



Mills & Boon

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THE GILDED BUTTERFLY

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When Selina went out to the tiny South American country where her father lives she soon got into the bad books of her father's friend, Alastair Grainger. Alastair thought her a silly, frivolous playgirl who would be better advised to leave as soon as possible and get back to her jet-set friends. In fact, Selina was forced to leave the country almost immediately, when she unwittingly got herself into a difficult and dangerous situation. As it was Alastair who had save her from it, perhaps it was inevitable ;that she should have fallen in love with him. But he was not for her, he told her firmly; apart from his ingrained disapproval of her there was too great a barrier between them. She must go away and forget him. Was it going to be as easy as that, though?

CHAPTER ONE

THE man looked at the girl and the girl dropped her eyes and turned her head away, unable to meet that lascivious stare. He was a big man and bulky, and looked enormously strong. The low forehead disclosed when he swept off his sombrero in mock salutation was covered with curly black hair like the head of a bull; bovine too were the round brown eyes under shaggy brows, but the teeth disclosed by the parting of the full red lips in a wolfish smile were white and pointed, more like those of a beast of prey. He had a black moustache and long sideburns; his skin was burned to the colour of mahogany.

By contrast, the girl was slight and fine-boned, her hair a gleam of pale gold under her hat. Her features were delicate, her eyes, veiled at that moment by her long lashes, a candid grey. She wore jodhpurs and a shirt, her head covered like the man's by a Spanish hat, a protection against the South American sun. Her horse, like herself, was all clean lines, fire and spirit, whereas the man's mount was a bay stallion, a massive beast capable of carrying his master's great bulk and with the stamina to endure exposure in the mountain fastnesses.

The girl glanced uneasily behind her, but the groom who should have been at hand to protect her had stayed at a discreet distance away from the couple who had burst out of the surrounding forest to intercept his mistress; for there were two mounted men in the road in front of her, and if the first looked like a bull, the second resembled a weasel, with his narrow face, close-set small black eyes and tufts of reddish hair on chin and cheeks.

Selina Stevens had ridden further than she had intended, for it was a glorious day and her horse was fresh and eager to gallop. The soft dirt road presented no hazard to its hooves, so she had let it have its head, despite warning shouts from her groom, who had received strict instructions not to allow her to stray too far from the town of Paracos where she was staying. Now she became painfully aware of the thick jungle lining either side of the narrow road and the presence of these two men, who might be, and probably were, desperadoes of evil intent.

The bull continued to stare at her, his bold eyes assessing every point, the fine-boned wrists and small gloved hands grasping her reins, the slight curves of breast and hip, the white column of her throat, as yet untinted by the sun. Such delicacy and daintiness did not often come his way, and all his brutish instincts rose in a wave of desire, to possess, to shatter and defile. He made some comment to his weasel-faced companion, which caused that individual to snigger. Then he addressed the girl in heavily accented English:

'Senorita, por favor, tak' off ze 'at.'

As if mesmerized by a snake, Selina obeyed. The sun beat down upon her uncovered head, turning her hair to pale fire. The man drew a sharp breath.

'Hermosa!' he muttered, and continued in his own tongue. 'A maiden too, I will be sworn, a flower to be picked, and a flower that I shall be the first to gather.'

The other man seemed to be expostulating and the bull laughed, deep-throated.

'Ingles? It is no matter. Who would dare to keep her from me?'

Selina recovered from the mesmeric spell the men's sudden appearance had momentarily cast upon her. She jammed on her hat, gathered up her reins and wheeled her horse about. But she had hesitated too long. Before she could escape the bandit, if that were what he was, had pushed his horse in front of hers, and his hand was on her bridle rein. His great bulk seemed to tower over her.

'You must not run away, my pretty one. First you must pay me a ransom, eh?'

Though his patois was difficult to follow, she knew enough Spanish to get the gist of it, besides which his action was obvious. His proximity made her flesh crawl with repulsion. Summoning all her courage, she bade him let her pass, and raising her riding crop, she struck at his brutish face. She missed it, merely hitting his shoulder, and her action seemed to amuse him immensely.

