him of her fears.

He waited a while, expecting an answer to his question, but as she still remained silent he rose to go.

'I'll try to come tomorrow,' he said, and with a little sinking feeling Janis knew that the change had been only temporary, that he wanted to get away, away from the hospital smells, the whiteness and the chromium.

'How long must I stay here?' she asked, her blue eyes wide and questioning, her fair curls tumbling over the pillow as she turned her head towards him as he reached the door.

'Six or eight weeks - so the doctor tells me.'

But under Dr. Grant's expert care she was able to leave the hospital within the month. During the last fortnight there had been a very noticeable difference in her husband's attitude towards her - not that he treated her as an equal, for his manner, though kind, remained impersonal and rather superior, but the scorn had gone from his voice and the contempt from his eyes. He had visited her often - though rarely staying for any appreciable length of time - and on several occasions had sent her flowers with Bebbie or Avril - flowers from the gardens at Dene Royal.

'I hope you can come home before they're over,' Bebbie said. 'You'll never see anything so lovely as the gardens in spring.' And, once or twice when he could not visit her, Perry had sent a little note.

'He's so busy,' Avril told her. 'There's so much to put right - after all those years of neglect. He's always wanted to modernize the farm buildings and also have a marvellous herd of Jersey cows. Now he can realize his ambitions.' He was having new cottages built for the workers.

Avril went on to inform her, and he had already sold his entire stock of cattle to make room for the Jerseys he meant to keep.

Later,»Janis asked about something that had been puzzling her since the day of her wedding.

'Perry's stepmother - did she sleep in the room next to Perry's? It would be his father's then, wouldn't it?'

'You mean the one overlooking the orchard?'

Janis smiled ruefully.

'I didn't have much time to view the scenery, but yes, I think that's the one.'

'No; she said it was too big. It has never been used since Perry's mother died.' She cast Janis a sideways glance. 'It has recently been re-furnished.'

'I know. It's my room now, and I was in it for a little while. Have you seen it?'

Avril nodded, still eyeing Janis curiously.

'Do you like it?' Janis asked, unconsciously smoothing the spotless white quilt.

'I loathe it! Perry must have been mad to have allowed—' Avril broke off in some confusion and Janis put in quietly,

'It's all right, I know about that other one - Bebbie told me all about what happened.' She stopped, aware that she had betrayed Bebbie's confidence. She had no alternative but to extract a promise from Avril not to tell Perry. 'No wonder he doesn't like women.' Then she added as an afterthought, 'He likes you, of course. Otherwise, he's a woman-hater, isn't he?'

'No such thing!' retorted Avril. 'No man can hate the whole race of women. He can only hate the ones he's met. The others - well, granted he may dislike them, even despise them, but not hate.'

'To be despised is as bad,' returned Janis rather sadly.

Her meaning was clear and Avril moved uncomfortably.

'Perry has suffered a great deal these past few years,' she explained. 'I don't know how much Bebbie has told you, but his stepmother not only drove him from his home, but managed, in less than six years, to squander the entire family fortune. Then there was Glenda. ...' Avril tailed off and, sensing her reluctance to discuss Perry's affairs, Janis steered the conversation away from her husband's ex-fiancee.

'What was Perry like before his father married again?' she asked, leaning back on the pillows.

'One of the kindest, gentlest men you could ever wish to meet.' Avril spoke dreamily, as if her thoughts were far away in the past.

'I can't imagine him being like that at all.' Again a note of sadness crept into Janis's voice.

'I expect it does seem incredible to you,' agreed Avril wistfully. 'To me, the change is incredible. I would never have believed anyone could become so hard and embittered.'

'I wonder if he'll ever change back again.' Even as she spoke Janis wondered, doubtfully, if it would make any difference to her. 'Has he always been so proud ?'

'I'm afraid so - though I call it snobbery—' Avril glanced swiftly at her friend, as if something had just occurred to her. 'I told him once that someone, some day, would break it down, that he would be taught humility. I wonder... ?'

'Yes?' Janis looked up questioningly, but Avril was shaking her head.

'Nothing - nothing at all.'

Perry came for Janis himself, driving the big new car. He had no need to, Janis reflected, for Mottram - the chauffeur who had worked for his father, and had recently been dispensed with as an economy measure - was back

again. Perry put her comfortably in the back seat, deftly tucking a rug round her knees. Janis knew that she would not be absolutely fit for several months, for she had heard Dr. Grant giving instructions to Perry. There was to be no strenuous exercise, no exertion at all, and she was to have plenty of rest. What Janis did not hear was the final warning.

'There must be no intimate relationship between you until I've given her a clean bill of health. She must lead a very restful life for a little while.'

They drove in silence for a time, both lost in thought, but as the car turned into the drive she uttered a gasp of delight. The tall limes, meeting overhead, were in full leaf now, and the wide grass verges on both sides of the drive were banked with daffodils - great golden clusters of them, as if some giant hand had carelessly tossed a myriad bulbs and left them to flower where they lay. The car came to a standstill in front of the house, and Janis again experienced the little access of happiness she had felt on her wedding day. She leant forward, her hair touching her husband's cheek, forgetful that her nearness might displease him, and exclaimed impulsively,

'Perry... it's *so* nice to be coming home!'

And Perry, who had come so very near to losing it, echoed softly,

'It is indeed, Janis.'

Avril was waiting, and Bebbie, too, with the tea laid in the playroom. What a different meal this was from that other when Janis had been so profoundly conscious of her own inferiority! Now she was welcome. She glanced first at Bebbie - dear Bebbie, who had calmed her that first night and cared for her afterwards, and visited her many, many times in hospital, even though she was old and the journey long.

Then she looked at Avril, who had so quickly become her friend, who had confided that she and John had been in love for years, and that they both lived for the day when marriage would become possible for them. It was with far more uncertainty that Janis looked across at her husband. Did *he* welcome her home? Their eyes met - and he smiled, bringing a sudden warmth to her heart and a flush of pleasure to her cheeks.

Then he was talking to Avril; telling her he would be away for a few days next week, attending a large sale of cattle. He was enthusiastic about the new shippens he was having built, the modern cottages which would replace the present dingy, insanitary ones; as he discussed his plans he was like an eager schoolboy - quite young, Janis thought. She was surprised to find how interested she was and wondered if he would ever talk things over with her, ask her advice, as he did with Avril.

Janis's progress exceeded even Dr. Grant's expectations ; soon he gave up visiting her and, instead, she went to his rooms in Chester once a week, accompanied by Perry or Avril. She saw very little of Perry, who was already out when she came down for breakfast. Sometimes she would see him from the window, far away in the distance; driving the tractor or working with the men in the fields. Avril did not come over every day, so Janis resorted to helping Bebbie in the kitchen in an effort to pass away the time. One day, however, the housekeeper was nowhere to be found, and Janis asked the new maid, Doris, where she was.

'Upstairs, in the attic,' came the pert reply. Doris had no respect for a mistress who worked in the kitchen - and, to judge by the expert way in which Janis did it, she suspected she was used to it. Unaware that Janis was under the doctor, Doris drew her own conclusions from the locked door between the rooms of her master and mistress. There was something fishy between this girl and her handsome husband.

Bebbie was polishing furniture in the largest of the three attics, and as Janis entered she replaced the dust sheet on the piece she had finished.

'Bebbie, what lovely furniture!' Janis stood for a moment in admiration. Then, in a puzzled tone, 'Why is it here?'

'There's nowhere else to put it!'

Janis raised her head in astonishment; she had never heard Bebbie speak in a tone like that before.

Picking up a duster, Janis began polishing an exquisite Queen Anne dressing table.

'I wish it were in my room,' she sighed.

'That's where it should be!'

'You mean—' Janis spun round. 'This was the furniture that was taken out ?'

'To make room for that - that monstrosity!'

Janis's eyes sparkled.

'Bebby ... do you think ... ?'

'I don't see why not,' Bebbie decided, turning to the door. 'I'll get Mottram and Gregson.'

But Janis stopped her.

'I must ask Perry first.'

'Whatever for? He wouldn't want to be bothered with such things.'

'You're quite sure ?'

Janis's doubts were instantly waived.

'Quite. He'll be glad.'

So the furniture was changed over; when it was all in place Bebbie surveyed the room with as much satisfaction as if it had been her own.

'Just as it used to be,' she sighed. 'Thank goodness Perry wouldn't have the walls interfered with. *She* wanted them stripped and that plastic rubbish put on.' Bebbie smiled humorously. 'You're going to get lost in that great tester bed.'

'It is rather big....'

'Never mind; you may soon have company.'

Janis blushed, wondering why the prospect was not half so frightening as when she had last thought about it.

'If Glenda had no intention of marrying Perry, why did she have all that done?' Janis asked curiously.

'Because Perry suggested it - not this decor, obviously - but he thought she might like some alterations and, having a guilty conscience to start with, she probably considered it best to show some interest in case he became suspicious.'

'So she wasted all that money!' Perry was far better off without such an odious person, Janis firmly decided. Glenda, planning to rob him of his inheritance, must have known he would never have the money with which to pay the enormous bill.

The only times Janis was sure of seeing her husband were in the evenings, for his lunch and tea - 'baggings' was the surprising name given to the various snacks sent out to the men - he took in the fields, wherever he happened to be working. Sometimes he would come in very tired, and would not trouble to change for dinner, but when he did, he expected Janis to do the same.

Changing that evening, Janis looked about her with excitement, feeling warm and secure - as though she really *belonged*; as the room belonged, too, having been lost for a little while.

She dressed carefully, in a misty blue creation of silk chiffon and, remembering Avril's warning, took particular pains with her hair and manicure. But she did not paint her nails, for she had heard Perry lecturing Avril on that subject. What would he say about the furniture? she wondered. Perhaps she would not find the courage to mention it at all.

Perry was waiting when she came downstairs, and she faltered, as she always did, whether to blame for anything or not,

'I'm s-sorry...'

'There's no need to be, Janis. I'm rather early.' His dark eyes flickered over her with faint interest. 'A new dress?'

'No - yes, I mean— I haven't worn it before, but I bought it that first day when I went to town with Avril.'

He responded to her agitation with amusement and, she thought, the merest suggestion of mockery. She felt, somehow, that he was thinking of Glenda, and the way she had deceived him, and that he was on his guard against being taken in a second time.

Because Dr. Grant had ordered plenty of rest, Perry had dinner served at seven-thirty, instead of eight. Some time between eight-thirty and nine he would be sure to look at the clock, and Janis, knowing that her company was no longer desired, would instantly obey the unspoken command and go to her room. There she would spend the next hour reading, or just looking out on to the orchard - a pink and white carpet of fallen blossom now - and wonder what Perry found to do on his own - and whether he were as lonely as she... ?

Tonight, engrossed in accounts and estimates connected with the farm, Perry seemed to have forgotten the time. They had taken coffee in the playroom, Janis hardly daring to move for fear he would look up and notice she was still there. Several times during dinner she had opened her mouth to tell him about changing the furniture over, but the more she thought about it the more presumptuous it appeared, and at last she decided to say nothing.

Eventually he looked up. Instead of glancing at the clock, he asked Janis when she was going to see the doctor.

'Tomorrow - at eleven.'

'I thought so. Perhaps you will do something for me? - it will save me going into town myself.'

'Yes; anything,' Janis responded eagerly, pleased that he should let her do some little task for him.

'That is nice and obliging of you, Janis,' he said, with a faint smile. 'However, I only want you to take some papers to Hannings' office along with a letter I shall give you. It is the reply which is important, so you must wait for it.'

'Yes.'

'I'll leave them with Bebbie as I shall be out very early in the morning. I want to make a start on the hay tomorrow if possible.'

The week of heavy rain, and the heatwave which followed, had made cutting possible a fortnight earlier than usual, and Janis had heard Perry express anxiety about the weather's breaking, for he had not yet bought the modern equipment and, therefore, the haymaking would take some considerable time. Surprised that he should mention it - for he did not seem to care whether she were interested in his work or not - she said impulsively,

'Can I help with the haymaking?'

'You?'

'Bebbie says it's a race against the weather - that everyone helps, even Mottram and Gregson.'

'Have you forgotten Dr. Grant's instructions?'

'My leg is much better now; he said so—'

'But he hasn't given you a clean bill of health?'

Janis was puzzled by his eagerness, and his obvious disappointment when she replied,

'It will be another month or two before he can do that. But he said I could learn to ride, so it must have improved, mustn't it?'

Perry moved impatiently, increasing her puzzlement.

'Did you ask him if you could learn to ride?' he inquired curiously.

'Yes.'

'Why?' Janis hesitated, plucking nervously at her dress. Avril had told her that she and Perry rode every morning in the winter, and Janis had thought it would be a good idea if she learnt to ride, so that next winter - by which time she and Perry would be better friends - she would be able to accompany them. 'Well, Janis?'

'I thought it would be nice to go with you and Avril sometimes,' she said lamely.

'But I'm too busy to ride.'

'I meant in the winter.'

'Janis,' he said softly after a pause, 'have you forgotten our arrangement?'

She looked up blankly.

'No - of course not....' What did he mean ? Was it his intention never to go outside the door with her? She recollected that he had only been out with her in the car, merely dropping her at the doctor's rooms and calling back later to pick her up. The prospect of such an existence chilled her. Perry had said it would be degrading to live in the same house with nothing between them, but surely it would be more degrading to live together in the way he was now suggesting.

'Are we never going to be friends?' she whispered desperately, and he stared at her in amazement. When he spoke his eyes had resumed their familiar hardness.

'I don't think friendship between us is either likely or necessary, and I'll be obliged if you will strictly adhere to the terms of our agreement. You need not bother to see Hannings for me; I'll get Avril to do it.' He waved an imperious hand towards the door. 'Please leave me now - I have work to do.'

He picked up his papers again, and Janis, tears blinding her, stumbled from the room.

Upstairs, she flung herself on the bed. If only she could understand him! Surely he was not going to treat her like this all her life? And why did he keep on referring to their agreement? It was up to him to decide when he wanted. ... Suddenly she frowned, recalling the way in which he had phrased his words when first telling her of the agreement. Could it be that she had misinterpreted his words? - that he hadn't been suggesting they make their marriage normal, but had meant something different altogether? But what else could he have meant? These and other baffling questions were still unanswered when at last she undressed and got into bed, unaware that her repeated references to the future were having a most disturbing effect on her husband.

She was almost asleep when the movement in the next room jerked her back to wakefulness.

'Janis, are you asleep?' Perry knocked softly and tried the door between their rooms.

'No. Did you w-want s-something?' Her heart pounding madly, she jumped out of bed and grabbed a dressing gown.

'I would like to talk to you. Open the door.'

To talk. ... She supposed she felt relieved, and yet....

'I can't; it's locked.'

'Haven't you a key ?'

'No.'

Silence. Then a jingling sound as if he were examining a bunch of keys; the next moment Janis heard a key being turned in the lock.

She flung herself against the door.

'I'll come downstairs!' He had pushed open the door slightly, but at her words he closed it again.

'Very well,' he said sardonically. 'I shall be in the playroom.'

Janis leaned against the door, trying to compose herself. Talking to Perry was never very pleasant, but it would have been much worse had he seen the room.

Standing by the fireplace, his hands thrust into his pockets, Perry turned as she entered. So small and pale she looked, the blue velvet housecoat accentuating the graceful, slender lines of her body, her eyes still swollen from crying.

'What is it, Perry?'

He came straight to the point.

'I want you to put your cards on the table and tell me exactly what you intend doing about the arrangement we made. I've kept to my side of the bargain ... now what about yours?'

Janis looked at him in blank bewilderment.

'I don't understand. Surely it's for you to decide. ... I'm willing to do whatever you want.'

'You're willing—' He stared at her. 'Then why these repeated references to the future?'

'The future?' She gaped at him for a moment. He talked as though there were no future for them! 'What do you mean, Perry?'

'I mean—' He made a gesture of impatience. 'Are you or are you not intending to keep to your bargain?'

'Of course. I promised.'

'I haven't much faith in a woman's promise,' he returned, but there was no mistaking the relief in his voice.

Janis came slowly across the room and stood before him.

'Would I really have any option but to comply with your wishes?' she asked gently.

'You hold most of the aces. What could I do if you refused?'

A smile trembled on her lips.

'Make life very unpleasant for me,' she told him quietly, and Perry frowned.

'I may have been somewhat harsh with you ... but only because I thought you meant to break your word.'

'I'm sorry if I said anything to make you doubt me.' Janis smiled up at him. 'Will it be different now? Will you be a little - kinder to me?'

Suddenly he put his hands on her shoulders, regarding her in silence for a long time.

'Yes, Janis. I'm sorry I misjudged you.' In spite of his relief he still seemed puzzled over something, and Janis, seeing the doubt in his eyes, ventured impulsively,

'I'll do as you wish just whenever you want me to ... if it will make you happy.'

There was an astounded silence.

'Does it matter to you whether or not I'm happy?'

'I would like to make you happy,' Janis said, trembling at the touch of his hands on her shoulders.

Another pause followed, then he said, in the kindest voice he had ever used to her, 'I believe you would. But we'll wait until Dr. Grant has discharged you. Now run along to bed; you're tired.'

'May I take those papers for you?' she pleaded, turning at the door.

'Yes, I'll leave them with Bebby.'

CHAPTER FOUR

THE following week was the happiest Janis had ever spent in her life; although she did not actually help in the fields she was kept busy most of the time helping to prepare the baggings, and it was she who carried them out to the men, three times a day. John stayed at Avril's for the weekend and both came early and helped until dusk. Every available man was on the task of getting the hay safely harvested before the weather broke, so there were endless sandwiches to be cut. Indeed, Janis had to make several journeys before everyone was served. The men sat in little groups, just where they happened to be working; Perry - who surprised Janis by insisting that all the men were served first - sat with Avril and John to have his.

Janis had just served them, and she stood a little apart, watching them, a wistful expression on her face. They were laughing together, so comradely in their shorts and open-necked shirts, their arms and legs tanned by the hot June sun. John looked up.

'What's the matter, Cinders?'

She flushed. He persisted in calling her that ridiculous name, and although Perry never said anything, Janis was very much afraid he didn't like it.

'Nothing. I'm going to have my lunch now.'

'Why don't you bring it out here and have it with us?' John peered into the basket and opened another serviette. 'I think there'll be plenty as it is. Sit down - you'll have to use Perry's cup.'

She looked doubtfully at her husband, who nodded.

'Sit down, Janis.'

Perry had been in good spirits all the week - because the weather had been kind, she supposed, hoping it would last for another few days, because Perry had had such a lot of bad luck since he started. He had lost all his pigs with swine fever, and a very valuable cow had died in calf soon after he bought it. Also, he was having a great deal of trouble to get the plans passed for the

cottages. But over half the hay was cut and there was no sign of a change in the weather.

John helped her to sandwiches, teasing her and ruffling her hair. That, she thought, would certainly annoy Perry, but he seemed rather amused, glancing at her at times with the most odd expression in his eyes. He rinsed his cup with a little of the tea and, filling it up, handed it to her.

'Oh ... thank you, Perry!' She shone up at him, smiling, and then the smile faded as she caught the glance that passed between Avril and Perry. In Avril's eyes there was dismay, and an unmistakable hint of compassion as her glance moved to Janis; Perry's expression was unfathomable, but the merest flush became noticeable under his tan before he turned his head abruptly away.

The meal over, John brought out cigarettes, tossing one into Janis's lap even as she shook her head. She picked it up as though it were hot; Perry took it from her and gave it back to John.

'Janis doesn't smoke,' he said curtly.

'Let her try,' John urged, but Perry shook his head. 'You've picked yourself a hard and cruel husband,' laughed John then, and added, 'It seems you're not to have any reward at all for making yourself so useful.'

'I wish I could do more,' Janis returned, with a glance at Perry. 'Dr. Grant said I may help a little - in the fields, I mean.'

'Did he? Well, I don't think so; the work's much harder than it looks, and as John says, you're being very useful as it is.' Her eyes lit up.

'Do you really think so ?' she asked shyly.

'Certainly I do, and I appreciate it, Janis.' Something in his tone brought Avril's head up with a jerk. Perry frowned at her searching scrutiny, and, curtly, told Janis to collect up the dishes.

There being no time for dinner, Bebbly made a hot supper* for ten o'clock. This was an informal affair in the playroom; John and Avril stayed, partaking of it in their working clothes. There was no question of Janis going to bed early, and even when their guests had gone Perry did not indicate that he wanted to be alone. On the contrary, he surprised her by showing interest in what she had been doing - when, of course, she was not cutting sandwiches.

'We've been making gooseberry jam - and bottling them, too.'

'Do you like doing things like that?' He looked at her curiously.

'Yes - but not picking them,' she admitted ruefully. 'I get all prickled.'

'Then send Doris - is her name Doris?' He looked vague.

'Yes,' and after a small hesitation, 'I don't think she would do it.'

Perry's brows went up arrogantly.

'Not do it? What do you mean? Have you told her to?'

'N-no, but—'

'But what?'

Janis did not answer. She was afraid she had not managed Doris very well; the truth was that she felt rather scared of her. Because Bebbly called her by her Christian name Doris did the same - though not when anyone else was present. Janis could not bring herself to tell her that it was disrespectful, and could only hope that Perry would never hear of it. And two mornings last week Doris had not made her bed.

'You'll have to do it yourself, Janis,' she had said. 'I've no time now.' And it was quite usual for her to begin clearing away the breakfast things before Janis had finished. Aware that Perry was frowningly awaiting an answer, she said hastily,

'It isn't really her job—'

'Her job is whatever you tell her to do! You're the mistress here—' He stopped abruptly and Janis's head jerked up. She had the odd impression that the last remark had slipped out by accident.

'I'm sorry,' Janis said guiltily. 'I'm not used to it yet, but I'll try very hard.'

'Of course you'll try! And you'll inform *me* of any trouble - do you understand ?'

'Yes, Perry.'

But it was he himself who caught Doris, the very next morning, dusting the room while Janis was still at breakfast. He had come back for the post, which was always late, and as the dew had been heavy overnight, he decided to stay for a cup of coffee with Janis. The maid skipped to the door, but Perry called her back.

'Come here!'

Doris turned - very different now from the girl who was so pert with her mistress.

'Yes, sir?'

'Do you usually clean the room while your mistress is having her breakfast?'

'No, sir.' But her apprehensive glance in Janis's direction did not escape Perry.

'I see that you do.' There was a cold finality in his tone; Janis's heart went out to the girl who had not hesitated to humiliate her.

'Perry—'

'See Miss Bebbington at once; tell her I've dismissed you and ask her to give you an extra week's wages in lieu of notice.'

Janis waited until Doris had left the room, then turned to her husband, but the plea died instantly on her lips as he proceeded to lecture her severely on the right attitude to adopt with insolent servants. His reprimand was cutting and icily sarcastic, yet she was left with the odd impression that it was not quite so unkind as it might have been.

When Janis took the baggings out at lunch time Avril and John were lying in the hay, Avril's head resting comfortably in the crook of John's arm; Perry was nowhere to be seen. Putting the jug of tea down, Janis went on, for she still had to take 'Old' Tom's lunch, which was on top of the basket. He was called Old Tom, because there was a Young Tom working on the farm, too. Most of the other men were somewhat derisive of Old Tom, because he lived in the shanty and cooked his own meals, but Janis had already given him a place in her heart, and had found a place in his. He was a kindred spirit - alone in the world, and Janis knew what that was like. She slipped little dainties into his packet of sandwiches, and chocolate which she bought when in town. He called her Miss Janis, and grumbled if anyone else brought his baggings, saying they just didn't taste the same. He was away at the far end as she went into the field where he was working.

Janis stood waiting, looking across from the gleaming lakes to the distant wooded slopes of the Peckforton Hills, crowned by the castle, sombre and dark against the vivid blue of a cloudless sky. In contrast, the ruins of Beeston, poised on a rocky outcrop in the great central sandstone ridge, seemed much less austere than when Janis had first seen them, for the sunlight cast into relief the weathered blocks, giving the castle a mellowed look which was made more pronounced by the softening effect of the vegetation clothing the hills around it. Old Tom was coming across the field towards her, mopping his brow.

'Good thing we've nearly finished. This weather's enough to kill a body,' he grumbled, appearing to take it for granted that the fine weather was only here to oblige while they harvested the hay and then it would rain. 'This 'eat ain't good for the likes o' me what has pants o' th' 'earth.' He mopped his brow again. 'Chronicle, that's what it is.'

Janis had to laugh. Tom's pains were always of the 'chronicle' sort, and if it wasn't 'pants o' th' 'earth' it was 'windy spasms'. Taking something from the

basket, Janis put it behind her back. Both were standing with their backs to the hedge, so did not see Perry jump the fence and approach from the adjoining field.

'Thundering good thunderstorm - that's what's needed,' Old Tom went on, and then, as Janis laughed merrily at his way of putting it, 'My, it's good to hear you laugh like that, Miss Janis. I've worked on this estate for fifty 'ears, and I haven't heard a laugh like that since Master Perry's mother died. Came 'ere as a young girl, she did - just such another as you.' He glanced at her speculatively. 'Wouldn't have been much more than you are now when Master Perry was born. She used to laugh....' He sighed. 'Used to bring little tit-bits, too.... You know something ? - I think Master Perry must ha' chose you because you're so like his mother!'

'I'm sure I'm not in the least like his mother, Tom.' Janis could think of nothing that would vex Perry more than for anyone to compare her to his mother, who was sure to have been a lady. 'Would he remember her?'

'Master Perry would never forget her! He worshipped her. An angel, she was - just like you.'

Janis smiled and held out the basket.

'That's yours, on top.' He took it. 'I have a surprise for you, Tom. Close your eyes and hold out your hand.' As he did so she placed a bottle of beer in it. 'I thought it would be nice and cool instead of tea. But you mustn't tell anyone - promise!'

'A bottle of beer! If that isn't just like Miss Janis - how did you know I liked beer?'

'I didn't; but I thought it very likely, so I bought it when I went out yesterday. You mustn't say a word, though. I'm sure my husband would be very displeased if he knew I went into a shop for it—'

'You didn't go into a beer-house!' He looked quite shocked.

'No. One of those little shops.'

'An" off-licence,' he said with relief. 'Well, I thank you very much. I'm going to enjoy my baggings today - yes, I am indeed!' Tom eyed the bottle of beer with relish.

'It won't make you drunk, will it?' Janis suddenly looked scared. 'Oh, dear, I never thought of that. Supposing you start driving the tractor all wobbly - and - and my husband gets to know—'

Two voices spoke at once.

'Me get drunk on one bottle of beer? I've never been so insulted in my—'

'Your husband knows already, my dear!'

'Perry!' Janis wheeled round, staring at him with a wide, almost terrified expression.

'The mistress has just brought my baggings, sir,' Tom began.

'So I see.' Though cool, Perry's voice was certainly not angry; he eyed Janis with a penetrating gaze, as if searching for something. 'I hope you enjoy your lunch, Tom. You ought to!' Reaching down, he took the basket from Janis. 'Come, we're all starving.' He walked briskly across the field, Janis trotting to keep pace with him.

During the meal she saw nothing more alarming than a touch of amusement in Perry's eyes, and eventually her fears subsided enough for her to appreciate John's humour and laugh with the others at his numerous jokes.

'Cinders, I congratulate you,' John said, passing judgment on the cakes she had made. 'You, too, Perry. You must admit she looks after you.'

'Not half so well as she looks after some people,' he returned dryly, and John looked puzzled.

'What's this? Have you some secret admirer?' he teased.

'It was Old Tom....'

'Ah, Old Tom, of course. Have you put some of these in his lunch?'

'Oh, not only cakes,' Perry interposed in the same dry tone. 'Beer, too. Nothing so commonplace as tea for Old Tom.'

'Beer?' John looked at her with admiration. 'That's a very sensible thing to do on a day like this. Where did you get it?'

'I bought it,' Janis faltered, looking at Perry.

He observed her quietly, and with a new tolerance.

'Why the scared look?' he questioned and, without giving her time to reply, 'I'm not vexed about it, Janis, although I would much prefer you to take the beer from the house. You must not go into a shop for it again.'

'I didn't think you would like me to touch that in the house.'

'You knew it was there?' It seemed to give him scant satisfaction to know that she hadn't touched it because she was afraid.

'Yes; I've explored the whole house ... you don't mind?'

'Why should I ?' Perry exclaimed, almost angrily.

'What a thing to ask!' John laughed. 'You have a perfect right to explore the house - hasn't she, Perry?'

'Yes, Janis, you're at liberty to go wherever you please.' Rewarded with a glowing glance from his young wife, Perry's mouth suddenly curved into a smile, which Janis tried fleetingly to analyse. Did she imagine things, or was there the merest trace of tenderness in that smile? Well - if not tenderness, certainly indulgence. The smile vanished as quickly as it came; Janis wondered whether her fervent desire for an understanding between them had caused her to see things which did not really exist. No ... there *had* been a sort of amused indulgence in her husband's smile.

Although Janis was glad for Perry's sake that the haymaking was finished, she was sorry, too, for it meant that the little picnics in the fields were over. The suppers, too, were replaced by formal dinners in the big dining-room.

The only difference was that Perry did not send her to bed immediately afterwards as he used to, but would allow her to stay up much later, sometimes until he went himself. He would chat with her on these occasions, his manner still impersonal, but never now impatient. And he let her have a horse, so that Avril could teach her to ride. And, at times, Janis had the odd conviction that Perry was surprised at his own forbearance. But there were times, too, when he seemed disturbed and irritated and he would then fling himself wholeheartedly into his work, and Janis would hardly ever see him during the day, and perhaps only for an hour at night.

It was taking a long time to clear up the mess into which his father had become entangled and at the beginning of July Perry decided to sell some property in Hampshire which, heavily mortgaged, was now only a liability. Han- nings advised him to have it repaired first, but Perry did not think it worthwhile. However, he made up his mind to take a look at the property before coming to a definite decision. As there were one or two sales which he wanted to attend, it meant his being away from home for at least three days, but there was nothing to be done on the farm which could not be left to the men. He had to smile at Janis's wistful expression, knowing that she would dearly have loved to accompany him. By this time, however, Perry had decided on another call.

The evening before his departure found him looking up the name 'Poole' in the telephone directory and writing down the addresses of those within reasonable distance of Chester. He did think, momentarily, of asking Janis once again about the reason for her dismissal, but felt sure she would lie as before.

It was significant of Perry's changing attitude towards her that, as she had to visit the doctor during his absence, he left her the car and went by train, telling Mottram he would telephone on his return so that the chauffeur could meet him in Chester.

Perry rang the bell, then gazed round the ill-kept garden. The lawn had evidently been neglected for years, and what he surmised had once been a herbaceous border was now a confused mass of weeds except for a few straggly perennials that had valiantly pushed their way through, lending little splashes of colour and giving the place a lived-in appearance.

He turned as a rather untidy maid in a soiled apron opened the door.

'I would like to see your mistress. My name is Caton.'

The door opened wider.

'Will you step inside, sir? I'll tell Mrs. Poole.'

He was left standing in a hall which matched to perfection the garden outside.

Mrs. Poole was one of those large, overbearing women with a heavy voice and Perry disliked her on sight. This was his first call, but he knew instinctively that the two further addresses on his list would not be needed. Pale, protuberant eyes flashed him a look which instantly made him bristle.

'What can I do for you, Mr. Caton ?'

'I'm making inquiries about a Miss Carter. Was she employed by you until a few months ago?' His words came reluctantly; it seemed wrong to be discussing Janis with this vile creature.

'She was.' Her voice was grim, but her eyes curious. 'Are *you* thinking of employing her?'

'No,' Perry said, trying to hide his revulsion. 'But I should like to know why you dismissed her - without a moment's notice?'

He was obviously a gentleman, Mrs. Poole mused, and if he did not intend to employ the girl why should he be making inquiries about her?

'Are you a detective ?'"Certainly not!" Perry snapped, and turned to the door. He would make Janis tell him the truth herself.

'I thought you might be - it's only natural I should expect she got into more trouble!' Mrs. Poole had no intention of letting him go without hearing the worst about the girl. Janis had been a good worker - for less than half the wages the new maid was receiving. Mrs. Poole owed her a grudge for that!

Almost against his will Perry turned.

'Why did you dismiss her?'

'I caught her in my son's bedroom - my eldest son. It was nearly midnight, and she was in her nightdress!'

Perry hated the triumph in her voice, but knew she spoke the truth. Janis's refusal to explain proved it beyond any doubt.

'She was always a fast little baggage,' Mrs. Poole went on. 'Every time Arthur was home I had to watch her. She tried to trap him into marriage at Christmas, but failed. This time she was trying different tactics.' The malicious sting in her voice did nothing to improve Perry's opinion of women in general; without another word he turned disgustedly away and strode down the path.

He had earlier telephoned Mottram, who had met him in Chester and was now waiting to drive him home. During the journey Perry kept telling himself that it did not matter why Janis was dismissed; he had never intended the marriage to be permanent. But, try as he would, he could not get Janis's innocence out of his mind. The frank, open eyes; her naivety over things which to Avril and John and himself were an open book.

His thoughts straying to Glenda - on the surface sweet and unaffected - he felt quite sick! And furiously angry with himself, which was most inexplicable, for he wouldn't admit that he had, for one moment, been deceived a second time.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Avril was spending a few days at John's home, Janis found the time dragging unbearably. The melancholy prospect of not seeing Perry for three whole days made life meaningless and empty - for although they had never been constantly together, to Janis there was happiness just in the knowledge that he was 'somewhere about'.

The afternoon found her in the attic. Squatting on the floor, she went through a box containing endless snapshots of Perry and Avril, and a lovely girl who she suspected was Perry's mother. There were photographs of a tall, distinguished gentleman - Perry's father, she concluded. But the one she liked best was of another man, superior like the other in features, but with a distinct twinkle of good humour in his very dark eyes. Who was he? Certainly some relation. Perhaps the uncle who had left Perry all that money. A large portrait of the same gentleman hung in the dining-room.

She took many of the snapshots - also a charming hand-carved trinket box - down to her room. The trinket box seemed to belong on the dressing table, and Janis eyed it pensively for some time, wondering to whom it had belonged.

One particularly attractive snapshot of her husband pleased her so much that she decided to buy a tiny frame and have it by her bed.

Even these interesting occupations did not make the time pass quickly, and it was only three o'clock when Janis returned to the garden. Strolling round the side of the house she came upon the open window of Perry's study. She had never been inside since the day he had asked her to marry him, when, occupied with her confused thoughts, she had noticed very little about it. Stepping up to the window, she peered inside. It was essentially a man's room. Her eyes moved from a large bookcase on one wall, to the desk in the middle and, by the fireplace, a rather battered old armchair. She gasped at the shabbiness of the curtains and covers, little knowing that most of the other rooms had been prepared for his expected marriage, and his study had not been done at all when the wedding was cancelled.

Going back into the house, Janis entered the study. Only a few weeks ago she would not have dared, but Perry's attitude had altered so much of late that she had no qualms at all about carrying out the idea which came into her head. There was a sewing machine in the kitchen; she would replace these threadbare covers with new ones - and the curtains, too. Something bright and cheerful. When Perry came home he would have a lovely surprise.

Excited and impatient, Janis summoned Mottram, for she had to begin at once. This was the chance she had been waiting for; to do some little service for her husband and prove she was not like those other two.

Surprised when she asked for a tape measure, Bebby was even more surprised when Janis announced her intention of going for the material immediately. 'We always get that sort of thing from Parridges,' she told her, but Janis had no intention of waiting for samples; she wanted to complete the work before Perry returned. Besides, she couldn't think of having it put on his account. Half the thrill was that she was paying for the material herself.

She spent a great deal of time over the choice of it, not wanting anything too loud, but on the other hand, it must be cheerful. The only thing which suited her was also the most expensive; it took all the money she had, without catering for the small window. Crushing down her disappointment, Janis left instructions for the rest to be sent on next month, when she would be able to pay for it.

Two whole days were taken up with her task. She made the curtains, and covers for the armchair, cushions, and small couch. When she had finished even the critical Bebby had to admit to their perfection, and Janis went to bed happy and excited, wondering what kind of flowers to put in the little cut glass vase which stood on his desk, at present containing an assortment of pencils and pens.

The following morning Mottram informed her that although he was going to meet Perry in Chester, he could not say when they would be back.

'Aren't you coming straight home?' Janis asked in a puzzled voice.

'No, madam. Mr. Caton has some business to attend to and doesn't know how long it will take; he gave me the impression that it could take some considerable time.' He glanced at his watch. 'I must go. I have to meet the twelve- forty at Chester.'

'Drive back as quickly as you can, won't you, Mottram?' Janis smiled. Then, hastily, 'But be careful, though.'

'I will, madam,' he promised gravely, smiling back at her.

After lunch Janis laid out her prettiest dress on the bed, and went off into the woods - a favourite haunt because of the stream where Avril and Perry played as children. Janis had spent many happy hours crossing and re-crossing the stream by its convenient stepping-stones, or just sitting on the bank, dangling her bare feet in the water. Today she searched for the violets which had been growing in profusion a few weeks ago, but they had disappeared. She went deeper and deeper into the woods before realizing she'd been much longer than she had allowed for. Turning, she hurriedly made her way back. She would have to get flowers from the garden after she'd washed and changed.

When she reached the garden, muddy and dishevelled, it seemed that the whole household had been out looking for her. Bobby met her, breathless and not at all her usual composed self.

'Wherever have you been, Janis? Perry wants to see you in his study immediately—' The old eyes softened. 'I'm afraid he's not very pleased with what you've done.'

'Not pleased - b-but he m-must be,' Janis stammered.

'Go in at once; he's already been waiting twenty minutes.'

'I can't go like this - I must change my clothes.'

'There's no time,' Bobby returned emphatically, 'unless you want to make him even more angry, of course.'

Perry couldn't be angry, she told herself; Bebbie must be mistaken. Yes, of course she was mistaken. Breathless, and very conscious of her appearance, but happy in the anticipation of her husband's praise, Janis entered the study ... and one look at his dark countenance told her without any doubt that Bebbie had not been mistaken.

His hard, angry eyes travelled from her muddy shoes to her dull untidy hair.

'Come here!'

Janis closed the door and walked nervously towards him.

'What's the meaning of this?' Perry demanded furiously, indicating the curtains.

'I - I did it— I thought you'd - you'd be pleased. D-don't you like them?'

'I do not! How dare you have the presumption to come in here and alter my study without my permission!'

'I didn't meant to be presumptuous,' Janis faltered. 'I saw how shabby it looked, and thought I'd m-make it m-more cheerful.' She ended on a little sob; this was so different from what she had expected.

'How did you come to enter this room in the first place?'

'I looked through the window, and—'

'Prying, eh?' He glanced at his desk. 'How very disappointing for you to find everything locked.'

Janis's chin went up indignantly.

'I didn't go near your desk - and it's very unjust of you to accuse me of such a thing!' She lowered her head to hide the tears that threatened. He had been so kind before he went away, and that new interest and indulgence had given her the courage to do what she had done. It would please him, she had thought - it *must* please him. Never for a moment had it entered her head that

he would resent her action. 'I won't ever do anything like this again.' Her voice was a whisper, her eyes misty and pleading. 'I won't, Perry.'

'You'd better not, or you'll find the consequences damned unpleasant! Now you can set about restoring this room to its original appearance.'

'P-put the curtains b-back?' she faltered, her heart jerking.

'Everything - don't stand there, get it done. At once!'

'I can't,' she trembled. 'The curtains were very old - and when Bebbie washed them they - they just fell to pieces. ...'

'Do you mean to say I have to put up with this - abomination?' he thundered.

She nodded dumbly and started to cry.

'It's not an abomination—'

'That's a matter of opinion.' Suddenly he took her chin in his hand and tilted her face up with a rough and angry gesture. He seemed inflamed by the dark smudges where she had brushed the tears away with dirty fingers. 'In future you will respect both my privacy and my authority in this house. Do I make myself understood?'

'Yes.'

'And you'll conduct yourself with a little more dignity,' he went on. 'Don't ever let me see you in this disgusting condition again. I've no wish that my wife shall be the laughing stock of the servants!'

Once in her room all control gave way; Janis flung herself on the bed and sobbed as though her heart would break. To have taken such care, hoping to please him - and then be told it was an abomination! It was *not*! The material was in good taste; even Bebbie had said the room was greatly improved.

And to suggest that she would pry into his personal belongings! ... Janis went again, stung by that unjust accusation.

After a long time she dried her eyes. Having given the matter much consideration - trying only to see it from Perry's point of view - she decided that perhaps, after all, she shouldn't have entered his study in his absence. Yes, he had every right to be annoyed. After washing and changing Janis went downstairs to join him at dinner. She would apologize, then things would be just as they were before he went away.

She had taken particular care with her toilet, trying to look her best, but Perry never glanced up as she entered the room, and the meal was eaten in complete silence.

They took their coffee in the playroom, and the homely atmosphere gave her more courage.

'Perry...'

He glanced up from the magazine he was reading, his expression frigid.

'Well?'

'I'm sorry. I know now I shouldn't have done it.' Her lip trembled and she looked at him like an unhappy child. 'I - I just didn't think. Everything looked so drab and I wanted to make it bright for you...It was no use, for his icy expression did not change. No amount of penitence on her part would soften him. This puzzled her as she sat there, watching him in silence as he again became absorbed in his magazine. Despite her self-reproach, her admission that she had done wrong, she could not help feeling that his treatment of her was much harsher than she deserved. She could not explain why, but she had the strange feeling that his punishment covered some other crime altogether, that the changed room had not greatly angered him, but that it had provided an excuse for him to vent his wrath on her. He glanced up as if forced by her stare and a little gasp left her lips. She knew without the slightest doubt that he had actually *wanted* an excuse for venting his wrath on her! After a little while she said, with dignity, 'Would you like to be alone, Perry?'

'I'd prefer it.'

His quick response pierced her heart; she could not think why he had the power to hurt her so. But she was hurt, and the tears felt hot and heavy behind her eyes as she rose hastily from her chair. Never would she allow him to see how easily he could hurt her.

'Very well.' Her voice was low, retaining its dignity. 'I'll leave you.' For a moment their eyes met; blue ones, wide and bewildered; brown ones, hard and relentless. But it was the brown ones that fell this time. 'Good night, Perry.' Janis closed the door softly behind her.

During the weeks that followed Janis made no attempt to re-kindle the tiny spark of tolerance - Janis felt sure Perry would not call it friendship - that he had shown her before he went away; but even her quiet air of dignity seemed to irritate him, so that when he did speak - which was very seldom - he either snapped at her impatiently, or treated her to a scornful tirade that humiliated her almost beyond endurance. With the passing of each day he became more and more remote, until she despaired of ever reaching him at all. The future stretched before her, lonely and frightening. She had wanted so much to make a success of their marriage, even though she knew Perry would never love her, but he had put a barrier between them, and only he knew how to remove it.

Strangely, Janis sometimes felt that this was a defensive barrier, resolutely built to prevent him from being hurt. In one unguarded moment, when they were sitting one on either side of the fire in the playroom, she caught him staring into the flames with such unhappiness in his dark eyes that she could barely suppress an impulse to go to him, to draw his head against her and comfort him. But the next moment the familiar hard lines appeared, and the notion that Perry needed comfort seemed ridiculous in*the extreme.

Janis began to spend her afternoons in the kitchen with Bebbie; here she would curl up on the old-fashioned sofa, listening to stories of Perry's childhood. Bebbie would tell her of the pranks into which he would lead Avril; how he would always take the blame - and the punishment; and how he would make Avril sit for hours, not daring to move, while he fished for trout in the brook.

'They were very, very good friends, weren't they?' Janis sighed wistfully. 'It's a wonder they never married—' And, suddenly realizing that that was not quite the thing to say, 'I'm glad, of course, that they didn't.' That seemed wrong, too, but if Bebby noticed she made no comment.

'Avril wouldn't have done for him at all. Two people as fond of their own way as she and Perry would lead a cat and dog life. You're just right for him, as I told you once before.'

Janis's face was sad and her lips trembled.

'You're always so wise, Bebby, but this time you're quite mistaken; Perry hates me.'

'He was annoyed on account of the curtains, but—' Bebby broke off, shrugging.

'Something else angered him,' Janis asserted, shaking her head. 'I often have the feeling that he resents my presence in the house, and then - then I feel like running away.'

Bebby looked startled.

'You must do no such thing! Don't you know how we'd all miss you?'

'Perry would be glad.'

'Nonsense! He'd be very annoyed if you put him to the trouble of finding you!' At which Janis smiled faintly. Perry wouldn't take the least trouble to find her, she decided, and at the thought she had the greatest difficulty not to rest her head on Bebby's breast again, and weep her heart out, as she had done on that very first night. 'It's a pity you fell in love with him so soon,' Bebby sighed, eyeing her shrewdly. 'Perry always gets what he wants far too easily. To be the one to fall in love first would have done him the world of good!'

Janis stared, but she did not resent the fact that Bebby had guessed the truth about her feelings for her husband.

'Gets what he wants?' Janis could almost have laughed at the irony of it. 'Perry doesn't want me - he never will.'

'No ...? That remains to be seen.' The confidence of her words startled Janis. Did Bebbby actually believe he would want her, some time . . . ? It only went to show how little she knew him, even though she had brought him up.

Perry's treatment of his wife did not escape Avril, and she and John called for her one evening and took her to a show in Chester. It was then that Janis met Richard. During the interval John went for refreshments and Richard came up and calmly asked to be introduced. It occurred to Janis, though, later, that he must have concluded that she was Perry's wife.

Literally staggered by his effrontery, Avril stammered out an introduction before she had time to think.

'What a charming cousin!' He took Janis's hand and held it in a tight grip. 'Janis? A pretty name to match a pretty face.' He had the height and aristocratic bearing of the Catons, but none of their arrogance. Suave, polite, he possessed an easy charm that rarely failed to captivate women, a circumstance that had brought him much pleasure - and caused many broken hearts.

'I - please—' Janis tried to draw her hand away, wondering how Avril could bear to speak to this man who had tried to do so much harm to Perry. 'My husband wouldn't want me to—' She was swiftly interrupted as Richard, seeing John returning, bade her good night.

'Not good-bye,' he added, 'for I'm sure we shall meet again.' And with that he was gone.

'What did that fellow want?' John was clearly furious and, in some dismay, Avril told him what had happened.

'I just didn't have time to think—'

'You introduced him?' John snapped, and then, 'Janis, you're not to speak to him again, do you hear?'

His manner was so characteristic of Perry that Janis could only stare at him in amazement.

'Of course I won't speak to him,' she said. 'I do understand Perry wouldn't want me to.'

'You know they are bitter enemies?' and when Janis nodded, 'Perry would be furious if he knew Avril had been stupid enough to introduce you to him!'

'But I've told you, it happened so unexpectedly,' Avril protested, a deep flush rising.

'That's a darned silly excuse!'

'Don't quarrel,' Janis begged. 'I've promised I won't ever speak to him again, so please don't be vexed with Avril.'

John let the matter drop then, and within a few minutes was his usual self again.

Life with Perry was becoming unbearable, and the next time Janis visited the doctor he was quick to notice her unhappiness. He asked her about it, but loyalty made her reluctant to confide.

'It's nothing—'

'Things are clearly not as they should be, my dear,' he interrupted grimly. 'If you don't tell me about it I shall ask Perry, for nothing must retard your progress.' Janis looked startled. After a moment she felt an arm about her shoulders. 'I've known your husband for many years, and I would never have suspected him of unkindness,' he murmured in soft and gentle tones. 'And yet it's obvious that he's not playing his part in this strange marriage—'

"You know about—about—?"

'I know the circumstances of the marriage, Janis - that couldn't possibly have been kept a secret from those who knew him, and knew of the plight he was in, but I did expect Perry would try to make the best of it. Apparently he isn't

doing this and, as I've said, I'm not prepared to run any risks with your health. I want you to tell me everything.'

Janis spoke haltingly, reluctant to talk about Perry, and in fact she said very little, but the gleam of perception that crept into the doctor's eyes as he again sat down left her in no doubt about his reading into her story all that she had left unsaid. This produced a feeling of guilt, and yet she had to go on and mention her bewilderment over what Perry had termed 'their agreement'.

'I thought at first that he meant - meant he wanted the marriage to be normal,' she continued with difficulty, 'but he acts so strangely, and talks strangely too, that I'm wondering if I made a mistake, and that he meant something different altogether.'

The doctor's thick brows contracted in a frown.

'What else could he have meant?'

It was with even greater difficulty that Janis spoke now, for she had never before allowed her doubts to come to the forefront of her mind.

'I've been thinking that he might have meant a ... separation—'

'A separation?'

'Well... if we didn't - what I mean is, he could have our marriage annulled, couldn't he?'

'Good gracious, child, Perry wouldn't do that!' Yet even as he spoke Janis sensed his sudden uncertainty. She felt the idea had never before occurred to him, but that he was certainly considering it now. 'What are these strange things he says to you?' he wanted to know, his voice faintly perturbed.

Mainly, they were his odd remarks when she spoke of the future, Janis told him, but was unable to expand on that, suddenly realizing that Perry's remarks had never held anything concrete. In fact, right from the first he had been vague to the point of ambiguity regarding the agreement she was supposed to have made with him.

Dr. Grant's fingers moved mechanically, tapping the edge of the desk as he sat there considering her words, his brow creased in thought. As Janis fell silent he glanced up, noting her deep anxiety and doubt.

'I think your first assumption was correct,' he said in tones of gentle reassurance. 'You must have patience with Perry for a little while. As soon as I can give you a clean bill of health everything will be all right.'

Janis stared at him in some perplexity.

'I don't know what you mean?'

'Didn't Perry tell you that I forbade anything personal between you until you were quite well ?'

'No....' She shook her head, trying to take in the significance of this. 'No, Perry never said a word about it.'

'Well, that's what I did tell him.' His eyes moved from the tender curves of her body and graceful lines of her neck to her face, and then to her hair, and he smiled. 'I imagine your husband is finding life something of a strain at present, but I don't doubt he'll soon appreciate your charms once your lives can be lived in a normal way.' The swift colour mounted in Janis's cheeks and his smile deepened. 'I shall probably give you your discharge in a fortnight's time. Until then you must bear with his impatience, his unkindness, for I'm certain it stems solely from this strain I've mentioned.'