'A wildcat to tame!' he exclaimed exultantly. 'But when I have finished with you, *chica*, you will lick my boots.'

He urged his beast forward, and encircling her with his arm, sought to lift her off her horse on to his own.

'Juan!' Selina cried to the groom, but he made no move to come to her assistance, rather he drew farther away.

What would have happened next Selina shuddered to contemplate when she reviewed the incident in retrospect, but at that moment the sound of a motor horn, loud and insistent, caused the bandit to loose his hold and back into the undergrowth with the quick reflex of a man who lived with danger, and his hand sought the revolver in his holster.

A battered landrover had come to a halt within a few yards of them and its driver held a rifle at the ready.

There was a second's tense pause and then the bandit relaxed and laughed again.

'*Por dios*, it is the mad explorer! *Saludo, senior*. Have you yet found your lost Inca gold? When you have, we will do a deal, but I doubt you will be more fortunate than your many forerunners.'

The newcomer made some response in Spanish that Selina did not catch. He climbed out of his vehicle, still keeping his gun in the crook of his arm. He too was a big man, but unmistakably British. He had a lean, leathery look, proclaiming that he was a man who was used to hardship and exposure. His features were craggy, his blue eyes keen and direct. Although clean-shaven, he had a day's growth of beard, which made him appear almost as great a ruffian as the two South Americans.

Ignoring them, he deliberately walked up to Selina.

'You'd better be on your way, you little fool,' he told her curtly in her own tongue. 'And don't stray so far from the town again.'

He gave her horse a slap on its quarters. The spirited beast sprang forward, nearly unseating its rider, and broke into a gallop. She had flushed angrily at the stranger's tone, wanting to make excuses; to tell him that she was not a fool, that her horse had got out of control, and she had not expected to encounter bandits so near the capital city of Titicamba, but having escaped there was no sense in lingering. Juan fell in beside her and the two horses galloped side by side until the houses of Paracos came into view. Drawing rein, they continued at a more sober pace, while Selina sought to compose herself. Her father, she knew, was already worried about unrest in the country, and she did not want to have to confess that her own lack of forethought had nearly led to tragedy. Glancing back along the winding road, she saw a trail of dust which, indicated that the landrover was following them. As she recalled her rescuer's contemptuous blue eyes, his assessment of 'little fool', Selina's grey eyes sparkled.

'Almost I could wish the bandit had shot him,' she murmured.

Which was ungrateful, but the arrogant way in which he had dismissed her was rankling, for Selina was used to deference from men, and particularly her own countrymen.

There was a dance that night at the Presidencia of Paracos, though the President himself was not there. He was supposed to be indisposed, but those in the know whispered that he had fled the country.

The beautiful marble hall with its pillars and gilded carving was decorated with flowers and potted plants, their heavy scent adding to the oppressiveness of the atmosphere, which had all the tenseness that precedes a thunderstorm, only this was a storm of human making. The handsome Latin girls and their sinuous escorts danced with hectic gaiety, for none knew what the morrow would bring forth. Their uneasy expectancy was similar to that which must have overhung the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of Waterloo.

Paracos was the principal city in Titicamba, a small state that was tucked away in an Andean valley east of Peru and Bolivia. It had managed to

preserve its independence because of its inaccessibility. On the eastern side, impenetrable forest covered the hills between it and the Amazonia, to the north and west the mountain slopes towered above it. Only to the south did any road lead out of it.

Of late its mineral potentialities had brought in foreigners from many European countries, among them Thomas Stevens, Selina's father. A mining engineer representing a large British concern, his company had accommodated him in a commodious bungalow on the outskirts of the town of Paracos. The concessions he had been granted were expected to bring profit to the mutual advantage of his company and the Titicambian government.

That country like so many of its neighbours had continual political troubles. Its presidents came and went. Now it was threatened by a take-over by a powerful band of malcontents, who had gathered in the surrounding forests, and having no army to speak of, there was little doubt that their leader would succeed in ousting the present regime.

Selina was dancing with a young American, Bob Howes, and she remarked upon the absence of the Titicambian officials, who usually loudly advertised their presence.

'Making their getaway while the going's good,' Bob told her lightly. 'This ball is cover for their desertion. Everyone is supposed to believe they're still here.'

A little anxiously she asked: 'Will there be fighting?'

'Nothing to speak of, a few shots fired mostly in the air. The peons are indifferent, a change of dictatorship won't affect their poverty, poor brutes.'

He went on to reassure her, as her father had already done, that the foreign business men and their property had nothing to fear. Only an utter fool killed the goose which laid the golden eggs, and Titicamba desperately needed foreign capital and foreign expertise to develop its resources. Nevertheless, his blond, boyish face had a worried look as he regarded the fragile fairness

of the girl in his arms. She stood out among the other dark, exotic types of womanhood like a lily in a field of oriental poppies.

'I can't figure why your pop brought you out here,' he said. 'It's a primitive sort of place for dames.'

Selina blushed faintly. She had not been brought out by her father nor anyone else, but she could not confide her own recklessness to a comparative stranger. She explained lightly:

'It was an opportunity to see a new country, and I can live without luxury. Actually I've nothing to complain about - our bungalow is charming and everybody has been so friendly.'

The young man continued to frown. She had an innocent, untouched air, and he could not tell her how her Nordic colouring could inflame the amorous Latins surrounding her, and one man in particular, who, when he brought off his coup, would be all-powerful, a man, moreover, who had a bad reputation where women were concerned.

'You'd better keep away from here when the new guy's installed,' he warned her. 'That is if he entertains at all. I'm told he's a bit uncouth.'

Selina looked round the beautiful room, with its lofty vaulted ceiling, the slender marble pillars and wide windows opening on to a terrace.

'That's a pity,' she observed gravely. 'This room was designed for stately functions. I imagine the Presidencia was built by the Spaniards.'

'Yes, though Pizarro, who conquered the Incas, was also uncouth, a soldier of fortune who could neither read nor write properly. But those who came after him had more culture. It's a shame to think of all the beautiful objects those first *conquistadores* melted down. They couldn't appreciate the Inca art, all they wanted was the gold.'

'There isn't any left for your new dictator to melt down,' she remarked lightly.

'No, though there are always rumours of lost treasure in the forests and possible goldmines, and a propos of that, do you see that guy talking to your pop ?'

He swung her round so that she could look at Thomas Stevens and his companion. She recognized the big man at once, though he was now closely shaven, and his thatch of reddish brown hair uncovered, which was greying at the temples. His evening clothes were old-fashioned and she suspected rarely worn, but he carried himself with an air of distinction. For all that, he looked completely out of his element in a ballroom. He was essentially a man of the wide open spaces, the type which in the old days made good pioneers. The penetrating blue eyes were fixed upon herself, but not with admiration. Rather he seemed to be assessing her and finding her wanting. Her father was talking to him eagerly, almost as if he were pleading with him, though Selina could not imagine what possible request he could be making to him. She remembered with a quick throb of anger how the stranger had called her a fool and dispatched her with a slap on her horse's rump.

'Who is he?' she asked.

'Alastair Grainger, archaeologist combined with, I guess, a little prospecting and treasure-hunting on the Q.T. Still, to give the guy his due, he has discovered some notable Inca ruins, though not any hidden gold. Haven't you met him? I thought he was a buddy of your pop's.'

'He hasn't been to Paracos since I've been here,' she told him, disconcerted to discover that this man who she was determined to dislike was the Alastair about whom her father had often spoken to her. In his eyes he was a fine man, and they had shared more than one adventure together, while their friendship was of long standing.

With heightened colour, she remarked drily:

'Actually I have met him, without knowing who he was, and his manners left much to be desired.'

Bob laughed. 'He's no lady's man. I've a hunch he despises your charming sex, though gossip says ...' He broke off, realizing that what rumour said was hardly fit for a young girl's ears.