'Is that the reason - oh, Dr. Grant, do you really believe it is?' She recalled how the prospect of Perry's coming to her had once filled her with dismay, but now - now her one fervent desire was that her husband would want her.

'I'm sure of it. Perry would never be deliberately unkind.'

Strange, she mused, how everyone who knew him always intimated that he was a kind man— Avril had even described him as gentle! - and yet with her he was just the opposite. But Dr. Grant's words seemed to solve the mystery of Perry's treatment of her.

'You couldn't give me my discharge today?' she ventured shyly, her colour deepening as she saw the sudden twitch that came to the doctor's lips.

'I'd rather not. You're still not as fit as you think you are, you know. But run along now - and remember, no more worrying; everything is going to be all right.'

'Thank you for telling me; I do understand now,' and, turning as she reached the door, 'You don't think that next week...?'

'I do not! I said a fortnight and I meant it!'

As it happened, Janis did not see much of Perry during the next fortnight. Earlier, he had cleared a large field of young saplings and planted it with potatoes in order to put the ground into good condition, and now they were lifting the produce. Avril did not assist in this, but John came over at the week-end to lend a hand.

On Sunday they had tea in the garden, the girls still in jodhpurs after riding. Janis looked very small and slender in hers; the white open-necked shirt emphasized her tan, and her fair hair was bleached almost white at the front.

John's eyes flickered lovingly over Avril's slim figure, and Janis felt a lump in her throat as she caught Perry's indifferent glance. But she always made excuses for him now, and tried not to be hurt, for soon - the day after tomorrow, in fact - she would be seeing Dr. Grant and, if everything went well, she would be able to carry out her part of the bargain. Perry had certainly carried out his, she mused, thinking of the lovely clothes he had bought her, of the generous monthly allowance, and of the home he had given her ... the only real home she had known since the death of her parents.

Her aunt's house had never seemed like home, not like this one. The Manor was different, somehow. Janis felt she had known it always. She suddenly thought of the little cedar tree she had planted, and how she had felt as if she were planting her heart with it ... here at Dene Royal. John had said it was the wrong time for planting, but she hoped fervently that it would live.

'Penny for them, Cinders? You look very happy.'

Janis glanced up with a smile, at the same time profoundly conscious of her husband's penetrating gaze.

'I was thinking of my tree. I do hope it won't die,' she said earnestly.

'If it does you can always plant another - can't she, Perry?'

'I suppose so,' came the expressionless reply.

'In November—'

'But I don't want to plant another one. I want this one to live.' There was a note of desperation in her voice, and John said laughingly,

'You sound as though something dreadful will happen if it dies. Be prepared, Cinders - I doubt very much if it will survive this weather.'

'But you said if I watered it well it would probably live, even though it was the wrong time, and I've watered it every day.'

'I didn't expect another heatwave. Don't worry, though, Perry will order you another from the nursery.'

Perry gave him a sardonic glance. Still trying to make a success of someone else's marriage - when he had made a failure of his own— Perry bit his lip, ashamed of that ungenerous thought. John's wife had been entirely to blame; and there was no doubt that he and Avril would be perfectly happy if marriage ever became possible for them.

'Perhaps I should have listened to you and waited till the autumn,' Janis was saying, and Perry raised his brows. She saw the gesture and was oddly disturbed by it, but almost immediately he was laughing at something Avril said and Janis's misgivings disappeared.

The two men returned to the fields after tea, and Janis went to bed before Perry came in. The following day she spent with Avril, once again going to her room before he came in. On the Tuesday he decided to come up to the house for lunch, and when Janis returned from the doctor's she found it laid

in the playroom, much to her surprise. But she was glad, too, for it was her favourite room and she always felt more confident and at ease when in it. All the same, she found it difficult to begin. Was this really what Perry wanted? Supposing Dr. Grant were mistaken—?

'Was your visit to Dr. Grant satisfactory?' Perry inquired, breaking into her thoughts.

'Yes,' came the eager response. It wasn't going to be so difficult after all, not now that Perry himself had provided the opening. 'He says that we, that I—'

'Good; I have something to discuss with you.'

Her eyes flew to his, for something in his tone filled her with dismay. He stared broodingly at her for a space and then, curtly,

'It's about that arrangement we made. There have been times lately when, in spite of what you told me, I've wondered whether you've forgotten what that arrangement really was?'

'I haven't forgotten, Perry, and I'm quite willing to do as you wish.' She lowered her eyes. 'Dr. Grant says—'

'Never mind Dr. Grant for the moment,' Perry snapped. 'The point I want to make clear is that this state of affairs can't go on much longer. It's becoming unbearable to us both.'

'Then we're to be friends?'

'Friends?'

'Like we were before you went away.'

'I am not aware that we have ever been friends.'

His manner was hardly encouraging, but Janis went on bravely,

'Perhaps not friends exactly, but you were not so impatient with me then.' She waited a few seconds. 'Perry, we are going to be friends some time? You can't treat me like this for ever.'

'For ever?' he echoed, frowning. 'What do you mean? You've just said you're willing to do as I wish.'

'Yes, I am.' Her dismay sharpened as all her doubts and fears returned. 'I don't understand you at all, Perry.' She found her hands were trembling and she clasped them tightly in her lap.

'Neither do I understand you,' he responded curtly. 'These continued references to the future scarcely indicate any willingness on your part to keep to your word. However, you have assured me that you are willing, and that's why I want to discuss the matter now. I had meant to postpone it until you were absolutely fit and well, but I can't see that there's anything to be gained and I'm sure you'll be as eager as I to get the matter settled. I shall arrange everything; you'll be well provided for - I did promise to increase your allowance,' he went on to remind her, 'and there will be no need for you to work. And when the annulment goes through I shall also settle a sum—' He stopped as Janis half rose to her feet, her whole body quivering, her face drained of colour. 'What—?'

'So - so that's what you meant!' Despite those vague warnings she had begun to experience, despite her renewed doubts and fears of a few moments ago, Janis stared at him in disbelief. It was as if her heart and mind refused to accept the fact that her husband didn't want her, that he had never intended the marriage to be permanent. She just couldn't believe he had used her so callously, had used the sacred state of marriage merely to achieve his desires and his revenge. And because of this non-acceptance she spoke in desperation, on an urgent note of pleading, not quite realizing that her words were irrelevant to the situation. 'I may not have been a very ... useful wife to you, but it will be different now. Dr. Grant—'

'What a disgusting way you have of expressing yourself!' Perry cut in sharply. 'Have you no delicacy? I told you right at the first that I wanted nothing from you!'

Her body sagged.

'Yes - of course you did, but I thought you meant--' She tailed off. What good would it do to talk about that now?

'You knew our marriage was a business arrangement, nothing more,' he said with some exasperation. 'We've both benefited by it, but, as I said at the time, it was only temporary.'

She lowered her head in humiliation, recalling her blushes when Perry was explaining about the arrangement. No wonder he had seemed puzzled by her attitude! And then she thought of her eagerness of a few moments ago her eagerness to impart her news to Perry, and her hope that, as the doctor stated, everything was going to be all right. She had not supposed that their new relationship was going to produce any sudden change in her husband, or that he would ever feel any great love for her, but she had hoped that gradually he could come to care for her, just a little.

He was waiting, still with that look of exasperation on his face, and she told him, in tones scarcely above a whisper, that she had made a mistake, had misunderstood his meaning.

'But— How could you make a mistake? I put everything clearly to you.' He was frowning in recollection, obviously trying to remember what had been said. Would he recall her embarrassment? She hoped not.

'I see that now.' She looked up at him, a stricken expression in her eyes. 'But I didn't think you meant a separation.'

'Then what did you think I meant?' There was a sudden urgency in his tones; to her amazement he seemed gravely perturbed.

'It doesn't matter—"But it does matter. I thought you understood. I wouldn't have left you under a misapprehension.' There was anger in his tones, though the gravity of his expression remained."Whatever my faults I play fair, Janis. If you didn't understand why didn't you mention it at the time?'

'I thought I understood.' She moved unsteadily to the door, noting vaguely that the lunch lay untouched on the table. 'May I go now?' For the first time since she had left the hospital she felt ill. Perry's voice drifted to her from a long way off.

'Are you all right?' and he came towards her, but she put out a hand to prevent any closer approach.

'Yes, I'm all right, but I want to go to my room.'

'But this mistake. ...' Janis left him talking to himself.

As she reached the top of the stairs she was conscious of Bebbie in the hall; heard her say,

'A parcel for Janis. There's six pounds to pay.'

'I'll get it. Leave the parcel on the table; Janis will see it when she comes. ...' Perry's voice faded as she moved along the landing and entered her room.

The curtain material, she thought bitterly and, flinging herself on the bed, she buried her face in the quilt and wept despairingly into it.

CHAPTER SIX

PERRY spent the afternoon in the fields, but, somehow, he could not work, and at tea-time he came up to the house instead of having his baggings outside. The parcel was still on the hall table where Bebby had left it.

Janis did not put in an appearance at tea, and Perry was relieved that it was the housekeeper's afternoon for visiting her sister in the neighbouring village. She usually stayed until fairly late in the evening, when her brother-in-law would run her home in the car. He was in no mood to answer Bebby's awkward questions.

He had his dinner alone, still thankful for Bebby's absence. Then much later he went upstairs and, entering his room, stood by the communicating door. There was no sound at all. Try as he would, Perry could not forget that stricken look, and it was with a feeling of deep anxiety that he opened the door and stepped through. For an astonished moment he stared round the room. It was exactly as his mother had had it; the furniture in the same place, the same carpet... and even the little carved trinket box, his birthday present to her only a month before she died, was on the dressing table, just where he had put it when she lay so ill.

Then he saw Janis, a little heap on the bed. Several times her body shook with sobs, or perhaps she was shivering, he thought, noting the thin nylon nightdress which she now wore. She raised her head as he bent over her, her eyes momentarily blank and he knew she had been asleep. Then she moved to the other side of the bed and slipped off, the tears running unchecked down her face.

'Don't cry like that,' he said sharply. 'Get into bed - you must be frozen. What do you want to lie on top of the covers for?' Going over to the electric fire, he switched it on. When he turned Janis was standing by the window, wiping her eyes with the front of her nightdress. 'Get into bed,' he said again. 'Do you want to catch your death of cold?' It wasn't cold really, but Janis was shivering violently now.

'I don't care,' she retorted childishly, and Perry's eyes narrowed.

'Don't you, indeed?' His tones became dangerously quiet. 'Well, I do. Are you getting into that bed or shall I put you there myself?' He walked purposefully across the room and Janis hastily obeyed him. 'That's better,' he said grimly. 'Have you had anything to eat?'

'I don't want anything,' she returned with a note of defiance.

Perry sighed exasperatedly and went out, coming back ten minutes later with a hot water bottle and a tray. Janis stared. Why hadn't he sent the new maid, Mary?

'Sit up.' He propped the other pillow behind her and gave her the hot water bottle. 'Put this in beside you.'

'Thank you.'

Placing the tray carefully on the bed, Perry looked for something to put round her shoulders. She made no attempt to eat anything and, tucking her dressing gown round her, he said abruptly,

'Eat your supper.'

'I don't want it.'

Perry raised his eyebrows.

'You'll eat it, nevertheless.' He sat down on the edge of the bed. 'You might as well begin, Janis, because I intend to sit here until you've finished.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'What an obstinate child you are!' he exclaimed with some asperity. 'You'll eat it if I have to stay here all night!'

Janis picked up a sandwich and started to nibble at it.

'Why didn't you come down for dinner?'

'I didn't want to intrude.' Janis meant that to be dignified, but it was very childish, really, and Perry's lips twitched.

'You think I would want you to starve, then? Surely I'm not such a brute as that?'

'I didn't think you'd want me - under the circumstances.'

'I wouldn't want you to go without your dinner!'

Janis did not reply; she wanted him to leave. He had humiliated her enough already, and she knew that if he stayed much longer she would be crying again.

'Drink your milk.'

Janis sipped it obediently. Then, putting the glass on the tray, she said,

'When would you like me to go?'

He was taken aback, as though forgetting for the moment that this was what he wanted. 'Go?'

She nodded.

'I shall have to leave here before we can have our marriage annulled, I suppose.' There was a quiet resignation and dignity in her tone and Perry moved uncomfortably. 'I can go tomorrow if you like.'

Janis wondered at the steadiness of her voice ... because, if he did prefer her to leave tomorrow, she had no idea where she would go. The old familiar feeling of loneliness engulfed her; hot tears filled her eyes, and she abruptly turned her head away.

'I've been reconsidering that,' he told her after a prolonged pause. 'We shall wait, after all, until you are completely out of Dr. Grant's care.'

Janis turned to him, wondering why he had changed his mind.

'I'm completely well,' she began with unhappy resignation ... and then stopped.

'But you're not yet out of Grant's care, are you ?'

Only for a fleeting second did she hesitate. If she could stay here for another few days - perhaps a week - she might be able to find a job, or, at least, somewhere to go.

'N-not yet.'

'Then you'll stay till you are. Lie down now - and promise me you won't cry when I've gone.' As Perry tucked the bedclothes round her, with unfamiliar gentleness, she smiled wanly up at him.

'Thank you for letting me stay. I'll start looking for work tomorrow.'

Perry gave an exclamation of annoyance.

'I've said that you needn't work. I intend making adequate provision for you.'

'You're very kind,' she told him gravely, 'but I can't take your money. In any case, I shall be better if my mind is fully occupied.'

Seeing the determined set of the pointed little chin, Perry knew that argument - for the present at any rate - was useless. He was not interested in what she did when she left him. Why, then, should he feel so disturbed at the idea of her slaving for some tyrant like Mrs. Poole?

'You will not look for work while you're here. Is that understood?'

'I shall begin looking for work tomorrow.'

Perry's mouth tightened. He was quickly discovering that the pliable, submissive Janis could be as stubborn as he!

'Until you leave here you will respect my wishes!' he said imperiously. 'And I will not have you looking for work!' His eyes, glinting with the old

arrogance, met hers, and for a long moment she was able to hold his gaze defiantly. Then she lowered her head.

'Very well, I'll do as you wish.'

As Perry picked up the tray he suddenly noticed the framed snapshot of himself. The tiny frame stood at an angle ... facing the bed! There was a moment's profound silence before Janis said apologetically,

'I found it in the attic; you said I could go up there.'

'Yes ...' His thoughts were a long way off, as he stood looking down at her. Then, gazing round him again, Perry was conscious of a feeling entirely new.... He actually felt humble. A strange experience for one so proud ... yet not unpleasant!

Sliding down further, Janis peeped at him cautiously from under the bedclothes.

'I know I shouldn't have taken the furniture without asking you. I wouldn't have done so if I'd known I wasn't staying. I'll get it changed back again in the morning.'

Perry swallowed hard. After a while he said firmly, 'Don't do that, Janis. The room is far nicer as it is.'

'You don't mind?' The way she said that gave him no satisfaction at all. He shook his head, wondering why he did not resent her action. He had hated what Glenda bought, but had left it here because he had no wish for Janis to have his mother's possessions. He had wanted Glenda to have them, though, he recalled grimly, and she had refused. They were 'clumsy and old-fashioned'. Glancing down at the bed, he came to the conclusion that women were the most unpredictable creatures ever made. Janis was thinking exactly the same about men as he said, in the gentlest way he knew,

'No, Janis, I don't mind at all. Good night.'

Bebby was waiting for him when he came downstairs.

'Where's Janis?' she demanded. 'Mary tells me she hasn't had her dinner and that you asked for a tray.'

Perry's brows shot up. He was in no mood to argue with his housekeeper.

'She is unwell, and won't be down for dinner,' he replied curtly.

'Why?'

'What do you mean, why? I've told you she's unwell. Do you mind leaving me?'

'Not until I've told you what I think about you. The way you've treated that child lately has made me ashamed of the fact that I brought you up!'

'Aren't you forgetting yourself?' Perry asked dangerously.

'If I am it's not before time! You've evidently forgotten that if it hadn't been for Janis you wouldn't be standing there threatening me with dismissal—'

'I'm not thinking of dismissing you.'

'That's a matter of indifference to me,' Bebbie retorted. 'But while I'm here I won't stand by and have Janis ill-treated. You're deliberately punishing her for what that other little - for what the Forbes woman did to you—'

Perry's fist clenched.

'Get out!' he thundered, 'before I really lose my temper!'

'And I persuaded Janis to marry you,' she mused. 'I had money and could have helped her—'

'You persuaded her! She didn't need persuading.'

'She had nowhere to go and you refused to help her,' Bebbie shot at him. 'If I'd offered to help her she would never have married you. I was a fool; I loved you and didn't want you to lose the house.'

Perry watched her as she went out, feeling convinced that she would give him notice when Janis left. He could not imagine the house without Bebbie. For the first time, angry words had passed between them....

What a muddle he had made of everything! His eyes lighted on the portrait of his uncle ... and he swore softly under his breath.

Although awake very early the next morning, Janis did not go down until she was sure Perry would have finished his breakfast and gone out. To her surprise, however, he was in the breakfast-room, and one glance at the table told her he had not yet begun his meal.

'I'm sorry. ... I thought you would have finished.' She half turned to the door.

'Don't go, Janis,' and, after a slight hesitation, 'I waited for you.'

'You want to speak to me?'

'No - to make sure you would eat your breakfast,' came the astonishing reply.

'Oh—' She glanced guiltily at the clock. 'I wouldn't have kept you waiting if I'd known. I'm sorry.'

Her words brought a quick frown to his face, but he made no further comment and they ate their breakfast in silence.

He went out immediately the meal was over, surprising Janis by telling her he would be spending the whole day in Chester. He had to see Hannings and then he intended visiting an old friend who had just come out of hospital.

It rained all day. Janis had been out only once, braving the weather to see how her tree was progressing. Somehow she still couldn't help thinking that if only it would live everything would come out right. But she was disappointed; almost all the needles had fallen off - the ground underneath was covered with them - and she gave a sigh of despair.

The rest of the day was miserable; she was used to being lonely but, until yesterday, had hoped that she and Perry would eventually draw nearer to each other in friendship. Now there was nothing to look forward to, and the future terrified her.

Perry had said she need not work, but then he didn't know just how necessary it was that her mind be fully occupied. For if she were idle there would be nothing to stop Perry intruding continuously into her thoughts - nothing to prevent life from becoming unbearable. She must forget him, at least, for part of the time.

'The nights will be bad enough,' Janis thought. 'The long, lonely nights when I won't know where he is or what he is doing.' Why did she love him? What had he ever done to endear himself so hopelessly to her? Made her unhappy, despised her, rarely been civil to her. ... Yet she did love him. No one could ever take his place.

'Why couldn't you have liked me a little - only a very little - just enough to have made you want me to stay with you?' she whispered convulsively.

Janis never changed for dinner when alone and, not thinking Perry would dine at home, she went into the playroom, where she usually had a tray brought to her.

'Are you dining in here?' Mary asked in surprise.

'Yes, Mary. I always do.' Janis looked puzzled, but no more so than Mary, who hastened away to do her bidding.

Sitting on the rug with the tray beside her, Janis did not hear the door open, or know that Perry was watching her as he leant against the jamb, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets.

Her profile was towards him. She looked so small and fragile in the firelight, the glow flushing her cheeks and sending coppery glints into the soft curls clustered about her high forehead. For some quite inexplicable reason Perry felt reluctant to disclose his presence. But after a while he came into the room.

'So this is how you dine.'

She jumped, and rose hastily to her feet, almost upsetting the tray.

'I didn't expect you to be dining at home.' She smoothed her dress with agitated fingers. 'Shall I - do you want me to have mine with you ?'

He nodded, his eyes still fixed on her face.

'I think you should. We'd better keep up appearances before the servants.'

Janis didn't see why; she would be gone from here in a few days' time. Perry didn't know that, of course. Still, he knew it would not be very long....

'I'll go and change.' Her eyes fluttered to his. He must be heartily disapproving of this way of dining - but, strangely, there was nothing in his face to show it. 'I'll be as quick as I can. I'm sorry to keep you waiting.'

He picked up the tray; Janis ran past him and upstairs to her room.

'Do you always have a tray when you're alone?' Perry asked as they were waiting for the second course.

'It seems silly to change and come in here.' Perry would do so, she felt sure. Another proof of the difference in their positions. 'I suppose you consider me very ill-bred to sit on the floor and eat off a tray,' she said abruptly, speaking her thoughts aloud - with, at the same time, a profound desire to hit back - and a look of astonishment came to Perry's face. It was the first time she had dared to speak to him in just that tone of voice, and the childish desire for revenge surprised him. He realized that he had come to take her gentleness for granted, and thus the little note of peevishness was strangely out of place.

'I wouldn't have this misunderstanding happen for anything,' he said after a pause. 'I did think I'd made my offer perfectly plain to you; you don't regret it more than I.'

'It doesn't matter now. In any case, I don't think we could ever have been happy together.' She smiled faintly. 'You're obviously so far above me.'

'I have never said that, Janis.'

'Words weren't necessary,' she told him gently, breaking off as Mary entered the room. When she had gone again, Janis continued, 'You've shown me by every conceivable means that you consider me far beneath you.' Janis felt she'd grown up since yesterday, and a note of experience and maturity entered into her voice. 'But, however ill-bred I may be,' she went on, 'if I despised anyone half as much as you despise me I would at least have the good manners not to show it.'

An astounded silence followed, and Janis was aghast at her temerity. It seemed that for a few seconds she had lost all fear of him; that her desire for revenge had given her courage. But it was gone now, and she faltered contritely,

'I'm sorry—'

'For heaven's sake, don't keep on apologizing!' It was the first time that anyone - other than Avril, and he had always supposed her to be joking - had accused him of snobbery. Proud he might be, but he was no snob ... and she had implied that his manners were lacking, too! He would never dine at home again while she was here.

Janis remained silent, occasionally glancing at him through her lashes. He was plainly furious, but that was nothing new.

She would tell him the doctor had discharged her, she suddenly decided, and go away tomorrow. Then looking round the room, she felt a most passionate wistfulness. How could she leave this house which she loved so much? Loved, not because it was old and luxurious, but because it was the first home she had known since she was eight years old. She buried her face in her hands.

'Janis.' Perry's voice held genuine distress. 'Don't cry—'

'I'm not crying - not really,' she assured him, raising her head. But she was very near to it, he could see.

'I'm sorry I was rough. Come along; we'll have our coffee in the playroom.'

Janis managed an apologetic little smile.

'Being in all day makes you sort of - miserable.'

'Have you been in all day ?'

'Except for looking at my tree. That only took a few minutes. It's rained all day.'

Perry looked surprised.

'It was wet this morning in Chester, but it soon cleared up.'

When they were seated in the playroom, having their coffee by the fire, he said interestedly,

'Has your tree taken?'

'It's dead.' Something in the way she said that made him rejoin quickly,

'Never mind; I think I know where there's a small cedar growing wild. We'll dig it up and you can plant it now, while the weather is wet.'

'I don't want to plant another one,' she sighed, shaking her head forlornly. 'It won't be like that one.'

'Nonsense.' There was a hint of humour in Perry's voice. Janis had planted her tree in the shrubbery in place of one that had died and, for the life of him, he could not see why she attached so much importance to it. 'We'll get it tomorrow before I start work.'

'I'm not planting another tree.'

'Please yourself,' he returned shortly and, picking up a book, he began to read. After a while Janis rose, saying she was going for a walk now that the rain had stopped.

Perry looked up as she moved away.

'Has Twinkle foaled yet?'

'I don't think so; Old Tom didn't say anything when he came for his baggings.'

'Hmm. ...' Perry laid his book aside. 'Perhaps I'd better nip over and have a look at her; she should have foaled a fortnight ago.' He had been very worried about Twinkle, the only carthorse remaining on the farm, because she had not been well lately and on several occasions he had had to bring the vet to her. 'Fetch your coat and come with me. That'll be a walk for you.' Janis gasped ... and just stared at him. 'Don't you want to?'

She nodded, still rather dazed.

'Be quick, then,' he urged. 'It's going to rain again before very long.'

'Will you wait till I've changed my dress?' she inquired anxiously.

'Yes,' he said, and Janis sped up to her room.

After changing with record speed she came to get her coat - and found the large wardrobe locked. Who could have locked it? The only thing *she* locked was the trinket box. Making another futile attempt to open it she turned with frantic haste and ran downstairs to Bebby.

'My wardrobe's locked. I can't—'

'I locked it,' Bebby informed her. 'The new daily woman cleaned your room today, and I never leave things open until I know what people are like. I thought I'd unlocked everything again, but I must have forgotten that.'

'Please be quick!' Janis hopped with impatience. 'Where's the key?'

'Just a minute.' With her usual calm Bebbly went into the other room, Janis close on her heels. 'I must have-left it in my apron pocket....'

'Do be quick!' Janis implored. 'Perry won't wait for me!'

The key was found at once, but to Janis it seemed that she had been far too long in getting ready. When she did take out her coat she just flung it on, not waiting to fasten it, and ran downstairs. Perry was not there, and she wasn't surprised, having already convinced herself that he had become impatient and gone without her.

The front door was open and she sped down the steps, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. Her lips quivering, she turned and ran back round the side of the house. He must have taken the short cut through the orchard, in spite of the wet grass. But he was not there either and, sheer disappointment flooding over her, she returned to the house, with dragging steps, her coat drooping forlornly off her shoulders.