'Says what?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Come on, Bob, you know there's something. It's too bad of you to stop, just when your revelations were going to be interesting.'

'Well, I guess it is only gossip, but out here men don't live like monks - it's something to do with the climate. It's probably only gossip, and anyway he's a good guy to be with in an emergency.'

'I daresay,' she said indifferently, and started to talk of something else. She had given her father a very brief account of her adventure with the bandit that morning, making light of it, for she did not want her liberty to be curtailed, but it was more than probable that Alastair Grainger would enlarge upon it. That would account for the worried look upon her father's face, the same look that she had seen upon Bob's.

The dance came to an end and Bob led her up to Thomas Stevens. He said almost roughly:

'Isn't it possible to get Selina out of Paracos before the new regime takes over?'

'Oh, rubbish,' Selina interposed quickly. 'I couldn't leave Daddy, and you said no one would interfere with us.'

She looked uncertainly from one to the other of the three men. They were all regarding her sombrely, as she stood between them, a dainty wisp of a girl, her creamy shoulders rising out of the folds of her white dress, which clung to the long lines of her graceful figure. The small head with its pale gold crown was lifted proudly, her wide grey eyes were steady and unafraid.

'I'm not a Victorian miss,' she went on. 'Even if there is any... shooting... I shan't scream or faint.' She glanced round the ballroom. 'None of the other women seem to be leaving.'

None of them look like you do, was the unspoken comment of the trio as they glanced meaningly at each other. Then Alastair said solemnly:

'Will you give me the next dance, Miss Stevens? I'm not much of a dancer, I'm afraid, but I would esteem it a privilege.'

His wording was a little stilted and old-fashioned and she wondered vaguely why he made his request.

'I'm sorry, but I'm engaged for it,' she said stiffly, and looked round for the young Brazilian who should be coming to claim her, but he was late, and Alastair said firmly:

'Since your partner is so tardy, I insist,' and drew her into his arms.

'You are a little high-handed, sir,' she told him coolly, as he swept her round the room, 'and I'm surprised you're so anxious to dance with a little fool.'

He smiled faintly, the sun wrinkled round his eyes crinkling attractively.

'Does that still rankle?' he inquired. 'You were foolish, you know, to wander so far in this unsettled country. If I hadn't come along...'

He did not finish his sentence and her colour rose, while a little skiver ran down her spine.

'I must thank you for that timely rescue,' she said, but there was no warmth in her in her tone.

'I'm afraid I only did half the job. I should have driven you straight out of the country. Now I'm afraid it's too late, the frontier will be guarded by Pablo Rodriguez's men.'

'Must I repeat that I don't want to leave, and I'm sure I'm in no danger.'

Though he had said he was not much of a dancer he was light on his feet and moved in time to the music, but now he drew her off the floor into a small alcove screened by potted palms.

'Let's sit down for a moment,' he suggested, indicating the double seat set there intended for couples desiring privacy.

Surprised, Selina glanced at him uncertainly.

'I'd prefer to continue dancing.'

'This isn't the time for dancing. Sit down.' His tone was peremptory. 'I've something to say to you.'

'If I must.' She seated herself demurely. 'But I hope you won't keep me long, I've other partners waiting for me.'

As well to let him know that other men found her attractive, if he did not. He sat down beside her, saying:

'Believe me, I've no wish to force my company upon you.' His tone was quietly savage. 'Cajoling young women isn't my favourite occupation. Nevertheless, your father *is* my oldest and greatest friend and he saved my life once, so he has a claim upon me. I'll say nothing about the idiocy of bringing a girl like you to Titicambo ...'

'Please,' she interrupted, flushing with anger, for she was again reminded that it was not her father's doing that she was there. 'I don't see that my presence here is any concern of yours, and though I know you and my father think the world of each other, we've only just met, and I don't think your good opinion extends to his daughter.'