As she entered the hall Perry appeared from the library.

'Are you ready—?' He stopped short, his eyes flickering over her in evident surprise.

'Oh, Perry, you're here!' she gasped.

'Of course I'm here,' he frowned. 'Where did you expect me to be?'

She took a step towards him.

'I - thought you'd g-gone without m-me...' and to his utter astonishment she started to cry.

He stood looking down at her, tall, assured, his shirt gleaming white beneath the upturned storm collar of his coat. They made a startling contrast, but for once Janis was oblivious of everything save the fact that Perry had waited for her, after all.

'What made you think I'd gone without you? Didn't I say I would wait?' he asked her, a most odd expression on his face.

'Yes, but you weren't there,' she sobbed piteously, 'and I thought you'd become impatient because I kept you waiting.'

'But you hadn't kept me waiting. I didn't expect you to change your dress in a second.'

'It seemed a long time.' She was drying her cheeks with the back of her hand; Perry took out his handkerchief and, tilting her face, wiped her eyes.

'You're very young, aren't you?' he said rather gently. Then, taking hold of her coat, he put it firmly on her shoulders and fastened it. 'Run along and comb your hair. I won't move from here.'

Janis smiled self-consciously as she came downstairs again, and Perry said curiously,

'Would it have mattered so very much if I'd gone without you?'

'Yes, yes, it would.'

He regarded her with a baffled stare.

'But why, you silly child ?'

'I wanted to come with you,' she replied simply. 'It's so long since we went for a walk together and - and this may be the last time.'

He frowned slightly but made no comment. They walked briskly, going by the lane to avoid getting their feet wet. Skirting the lake on both sides was a lake, colourful with the plumage of wildfowl and water lilies and the tinted foliage of aquatic plants growing in profusion all along the lake sides. High on a distant rise stood the old dove-cote, renovated by a wealthy business family without regard to cost or time. Its terraced gardens, a spiral staircase of colour winding round and round the circular building, swept down to another lake, while behind the dove-cote rose a high cuesta, its wooded

slopes forming a dark silhouette against a sombre rain-filled sky. The whole village belonged to the Dene Royal estate, and consequently no modern building had taken place. All was silent and still, the scene dominated by Dene Royal Manor, and by the massive Norman church, its great tower reflected in a fourth and larger lake. The lane curved, running alongside the wall on the east side of the park. In places the wall had fallen into ruin, revealing the long rectangular tilting ground, scene of mediaeval tournaments when the local 'queen of beauty' would sit in state upon a raised platform and watch the shining knights in armour display their feats of arms.

'I must have this wall repaired.' Perry spoke almost to himself, a tiredness in his voice. He had so much to do, Janis thought. It was such a pity that the place had been allowed to fall into this state of neglect.

But at least he had two gardeners now and the grounds were gradually taking on that cared-for aspect that had been so pronounced in the pictures Janis had seen in the *Cheshire World*.

Perry was satisfied with the condition of the horse. She would foal in a day or two, he said as they left the stable and began their way back to the house.

'Why did you call her Twinkle?' Janis wanted to know, looking up at her husband curiously.

'Avril christened her - called her after a horse of her own that died.'

'It seems a funny name for such a big horse.'

Perry laughed.

'I agree. I must have been in a most indulgent mood to have allowed her to give the horse so unsuitable a name.' Strangely talkative after that, Perry mentioned odd incidents of their childhood, and it was not difficult for Janis to imagine the bond between Perry and Avril, the comradeship which had begun so long ago and still remained so very strong. Her expression became wistful and, looking down at her, Perry said, on what Janis felt sure was a sudden impulse,

'Would you like to christen the foal?'

'Oh ... I would like that, very much,' she breathed, quite forgetting she would not be here when it grew up. The wistfulness had changed to a fleeting happiness and Perry's voice was strangely soft and gentle as he said,

'How easily pleased you are, my dear.' She was having to trot to keep up with him and he slackened his pace.

'Well, you see,' she began seriously, 'I've never christened anything before,' and, wrinkling her forehead, 'I shall think of a suitable name in bed.'

'Wait until you know the sex first,' he advised, smiling at her gravity.

'If I find names for both, I shall have one ready whatever sex it is,' she pointed out, and his smile deepened.

'You attach far too much importance to small things,' he said, still amused. 'It's only a foal you're christening, you know.'

Only a foal. ... A lump rose in her throat and she turned away so that Perry should not see how her lips trembled. Would Perry marry someone else when she had gone? Would his children play in the brook - on the stepping-stones placed there by him and Avril? Her terrible ache of hopelessness returned, and as they reached the house she announced her intention of going straight to bed.

'Why? Are you tired?'

'Not really; but there's nothing else to do.'

A cheerful, inviting blaze shone through the open door of the playroom. With a sudden unexpected gesture Perry took her arm, urging her forward into the room.

'Don't go to bed yet, Janis. It's much too early.' She stared in astonishment. Was it possible that he wanted her company? 'Take your coat off,' and when she obeyed, in a rather dazed manner, he surprised her even further by taking

her coat and putting it over the back of the couch. She felt uncomfortable, not knowing how to react to this inexplicable change in his attitude towards her, and sat stiffly on the chair, hoping he would as usual pick up a book and settle down to read. He didn't take up a book, but sat for a while staring into the fire, lost in thought. Janis stirred and he turned his head. There was a softness about the stern mouth and the familiar arrogance had left his face. Reaching for a stool, he put it by his chair.

'Sit here - and talk to me.'

'There? Near you—?' She had risen from her chair when suddenly she knew the reason for this change in his manner towards her, knew why he had taken her for the walk, and offered to let her christen the foal. He pitied her! Well, she could do without his pity - and she would let him see it!

Her frank clear eyes met his, deep resentment in their depths.

'I'm not a very interesting person to talk to; in any case, I'd rather go to bed. I've suddenly realized I'm tired!'

He looked startled, but returned quietly,

'I'm sure you're not. What's the real reason for your wanting to go to your room ?'

'It so happens,' she told him with a flash of anger, 'that I too have my pride. I neither need nor want your sympathy!'

His brows lifted, though he still remained calm.

'I wasn't aware that I had offered sympathy. I'm not a sympathetic person, as you should know.'

'You're not - kind, certainly. But that's nothing to boast about!' Bright little spots of colour fused her cheeks, and her fists were tightly clenched.

'I was not boasting—'

'Yes, you were! You're hard and proud - and you like being that way! I wondered why you walked with me just now, and it surprises me that you can feel pity for anyone or anything - but you needn't give me your pity! I can manage very well without it!' He seemed amused and she looked down at the priceless Chelsea group at her elbow. His expression changed and he watched her warily for a moment until, reassured by her prolonged hesitation, he said, on a note of laughter,

'Why, Janis, I do believe you're lecturing me! The conversation appears not to be so dull as you expected.'

'You think it's clever to laugh at me,' she retorted hotly. 'Just as you thought it clever to use me for your own ends and then cast me off—'

'Janis—'

'Yes, you did! But I don't care! I meant what I said; I don't need your pity, I can look after myself, and what's more - I don't want your money, either!' She stamped her foot with childish emphasis? 'I intend to - to get married again!'

'And I'm quite sure you will, Janis,' he agreed.

His indifference tore at her heart; she turned and stumbled to the door. Then, with a returning flash of anger, she swung round.

'You think no one of any consequence would want to marry me - but you're wrong! You weren't the first man. Arthur Poole asked me to marry him, and I wish I had. Then you would have lost your precious house!'

'What—?' Perry stood up and a greyness seemed to touch the corners of his mouth. 'Come here.'

'I'm going to bed—'

'Come here!'

Janis came back into the room, scared by his tone. Perry pointed to the stool and, obeying the unspoken command, she sat down.

'You never told me why you were dismissed from your post,' he reminded her grimly, 'but you're going to tell me now - and I want the truth.'

For a moment she hesitated ... but it did not matter what he thought of her now.

'Mrs. Poole found me in Arthur's bedroom at midnight - and you can think what you like!'

'Why were you in young Poole's bedroom?'

A blank stare was her only response. Where was the contempt she had expected? - the familiar scornful curve of his mouth? Sharply he repeated his question.

'Why do you think!' she flashed, tossing her head defiantly. But her defiance was short-lived. He moved, towering over her, his face like thunder.

'For the third time, why were you in this fellow's bedroom?'

'I - I was making the bed,' she faltered, starting to tremble.

'Making the bed?' To her surprise there was nothing sceptical in his gaze; his expression was in fact one of bewilderment. 'At midnight?'

'I was in my nightdress,' she added, aware that she should practise caution, yet driven on to tell him the worst. 'And now you know everything.'

'Do I ?' His lips were tight as he regarded her in wrathful silence for a while. 'Tell me the rest!' he commanded, but Janis remained stubbornly silent. 'Why were you making the bed at that time of the night? - For heaven's sake, girl, must I drag every word out of you!'

He seemed more furious with himself than with her, she thought. But how could that be?

'I didn't think you would believe me - about the bed, I mean.'

'Well, I do believe you. Now tell me all about it.'

'There isn't much to tell. I'd forgotten to make Arthur's bed - because the children had been extra troublesome all day - and I only remembered it after I'd gone to bed myself. They were all out and I ran along to do it. But they came in and Arthur came straight upstairs. Then - then his mother came up and - and said awful things. She said I was trying to make Arthur marry me—' Janis shuddered at the memory of Mrs. Poole's open accusation that she had deliberately waited in her son's bedroom until he came in. 'Immediately after lunch the next day she told me to go.'

Perry's eyes never left her face as he inquired softly,

'This Arthur ... what did he have to say about it?'

'He tried to explain, but neither his mother nor his father would listen. You see, they knew he liked me. Mrs. Poole said on a previous occasion that Arthur was infatuated with me and that I was entirely to blame. ... Then Arthur wanted to come with me - to marry me,' she added hastily. 'He had asked me before, at Christmas, but his parents knew nothing of that.'

'Why did you refuse him?'

'I didn't love him,' she answered simply.

'Was Mrs. Poole aware that you had nowhere to go?'

'I told her, but she wouldn't let me stay until I'd found somewhere.'

'So you refused him a second time. ..Perry's face was dark and very grim. 'Mrs. Poole knew he'd asked you to marry him ... she knew that and yet she—' Just in time he pulled himself up. The grimness had left his face and his tones were oddly gentle when he spoke again. 'No wonder you weren't looking where you were going.' He seemed to be talking to himself and, recalling Avril's words, Janis knew instinctively that, if he loved someone,

he could be extraordinarily kind and tender. He didn't appear to notice when she rose, and only nodded absently when she bade him good night.

Long after she was in bed Janis remembered that she had not told him the doctor's verdict. With a despairing little moan, she hid her face in the pillow, resolving to tell him first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'YOUR coffee, Perry.' Janis handed him the cup across the breakfast table. He was glancing through his mail, and took the cup from her without looking up.

'Grant's handwriting - can't think what he has to write to me about.' As he slit the envelope and withdrew the letter Janis's heartbeats quickened. She wanted to blurt out the truth before he read it for himself. She hadn't expected Dr. Grant to write to Perry, for the last thing he had said to her was, 'Now, it isn't any of my business, but if things go wrong you must come and see me and I shall have a talk with Perry.' She had thanked him, telling him optimistically that she was sure everything would be all right now, and he had replied smilingly, 'I think so, too.'

Yet he had written to Perry. For one dreadful moment she wondered if he had mentioned her confidence - but instantly rejected the idea. Doctors always kept what they heard to themselves. What *had* he put in the letter, then ? Janis could contain herself no longer.

'The letter is about me ?'

'You?' Perry said absently. 'No, it's about a pig.' Folding the letter, he returned it to its envelope. 'You didn't tell me he was going away. He told you to see Dr. Potts during his absence, I suppose?'

Relief flooded over her. Of course. ... Dr. Grant had mentioned that he intended keeping a pig. 'There's nothing like home-cured bacon,' he had said. 'I must ask Perry to let me have one from the next litter.'

He hadn't mentioned anything about going away, but then it wasn't necessary.

'No, he didn't tell me to see Dr. Potts.' Janis noticed Perry's surprise, but found it difficult to continue, for in telling the truth now she would reveal the fact that she had lied the other evening. It had been very foolish of her to do so, and hadn't done her a scrap of good, tie- cause Perry wouldn't allow her to look for work until she had left him.

'He must be well satisfied with you, then. He won't be back for a month. He always has four weeks in Cornwall during the summer.'

Janis put her cup down with a little bang. Four weeks. Four whole weeks....

She tried to dismiss the idea, but the words kept on hammering in her brain. Four weeks. Perry could not find out for another four weeks. There was no possibility of a chance meeting with the doctor in town, no possibility of a telephone conversation....

'He *is* satisfied with me,' she said, keeping her head averted. 'That's why he thinks it unnecessary for me to see Dr. Potts.'

'I'm very pleased. When is your next appointment?'

Her mind fumbled with dates; she couldn't calculate quickly enough and realized that she might mention a date which fell on a Sunday.

'He - he didn't make a definite appointment; he said he would telephone me—' It was no use, she lied too badly. Much to her surprise, however, Perry was smiling when, at length, she dared to look up.

'Of course' - he had taken the letter up again - 'he says he'll see you in about a month's time.'

Janis blinked.

'Does he say *that*?'

'Yes, to have a little talk.' Perry frowned. 'Funny way of putting it. ...' His face cleared. 'He's probably going to discharge you. Yes, that's it.' Perfectly satisfied with his own explanation, he turned his attention to his breakfast. But Janis had the real explanation; Dr. Grant wanted her assurance that all was well now that she could be a proper wife to Perry. How little the doctor knew, after all. And how stupid she had been to think Perry would ever want her.

For the time being, however, all that mattered was that she could stay here for another month; a whole month in the place she had grown to love with a passion quite beyond her understanding. She wouldn't. think about leaving - she'd pretend she was on a month's holiday - and enjoy every moment of it!

Only for a second, with a little tremor of apprehension, did she allow her thoughts to dwell on the possibility of her husband's discovering the truth. But he couldn't - not until Dr. Grant returned.

Immediately after breakfast Janis went over to warn Avril not to say anything that would arouse Perry's suspicions.

A trim maid showed her into a large, charming room with a magnificent view of the lakes and the hills, and the dark outline of Peckforton Castle. Janis was used to luxury by now, but this particular room never failed to please her. The rich, heavy curtains, the antique furniture, the thick carpet and large family portraits, gave the room not only character, but a sort of grand simplicity.

Mrs. Martin, a shrewd, homely woman, gave her a smile of welcome as she entered.

'Sit down and we'll have some coffee. Avril's gone to take the dogs for a walk. I really don't know why she breeds them, they're such a nuisance. They make an awful mess, especially when it's wet.' She rang for coffee, and Janis chatted unselfconsciously with her until Avril arrived.

The three boxer puppies bounded into the room ahead of her; their mother, Tina, followed more slowly and with much less noise. Relaxing by Mrs. Martin's feet, she stared up at her with worshipful eyes. Mrs. Martin gave her a biscuit and the puppies immediately tumbled over themselves in an effort to take it from her.

'Put them out,' Mrs. Martin said exasperatedly. 'We could do very well without them, Avril.'

Avril laughed and opened the door of the porch leading on to the terrace.

'Out you go.' She turned into the room again. 'We couldn't do without Tina, though.'

'Tina's different,' her mother commented. 'Coffee?'

'Please.' Avril sat down by Janis. 'It seems ages since I've seen you. What's the latest bulletin?'

'Dr. Grant signed me off, as he said he would.'

'*I am* pleased,' Mrs. Martin said, passing the biscuits to Avril. 'It's been such a long time^- Perry must be greatly relieved.' Mrs. Martin knew very well why Perry had married Janis, but always tactfully pretended she didn't. Extremely fond of Janis, she saw no reason for bringing into the open facts which would only hurt her. Therefore it was with some considerable surprise that she heard Janis broach the subject herself.

'I haven't told Perry ... you know why he married me, Avril—' She turned to her friend. 'But did you know that he never intended the marriage to be permanent?'

A few moments elapsed before Avril replied. The fact that Janis hadn't the faintest suspicion of Perry's intentions had puzzled Avril, for he would never have married her under false pretences.

'Yes, Janis. Surely Perry told you?'

'I misunderstood him— That sounds ridiculous,' she added hastily, noticing their puzzled stares. 'Nevertheless, it's true. Don't ask me how I came to misunderstand his meaning, it's far too embarrassing. The important thing is that Perry meant us to have an annulment and - and that takes place just as soon as I'm completely well.'

'You mean—' Avril swallowed. 'You're going away ... now?'

'No.' Janis twisted the buttons on her dress nervously. 'Dr. Grant is away for a month, so Perry can't find out. I shall tell him a day or two before Dr. Grant

returns.... I might not even tell him at all - just go away and send him my address later on.'

For once Mrs. Martin forgot to be tactful.

'Avril told me everything was going fine; that she didn't think there would be a separation.'

'Things have changed since then. Perry - Perry hates m-me.' The hand holding the cup was far from steady; Avril took the coffee away before it spilled over on to Janis's dress. 'I told you about the curtains in his study,' Janis went on. 'He changed towards me after that.'

'I can't believe Perry would hold out a grudge against you for so trivial a matter,' said Avril in a puzzled tone. 'Are you sure there's nothing else, no other reason for this change you say has occurred ?'

'Nothing that I know of; and yet, Avril, it's strange that you should say that because, at the time, I had the feeling that he was angry about something other than the changes I'd made in his study.'

'You must speak to Perry,' Mrs. Martin put in, glancing at her daughter. 'Make him see how unfair he's being to Janis. After all, if she didn't fully realize what he meant—'

'You're very kind, Mrs. Martin, but no one can do anything. Perry did put it all clearly to me at the beginning, and it isn't his fault if I misunderstood him. I can't expect him to change his mind, to spoil his life, simply because I was so stupid.'

'I think Janis is right,' Avril reluctantly agreed after some consideration. 'Perry never intended the marriage to be permanent - though there was a time when John and I speculated on the possibility of his changing his mind - and he now obviously means to keep Janis to her bargain.' She looked utterly miserable, and Janis forced a laugh.

'Don't look so glum, Avril, or you'll make me glum too. I have a whole month, and I intend to make the most of it. I shall make it the happiest month of my life, a time to remember always—'

'My dear child, don't,' implored Mrs. Martin in pained and troubled tones. 'There must be some way of opening Perry's eyes. What stupid creatures men are!'

'It's not a case of his being stupid,' Janis told her gently, 'nor of opening Perry's eyes - if by that you mean I'm a suitable wife for him. I'm not, Mrs. Martin, but even if I were that's no reason why he should fall in love with me. Love isn't like that at all.' She thought of the photograph she had seen of Glenda, so well-groomed and poised, her exotic beauty reminding Janis of an orchid. She had read somewhere that a man has a constant picture of how his ideal should look; Perry had loved Glenda so therefore she must be representative of his ideal.

Neither Mrs. Martin nor Avril seemed able to comment, and Janis abruptly changed the subject, asking Avril if she could go with her to Fourstones Kennels the following day.

'You said you were going to buy a dog, and I've never been to a kennels.'

'Very well. Mr. Pilkington rang me on Friday to say he had one that might suit me and I promised to go and see it,' Avril explained to her mother, who apparently knew nothing about it.

'We don't want any more dogs,' she protested, but Avril merely passed some remark about stud fees being too high. A few moments later she was walking to the gate with Janis.

'You won't forget, Avril?' Janis warned urgently. 'Perry mustn't know that the doctor has discharged me. Whatever you do, be careful when you're with him.'

'Trust me. I shan't even mention it.'

The day was fine and clear, with the sun high in a cloudless sky. The drive to Fourstones Kennels took them through some of Cheshire's most beautiful countryside, through quaint old-world villages nestling on the remnants of some ancient river terrace, or spread along the spring line of the wooded sandstone hills. They passed lush green water meadows and fields of waving corn, they took the cool and shady lanes through a dense forest and came out into the sun again. Janis had never been on such a drive before and she savoured every moment of it.

Immediately Avril saw the dog she bought it, but she and Mr. Pilkington seemed to have so much to talk about that eventually Janis became bored and made her way over to a large shed, from which came the loud howls and yelps of the imprisoned inmates. Stepping inside, she found several pens containing litters of puppies, some very young, others ready to leave their mothers. When Avril and Mr. Pilkington came at last to join her she was laughing merrily at the antics of one especially adorable puppy who seemed quite determined to get out to her.

'Oh, Avril, isn't he perfectly sweet!'

Opening the hatch, Mr. Pilkington put the little creature into her arms. Janis flushed with pleasure as it wriggled about, licking her hands, struggling to reach her face and lick that, too. At last, wistfully, she handed it back.

'You seem to have taken a fancy to him,' Mr. Pilkington remarked. 'And he to you.'

'I love him!' she exclaimed. 'I wish I could buy him.'

'Why don't you - for Perry?' came Avril's quiet suggestion, and Janis cast her a doubtful glance.

'Do you think he would - like it?'

'I'm sure he would. English setters are his favourite breed; his last was a setter. It died a few months ago and he's often said he'd get another.'

'He has two dogs....'

'Farm dogs - they're not the same.'

Janis still looked uncertain but, an hour later, walking slowly up the drive towards the house, she was tenderly clutching the puppy against her breast.

She had begun the journey optimistically enough; half way home her optimism had evaporated considerably; by the time Avril dropped her at the gate it had vanished altogether.

'Why do I do these foolish, impulsive things?' she wailed, her footsteps flagging more and more as she neared the house. Then, suddenly, she stopped altogether. For the past thirty minutes she had been wondering what Perry would say when he saw what she had bought, but now - *now* she remembered that most aggravating and inevitable habit of all puppies ... and became quite certain that he would not have it in the house.

Her first impulse was to take the dog over to Avril's and ask her to have it, but she did not want her to know that she was afraid to take it in after buying it. Janis looked round vaguely, as if searching for some unsuspecting passer-by to whom she could make a present of the puppy, then she caught sight of Old Tom in the distance, going towards the stables. He would look after it for the time being! Turning, she sped back the way she had come; it was a long way round, but she dared not go past the house. Drawing near the stable she proceeded more cautiously - for in spite of Perry's confidence Twinkle had not yet foaled, and he might just be there, having a look at her.

However, he did not appear to be anywhere about, and as she could not hear voices, Janis went inside. Tom looked up from spreading clean straw on the floor, expressing surprise on seeing the puppy in her arms; he was more surprised when she told him what she wanted and, although he took the puppy from her, he shook his head in doubt.

'I'll look after him, of course, Miss Janis. But he's sure to feel the cold, just coming from his mother. What he needs is a nice warm basket by the fire.'

'But the weather's quite warm,' Janis protested, swiftly becoming conscience-stricken.

'The nights are chilly though... You know, Miss Janis, I think Master Perry will be delighted with this little fellow. If you take my advice—'

'No, Tom, you must keep him for me. Take him over to the shant right away.'

'Very well.' He sounded disgruntled, she thought. 'You'll come and fetch him in the morning?'

'Yes,' Janis assured him, wondering what she would do with the puppy if her husband refused to have it in the house.

Perry had told her that he would be dining at home, and he was waiting for her when she came down. He stood by the fire, regarding her in silence, and appearing to be deeply amused about something. With a typical gesture he motioned her over to him, saying dryly,

'That's a very charming dress, Janis, but I'm sure you must be tired of it.'

'I—I—'

'Trying to hide your ... extravagance from me? Well, you're wasting your time, my dear. I've had the bill a long while ago.'

Janis hung her head.

'I thought you would have. I didn't know how expensive things were - not until I'd looked in the other shop windows, and it was too late then.' Not a very opportune time for asking favours, she thought, as she added quickly, 'I won't need any more, though.'

Perry smiled at the naïve attempt to soften the blow.

'I'm quite sure you won't - if you never wear them.'

'Aren't you displeased about the bill ?' she asked, much astonished by his tone. 'You must think I've wasted a lot of money.'

'Not-necessarily. How can I when I haven't seen what you've bought?' and, glancing at the clock, 'go and change, there's plenty of time.'

Absurd to float upstairs just because he'd noticed what she was wearing. But he noticed so seldom, spoke to her so rarely in that indulgent, half-amused tone which had been so familiar before the curtain incident.

A little while later, looking adorable in a pink tucked cotton dress with billowing skirt and wide sleeves, Janis stood in the centre of the room, holding out the skirt of her dress for him to see, and wondering at the curious expression that had entered his dark eyes.

'Do you like it?' she asked anxiously when he made no comment.

'Turn around.'

She turned slowly, quite bewildered by his interest.

'It's ... lovely,' he murmured, immediately banishing her anxiety by the softness of his tone.

'Then you don't think I've wasted your money?'

'Certainly not. Did Avril choose it?'

'N-no, I did,' she faltered, remembering that he had forbidden her to choose anything herself.

'Then I must compliment you on your most excellent taste.'

He would never be in a more promising mood, and yet she felt quite incapable of broaching the subject of the dog. By the time they had finished dinner and retired to the playroom, she had decided not to mention the matter at all.

When they were settled in the big easy chairs by the fire, and Perry asked her what she had been doing all day, Janis again had the impression that he was amused about something.

'I walked over to Avril's this morning, and we went to Fourstones Kennels after lunch. Avril bought a dog, a very special one. She intends to breed from it.'

'If she must breed dogs why on earth choose boxers? I can't abide the brutes.'

'They're really very gentle. Avril's was a pet.'

'Everyone to their own taste.'

'But you do like dogs?' Janis ventured, and for some reason Perry's lips quivered slightly.

'Very much. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of getting one. Home isn't quite complete without a dog on the hearth.'

The opening was too good to miss; Janis promptly fell into the trap, as he meant her to.

'Then you wouldn't mind if I bought one?'

'Mind?' He looked surprised. 'Why should I?'

'Even a small puppy... ?'

'A small puppy it would have to be. It's too difficult to train an older dog.'

'Oh. ...' Janis laughed shakily. 'And I was *so* sure you wouldn't like it—' She clapped a hand to her mouth, looking so comically abashed that Perry could hardly suppress the laugh which rose to his lips. 'What I mean is - I nearly bought one...If I went back tomorrow—'

Perry broke in, ignoring her last words.

'On the contrary, I like it very much. You may fetch it in now.'

Janis stared at him stupidly.

'You know?'

'I do.' He gazed at her meditatively. 'Just when did it occur to you that I might not allow you to keep it?'

'When I was in the drive.'

'Left it a little late, didn't you ?'

'Yes, indeed. I would willingly have given it away if there'd been anyone to give it to. How did you find out?' And, suddenly concluding that Avril had telephoned to ask how Perry liked his new dog, 'Did she tell you I bought it for you?'

'She?'

'Avril.'

'I haven't seen Avril.' He seemed deeply moved. 'You bought it for me?'

'Yes,' and after a pause. 'Did Tom tell you?'

'No. I saw it when I went over to see Twinkle just before dinner. Tom had it in a basket in the stable, thinking it would be warmer than in the shant. He was quite put out when it began to whimper and I insisted on knowing where the noise was coming from. Why did you tell him not to mention it to me ?'

'Did he tell you that?' she asked him in dismay.

'No ... but it was obvious.' Perry stood up and to her utter amazement reached for her hand, pulling her gently to her feet. 'Am I such a terrifying person, Janis ?'

'Of course not.'

'But you're afraid of me?'

'It's not you - exactly. I mean, I don't think it is...'

'What, then?' he prompted gently.

He still held her hand; Janis trembled slightly as she said,

'It's so dreadful when you lose your temper. I know I've done many things to vex you, but I didn't mean to - really I didn't.'

Perry tried to recall the 'many things' to which she referred, and could not think of one! The curtains, of course, but they were an improvement, and if anything annoyed him at all it was the appearance of the small window. He knew that Janis must have spent some considerable time making them, and if it hadn't been for what he had heard from her late employer, his reactions would have been very different indeed.

'I'm sure you didn't, Janis,' he said, smiling down at her. 'As for my part. .. I'll try not to lose my temper with you again.' He touched her cheek, surprising her by his gentleness. 'And somehow I don't think it will be very difficult.'

Perry went with her to fetch the puppy, which she had already christened 'Kim'. When they were half-way across the fields Janis touched his arm timidly.

'Thank you,' she said.

'What for?'

'So many things. For not being annoyed over Kim, for not thinking I'd been extravagant ... and for making it such a happy evening. You don't know how important that is.'

Perry glanced at her oddly, but if he were puzzled by her last remark he did not comment upon it, and they continued towards the stables in silence.

There was no doubt that Perry's attitude was changing, Janis thought. He never dined out now, and, when the weather was fine, they would usually go for a walk through the fields, looking at the new foal, or seeing how much

progress had been made with the cottages. Janis found herself sharing in Perry's enthusiasm and trying to forget that she would never see the cottages finished.

'Do you mind if we go through the garden?' she asked as they were returning to the house one evening. 'I would like to have a look at my tree.'

'I thought it was dead ?'

'It may have sprouted again.' She smiled, feeling rather foolish. 'I've been reading a book about trees, and cedars always lose most of their needles when they're transplanted. It's only if they lose them all that they're dead.'

There were a few still on, but when Perry shook the tree most of them fell off.

'Oh, *don't!*' Janis grabbed his arm and he turned, laughing.

'My dear child, if they're going to fall off they'll do so whether I shake the tree or not.' The laugh died on his lips as he noticed her distress. 'Why is it so important to you?' he asked strangely.

Picking up a handful of the tiny brown needles, Janis let them trickle slowly through her fingers.

'I do so want it to live.'

'Why?' he persisted.

'I don't think you would understand,' she said, staring at him hopelessly. 'I don't understand myself.'

The month went all too quickly, and Janis awoke one morning to the realization that Dr. Grant would be home any day now. She had not allowed her thoughts to dwell for a moment on how she was going to tell Perry that she had lied to him. Indeed, at times, the idea of a separation seemed remote and unreal. For she had seen her husband just as everyone had described him; kind, gentle - and often most tender in his attitude towards her.

Perry was in the fields when she came down to breakfast; the corn harvest had begun and once again it was a race against the weather.

John was on holiday, staying at Avril's, so he would probably be in the fields, too.

After breakfast Janis went to see her friend. Avril was coming to help Perry, and they met in the orchard.

'Avril, I'm so glad to see you. Will you come back to the house with me?'

Avril glanced at her shrewdly, and tucked a comforting arm through hers. They reached the house and sat down on the garden seat by the porch.

'Well?'

'It's Perry. How am I going to tell him, Avril? Dr. Grant will be coming home soon and I—' She stopped unhappily. 'I would go away, but Perry has been so different lately. I think he likes me a little.'

'Yes; I've noticed the change.' Having studied Perry's attitude, and knowing him so well, Avril could sense his struggle. He had reached the point where caution was replaced by fear - fear that he would be taken in a second time ... and fear could be so dangerous. John's conviction was that Perry needed a little more time. 'John and I have thought of something, Janis.'

'You have? What is it?'

'All you have to do is get Dr. Grant to defer that clean bill of health until Perry is properly in love with you.'

'P-Perry in love with me? Avril, what are you talking about?'

'Don't you know he's falling in love with you?'

'You can't say that,' she gasped. 'Perry would *never*—'

'You just said he was different,' her friend reminded her with a curious smile.

'Yes - but I meant that he likes me, and might even let me stay. I *know* he can never love me.'

'What a blind child you are,' Avril laughed. 'If John and I can see it...

'It's impossible—'

'It's obvious. But he doesn't know himself yet, that's why you must be very careful. When does Dr. Grant return?'

'I'm not quite sure.'

'Then find out from Dr. Potts. When he does return, go and see him—'

'But Avril—'

'Listen carefully! Explain to Dr. Grant, and ask him to let you visit him as usual. When you're quite sure of Perry you can tell him you've just been signed off. Simple, isn't it?'

Put as coolly as that, it did seem simple. But as for Perry's falling in love with her.... And yet was it so impossible? She recollected the many times lately when he had looked at her with tenderness, and there was one occasion when she had felt sure he wanted to take her in his arms... but if he had wanted to take her in his arms he would have done so, for there was absolutely nothing to stop him.

'Supposing he finds out?' Janis faltered. 'It would be worse than anything.'

'How can he? There's no one to tell him - once you've warned the doctor.'

Janis hated deceiving him; on the other hand, it meant she would be able to stay. And if, when she was unable to carry Out the deception any longer, Perry was still determined to have a separation, she would be in no worse position than at present.

'I'll do it,' she declared. 'But if he finds out....'

'He won't. Stop worrying.' They rose and Avril put her hands on Janis's shoulders. 'We don't want to lose you,' she said softly. 'Always remember that, Janis. Go ahead and break down that protective armour. Somehow I think you're not going to find it very difficult.'

'Do you, Avril? - truly?'

'Truly. And now I must fly, or John will be coming to see where I am.'

'And I must help Bebby with the baggings. Avril. ...'

"Yes?'

'Thank you for being such a good friend. You're so kind to me.'

'I want you and Perry to be happy together,' Avril returned quietly, and went to join the men in the fields.

Dr. Grant returned three days later, and Janis went to see him. Astounded at her request, he at first refused to agree, but after Janis had told him everything it was arranged that she should visit him once a week as before.

Perry was clearly disappointed at the news Janis gave him.

'It seems strange that he should let you ride, and it's three months since he said you could help in the fields. I must have a word with him. I hope there aren't any complications.'

'I don't think so,' Janis said flatly. Complications would delay her departure, he was thinking.

She did not know what excuse the doctor had thought up, but Perry was in much better spirits after he had spoken to him on the telephone.

'It will only be a matter of weeks before you're out of his care,' he said cheerfully. 'Don't look so glum! You want to be well, surely?'

'Of course.'

'You don't sound very happy.' He frowned at her. 'I'll tell you what; I'll teach you to drive the car. Does that please you?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed, all her world rosy again. 'When can we start? Don't I have to have a licence? Where shall we—?'

'Just a minute, you excited child,' he laughed. 'I'll send away for your licence tomorrow. Meanwhile, there's no reason why you shouldn't have your first lesson this evening, in-the grounds, of course.'

Avril and John were waiting in the playroom when they returned, Janis miserable, Perry looking as though his patience had been taxed to the utmost.

'So the experiment wasn't a success,' observed John. 'I didn't exactly think it would be. What have you done, Cinders - smashed up the new car?'

'Not quite,' interposed Perry. 'But it wasn't for the want of trying!'

'It's so big ... and you weren't very patient.'

'Patient? I think I behaved with amazing restraint!'

'I'm sure,' from Avril. 'You were so perfectly sweet-tempered when you taught me to drive!' And to Janis, 'You can't say I didn't warn you. I'd better give you your next lesson.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind,' Perry snapped.

'Then I shall,' John offered, but Janis shook her head.

'Perry said I will never drive—'

'I said no such thing!' And, noticing her woebegone expression, his face softened. 'Sorry if I said that - I didn't mean it. John shall teach you.' He was rewarded with a rosy smile and grinned ruefully. 'Avril's right - my infernal temper gets the better of me. Now for some dinner, I'm famished!'

It was another of those informal dinners during which a variety of subjects were discussed, from the latest cricket score to fat stock prices, and the little attentions which Perry paid to his wife did not pass unnoticed either by Avril or John.

It was when they were chatting over coffee that Perry announced his intention of going away for a few days as soon as the corn was in. He would probably go the following Wednesday, returning on the Saturday afternoon, he said. Avril glanced at John from under her lashes ... then said carelessly,

'We've been invited to stay with a friend in Scotland for a few days, and wondered if Janis would like to come with us.'

'Thank you very much, Avril - but I'd rather not.' It was unthinkable that she should spend time away from Perry when she could be with him - for if they were going to Scotland they would be away more than three days. To her surprise, however, Avril said,

'We thought of going on Tuesday and returning on Saturday. It would have fitted in rather well - but if you'd prefer to stay here alone...'

'It's a good idea,' Perry agreed with sudden enthusiasm. 'Far better than being on your own, Janis.'

'I couldn't come with you?' she ventured after a pause.

'You wouldn't be interested. It's only a sale of cattle, and that would bore you.'

'I wouldn't mind at all,' Janis returned eagerly. 'I could amuse myself—' She stopped, arrested by her friend's expression. Avril looked as if she could have shaken her!

'A break in Scotland will do you much more good,' John put in quickly.

'I agree,' Perry said. 'I shall be very busy—'

'I wouldn't mind,' Janis repeated.

'You'll be better with Avril and John,' Perry said firmly, and Janis's lips suddenly quivered. Perry just didn't want her.

'Very well,' she said meekly.

And so it was arranged that Janis should go with her friends to Scotland on Tuesday.

'You'll be back on Saturday?' Perry asked.

'Yes.' A rather wooden tone hid Avril's satisfaction. For they had no intention of returning on Saturday. She and John had decided that a few days without Janis would do Perry the world of good. If he thought anything about her at all he must miss her, and it would give him the chance to think twice about the separation.

That evening she wrote to her friend, accepting the invitation and explaining that Janis would be accompanying them.

Janis was dismayed on discovering that Avril wanted to prolong the visit.

'There's no real hurry to get back,' she said. 'If we leave on Tuesday it will do. You don't see the doctor till Wednesday.'

'But you did say we'd return on Saturday,' Janis reminded her on a note of pleading. Surely Avril knew that she wanted to be with Perry. But there was something very strange about Avril - had been since the first mention of the holiday. Janis knew it was ridiculous, yet she was unable to rid herself of the conviction that Avril actually wanted to keep them apart.

'Yes, I did, Janis, but three days isn't long enough - it's hardly worth the journey.' Her voice was expressionless as she added, 'The break will do you the world of good.'

'Avril.... I don't know—'

'I'll ring Bebbie and tell her to give Perry the message when he comes home tomorrow evening.'

Janis's shoulders sagged. She wished she had the courage to tell her friend that she was going home tomorrow, but she was sure her feelings would be hurt. Avril obviously meant well, genuinely believing Janis would derive more benefit if the holiday were prolonged.

The following evening, Saturday, they all went to a dance. In addition to Morag and Ian, Avril's friends, there lived in the house a young paying guest, George, a friend of Ian's, who made up one of their party. From the first he had made no secret of his regard for Janis and often he brought a blush to her pale cheeks by the things he said to her. Apparently he saw no reason why they shouldn't indulge in a little innocent flirtation.

He had practically every dance with her and when the atmosphere became hot and the dance hall crowded he propelled her towards the door and they went out into the garden.

'That's better; let's sit down here.' They sat down; he slipped an arm round her shoulders, but Janis twisted away. 'What's the matter with you?' he laughed. 'Give me a kiss.'

'You've forgotten that I'm married,' she returned, blushing, and he laughed again.

'What difference does that make?' And then his laughter died as he caught her expression. 'You puzzle me, Janis. How long have you been married ?'

'Five months.'

'And you come away ... don't you miss your husband?'

'Naturally I miss him.' She clasped her hands in her lap and looked away to the distant mountains, purple and rugged, their summits lost amid the clouds of a starless sky.

But her thoughts, as ever, returned to the lovely Tudor manor house, proudly standing on the rise overlooking the peaceful scene of unspoilt countryside, of church and village and the winding tree-lined lane.

Perry would be home now, she mused, a catch of dejection in her throat. What would he be doing? Was he missing her? For the past month they had dined together, in an atmosphere of companionship. And then each evening they had retired to the playroom, often talking, but just as often silent. There had been no strain between them, no hint in Perry's manner that he preferred to be alone. Sometimes she had watched him closely, and it seemed he fought a battle that raged within himself. On other occasions she might catch him unawares, catch a fleeting glance of affection. But as soon as their eyes met his expression would change and always Janis experienced the same odd feeling that he had suddenly remembered Glenda, and the disillusionment that his engagement had brought to him. He would then seem to put on an armour as if determined never to be hurt a second time.

She was brought back to the present again as she felt George's hand on hers.

'What thoughts are passing through that lovely head of yours,' he asked, 'to give your eyes that sad and wistful look?'

At that she managed a wan smile but made to draw her hand away.

'I was thinking of ... home,' she murmured, leaving her hand where it was as his clasp tightened.

'Ah, home. ... Tell me about this strange husband of yours.'

'Strange?'

'He must be a very strange sort of man to allow you to be away from him like this.'

'It's only for a few days.'

'Were you my wife I wouldn't let you out of my sight for a minute,' he said, and her cheeks coloured adorably.

'Do you flatter all the girls like this?' she wanted to know, surprising him by entering into his mood, but surprising herself even more.

'Aren't you used to flattery?' he asked, eyeing her curiously. 'Doesn't this husband of yours tell you how beautiful you are?' She shook her head, an unconscious little gesture, which was accompanied by a sudden quivering of her body which seemed to reveal all the despair which she tried so hard to suppress.

And before either of them fully realized what was happening she was in his arms and he was kissing her, tenderly, on her lips, and her cheeks, and on her brow.

'Oh. ...' She drew away, though without haste, and put a hand to her mouth. 'I - we - shouldn't have done that.' All was so still, with pale lights gleaming from the corners of the building and from a fountain in the grounds. Neither spoke for a while and Janis experienced a strange wonderment at her own reaction. She knew neither shame nor anger; certainly she felt no resentment at his action. 'That was wrong, George.'

'But nice—' He grinned suddenly. 'Shall we try it again?'

'Certainly not!' She was indignant now, but still quite unashamed.

'No?' His eyes were alight with amusement. 'Are you going to mention this when your husband asks you what you've been doing?'

'He won't ask me.'

'Won't ask about your holiday? How very odd.' He made a rather half-hearted attempt to take her in his arms again, but Janis stood up.

'I want to go in now,' she said and he followed her back to the ballroom.

Just before lunch the next day Janis phoned Perry, but he had chosen that particular time to go over and take a look at the cottages, so she had to leave a message with Bebby saying she would ring again later.

'We're going out this afternoon,' she said, 'so it will be some time this evening.'

'I'll tell him,' Bebbly promised. 'Are you enjoying yourself?'

"Yes, very much," Janis replied, reluctant to upset Bebbly by telling her the truth.

However, Janis did not have the opportunity to ring the Manor that evening, for Morag and Ian had arranged for them all to dine out at an hotel, and while there they ran into friends who insisted on taking them back to their house, where they stayed until after midnight.

All day Monday was spent in visiting local places of interest and they did not return until almost dinner time. She would ring immediately after dinner, Janis decided as she went up to her room to wash and change. As she came out on the landing half an hour later she heard Avril speaking on the telephone in the hall.

'Janis is enjoying herself so much, so I know you won't mind. And it won't matter if she misses her visit to the doctor for once. It seems such a shame to come home when she's having such a good time. You don't mind, do you, Perry?'

Gasping in disbelief, Janis remained still, unable to move even had she wished.

'Yes, of course she wants to,' Avril went on after pausing to listen to what Perry had to say. 'Don't sound so surprised. Why shouldn't she want to stay?' Another pause and then, 'Why, because she's enjoying herself so much, I've told you. ... You want to speak to her? I'm sorry, but she's out—' Perry interrupted and even from this distance Janis could hear his voice, raised in anger, though she couldn't catch the actual words.

'Don't bawl me out like that! I'm not her chaperone - she's quite safe with George—' Avril held the phone away; Janis couldn't see her expression, for Avril had her back to her, but Janis saw her shoulders shaking. 'Who the devil's George? He's a friend of Ian's. He's been awfully good to Janis, taking her out to dinner, and he's teaching her to dance. ...' There was a longer pause and again Janis could hear Perry's angry voice at the other end of the line. 'It's all very well for you to say now that if you want her to dance

you can teach her yourself - but you haven't made any effort to do so yet, have you?' Janis came slowly down the stairs, making no sound at all on the thick carpet. She was just about to speak when Avril began talking to Perry again. 'Another week; we'd be coming home on Monday or Tuesday—

'Another week!' Janis could hear her husband's voice, for again Avril held the receiver away from her ear. 'You and John can please yourselves - but Janis comes home tomorrow. Is that clear?'

'You'd spoil her fun—?'

'Should you decide to stay you can put her on the train and I'll pick her up at the station. Ring me first thing in the morning and let me know what—'

'It's all right, Perry; we'll all be home tomorrow.'

'That's up to you, but see that Janis comes home!' His imperious voice made Janis tremble in her shoes; to her amazement Avril was laughing softly to herself, not in the least put out by Perry's anger.

'I hope you won't be as sharp with her as you are with me. She's enjoyed herself so much—'

'You've told me that - several times! You needn't repeat it again!' Before Avril had time to say another word Perry had slammed down the receiver. Avril started when she saw Janis, but there was no sign of guilt in her manner as she asked her how much she'd heard.

'All of it - oh, Avril, how could you say I wanted to stay? And all the other things - about George. What will Perry think?'

'Just what I meant him to think.' Avril was obviously in high glee. 'Janis, my girl, that husband of yours is absolutely smouldering with jealousy!'

'How can you say that?' Janis's trembling increased, but for another reason now. 'Perry would never be jealous.'

'I thought you'd heard everything?'

'Yes, but—' Janis spread her hands. 'He was dreadfully angry.'

'Of course he was - at the thought of your going about with George.' She paused, her face softening with sudden affection. 'He's missed you, Janis - oh, yes he has, dear, I can tell,' she hastened to add as Janis would have interrupted her. 'I know Perry, and I can say with absolute certainty that he's missed you. And I really meant it when I said he was smouldering with jealousy.'

They arrived back at eight o'clock the following evening. To Janis's surprise John and Avril dropped her at the end of the drive, saying they'd be over later with her luggage. It wasn't until they were disappearing round the bend in the lane that Janis realized the reason for their action. They had no intention of being present when she and Perry met.

Walking up the drive, Janis was suddenly overcome with anxiety. Was Perry smouldering with jealousy? It would be wonderful if he were jealous, but to think of him 'smouldering' quite filled her with dismay. On reflection, however, Janis came to the conclusion that she had nothing to fear from her husband's jealousy. Only people in love experienced jealousy and had Perry loved her he'd never have let her go to Scotland. On the other hand, he *had* wanted her home; there was no doubt about that. He had absolutely refused to let Avril keep her away for another week. With this in mind Janis felt her spirits lighten, and as she looked up and saw the house, so warm and friendly in the slanting rays of the sun, she felt almost happy. And then, as if he knew she needed more tangible proof of her welcome, Kim bounded up to her, barking excitedly.

'You haven't forgotten me,' she cried, feeling she'd been away for months. 'You've grown, and how heavy you are!' She hugged him, burying her face in his silky coat. When she raised her head again Perry was coming down the steps; as he drew near she had an almost irrepressible urge to run to him, to fling herself in his arms and tell him how much she'd missed him. Instead, she stood quite still, shy and uncertain, her anxious eyes searching his face for some sign of gladness at her return.

He smiled, rather crookedly, as though he were not quite sure of himself either, and said, in a tone of polite inquiry,

'Did you have a nice holiday, Janis?'

Janis put Kim down. She wanted to tell Perry that it was the longest six days of her life, that she hadn't enjoyed one moment of it, but that would reveal that Avril had lied. Also, Avril had told her emphatically that Perry must be made to believe she had thoroughly enjoyed herself.

'Yes, thank you, Perry,' she answered, equally polite.

'I'm glad.' The rough way he took her arm and led her towards the steps seemed to belie his words. 'Run along and tidy yourself,' he said when they entered the hall. 'Don't bother to change, it's so late.' And, after a slight hesitation, 'I have a surprise for you.'

'Oh.. .what is it?'

'You'll see when you come down,' he smiled. 'I'll be in the playroom.'

When she had washed her face and combed her hair she joined him there, and, noticing the table, turned to him in surprise.

'Are we dining in here?'

He nodded.

'I thought you would like that.' He pulled her chair out for her - just one of those little attentions to which she had become used of late. 'I have a present for you, too.' He took a jewel case from his pocket; heard her gasp of admiration as he lifted the bracelet from its bed of white velvet. 'Give me your hand.'

Janis leaned across the table.

'Perry ... it's *beautiful!*'

The bracelet *was* lovely - unusual, too, for it was made up of twelve gold squares, each engraved with one of the signs of the Zodiac. The workmanship was exquisite, and a diamond clasp added the final touch of perfection.

'I'm glad you like it.' Perry fastened the clasp and released her hand.

'I love it ... I don't know what to say. It's so unexpected. ...'

'It's in place of the pearls. I did buy this myself— Child, don't start to cry!'

'I'm not,' she denied, but her eyes were unnaturally bright.

Bebby came in with the tray, smiling a welcome.

'Did you enjoy your holiday?' she beamed.

'Yes, thank you, Bebby ... but I missed you terribly.'

'Not half as much as we missed you,' she declared, busying herself with the dinner, and not looking at Perry.

'We?' Janis spoke without thinking.

'Jackson and Mottram, and myself. To say nothing of Old Tom, grumbling that I didn't do his baggings right! Even that rascally puppy refused to eat for the first couple of days.'

Janis swallowed a lump in her throat. It was so nice to be missed. She raised her head to glance at Perry, a question in her eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind. Janis looked away.

'I must go and see Tom in the morning,' she said in a flat tone.

'Tell me about your holiday,' Perry invited when Bebby had gone.

Remembering Avril's warning Janis tried to sound enthusiastic as she began to tell him about Morag and Ian.

'And they have George living with them - Ian's friend. Avril told you about him?' Perry nodded. 'We went on a picnic, and one evening we all went out to dinner.'

'Go on.'

Janis flushed vividly as she said,

'We went to a dance and - and George came too.'

'Yes?' There was a note of persistence in his voice and her blush deepened.

'He danced with me - nearly all the time.'

Perry turned his attention to the food on his plate and there was silence in the room for a while. And then he said, softly, and without much expression,

'Why are you blushing, Janis?'

She gave a start and her fork clattered against her plate.

'I - I didn't k-know I was blushing,' she returned feebly.

Another silence and then, in cool and even tones,

'You seem to have got on exceedingly well with this - George. Tell me more about him.'

Despite her fear, and the quick surge of guilt which now welled up, Janis felt a tingling of excitement, of jubilation, almost.

Her husband *was* jealous!

The knowledge caused her hands to tremble; their unsteadiness as she endeavoured to manipulate her knife and fork was not lost on Perry and his dark eyes narrowed as he watched her.

'Yes, I did get on well with him.' Janis recalled once more what Avril had said about making Perry believe she had had a good time, so she put a little animation into her tone, hoping to make her words sound genuine. 'He was very nice to me, and very good company.'