She expected he would apologize. Though not vain she would have been stupid not to realize the effect she had upon most of the men she met. In Paracos, the unattached and some of the attached males were at her feet, but with the one beside her she was having no success whatever; the blue eyes remained cold and critical and he did not soften his words.

'That is neither here nor there,' he returned. 'I don't want to frighten you, Miss Stevens, but you're in some danger if you remain here.'

Selina paled, but her eyes remained steady as she faced him over the edge of the little fan which she was carrying attached by a ribbon to her wrist, an appendage which she knew was both provocative and alluring.

'Then do you expect me to run away and leave Daddy in the middle of a revolution?' she asked reproachfully.

'Tom's in no danger,' Alastair asserted. 'Whoever rules Titicamba expects to benefit from his company's activities, that is so long as you're not here. But when women and the passions they arouse become mixed up with politics then there's the devil to pay.'

He fell silent gazing unseeingly out of the gauze covered window to their right, so covered to keep out the insects. A large moth, attracted by the light, was trying to find a way in and seek certain destruction. Perhaps to him the creature's desire for suicide was symbolic.

Selina glanced at him a little nervously. His brown face looked carved from teak wood, the thin mouth set in an uncompromising line. Bob had said he had no use for women and he looked as though he were damming them up in heaps and the complications they caused.

'I gather you don't like my sex, she observed provocatively, touching her lower lip with her fan. 'Poor us, we can't help being women.'

He smiled a little wryly. 'Of course you can't, but most of my life has been spent in the wilderness, so you must forgive me if my approach is a little unpolished. Unfortunately it seems fate has thrown us together. I've promised your father to get you out of the country.'

'He asked you to do that?'

'As a very special favour.'

'But why you?'

'Because I'm the only person who can do it at this late stage.'

She was not surprised at her father's confidence in him. Alastair Grainger was a man who would accomplish any task he set his hand to do, but she resented being despatched like a parcel of unwanted goods.

'That's ridiculous!' she exclaimed. 'Everyone has been telling me there's no danger. I wouldn't have believed Daddy could be such an old woman. I won't go!'

He turned to face her then, and his eyes were like steel, cold and accusing.

'If you had kept at home you could have stayed so long as you had the sense to remain within doors, but no, you had to go flaunting yourself around the countryside although you knew it was disturbed. If it were only yourself to be considered, you could reap the harvest of your folly for all I care, but your father would feel bound to try to protect you and that might cost him his life. You will have to go, and I'm the only person who has a hope of getting you out.'

Selina laughed a little shakily. He must have exaggerated that incident in retailing it to her father, as she had feared he might.

'Oh, it's my adventure with the bandit that has upset him,' she declared, 'and I suppose you made the worst of it. He was rather a villainous-looking person, but surely the new dictator will be able to control his supporters?'

Haven't they any discipline?'

The blue eyes watching her suddenly blazed.

'Are you really so dim?' he demanded incredulously. 'Didn't you know ... didn't you realize that the man who accosted you was Pablo Rodriguez himself?'

'Oh, no!' She shrank back in her seat, recalling with horror that bull-like man, his evil eyes and his threat to make her lick his boots.

Alastair went on remorselessly:

'You lit a flame in him, my lass, and you may be sure he won't rest until he has found you again. He wouldn't have let you get away without fighting for you if he hadn't been confident he could pick you up whenever he wanted to. If I had had to shoot him in your defence, I would have had his gang of cut-throats howling for my blood, and getting it too. As it was, we parted amicably, he merely remarking that his possession of you would be all the sweeter for being delayed and you hadn't a hope in heaven of escaping him.'

Selina moistened her dry lips. In spite of the heat of the room she felt cold from head to foot. Not naturally nervous, she had viewed the coming revolution equably, confident that she could face any emergency calmly, and everyone had been sure the take-over would be affected without bloodshed. But this hideous personal threat was something that she had never envisaged, and with the recollection of that bull-like man still vivid before her mental vision, she was certain Alastair was not exaggerating.

'But... but how can we cross the frontier ?' she asked tremulously. 'It'll be in his hands by now. Do I disguise myself... or what?'