Perry's eyes were still narrowed and Janis waited with a suffocating little tightness in her throat, half expecting him to ask again the reason for her blushes. But to her intense relief he merely said,

'You must have been sorry to come home, seeing that you were having such a good time.'

She looked at him gravely, and could no longer continue her deception.

'No, I wasn't sorry. It's so nice to be home.'

A rather startled laugh escaped him, but his voice too was serious when he spoke.

'It's nice to have you home, Janis.'

'Do you really mean that?' she could not help asking as her heart began to flutter and the last of her fears dissolved. But he did not reply to her question and she fell silent, sensing a return of the remoteness that had once been so familiar and marked. She fingered the bracelet, knowing it was valuable; she glanced at him and knew instinctively that he was glad to have her back. There was a hint of sadness in his eyes, though - or perhaps that wasn't the word. Unhappiness, yes, and bitterness too.

Yet if he were glad she was home, if he had begun to care for her a little, why should he be unhappy? Desolation pierced her heart again. Perhaps she'd been mistaken and he wasn't jealous of George, after all; perhaps his unhappiness stemmed from the fact that he still loved Glenda. It could be that he still wanted their marriage to be annulled. The thought brought a shadow to her face and Perry surprised her by saying,

'What are you thinking to make you look so dejected ?'

She gave a little shake of her head.

'I can't tell you.'

'You can,' Perry asserted, a grim inflection in his voice. 'Was it George?'

'Oh, no!'

'What, then?'

'Our - separation.'

'You realize that things can't go on like this?' Perry seemed on the defensive; to Janis his tone sounded harsh and uncompromising.

'Yes,' she whispered, avoiding his eyes. So he hadn't changed his mind; her deception had merely afforded her a few more weeks in his house; there was no sweet, new understanding between them after all.

Why then had he changed in his manner towards her, for undoubtedly he *had* changed. He was never now impatient, never even sharp with her— Suddenly she knew the reason. Having made absolutely sure that she intended to do as he wished, he thought it better to pass the intervening time as pleasantly as possible. As her face puckered with hopelessness and despair she felt her hand covered and gripped firmly.

'The best thing is to wait until you're out of Grant's care,' Perry told her quietly. 'Then we'll have a long, serious talk and see if things can be straightened out.'

'Very well.' She felt tired, and suspected her husband was putting it down to the long journey because he said, with a strange new gentleness,

'You're all in. Would you like to go to bed?'

'If you want me to!'

He glanced at her in mild astonishment.

'Have I done something to upset you ?'

Her eyes sparkled with suppressed tears.

'No. But if you want me to go to bed—'

'I didn't say that!' he interrupted with some exasperation. 'I merely suggested it - because you looked tired. I would much rather you kept me company for a while, but if you're going to be quarrelsome—'

'Oh, I'm not!' she breathed. 'Do you really want me to stay with you?'

'Naturally.' His glance held slight reproach. 'You've been away three days longer than I expected, remember.'

Janis looked up quickly.

'I don't understand you,' she said, and Perry passed a hand across his eyes in a gesture of rather sullen helplessness.

'I don't think I understand myself,' he admitted. Then, quickly, as if to cover up his momentary weakness, 'Would you care for a walk? I've watered your tree every day.'

'Yes, I'd like a walk.' She made no remark on his reference to the tree, but she was childishly pleased that he had taken the trouble to water it.

They strolled together in the soft September twilight, through the gardens they both loved so well, ablaze now with all the lovely colours of early autumn.

The path fringing the long wide shrubbery was set with crazy paving, the interstices of which had been planted with saxifrages, thymes, and numerous other trailing plants, some encroaching on the flagstones. Janis trod daintily between them, frequently raising herself on tip-toe to avoid stepping on them. Perry slackened his pace to suit hers, looking down at her with some amusement.

'They'll take no harm if you walk on them,' he assured her. 'They've been chosen for that reason.'

'I don't like to do it, all the same,' she told him seriously. 'Plants are alive, so they must have feelings. Don't you agree?'

'I've never thought of it.' Perry stopped, took her by the shoulders, and turned her round to face him. 'You have some charming little ways, Janis.'

'I don't like to hurt things.' She trembled at his nearness, conscious of exquisite pain at the touch of his hands on her arms. For a long while it seemed that everything around them was hushed, waiting in breathless expectancy. Even the persistent thrush, which sang continuously from dawn to dusk on the high oak, was silent. Janis sensed a faint unsteadiness in her husband's hands as they moved to encircle her and bring her close against him. She sensed, too, a slackening of the tension within him, an abandonment of some long exhausting struggle. He held her tenderly, and in the sweet intimacy of the moment he bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE following Saturday was the day of the year in the village of Dene Royal, for the annual gymkhana was being held in aid of the village hall. Janis, who had been out riding with Avril, came in like a small hurricane, flushed and excited.

'What do you think! We met Mrs. Phillips - the secretary of the village hall committee, you know - and she asked me to help with the teas. Isn't it exciting!'

Perry looked up from his accounts with a slight frown.

'I don't call it exciting to spend the afternoon in a hot tent serving tea.'

'It won't be all afternoon. We take it in turns.' Her face fell. 'Don't you want me to?'

He stood up, reaching for her hands. She held hers out; a flush tinted her cheeks and he smiled faintly, as if aware that his touch was responsible for her heightened colour.

'You derive pleasure from the strangest things,' he said. 'Do it if you like, but remember - I shall be there and I've no intention of walking about by myself all the afternoon.'

Her flush spread to the high cheekbones, accentuating their delicate contours.

'Avril and John will be there ... and many more of your friends.' Only a few weeks ago it would have been a matter of indifference to him how she spent her time - so long as it was not with him.

He laughed and gave her a little shake.

'What am I supposed to say to that?' he demanded.

Instead of telling him she wriggled free and ran to the door.

'I'll go and change,' she said breathlessly, and fled to her room. The past week having convinced Janis that Perry did have some affection for her, she had made up her mind to tell him the truth and risk the consequences.

'Tell him the truth,' Avril exclaimed when Janis revealed her intentions, 'and spoil everything - after all our trouble!'

'He might be a little angry, but I'm sure he'll forgive me.'

'A *little* angry! Don't you know Perry yet? Can't you imagine what a blow it will be to his pride to know that we've all plotted to hoodwink him ?'

'I can explain.'

'Then you're much cleverer than I thought,' she flashed. 'What will you say - "I had my discharge six weeks ago, but Avril and John and I thought we would make you fall in love with me, so decided not to tell you?"'

'Of course not. I won't bring you and John into it. I shall just say I couldn't bear to leave the Manor. He'll understand.'

'And will he understand about Dr. Grant's part in the deception? He's an old friend of Perry's family, remember. What's Perry going to think when he knows you've told him everything?'

'It *will* be awkward, but—'

'Only because you're making it so. When have you to see Dr. Grant again ?'

'On Thursday - my birthday.'

'Why can't you keep to the original arrangement and ask him to sign you off then ? Perry will be none the wiser, and if you must tell him the truth, you can do it later — perhaps in a month or two.'

Janis considered this. Avril knew Perry better than she did, after all. Janis realized that she was being cowardly, but she wouldn't be able to bear it if anything came between her and Perry now.

'Very well,' she agreed, brightening. 'It will be nice to tell him on my birthday.'

Avril sighed with relief, and after arranging to meet on the field in the afternoon, they went their separate ways.

Knowing she would meet many people who knew Perry, Janis dressed with the greatest care. For the first time he was accompanying her to an event where he would be obliged to introduce her to some of his friends, and Janis wanted him to be proud of her.

He was still with his accounts when she came down in a simple, exquisitely cut blue cotton dress, the large matching hat tied with a bow under her chin.

'What a baby you look!' Perry exclaimed, and Janis indignantly retorted,

'I'm nearly eighteen!'

'I haven't forgotten your birthday,' he smiled. 'So you needn't take this opportunity of reminding me.'

'Oh, I didn't...!'

'Never mind.' He glanced at his watch. 'Look, my dear, will you run along without me? I have some work to finish.' He noticed her disappointment and went on hastily, 'Have a look round the stalls, then we'll watch the jumping together. What time must you be at your post?'

'Five.'

'It's only just two now. I'll meet you at the gate at three - that will give us plenty of time.'

The gymkhana was being held on one of Perry's fields; the ground was only five minutes' walk away, and after making sure that Avril and John had not yet arrived, Janis went over to the horticultural show. She spent a very pleasant half hour, during which she discovered that Old Tom had won first

prize ... with *Perry's* mangolds ! She came out into the sunshine again, and almost bumped into Richard.

'Janis, how nice to see you again!' He smiled charmingly. 'I told you I would, you know.'

Janis looked about her agitatedly.

'I don't want to speak to you, Richard. I promised John.' She began to move on, but he caught at her arm.

'This is no way to treat a newly acquired cousin—'

'Please ... you've done a very wicked thing to Perry and it would be disloyal of me to speak to you. Do go away.'

'Just a moment—' A pained and bitterly regretful expression appeared on his dark and handsome face and in spite of herself Janis's interest was caught. She stared at him with wide and questioning eyes and he went on, 'I liked you from the moment I saw you, Janis, and I want you to know the truth. Will you listen to me?' He was pleading with her, and although she twisted her arm to release it from his grasp she made no attempt to leave him. He seemed so sincere, and the candour in his eyes remained as she searched them for some sign of guilt.

'Perry will be here in a few minutes,' she began once more, looking around her apprehensively.

'It won't take long,' he put in quickly. 'I know the story you've heard, but it isn't the true one, Janis,' and before she had time to decide whether or not she wanted to listen to him, he was telling her his version of the story and at once she was impressed by his apparent sincerity.

'I'm making no excuses for my conduct at first,' he said in low and contrite tones. 'I was so crazy about Glenda, and had considered myself the luckiest man on earth when she became engaged to me. But she found out about the alteration to the will and insisted that we do something about getting that money. The idea was hers entirely and at first I flatly refused to do a thing

like that to my own cousin.' He paused, shaking his head as if unable to believe he could have allowed himself to be persuaded to take part in such a plot. 'But she had already begun to ensnare Perry and threatened to throw me over altogether and marry him if I didn't agree to her scheme.' He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. 'I had no option and, as I said, I was crazy about her. I couldn't bear the thought of her being married to Perry - or to anyone else for that matter.' He went on to say that he had at last been persuaded to agree with her plan, but that, after a little more thought, he had once more refused to have anything to do with it. 'Much as I loved her I could see her wickedness; I told her that my decision was final, and that if she persisted in duping Perry I was finished.'

'And did you finish with her?' Janis asked bewilderedly.

'Yes, I did.'

'But why didn't she marry Perry?' Janis had a sudden suspicion now as she recalled what Bebbie had told her about Richard and Glenda being seen together.

A slight pause followed her words and she looked up, waiting for her companion to speak. His lids came down, masking his expression as he went on to say that, to his surprise, Glenda really loved him, and she made one last attempt to persuade him to marry her if she jilted Perry on the eve of the wedding.

'Even then she was playing safe, for she meant to have one of us - and the money. I still refused and she went away determined to marry my cousin. However, it so happened that someone saw us together and told Perry. I think you know what happened then.'

She nodded, rather absently, searching for some flaw in his story. But there was none. Apparently Richard had suffered as much as Perry.

'This Glenda must have been very, very wicked,' she said at length, wondering how anyone so beautiful could deliberately hurt people just to serve her own ends.

'I agree, Janis,' he returned softly. 'Both Perry and I are better off without her.' He smiled at her, a charming smile, and added, 'Perry has been more fortunate than I. I hope he appreciates your youth and beauty, my dear.' His eyes flickered over her, noting the expensive clothes and shoes, the bracelet on her wrist. 'Everyone knows of course that he rushed out of the house in a rage, because I had been there—'

'Oh, yes. ..There was a flaw in his story. 'You came to look over the house - to buy it. Bobby told me about that.'

'Servants' tales, my dear, are always unreliable, always warped. I went to see him to confess everything, but also to convince him of my change of heart. I knew of course that I should inherit the money if he didn't marry, and I wanted him to know that I was willing to share it equally with him. However, he was away, visiting friends, for he hated being there when people were viewing the house. He must have become homesick, though, for he returned the day after my visit. I expect Bobby told him the same tale as she told you - or perhaps Gregson told him, I don't know. What I do know is,' he added smilingly, 'that he had the devil's own luck when he knocked you down with that old car.' She flushed adorably and he smiled again, his glance open and sincere. 'I thought, when I saw you at the theatre, that you were not very happy, but you certainly look happy now.'

She returned his smile and assured him that she was perfectly happy. And then she said,

'I wish you and Perry could make up your quarrel. Why don't you come and see him, and explain? He'd understand, and forgive you, I'm sure.'

'Are you, Janis?' Something in the way he said that brought back vividly Perry's previous treatment of her, reminded her of that inflexible trait which she knew so well. The fact that she loved him did not blind her to his faults and she had to admit he was too hard and unforgiving, that he would probably not even listen to Richard's explanation, let alone allow bygones to be bygones. It was a great pity, though, for Richard really was a most charming person and Janis would have liked to have him as a regular visitor to the Manor.

'I must go,' she sighed at last. 'Perry will be waiting for me.'

'He's coming here, this afternoon ?'

'I'm meeting him at the gate at three.' Suddenly she was all agitation again. 'What time is it?'

'Ten to.'

'Then I must go,' she repeated, terrified now that Perry would be early and come and find her talking to his cousin. 'Good-bye, Richard, perhaps you and Perry will make up your differences some time, and then we can all be friends.'

'Good-bye, dear. Perhaps, as you say, we shall meet again some time - who knows?' and, with a little squeeze of her hand he was gone, leaving her with a faint, inexplicable feeling of uneasiness.

Perry was coming towards her; turning quickly, Janis saw that Richard's long strides had taken him almost to the car park and, relief flooding over her, she went to meet her husband.

'Who were you talking to?' he inquired abruptly, and her heartbeats quickened.

'You saw me?'

'No. Dick, on the gate, told me to make haste, as my wife had very attractive male company.'

'Oh.... It was only a friend.'

He looked down at her flushed face, an odd expression on his own.

'I didn't know you had any men friends.'

Janis blinked at him. Was he jealous again?

'He was only an acquaintance, really.'

'I see. Well, shall we go and watch some jumping?' His tone was one of dignified courtesy; Janis had the unhappy conviction that she had vexed him, and it was with a feeling of relief that she saw their friends coming across the field to join them. Avril was positively glowing, and even John looked excited.

'Perry ... Janis, we have wonderful news! Tell them, John.'

'Myra has consented to divorce me. It seems she wants to marry again.'

'Oh, I'm so glad for you,' Janis said earnestly, and Perry echoed,

'So am I. It's time she came to her senses.'

The warm, sunny afternoon had attracted a large crowd and Avril looked round with a sigh of satisfaction.

'It should be a very profitable day.'

Perry agreed, nodding to an acquaintance. He seemed to know everyone, and stopped to introduce Janis to a number of people. Each time she was aware of the curious glances, and concluded that they knew all about his previous engagement.

She had no idea that Glenda was riding until, Perry and John having gone for refreshments, she glanced idly at the programme. She was not very interested because, unlike the others, she knew none of the riders. Suddenly one name stood out from the rest.

'Is this - is this the girl to whom Perry was engaged ?' she asked breathlessly. She knew it was, but just had to ask.

Avril nodded.

'She rides at all the shows in the area. She's good, too. I've rarely seen her beaten.'

Janis could hardly contain herself until Glenda's first event came round. Perry was standing behind her, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders, looking over her head, so she was unable to see his face. But as Glenda passed them his grip tightened. Janis waited for her to come round again. Undoubtedly beautiful, more beautiful, even, than her photograph, and it seemed quite impossible that Perry could ever love *her* after having been engaged to anyone like Glenda. Then, just as she drew abreast of them, Glenda caught sight of Perry. Fleet-ingly her attention was distracted and there was a loud 'oh!' from the crowd as the horse refused. Pale with anger, Glenda swung at the reins and prepared to take the jump again. The savage way she used the whip brought a second 'oh!' from the spectators, and Janis involuntarily turned away.

'How ... awful!' she gasped without thinking, and involuntarily put her hands to her face. 'I can't bear it.'

'Hush, dear,' he whispered, and drew her close.

'I'm sorry ... I've never been to a gymkhana before. I suppose - I suppose they have to use the whip sometimes.'

'Not like that!' he returned abruptly.

'None of the others has even carried one,' Avril submitted, not without malice.

Eventually Perry turned Janis round again.

'Watch this young man. He was in the children's class until last year, and rides superbly.'

'Joe Calwell's our local champion,' Avril told her with pride.

There was an echo of agreement from John, who was writing 'four faults' against Glenda's name.

There were cheers and hand-clapping as the winner was announced. Joe Calwell had beaten Glenda. They were too far away to see how Glenda took

this, but she looked across at them and Janis wondered if she were blaming Perry for diverting her attention.

'Shall we have some tea?' John suggested, and Perry looked at his watch.

'Have we time? Janis, for some reason, insists on playing the role of waitress from five till six. What shall we do - rush it through now, or wait until she's finished?'

'Don't rush because of me,' Janis interposed hastily. 'I can get mine later.'

But they shook their heads. They must all have tea together, and it was agreed that they wait until Janis joined them again.

'Then I think we'll go home for it,' Perry said. 'Cold tea and stale sandwiches aren't in my line.'

Janis thoroughly enjoyed herself. She knew most of the other helpers by sight, and they not only welcomed her with enthusiasm, but afforded her the respect due to the wife of the most important man in the village.

Her time was nearly up when, with a gasp, she saw Mrs. Poole and her niece sit down at one of her tables. Janis's first impulse was to leave the marquee as quickly as possible, but it would not be the thing to go before the relief came, and, summoning up her courage, she went to take their order. They were talking together, and Janis waited quietly until Vera looked up.

'Janis! What are you doing here?'

'Helping with the teas,' she replied, as calmly as she could. 'May I have your order?'

Janis's new dignity seemed to crush any further comment for the present, and Vera gave her their order. She wrote it down and was just about to walk away when Vera said sharply,

'You're married?'

Janis glanced at her finger, conscious of the absence of an engagement ring, and of Mrs. Poole's searching scrutiny as she replied,

'Yes, I'm married.'

Mrs. Poole's lips curled, and her eyes travelled over Janis insultingly.

'Done pretty well for yourself apparently. Had better luck with your next victim! Who is he ?'

'You wouldn't know him,' Janis returned quietly. 'I'll get your order—'

'Sorry to interrupt this little heart-to-heart talk, but I have to take my wife home to tea.' Perry flipped the paper out of Janis's hand and gave it to a young woman who happened to be passing. 'Will you take this order, Miss Mason? Thank you.' He looked down at his wife's former employer with the cold contempt that Janis knew so well, and then obviously decided she was not worth his attention.

'Come, my dear,' he said, handing Janis her hat and bag.

The most unbelievable thought struck Mrs. Poole. She had recognized Perry at once as the 'Mr. Caton' who had made inquiries about Janis, but if he were also the 'Mr. Caton' who lived at Dene Royal....

'Do you live at Dene Royal Manor?' she gasped.

'I do,' he replied icily. 'And if, by any chance, you should think of trying to blacken my wife's name by repeating the falsehoods you told me, I warn you that you are not dealing with a child of seventeen now. I shouldn't hesitate to make things extremely unpleasant for you!'

'Janis - married to— It's impossible!' Vera looked ready to cry, and she clutched the edge of the table as though for support.

Casting them both a glance of sardonic amusement, Perry took his wife's arm and led her from the tent.

'Do you know Mrs. Poole?' Janis asked in bewilderment when they were outside the tent. He did not answer; they crossed the field, making for the gate, and as the silence continued Janis looked up questioningly into her husband's face.

'I didn't mean you to know,' he admitted then. 'But when I walked in there and heard the way that woman was speaking to you. ... Well, the positions are reversed now and I must apologize to you.'

'Apologize - what for?'

'When you were so reticent about the reason for your dismissal I decided to look up your old employer and find out for myself. She told me a pack of lies—' He broke off and then added reluctantly, 'That served me right.'

Janis glanced up at him perceptively.

'You believed her, though - at first, I mean ?'

He merely nodded and again they walked in silence until they were clear of the field and out on the lane.

'I was too ready to believe the worst of you,' he owned, again on a note of reluctance, and Janis knew that it had cost him a good deal to make an admission like that. She thought again of what had just occurred and experienced an almost ecstatic pleasure at the significance of his action. He wasn't ashamed of her ... he had come to her rescue and referred to her as his wife. And, being only human, she could not help feeling a little triumphant at the way in which he had dealt with her former employer.

They reached the privacy of the drive, and Perry slipped an arm round her shoulders.

'Am I forgiven?'

'There's nothing to forgive.' She smiled happily. 'I should have told you when you asked me. But I was so sure you wouldn't believe me.'

'I don't think I would have done - then,' he was honest enough to admit. 'Afterwards ... well, I knew you better.'

She hesitated, and then, timidly,

'Did you see Mrs. Poole the day you found your curtains changed?' It was the first time she had mentioned them since, and, having done so, she felt a little frightened.

'Yes.'

So she'd been right in thinking something else had been the real cause of his anger. When she did not speak Perry asked curiously,

'Why did you tell Mrs. Poole that she wouldn't know me?'

'I didn't want to disgrace you,' she answered quietly, and his arm tightened.

'You could never disgrace me, Janis. I want you to remember that... always.'

CHAPTER NINE

As she undressed that night Janis went over the events of the afternoon and came to the conclusion that, if Perry did not actually love her, he was well on the way to doing so. When she heard him moving in the next room she wanted to go in and tell him the truth; her hand was on the handle of the door when she restrained herself. How would he take it? Would he, as Avril had warned, be furiously angry? - or would he understand and forgive her at once? It was a risk, a risk she had no need to take and, thinking it over for another moment or two, she decided to wait.

After all, Thursday wasn't so very far away.

Perry had already gone out when she came down the following morning; the corn harvest over, he was ploughing in preparation for setting the winter wheat. It was Sunday, though, and he would finish early. In the meantime, Janis decided to go to her room and tidy out some of the drawers.

Reaching the bottom of one drawer, she found an old print dress which she had made at school. It had cost only a few shillings, she remembered, but she had been just as proud of it as any of her present expensive ones. She tried it on, laughing at her reflection in the mirror. It was ridiculously short and much too tight, but, for some stupid sentimental reason, she left it on, and went out into the garden, making her way leisurely down to the brook. Laughing Water, Avril and Perry called it. What a perfect name! The shimmering silver bubbles cascading joyously over the stones seemed to reflect the laughter of generations of children who had played there. Taking off her shoes, Janis stepped into the water. 'O-oo!' It was hardly warm enough for paddling; nevertheless, she crossed cautiously by the stepping-stones, making for the far bank.

After sitting on the side for a while, dabbling her feet in the water, she went a little further into the woods, idling the time away in rapturous dreams of a future in which Perry was always near. Suddenly she heard his voice, loud and peremptory, and began to run towards him. The stream lay between them and, reaching the bank, she started cautiously, but with a certain nervous haste, to negotiate the large slippery stones which had cost Perry many a watery tumble before they were arranged to his satisfaction.

Tall willows on each side of the bank cast long shadows on to the stream, but every now and then the sun escaped through a gap in the trees, rippling through her hair, transforming it into a silver halo for her high, intelligent forehead.

Perry made no move to meet her, and his eyes never left her face as, gaining the bank, she again started to run. In a moment she stood before him, breathless ... slender as a nymph, her great eyes anxiously searching his face.

Then he smiled; a tender, reassuring smile that brought a gasp of relief from her parted lips.

'You're not vexed?'

'No. Should I be?' he asked, then, looking down at her feet, 'Where are your shoes?'

'I - I'm just trying to think,' she murmured, wrinkling her brow. She looked round absently, and Perry realized that she hadn't the faintest idea where they were.

'What a baby you are! And where on earth did you get that dress - from the village jumble sale?'

'I made it,' she informed him in a voice of indignation, not unmixed with pride.

'Then you've made it about six inches too short! - to say nothing of the — er - fit.' His critical eyes moved upwards and Janis reddened.

'I made it five years ago,' she began, and he burst out laughing. '*I* like it! It was a beautiful fit when I made it!'

'I'm sure it was,' he said, still laughing. 'But for a respectable married woman it's disgraceful!'

Her cheeks dimpled enchantingly.

'That sounds wonderful.'

'What does ?' he frowned.

'Respectable married woman. It sounds dignified and matronly.'

'Then I shouldn't have said it! For you're nothing but a naughty, disobedient child! Didn't I tell you, only the other day, not to paddle unless the weather was warm?' Janis nodded contritely. 'And do you know what I ought to do to you for losing your shoes?'

Janis shook her head vigorously.

'Then ask Bebbie what she would do.'

The dimple reappeared.

'Oh, Perry ... did she spank *you* for losing *your* shoes?' she asked delightedly.

'So you do know,' he commented smoothly. 'No, she did not. As a matter of fact, I never lost my shoes!' His eyes lit with amusement. 'But I rather think you'd like to believe I had— Though I can't see why.'

'Because I like doing the things you used to do,' came the prompt reply, and his expression changed to one of tenderness.

'You're very sweet. I wish I'd noticed it sooner. ...' He paused and she waited breathlessly for him to continue. But he lapsed into meditative silence and after a while she said contritely,

'My shoes were terribly expensive, Perry, I'd better try to find them.' But although they both searched about in the long grass they met with no success.

'Never mind; you'll have to buy some more.' His voice sounded curt, she thought, and his glance seemed critical as it swept over her again.

She brushed the untidy curls from her forehead.

"You always catch me at a disadvantage," she complained. "I'll never wear this dress again."

"I'm glad to hear it." And, after a slight hesitation, "Is this what you were doing the last time—?" He stopped, and she knew instinctively that he had no wish to remember his treatment of her on that occasion.

"I had been in the woods, but I meant to be tidy when you arrived. You came home earlier than I expected."

"Why were you muddy?"

A long silence, and then,

"I'd been looking for some wild violets."

"What for?"

"It - doesn't matter." She made to walk away, but Perry caught her wrist.

"Tell me," he insisted, remembering the little violet glass from which the pens and pencils had been removed. "They were for me." His tone held a wealth of tenderness and wonderment.

"Yes."

"There were plenty of flowers in the garden, surely?"

"I didn't want those."

"They were too easy to come by, weren't they?" And before she could answer he drew her unresistingly into his arms, holding her close. After a little while she looked up, her eyes bright with emotion. "My little wife," he murmured, and kissed her tenderly.

To Janis's keen disappointment Perry had to go away on the Wednesday and stay overnight.

'What time will you be back?' she asked miserably.

'Some time in the evening.' He felt disappointed, too, thinking of the bright new little car which was over in one of the buildings, locked up. He had intended taking her for a run in it as soon as he gave it to her; but he had just heard of a large sale of Jersey cattle which was taking place at a farm in Northumberland and could not afford to miss it, for he felt convinced the heifers were just what he was requiring.

If Janis still had any doubts they were dispelled by the telegram which arrived at lunch time on Thursday. 'Many happy returns, dearest. Shall be home in time for dinner. All my love, Perry'.

All my love ... here it was at last - in black and white...

It was with some impatience that Perry realized he needed petrol just as he reached Chester. Even that slight delay was irksome.

He pulled up at his usual place and was waiting for the tank to be filled when young Dr. Evans from the hospital pulled up, too. Perry nodded absently, but the doctor came up to him, full of apologies for his mistake.

'I was away when the young lady was admitted to the hospital, but I saw Dr. Grant afterwards and he told me all about it.'

'Your carelessness might have resulted in my wife being crippled for life,' Perry admonished. 'However, she's better now.'

'I know. I saw Dr. Grant about two months ago and he told me he'd given her her discharge that very morning. I must congratulate you on your marriage, by the way - quite the romantic sequel.' He wondered what he had said to make his listener turn so pale.

'I think you've made a mistake.' Perry's words sounded hollow and meaningless, even to his own ears. 'My wife is still under Dr. Grant's care.'

'Oh, no. I remember it particularly, because he said how pleased he was to discharge her before he went away. Surely she told you—' He was talking to himself; Perry was driving off in a cloud of dust.

It couldn't be true, he told himself. His wife would never deceive him. Janis, with her sweet little ways and childlike innocence, her patience and readiness to forgive. By her gentleness she had turned him from his chosen path, had almost killed the bitterness in his heart.

Almost... but not quite, and now it surged up within him as he reached the starting point in this vicious circle. It *was* true! Glenda all over again! Lies, treachery, deceit.

The doctor couldn't possibly be mistaken. Janis had deliberately kept the truth from him - and there could be only one reason for it. How easily he'd been fooled once again ... and by the same air of innocence which had deceived him before.

At this stage Perry felt more disgusted with himself than with Janis. What sort of a man was he to be taken in by every pretty face that came along? But no ... his wife's beauty had not made him love her. He realized with increasing bitterness that his love for Glenda had been a pale and shallow thing in comparison. He had loved Janis for herself; for the way she looked and spoke, for her hundred little unselfish gestures - and it was all an act!

First his father had been fooled, and it had cost him his fortune; then Perry himself, and when that had nearly cost him his home he had sworn never to trust a woman again.

And now he had been fooled by a mere chit of seventeen!

How she must be laughing at him! Pretending to be hurt by the slightest sharp word or look; telling him she wanted to do the things he had done! - all so that she could take what he had to give ... and offer nothing in return.

She must have known how much he had wanted her these past few weeks; she would have been blind not to know why he dared not take her in his arms. He recalled how startled she had looked if he happened to mention her discharge; her dismay when, after telephoning Grant, Perry had told her that it would only be a matter of weeks. Then when the letter arrived - she had lied deliberately about her next appointment with the doctor; there was no appointment, nor had he said he would telephone her. ... Yet he *had* said he wanted to see her when he returned. Perry's eyes narrowed. Only last week he had spoken to the doctor about the pig ... and Grant had said nothing about having discharged Janis. He must also be in this little plot, then! Janis must have asked him to say nothing - and he had agreed!

Grant would never have done so unless she'd lied about him. Yes, she must have filled Grant with a pack of lies and he had obviously believed her. Perry's foot crashed on the accelerator. He'd been in a hurry to get home before. He was still in a hurry....

Hearing the car stop, Janis ran into the dining-room. She would have liked to rush into the hall to meet Perry, but was suddenly overcome with shyness so, instead, she tried to compose herself with a last inspection of the table which she herself had laid with such care. She was rearranging the flowers when he entered the room, softly closing the door behind him. She glanced up, starry-eyed, a soft flush of pleasure on her face. But the smile of welcome froze on her lips as she encountered his hard and merciless gaze.

'Is anything the m-matter?' Janis moved haltingly towards him.

Perry stood by the door, his hands in his pockets. He said, with a quietness that terrified her more than his violent outbursts ever had,

'When did Dr. Grant sign you off?'

The colour drained from her face, condemning her.

'This m-morning— I was going to tell you tonight—'

'Don't lie!' He strode across the room and caught her elbows in a brutal grip, shaking her until she cried out.

'You're hurting me—'

'I could kill you!' He flung her into the chair. 'Grant signed you off two months ago, didn't he?'

'Yes, Perry - but I can explain—' She rose unsteadily from the chair. 'You see—'

'I'll bet you can, you rotten, deceitful little wretch! But you needn't trouble; it won't do you any good. I know you for what you are—'

'Listen to me—'

'I've listened to enough of your lies. Pretending that you misunderstood the arrangement we made before our marriage - that, too, was a lie - calculated to fill me with remorse. I see that now! But you haven't been clever enough, my girl. You'll pack your bags and be out of here first thing in the morning!'

'You can't send me away without giving me a chance to explain,' Janis cried desperately. 'I'll tell you why I did it—'

'I know why,' he shouted, deaf to the anguish in her voice. 'You were glad to marry me, willing to take all you could lay your grasping hands on, but you'd no intention of giving anything in return.' He was far too angry to realize the injustice of that, and Janis did not remind him that he had practically forced her into marriage. She had risen, laid a trembling hand on his arm to stem his angry words. With a vicious movement he knocked it off, and then the significance of his last words penetrated her brain.

'You said you didn't want ... oh, Perry, it wasn't like that at all! *That* wasn't the reason I did it.' She moved closer to him again. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because, like a fool, I waited until you were completely well.' His mouth curved bitterly. 'I would have waited for ever. What lies did you tell Grant in order to gain his co-operation?' he demanded.

'I didn't tell him any lies—'

'Yes, you did. Grant's a friend of mine; he would never have agreed to the deception unless you'd lied about me. What did you tell him ?' Janis found it impossible to speak with him towering over her. 'Never mind. I'll ask him myself; I may then get the truth!'

'If only I'd known you wanted me....'

'You knew! You're not a child, though you act the part very well. I confess you had me completely fooled.' Then he added deliberately, 'But I don't want you now.'

Janis bowed her head as though he had struck her. There was a moment's bitter silence; then, mustering up all her courage,

'If you won't listen to me - let me try to explain - how can I make you understand ?' With a desperate yet involuntary gesture she extended her arms in entreaty.

'I understand everything,' he said inexorably. 'There's no need to carry this little scene further; we arranged for an annulment, and we shall go on from there.'

'You can't stop loving anyone just like that,' she began, and his eyes blazed.

'Who said anything about love!'

'You sent me that telegram,' she reminded him with gentle perseverance.

'Where is it?' he demanded.

Janis took it from the front of her dress, and before she had time to grasp his intention, Perry snatched it from her and flung it into the fire. She made a quick move to save it, but she was too late and stood there in mute despair, watching it burn ... a symbol of his love for her. ... One tiny flame; a few irretrievable ashes....

Perry watched it, too, and as the flame died, so did his anger, leaving utter weariness in its place.

'You'd better have something to eat,' he said flatly, and rang the bell.

'I d-don't w-want anything,' Janis sobbed, thinking of the dinner she had planned in the knowledge of the new sweetness that had come between them. '*Please* listen to me, Perry. I know I've been - deceitful, but it's not as bad as you think.'

'I've finished with the whole miserable business,' he said, his eyes heavy with disillusionment.

'Very well.' Janis turned and ran from the room, almost colliding with Bebby who, answering Perry's summons, was carrying in the dinner tray.

'What—!' But Janis paid no heed to Bebby's astonished exclamation and a moment later she was on the bed, her lovely dress crumpled beneath her, her body convulsed by sobs as she lay in an abandonment of grief and despair. How different from what she had imagined. Was this the end? Would Perry never forgive her? - never soften enough to listen to her explanation, or understand how desperate she had been to win his love?

It was quite dark when at last she moved. Snapping on the light she glanced at the clock. Half past ten. Strange, she thought, that Bebby hadn't come up to see what was wrong. Perry must have forbidden her to do so, for Bebby knew just how excited she had been all day, scarcely able to contain herself until her husband's return.

She heard him in the next room, and then silence. How long had he remained downstairs ? Surely he would have noticed the table, which she herself had laid with such care - the flowers and the silver, and the Rockingham service which Bebby had said was used only on special occasions. Surely he must have known that it wasn't just for her birthday.

She undressed slowly, reflecting again on what might have been, and had slipped her nightdress over her head when she turned, her nerves quivering.

'Perry!' He stood in the open doorway, leaning against the jamb, his arms folded, regarding her coolly. Janis stared at him, a flush rising, her eyes still swollen from weeping. Had he been watching her? No, he would never do

that, she decided, her embarrassment beginning to fade. 'Do you want something?' she asked innocently, unaware as yet of any lurking danger.

That amused him, but only fleetingly - and suddenly she knew. She stepped back, the colour draining from her face as he advanced slowly into the room, his eyes glinting with a light that terrified her.

'You ask what I want?' His brow lifted a fraction. 'An odd question to ask your husband, Janis.' His tone was smooth, and menacingly quiet. 'Come here.' The intensity of his loathing filled the room. Her throat went dry and her eyes flickered, dark and afraid. It mustn't be like this .. not this way.

'You said you didn't want me.'

'I've changed my mind.'

'No, Perry—' She shook her head, in a dazed sort of manner, and extended her hands as if to ward him off, yet at the same time it was a gesture of entreaty. 'I d-don't want you—'

'I'm fully aware of that!' Her action, and her words, seemed to release a savage, pent-up fury and he gripped her outstretched hands, drawing her, resistingly, towards him. 'It's only too obvious that you don't want me—'

'Let me finish,' she pleaded desperately, her heart pounding as she sensed his latent passion. 'You deliberately misunderstand my meaning.'

He held her at arms' length, his eyes running over her contemptuously. Her hands freed, Janis pressed one tightly to her heart, pressing the other one tightly against it, for its swift, unnatural throbbing hurt and frightened her.

•Very well. What is it you have to say? What plausible excuse has that scheming little brain of yours devised now? Tell me!' But he didn't give her the chance to speak, even had the wish to do so remained after his icy, scathing remarks. Roughly he pulled her to him; his mouth came down on hers, possessive, merciless. He took his fill, despite her struggles, and when at last he ceased she stood there in his arms, passive, staring up at him, shocked and repelled by his brutality. 'Do you know now what I want?' The

low vibration of his voice added to her terror. She pleaded with him again, her eyes heavy and bright with tears.

'I'm afraid of you,' she whispered, and for one fleeting moment a softness entered his eyes, only to vanish so suddenly that Janis was left wondering if it were a vision created from the strength of her own desperate desire to soften him. 'Perry, I want to tell you all about it.'

'There's nothing you can say that will change my opinion of you. You're a cheat, Janis, and there's only one way to deal with cheats. I'm going to take what you've gone to such lengths to keep from me.'

Take. ... She shuddered, again recalling the eagerness with which she had awaited his return and reflecting on those daydreams that had half embarrassed her while at the same time enveloping her in ecstatic anticipation. In her imaginings she saw Perry as a gentle lover, come to conquer, yes, but in the tenderest way. She saw herself led lovingly through byways of delight, strewn with gifts bestowed in adoration to lure and tempt by tender gentle steps towards that realm of all-transcendent joy.

No, it must not be like this, she thought again, leaning back, away from him as his arms slackened their hard and cruel embrace.

'You mustn't, Perry - no, I want to talk—'

'Talk!' He laughed then, a heartless laugh that robbed her of all hope. 'My good girl, do you think I've come here to talk?' He tightened his hold, desire no longer dormant. She tried to offer some resistance as he picked her up, but she was in the grip of a strange physical incapacity and her only reaction was a little moan of despair when, a moment later, the room was plunged into darkness.

She lay awake, conscious of Perry's even, restful breathing and the weight of his arm across her body. Had she slept? Yes, she must have done, for the first light of dawn was already apparent through the partly-open curtains. She turned her head; he looked so tranquil now, and there was a softness

about his mouth, that brought a sudden prick of tears to her eyes. For there had been no softness about him last night; she had known no tender guidance through those paths of bliss which lead to glad and sweet surrender. And when, desire fulfilled and passion spent, he had not led her back, caressingly, to sleep within his arms. His was the way of primitive unbridled dominance, his aim to crush and break, avenging that imaginary slight.

And then he had slept. No loving word, no tender goodnight kiss.

Yet through all the disillusionment she clung to hope; it glimmered, refusing to be quenched, for, stirring in his sleep, he had heard her sobs and murmured tenderly,

'Hush, my darling ... you mustn't cry. ...' And his arm had come about her and stayed there through the night.

If she could keep him here, if, when he woke, they could talk, in this intimate situation, all would be explained, all their problems and misunderstandings resolved. And so she waited patiently until he stirred. But his first act was to remove his arm abruptly, and before Janis had time to frame her words he had left her side and was putting on his dressing-gown. Urgently, for it seemed he intended leaving her without a word, she whispered in gentle pleading tones,

'Perry ... stay with me. I want you to stay—' Her words were stemmed by the contempt in his eyes as he stood by the bed, looking down at her. But she persevered, although with painful difficulty. 'If you would stay we could talk and - and we might be able to put things right between us. ...' Her voice, already low and subdued, trailed off into silence, for never had she seen such harshness in his glance.

'You believe that possible - after last night?'

Her eyes filled up. That was his fault. She had wanted it to be so beautiful. She tried to tell him, but his expression remained so cold, and all she said was,

'We could forget that, Perry ... and begin again.'

He shook his head.

'Neither of us will ever forget it.' He spoke with bitterness, and ... could it be regret? 'No, my dear, last night, if nothing else, should have convinced you that things can never be right between us.'

She flinched, yet again recalled those words, so tenderly spoken in his sleep, and she went on again, still with that gentle perseverance,

'If we tried - if we tried to find a way. ...' Her whole body sagged. Perry was moved neither by the silent pleading in her eyes nor the anguish in her voice.

Without another word he turned and left the room.

The door clicked, with a terrible finality, and Janis's first impulse was to leave the Manor, as Perry had told her to last evening, but again his gentle words intruded— 'Hush, my darling ... you mustn't cry. ...' He must feel something for her. Time might close the rift between them. Bravely she resolved to stay.

CHAPTER TEN

FOR the next few days Janis saw very little of Perry, but when they did meet, usually at dinner time, his manner on the surface was one of cool politeness, yet Janis sensed an underlying hurt within himself, and a deep regret. This latter puzzled her, for although she knew it was concerned with his action in coming to her, she could not tell whether he regretted his treatment of her or whether his regret resulted from the fact that there could now be no annulment. If this were the case, then there was no hope for their marriage, even though they were irrevocably bound together. But if the former were the case, and he was sorry for hurting her, then there was a hope of happiness for them. But how was she to find out? Knowing him so well, aware as she was of his deep and innate pride, she despaired of his ever coming to her again.

And because she must find out, because she wanted so desperately that their marriage would succeed, Janis decided to sink her own pride and go to him. He would either accept her, treating her as a loving husband should, or ... Janis refused to dwell on the alternative.

However, despite her firm resolve she found difficulty in approaching him and another week passed before a suitable opportunity arose. Perry had been rather less cool in his manner towards her when, after dinner, they sat together in the playroom. This slight relaxation of his attitude gave her courage, and hope. And when, later, she knocked timidly and opened the door between their rooms her embarrassment was submerged by the optimism which this new attitude of his had given her.

He was standing, fully dressed, looking down at a book that lay open on the table by his bed. He turned in some surprise, his eyes travelling up from her bare feet to the whiteness of her shoulder where the strap of her nightdress had fallen away on to her arm.

'What is it, Janis? Is something wrong?'

A slight shake of her head answered him as she came forward into the room to stand before him, small and pale and rather scared. But in spite of the hammering of her heart she faced him bravely and her voice was steady

when she spoke. In simple words she told him why she had come, looking up with a wide and steadfast gaze and waiting with an ache of almost physical pain for his reaction, for him to hold out his arms to her; waiting to see the look of relief and thankfulness that she had made the move which he himself could never do.

But as his expression changed, as his eyes moved insultingly over her, the last remnant of hope fled, yet she became supported by a new element of pride which suddenly entered into her. She was able to face him unflinchingly, to hold his contemptuous gaze until it fell beneath her own.

'I shan't try again, Perry. This is the first time I've come to you and it will be the last—'

'The first time you've come to me, yes—' He paused for a moment as if determined that his words should sink in . . . and wound. 'But it's not the first time you've come - like this - to offer your favours, is it, Janis ?'

'What do you mean?' All innocence, she stared at him in blank bewilderment.

'Have you forgotten why you were dismissed from your post?'

'Arthur ...?' The insinuation staggered her. 'You said you believed me. You can't go back on your word. You did believe me, Perry. You were so emphatic about that.'

He shifted uneasily; Janis had the impression that he knew he should take back those words, and yet he seemed at the same time to be driven by some force stronger than himself.

'Perhaps... but what about your young friend George? What was your relationship with him?'

To her dismay the colour flooded her cheeks; her mind became confused and she spoke in tones of urgent desperation, without considering her words.

'That was nothing - oh, you must believe me! We only - that is, he only—'
Janis put a trembling hand to her mouth and her husband prompted softly,

'Yes? He only . . . what?' He was waiting; she had gone too far now to retract and she admitted, reluctantly, that George had kissed her.

Until now Perry's manner had been contemptuous but controlled; he had seemed only mildly interested in the situation in which Janis herself was so deeply involved. But now as the dark and angry colour slowly fused his face she wondered if he had really meant those insinuations, for he seemed to have difficulty in accepting the fact that George had kissed her. Mingling with his rising anger was a strange incredulity and Janis gained the impression that although he had practically accused her of something far worse, he could not in fact believe that she had allowed another man even to kiss her. She became more and more confused as she saw his anger manifested in the clenching of his fists and the compression of his lips. Was he jealous of George? She had thought so once before ... but no. How could he be jealous when quite obviously he didn't love her?

'You let him kiss you?' His voice, too, sounded incredulous, but harsh and wrathful also, and Janis moved back, beyond the reach of his arms. 'You actually allowed him to kiss you?'

'Yes, I let him,' she confessed, for it was futile to deny it now, but she did add, with absolute truth, 'I don't know why, Perry. I didn't really want him to.' Why had she let George kiss her? She had often wondered, and only now did it dawn on her that she had been feeling utterly miserable, missing her husband and wanting to be back home with him. She looked up at him now with a frank expression in her lovely eyes. 'I think I must have let him do it because I really wanted—'

'You brat!' Contempt once more replaced the fury in his gaze. 'You shameless little brat to stand there and talk to me like this. Get out!' He flung up a hand indicating the door; Janis turned and moved away, swallowing convulsively as a terrible little ache of misery settled in her throat. But her head was held high and as she reached her own room she turned again, to cast him a glance of deep reproach before, passing through the door, she pulled it to behind her.

For a moment she stood leaning against it, still trying to rid herself of the tightness in her throat. Her eyes wandered over to the dressing-room; she went across and took a suitcase from one of the shelves. Not a very sensible time to leave, but she felt she could not remain a moment longer in the house of the man who so obviously hated and despised her.

Bebby was aware that something had gone amiss, so Janis felt no reluctance at writing her a note. She told the housekeeper of her intention of staying at an hotel for the night, and then finding a flat. She would write to her as soon as she was settled. She did think of leaving a note for Perry, but she could find nothing to say and she abandoned the idea. As for Avril, she would write later - if at all.

She must make a new life, she decided, away from all these people whom she had grown to love.

The last train to Chester was at eleven-thirty and Janis had to walk briskly, for she had only three-quarters of an hour left which to cover the two and a half miles to the station.

It was past midnight when she arrived in Chester. She had noticed several hotels when in town shopping, and she made for the one nearest the station. It was full, so was the next.

She was just leaving the third when she heard her name called, and turned to see Richard hurrying towards her.

'What are you doing in town at this time?' He glanced at her in astonishment, noting her swollen eyes and the suitcase she carried. Janis did not see the smile of triumph that curved his lips.

She stood irresolute, wondering what to say to him. But it did not matter if he knew the truth, she decided, and went on to tell him that she had left her husband.

'But I thought you were so happy.' Richard looked deeply concerned. 'You must go back, my dear— Perry will be almost out of his mind. Let me get you a taxi—'

'I'm never going back,' Janis declared. 'Perry doesn't want me.'

'You don't know what you're saying, Janis. You're upset. Come along with me and I'll put you into a taxi.'

'You don't understand, Richard. We made a pact to stay married for a little while and then have an annulment. Ours is not a normal marriage; if it had been I wouldn't have dreamed of running away, because I would have known that we'd soon make up our quarrel.' If it had been a normal marriage, she thought, Perry would never have told her to go - the way he had on the night of her birthday - no matter how angry he was.

'I see ... that certainly makes a difference. You haven't found a place to stay?'

'All the hotels seem to be full.'

Richard smiled to himself. The hotels near the station always filled up first; there was plenty of accommodation elsewhere.

'They will be, Janis. I don't think you'll get in anywhere at this time. Even the big hotels are full.'

'I must find somewhere,' she cried. 'I'll have to keep on trying.'

'I know this town better than you - I live here.' Richard shook his head. 'I don't know what to suggest.' 'I've only tried three....'

'Do you intend living permanently at an hotel?'

'No. I shall look for a flat tomorrow. I have plenty of money to see me over till I get a job.'

She had it all worked out, apparently, Richard mused. Not quite so helpless as she looked.

'I'll come with you,' he offered. 'I know most of the hotels. We'll fix you up somewhere.'

'Oh, thank you, Richard. If it's not putting you to too much trouble—'

'No trouble at all. You're my cousin - it's my duty to look after you.'

Janis looked up at him gratefully, and he gave her a reassuring smile.

'I've been to these three here,' Janis told him.

'I know of a little place round the corner.' Richard took her suitcase with one hand, and her arm with the other. Reaching the hotel, he told her to wait outside while he made inquiries. He came out shaking his head. The same thing happened over and over again, and Janis became more and more agitated as the time went on.

'It's nearly half past twelve—' She stopped abruptly.

'What's the matter?'

'I thought - I thought I saw Perry's car - over there - it's in front of that lorry now.' Janis's heart raced. Was Perry looking for her?

'Perry wouldn't be in town at this time.' Frowningly Richard followed the direction of her gaze. 'Poor little Janis! I don't think there's much likelihood of his coming to look for you, dear.'

'No - of course not.' How stupid she was! Perry would be asleep in bed, and when he awoke in the morning and discovered her absence he would be overwhelmingly thankful that he had rid himself of her at last. The tears trickled slowly down her cheeks. 'Richard ... what can I do?' she whispered, and his grip tightened on her arm.

'Don't cry, dear. You're not alone. I shan't leave you until you're safely fixed up for the night.' Again he glanced towards the line of traffic, a frown appearing on his handsome face.

'But we've tried everywhere.'

Richard hesitated a moment. Then, cautiously,

'You could stay at my flat— I could go to a friend - but perhaps you wouldn't care ... ?'

'You'd give up your bed for me!' How kind of him— And it wasn't as if he knew her very well. Before tonight they had spent no more than half an hour in each other's company.

'I'll give it up willingly,' he told her with a smile.

'There isn't anywhere else we could try?' she asked after a pause, and Richard shook his head.

It was late; Janis felt miserable and exhausted, yet she remembered her promise to John; remembered also that Perry disliked his cousin excessively. But what did her husband's approval or disapproval matter now?

Two mornings later she was trying to eat the toast she had made when Richard looked in on his way to work.

'Sleep any better last night?' He sounded anxious and his tone was gentle.