'That would be useless. We can't go out by any of the normal routes. Anticipating such a move you can be sure Rodriguez has posted scouts on road and rail. There's only way we can go, over the mountains.'

Selina looked towards the window, where she knew the crests of the Andes towered over the countryside. Actually she could not see them for the densely wooded foothills rising below them. She had been told they were impassable, and she said so falteringly.

'Not quite.' Her companion smiled, and she noticed his smile was unexpectedly attractive. 'I've traversed them in the landrover. There's a pass up to the Altiplano. Once we reach that you'll be safe.'

He became silent. There were miles of steep and stony road and thin rarefied air which she would have to endure, and Selina looked incapable of suffering any hardship. Her elegant appearance, perfect in every detail, suggested that she was a little sybarite, cherished, pampered even. Alastair

had told her father frankly that he did not think she had the physique for such an ordeal, but Thomas Stevens, desperately anxious to get her out of the country had insisted that she was tougher than she appeared. Tough was singularly inappropriate as applied to his daughter. With her slender limbs and porcelain prettiness, she did not look as if there were a tough fibre in her whole body. Aware that Alastair was disapproving of her, Selina returned his critical gaze steadfastly. There was fear lurking in her grey eyes, but it was not fear of the mountains. Her face was quiet and composed with no hint of panic. Though she did not know what she was being asked to face, she had plenty of spirit, and she was determined to show this critical person that she could meet any contingency.

Alastair said roughly, to disguise his disquiet: 'I won't pretend it won't be an arduous expedition and you'll have to do your share. There'll be no one to wait upon you, and I've no use for tears and vapourings.'

She flushed, a delicate rose staining her face, while she played with her fan. Looking at him challengingly, she said: 'I'm not given to tears or vapourings, whatever you mean by that. I would endeavour to pull my weight.'

He said more kindly: 'Such a slight weight.'

'I'm not entirely soft,' she informed him. 'I'm accustomed to long hours in the saddle. I can see you're very reluctant to take me, so suppose we call it off?'

To shock her into the realization of her desperate situation, he said bluntly: 'You would prefer Rodriguez's bed?'

The fan snapped between her fingers and she went very white.

'I would sooner perish on the Cordillera than that,' she told him quietly.

That she would perish was only too possible.

'But if I run away,' she went on in the same quiet tone, 'what about Daddy? Will this man avenge himself for my escape upon him?'

Alastair shook his head. 'There would be no point in antagonizing a friendly nation by doing that, since he would have nothing to gain. He'll take it that you got away with the last batch of refugees, or possibly are hiding in the locality. That won't prevent him from scouring the country round to try to recover you before you reach safety, but first he has to consolidate his position here, and by then I trust we will be beyond his reach.'

'I see.' She laid the broken fan down on the seat beside her. With her eyes downcast, she asked, 'So for an unpredictable period of time you and I will be alone together?'

'I'm afraid so.' Sensing her misgiving, he smiled quizzically. 'But you'll have only the elements to fear, Miss Stevens. I shall regard you as a sacred trust.'

A statement meant to reassure her, but perversely she felt it was a challenge to her femininity. She was unused to men showing indifference towards her.

'You haven't got a wife or a fiancée?' she asked provocatively.

'That's beside the point,' he evaded her, and she remembered what Bob had said. He went on to say: 'On this trip I stand in for your father.'

'Oh, can't he come too?' she cried impulsively.

'I'm afraid not. He can't leave his business here. He'll have to get his concessions ratified by the new government.'

'Yes, of course.' She had spoken without thinking.

'You can trust me,' Alastair said more gently than he had yet spoken.

'I'm sure I can.' But he would be a hard taskmaster on this journey into the blue, making no allowances for her feminine weaknesses. He had already expressed doubt about her stamina, and she would have to strain herself to the utmost to prove that she was not the fragile flower that he believed her to be.

Alastair looked at his watch.