'Not much.' Janis gave him a wan little smile, though he had the impression that she seemed more cheerful than on the previous morning. 'The bed is very comfortable, though,' she added hastily, and then, 'Would you like some coffee ?'

'Haven't time, dear.' He glanced at the clock. 'I've decided to take the afternoon off - just dropped in quickly to let you know. Can't have you trudging round by yourself again today. We'll go flat-hunting together. All right?'

There was a moment's hesitation.

'The thing is, Richard, I'm beginning to wonder—' She broke off as he glanced again at the clock, this time with faint impatience, and before she could continue he had said a hasty 'Good morning,' told her he was already late, and left her. She stared at the closed door for a moment, then rose and went into the kitchen, taking the tray with her.

Yesterday's flat-hunting had been a very half-hearted affair, for gradually a strange conviction was being borne upon her. And all last night she had lain awake thinking, not of Perry's heartless revenge, or of the quarrel which led up to it, but of those wonderful weeks preceding it. Surely Perry could not act that way towards her and yet not love her! Had she been too hasty? After all, her husband's violent outburst over her deception was only what she had expected whenever the thought of his discovering it assailed her. His revenge, too, she could understand, for he genuinely believed his wife didn't want him, and that must have been a most severe blow to his pride. Janis thought, too, as she lay there, of the car she had seen. She felt absolutely certain it was Perry's, and that must mean he had relented soon after she had left his room and he had then come in to her. He would find her note to Betty....

But even as she made up her mind to telephone him Janis realized the terrible position in which she had put herself by staying two nights at the flat of the man whom Perry disliked so much. True, Richard had not been a party to that wicked plot to rob his cousin, but Perry believed he had; consequently he hated Richard and he would never be able to forgive Janis for staying at the flat.

She must find accommodation at an hotel, Janis decided, and then she would ring Betty and give her the address. If Perry wanted her he would come and fetch her. It would be unlikely that he would ask how long she had been staying at the hotel.

Having resolved upon this action, she washed the dishes, put them away, and then sat down with the telephone directory. There would be no difficulty in obtaining a room now; the travellers usually went off early each morning.

The first hotel she rang was one which Richard had tried. There was plenty of accommodation, she was told, for this happened to be a slack period. She could have a choice of rooms - even one overlooking the river if required.

Janis held the receiver away for a moment, her brow furrowed in perplexity. Then some instinct made her ask if the hotel had been full to capacity on the evening before last. Again she was told this was a slack period. The hotel never filled up at this time of the year.

After booking a room she rang another hotel which Richard had tried, and made the same inquiry. She received a similar reply.

Slowly she replaced the receiver, her eyes dark and puzzled. Why should Richard have done this? His professed desire to help her hadn't been genuine. In fact she knew without doubt that he wasn't a genuine person at all. Bebb's story had rung true, and Janis was appalled at her own stupidity in even listening to Richard's version of the story. Also, Perry would never be the one to make a mistake, to condemn his own cousin without absolute proof.

With a little gasp she put a trembling hand to her mouth. No doubt in her mind now that Richard had meant her to stay in his flat. And in some terrifying yet indefinable way she knew that he was seizing what he thought to be a heaven-sent opportunity to be revenged on Perry ... and that he meant to use her as the instrument of revenge.

Within half an hour she was entering the hotel. Giving her name at the reception desk, she stared in some surprise as the clerk immediately hurried away, returning a moment later with the manager.

'You are Mrs. Caton?' he inquired politely, eyeing her up and down with a rather odd expression.

'Y-yes.'

'Your husband has been here inquiring about you -- both last night and the night before,' he informed her in toneless accents. 'He said if you did appear I was to ask you to telephone him.' He cleared his throat, but instantly a

smile appeared as he caught the glowing look that entered Janis's eyes. 'There's a telephone in your room, madam.' A wave of his hand brought a porter to take her suitcase.

'This way, please.'

She turned to follow the porter. It was sheer torture to have to walk sedately when her feet had wings! In an hour - no, three-quarters of an hour - her husband would be here to take her home! He wanted her ... but she had really known it all the time....

The moment the door closed behind the porter she began to dial the number—

And then the terrible truth flooded over her. Perry must have been to all the hotels, looking for her. He knew she hadn't stayed here or at any other hotel in Chester. The very first thing he would ask would be where she had spent the last two nights.

And she hadn't even the excuse that all the hotels were full, because Perry knew otherwise.

'What have I done ...?' Her temples throbbed painfully and her heart sank as she realized the hopelessness of her situation.

It was clear that her husband was now prepared to overlook her recent deception - but this he would never forgive. ...

'Four guineas a week, including electricity. That's cheap.'

'I'll take it.' Janis produced the money, shuddering at the meagre furnishings of the room. 'Are the shops very far away?'

'Just along the road - and the bus stops at the other end.'

'I know. I came on the bus.'

Mrs. Scott hesitated, then told Janis that if she felt lonely she could come down to the kitchen and watch the television.

'Thank you very much, but—'

'My sister's on tonight; she's a model - a real top-notch. Married now though, but still keeps on with her job. Don't forget, come down if you want.' She turned, stuffing the money into the pocket of a creased and greasy overall.

When she had closed the door Janis looked round her, thought of the lovely rooms at the Manor, and sat down on the bed and wept.

Was it only this morning that she had been so hopeful, so optimistic of a reconciliation with Perry? Well, there could be no going back now. As she had decided the night she had left him, she must now make a new life for herself.

After a long while she dried her eyes, and went out to the shop for something for her tea. Silly, because she had no appetite. On her way back she bought an evening paper; there might be a suitable job advertised....

At nine o'clock Mrs. Scott shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

'Mrs. Caton, she's coming on now - if you want to see her!'

'I don't think—' -

'You'll have to hurry!'

With a sigh of resignation, Janis turned off the electric fire and went downstairs.

'Sit here, dear - no, shift the dog off that chair; it's more comfortable.'

Janis sat down, somewhat curious now about Mrs. Scott's sister. She had always thought models were educated, refined girls, with cultured backgrounds, for one often read of their marrying men with titles.

'That's her!' Mrs. Scott exclaimed. 'Isn't she beautiful?'

'Yes; very.'

'Had a different education than me - years younger, that's why. Father'd got a good job by the time she went to school? Married a real toff, she did, but had some trouble over the baby.'

'She has a baby?' Janis felt obliged to show interest.

'Yes. But her husband thinks she should look after him herself - real domineering, I call it. Why shouldn't she carry on with her job if she can get someone to look after the child?'

'Well ... if her husband has plenty of money, she doesn't really need to work,' Janis submitted.

'But she likes it - and it doesn't matter how rich you are, you always need money.' Mrs. Scott shook her head. 'I think she'll have to give it up, though - unless she can get someone who'll suit that husband of hers. Too particular, he is, always finds fault with every one of them. He's sacked this one - she leaves at the end of the month. Too flighty this time. Oh, look - that's a pretty dress!'

Janis looked at the dress, then turned again to Mrs. Scott.

'Where does your sister live?'

'London, of course.'

'Oh... it's a very long way from here.'

Mrs. Scott looked at her strangely.

'You're not thinking of going in for modelling? No, dear, you haven't got the height.'

'I—' Janis hesitated. 'I'm looking for a job, Mrs. Scott - I've done that kind of work - caring for children, I mean.'

'Have you now! Well, who'd have thought it?' She eyed Janis up and down. 'I think you'd do! I'll write to Pam in the morning. I'm sure that stuffed-shirt of a husband won't be able to find fault with you.'

Janis stared dejectedly at the suitcase, packed and ready on the bed. Mr. Watkins was coming for her at five-thirty and he had asked her to be ready, for they had a long way to go.

She would have liked a little more time to consider this step, but her services were required at once, and so she was going away to London - far, far away from her husband and from all the others whom she loved. She tried not to cry, for tears were so futile - they did not even bring relief. Yet her eyes were heavy as she thought of what might have been, of how near she had come to perfect happiness. And the most terrible burden of all was the knowledge that Perry had loved her, loved her enough to search for her, to want her back to live with him. Had he been softer, more understanding and forgiving, she could have let him judge her folly, sure that he would consider it folly, and not wickedness. But he had always been quick to believe the worst of her, she thought, recalling those wounding and unjust accusations on the night she had left, and no matter how she explained about the reason for her staying at his cousin's flat, he would never believe in her innocence.

With a little sigh she slipped off her dress and put on the old school dress that lay on the bed. Then she hung the other in the wardrobe, ready for when she returned. After putting on a pair of old shoes, she picked up the packet of sandwiches and went quietly from the house.

She caught the bus for Dene Royal; there would be a three-mile walk from the place of alighting, but she had the whole day before her, she reflected, wrapping her warm travelling coat around her so that it hid her dress.

It was lunch time, however, before she reached the wooded outskirts of her husband's estate and, with a sudden pang, she realized that she would have

but three hours at most. Glancing up at the 'no trespassers' sign she experienced a slight shock. Was she a trespasser now ?

Stooping under the barbed wire, she found a shady place on the bank of the stream and sat down to eat her sandwiches. Cupping her hands, she drank from the cool clear water, watching it, entranced, as it leapt between the-polished stones or rode a harder band of rock, causing rapids which made music to echo through the stillness of the woodland glade, or murmur softly in the towering pines. The air was warm, touching her face with a gentle caress; she became enveloped in peace, shedding her cares and pain as she gathered and stored these memories for all time.

It had been a foolish little urge to see the brook and the lakes, the woods and the Manor again which had brought her here. She had made up her mind during the lonely wakeful hours that she must see them all once more. She stood up after a while and moved to the water's edge, taking in the deep reflection of the sky with its filmy puff- balls of cloud floating across the gold of an autumn sun, the slanting flame of light on the pine-clad hillside and, in the far distance, the wooded slopes of Peckforton, and the ragged outlines of the two castles, dark sentinels standing above the green and fertile Plain of Cheshire. Closer to, the willows dipped gracefully into the water, picking up jewels to gleam and glint with the gentle sway of the branches, and the incredible tints of autumn coated the woods with yellows and browns and rusts which blended deftly with the rich deep greens of conifer and fir.

This was how she wanted to remember it, and as she gazed up at the clear sky she breathed a sigh of thankfulness that she had managed to choose a fine day for this, her last visit to Dene Royal.

Moving on the soft springy moss, she took the path through the woods to where the trees thinned and the house became visible across the wide lawns. Smoke coming from the chimney in the playroom.. ..

Janis sat down and took off her shoes and coat and, leaving them on the bank of the stream where it meandered by the path, she stepped gingerly into the water. Engrossed in her progress downstream, she suddenly realized she had not been listening for the church clock. The bus ...! She must leave at three

or shortly afterwards. She heard it, holding her breath. One ... two ... surely it would stop there. Janis gasped with relief. Still an hour. ...

Proceeding to the bank, she sat down, dangling her feet in the water. The leaves were already beginning to fall. She had come in the spring - she was leaving in the autumn. What was the rest of the year like at Dene Royal ? The woods must be a fairyland of wonder when they were blanketed with snow. ... And the house? A little cold and forbidding from the outside, but within ... snug and warm with log fires showering the panelled walls with a rosy glow and filling the air with a pine- scented fragrance. Home....

Bravely she blinked away the tears. This was never meant for her; it had been a dream, nightmarish for the most part, but there had been wonderful moments, too. Moments like the one, when, not so far from here, Perry had stood beside her, and had spoken to her so softly, so tenderly. ...

The chimes echoed in the distance and making her way to where she had left her coat and shoes she stood for a long time gazing over to the house. Then, with a despairing little sob, she reluctantly put on her coat. She held her shoes as, stepping again into the water, she moved towards the barbed wire fence. The stones were slippery, covered with slimy feather-grass, but she had done this many times and with confidence she continued on her way until arriving safely at the curve by the 'no trespassers' sign. Here she turned for one last look in the direction of the house, hidden now by the trees. Bebbby would be preparing tea; soon Perry would come striding across the fields— With a sudden catch of physical pain in her heart, she recalled the way she had so often been forced to trot in order to keep pace with him.

She turned again and, without warning, slipped on the slimy water-weed, catching her foot on something that felt as sharp as glass. In an instant she had toppled headlong into the stream, her shoes jeiking from her grasp. Raising"herself, she was just in time to see them caught in the swirling current of the bend and go sailing swiftly downstream, towards the thickest part of the woods.

With a desperate effort she dragged herself to the bank and ran after them, flinging off her coat as she went along. Thorns began to cut mercilessly into her feet, but she ploughed on, through the tangled undergrowth heedless of

her drenched clothing. After searching frantically for what seemed to be an eternity, Janis was forced to admit she had lost them, and at last, breathless and tired, she sat down and wept with the abandonment of despair.

What could she do now? Impossible to go to the house. 'I don't care if I die here,' she sobbed, but instantly pulled herself together. That was silly and childish. Nevertheless, she would not ask Perry to help her; he should never know she had been here today.

Only one thing to do; wait for darkness and then creep round to the back of the house and ask Bebbie for help. Her tears ran faster as she realized she had missed her bus and in all probability lost her job.

The sun, already low in the sky, had lost its warmth; Janis shivered and rubbed her legs to restore the circulation, noticing as she did so that her dress was torn and frayed by her dash through the undergrowth.

For a long while she sat there as the dusk gathered with frightening speed. She must find a spot nearer the house, while she could still see her way. Within reasonable distance of the drive she rested again. It was still too light to venture-out and, leaning against the wide trunk of a tree, she waited for complete darkness to come down....

Shivering violently, Janis awoke to an eerie blackness and as memory flooded over her she struggled to her feet, stiff and still drenched to the skin. She tried to move in the darkness, to pick her way to the drive, but even when her eyes had become accustomed to the gloom she realized that everything was shrouded in a grey, damp mist, and she had no idea which way to go.

Terrified, she stood there, listening to the flow of the stream and the distant hoot of an owl. Then something soft and furry scuttled across her feet and with a muffled scream she started forward, making for the tiny pin-points of light that had appeared between the dim shapes of the trees.

Several times she caught her foot in trailing brambles or roots, and fell, but she was up again instantly, and stumbling on, aware of the deepening mist which was fast developing into a yellow, choking fog. The air seemed filled with terrifying whispers; the gnarled oaks took on spectral shapes, and to Janis's imagination the ghost of every Caton who ever lived surrounded her - barring her way to safety.

The gash in her foot bled profusely now, but she had her bearings and knew she was nearing the drive where it curved past the shrubbery; with one last effort she reached it.

Breathless and sobbing, she sank on to the verge, intending to rest awhile before going on to the house.

The sound came to her, muffled at first, and then she heard the soft footsteps approaching. Panic-stricken, she jerked herself to her feet, but even as she started to run a hand shot out and grabbed her firmly by the wrist.

'Let me go!' Her scream echoed dully through the mist; at the same time she heard Kim's excited barking and her husband's incredulous exclamation.

'Janis!'

For one moment her brain seemed numbed and then, forgetful of all that had passed between them, she flung herself into his arms.

'Perry, it's you!' she gasped, repeating his name over and over again.

'Hush, darling.' He held her tenderly, protectingly. 'Hush, my little love, you're quite safe now.'

'I th-thought you were a ghost.' She shuddered, and clutched" the lapels of his coat. 'The woods are full of them - dozens of them!'

She was hysterical, and yet he could not bring himself to apply the most effective remedy, so he just held her trembling body to him until she should become calm from sheer exhaustion. When at last she did relax he picked

her up and strode briskly along the drive to the house, with the excited Kim close on his heels.

If he had surprised Bebby once, it was nothing to her astonishment now as, walking straight past her, he crossed to the playroom and placed Janis on the big couch by the fire.

'What's happened to the child? What a state— Where did you find her?'

'No questions now, Bebby.' Perry's face was grim and taut. 'The important thing is to get her out of these wet clothes - you do it, will you? - while I find some others.'

'Yes, but—'

'I don't know any more than you do,' he said quickly. 'I found her in the drive.'

Before the old lady had time to speak again he had left the room.

Returning a few minutes later, the blue housecoat and a nightdress over his arm, he found Janis being rubbed down briskly, while the old lady murmured to her in half soothing, half admonitory tones.

'Perhaps a hot bath would be better,' he suggested. His face was pale and anxious as Janis continued to tremble violently; standing there naked, only vaguely aware of what was going on.

'It's warmer here - she'll be all right.' Bebby took the nightdress from him and slipped it over Janis's head. Perry held the coat for her and she put her arms into it.

'Have we any soup?' he asked, fastening the buttons and gazing down into Janis's wide and troubled eyes.

'Yes; I'll go and warm it.'

'I shouldn't have come,' Janis whispered as the door closed behind Bebbie. 'I'm sorry to cause you all this trouble.'

A muscle moved in Perry's cheek; he said, very quietly,

'Tell me about it when you've had your supper. But first of all we must attend to these feet. What were you doing without your shoes?'

'I - lost them,' she faltered, and Perry could find nothing amusing in that just now.

'Sit down while I fetch some hot water.' Within minutes he returned with a bowl of water and a large medicine box.

To Janis's utter astonishment he went down on his knees and bathed her feet, and then, with deft and gentle fingers, he smeared soothing ointment into the deep, ugly gash and bound it up. He extracted the thorns, ignoring her squeals of pain each time he punctured the flesh with the needle. Then he cleared everything away, drew the couch nearer the fire, and brought a small coffee table over to it.

'Have your supper,' he said, when Bebbie had brought in the tray, and Janis obeyed, though she didn't feel at all hungry.

The meal finished, Perry removed the table. Bebbie hovered in the background and Perry, asked her to ring Avril and let her know that Janis was home.

'And tell her *not* to come over until the morning,' he added.

Bebbie still hesitated and, smiling faintly, Perry said he would talk to her when Janis had gone to bed. With that promise she went out, closing the door softly behind her.

Perry stood looking down at his wife for a moment, then he sat down on the couch beside her.

'Would you like to tell me all about it,' he asked, 'or are you too tired?'

She paused, her eyes still wide and anxious.

'You don't know what I've done,' she began, and then stared silently into the fire. Would Perry understand if she told him of her stupidity? If he didn't ... Janis clasped her hands convulsively in her lap. To come home, only to be told to go again. ... 'Oh, Perry, you have no idea what I've done,' she whispered despairingly, and two great tears rolled down her cheeks.

Perry took her hand.

'Why didn't you come home when you left Richard's flat?' His grip tightened as she made to snatch her hand away.

'You know!'

'John saw you leaving one morning. He was in a traffic jam and could do nothing about it just then. But he went to see Richard at his work.' A slight pause as Perry's lips curved in a sort of grim amusement. 'John used to do a little amateur boxing at one time.'

Janis blinked at him, one hand automatically fondling Kim, who sat looking up at her with a soft and worshipful gaze.

'John didn't—?'

'Wasn't necessary. People like Richard are born cowards - they usually succumb to threats.' Again Perry hesitated, and his tone held a hint of censure when at length he said, 'Surely, my darling, you knew I wouldn't think that of you?'

Janis sat in reflective silence for a moment, recalling how easily her husband had condemned her, how quick he had been to believe the worst. But, glancing up, she saw his expression, an expression that swept away for ever all her fears and doubts. Never again would Perry distrust her.

And as she watched his face, with the firelight softening the arrogant lines, and saw the tenderness in his eyes, all her love welled up and she moved with a sort of shy hesitancy to fill the tiny space between them.

He gathered her into his arms and kissed her tenderly, and after a while she began to tell him all that had happened. When she mentioned the post of nanny he stiffened, but Janis did not notice.

'Supposing I'd gone,' she breathed in a frightened little voice. 'Oh, Perry, you'd never have found me - and it would have been awful, when you wanted me—'

'I'd have found you,' came the grim response, and then, 'What kindly act of providence prevented your going? You haven't told me how you came to be at Dene Royal?'

'I missed the bus,' she said, answering his first question, and he turned his head sharply, a puzzled frown on his brow. 'Mr. Watkins was calling for me at half past five this afternoon, but I wanted to see everything again before I went away, so I brought a picnic lunch. I meant to stay in the woods until three o'clock and then catch the bus back to Chester. I was just going when I fell in the brook.' That was too much. Perry's sense of humour refused to be kept under control. Janis looked at him reproachfully from under her lashes and, feeling sure of him for the very first time, she said indignantly, 'It's nothing to laugh at! I assure you it was most uncomfortable.' And, as he made no attempt to stop laughing, 'I might have caught pneumonia - perhaps I have, even now !'

That sobered him ; he tucked the housecoat snugly round her and held her even more closely to him.

'Are you quite warm?' he asked on an anxious note.

A mischievous laugh rippled.

'I'm lovely and warm, thank you, Perry.' She peeped at him, adding, 'You look so very worried.'

'And you look as though you like that immensely!' he retorted. 'Why didn't you come home immediately you fell in the brook ?'

'Home?' Janis became grave. 'I didn't know you knew what I'd done - I thought you'd be so angry, and hate me—'

'Darling, don't!' So I waited until it was dark, intending to ask Bebbie for some shoes from my room. But I fell asleep and didn't wake up until a few minutes before you came. .. ' Janis tailed off as his shoulders again shook with mirth. 'It isn't at all funny!'

'My dear child, it's the funniest thing I've ever heard!' he gasped. 'On the day you intend leaving me for ever, taking up a post in London, you go for a picnic, lose your shoes, fall in the brook, go to sleep in the woods until nearly midnight—' Perry was unable to continue for laughter. 'We haven't come to your coat yet,' he went on when he'd recovered, 'but presumably you lost that, too!'

'I did,' Janis admitted baldly, still unable to find anything amusing in that terrifying experience.

'And I asked you what act of providence prevented you from going. It strikes me providence was working overtime!'

'The primary cause of it all was falling in the brook,' she pointed out. 'Everything else was just a result of that.'

But Perry had gone off into renewed laughter.

'Wait till Avril and John hear of this!'

'Have they been very worried?' she asked, and Perry nodded, becoming suddenly grave.

'Avril told me everything, blaming herself for persuading you to keep silent when you wanted to tell me that Dr. Grant had signed you off.' He pressed her hand, tenderly, and lifted it to his lips. 'What a fright you've given us - never leave me again, my little love. Never, do you hear?'

'No, I won't.' She examined his face again, noticing -this time those things she had missed - the little grey lines round his mouth, the tiredness at the

corners of his eyes. He looked as if he hadn't slept for nights. 'I thought I was doing it for the best, but now I know I should have stayed, for you would have forgiven me, wouldn't you, Perry?'

'There was nothing to forgive.' He went on to tell her how he had stood there after she had left his room, prompted by the knowledge of his own injustice to come to her, yet held back by his anger at her confession about George. 'What made you indulge in a flirtation like that?' he demanded, on a sudden note of censure.

'It wasn't a flirtation - oh, no, Perry!'

'Why did you let him kiss you?' He regarded her more in puzzlement than in anger. 'I just couldn't believe it.'

'I was miserable because we were staying those extra days. I wanted to be with you,' and she went on to confess that she had lied about having a good time. 'I hated every moment away from you and - and I think I must have let him kiss me for - comfort.'

'Did you, darling? And if only I'd listened everything would have been all right. As it was I wasted precious time, for when I did come you'd gone - and then I saw the parcel and that wasted more time, otherwise I'd have caught you before you reached the station.'

'The parcel?'

'I opened it and found the curtain material. I just had to ask Bebbie about it, yet I knew all the time, knew why you hadn't done the small window, knew that you'd spent your own money.' He shook his head rather sadly and his eyes held an expression of deep regret. 'Bebbie only added to my own self-torture by telling me how happy you had been in doing something for me ... and all I did in return was to hurt you. Sweetheart, can you ever forgive me?'

'It wasn't your fault - you'd seen Mrs. Poole—' She passed it off and said, 'What did you do then, Perry? Did you go into Chester?'

'Yes. I went to the station first, but the train had gone. What made you think I'd gone to Chester?'

Janis told him about seeing the car, and explained what had happened afterwards. Avril had told Perry of the introduction to Richard, but he was puzzled that she should stay in his flat. Janis then explained about Richard's giving her his version of the story, having to tell Perry that she had already heard it from Bebbie.

'I believed him at first,' she owned, 'because he sounded so sincere, but when I learned that the hotels hadn't been full I knew he wasn't a very nice person, after all. Why did he want me to stay in his flat?' she went on to inquire innocently, and then wished she had kept silent, for a harsh and dangerous glint entered her husband's eyes.

'I don't think we'll go into that, Janis. But you were most sensible to come away, for he meant to be revenged on me in a way which only a brain like his could devise.' And with that she had to be content. He still seemed angry and her eyes clouded, though only for a moment, for, aware of this, Perry drew her close and said, 'Darling, don't look like that. I'll never hurt you again, I swear it.' And that hint of sadness was apparent once more as he added, 'I've hurt you, I know, but I'll spend my life making up to you.' She knew to what he referred and she tenderly responded to his kisses as his lips found hers again.

They sat quietly for a while, each knowing that there was still much to be explained, but for the present they were content to be close, to feel the security of a love that was deep and strong, a love that would last for ever.

At length Janis stirred in her husband's arms, and murmured placidly, 'I must look at my tree in the morning.'

'I examined it today. It's fought valiantly for survival, but its roots are firmly established now. It will live.'

At those words a strange smile hovered on Janis's lips.

'I know.' She paused, gazing dreamily into the fire. 'Yes, I know it will live.'