'Might I suggest that you go home and pack? The sooner we're off the better. Please bring with you only the bare necessities, and a canvas bag would be better than a suitcase. Include something warm, for it will be cold when we reach the higher altitudes, but we must travel light.'

She gave him a tremulous smile. 'Are you afraid I'll overload you with cosmetics and fripperies?'

'Most of the women I've met never travel without a pack of unessentials,' he retorted. 'You won't need cosmetics on the Altiplano, but bring some cold cream and dark glasses, for we may meet snow. ..' He ran off a list of what he considered important.

Thomas Stevens came across to join them.

'You've told her?' he asked. 'She'll go with you?'

Sensing his intense anxiety, Selina managed a bright smile, while Alastair told him glumly that she had accepted his plan.

'Then the sooner you're off the better,' Tom said with a sigh of relief. 'I'll run you back to the bungalow, darling, and Alastair can pick you up there.'

'It would be better if you brought her outside the town,' Alastair suggested. 'I don't want to be seen in the vicinity of your bungalow.'

'Cloak and dagger stuff?' Selina asked, assuming a lightness she did not feel with an effort for her father's sake.

'Definitely,' Alastair returned, 'or more correctly in this country, poncho and machete.'

They made their final arrangements and parted to go their several ways. As he put her into his car, Tom said:

You couldn't be in better hands, my darling. Alastair is completely trustworthy in every way. You need have no fears.'

Selina smiled wryly at the enfolding darkness as they glided away from the bright lights of the Presidencia. Alastair Grainger was completely trustworthy because he would never see her as an attractive girl, only as a troublesome burden he had assumed for her father's sake.

CHAPTER TWO

THE landrover came to a halt after what had seemed to Selina to be hours of bumping and jolting along the rutted sandy road. The journey had not been easier for her because she had had to sit on the floor in the rear of the vehicle along with their baggage, various tins and plastic containers, and the tools Alastair used for his excavations. Every time the machine jolted, she had been flung against some undefinable article, and the rug in which she was wrapped, with injunctions to pull it over her head if they met anyone, was hot and scratchy.

But the discomfort was a small thing compared with the desolation and apprehension in her heart. She did not know when she would see her father again, and in spite of all the assurances that she had been given, she feared he might be in some danger, added to which she was faced with a gruelling journey in the company of a man she disliked. Only the horror of the fate that awaited her if she had stayed had made her consent to embark upon it, and that, she kept wondering, might have been exaggerated. Surely a man engaged upon taking over a country, however insignificant would have too much else to think about than a girl whom he had met for a few moments out riding? But recalling his brutish face and the look in his eyes, it was a risk she would not care to take.

At long last the landrover jolted to a stop, and Alastair said:

'You can come out and breathe now.'

Thankfully she scrambled out of the back of the vehicle and looked about her, to discover there was nothing to see except trees. They grew on either side of the winding track and in places overhung it. The ground beneath them was dense with impenetrable undergrowth; only by arduous use of a machete could a man hack an entry through it.

Alastair too had descended from his seat; she glanced at him slyly, and saw he was taking stock of her. Both presented a great contrast to their appearances in the ballroom. He wore a khaki shirt with a coloured scarf about his neck, breeches and high boots. His sleeves were rolled up to display his brown, muscular arms. The garb suited him much better than the

evening clothes of the night before. In the Presidencia, he was upon alien ground, but here he was in his right environment. Selina had dressed herself in a shirt, denim trousers and short boots, in which costume she looked more like a boy than a girl. Her hair she had ruthlessly cut to a level with her chin. She knew she would have no opportunity to care for it on this trek, so the shorter it was, the better, but the ends curled enchantingly about her face and neck, under the felt hat she was wearing.

'Well, you look workmanlike,' Alastair admitted grudgingly. Since they had left in the dark, neither had had a chance to assess the other.

'I'm glad my get-up meets with your approval,' she said demurely.

'It'll do for now,' he told her. 'Higher up you'll need a sweater or a poncho.'

'I've got both with me, but at the moment I'm much too hot.'

She made a movement to roll up her sleeves, but he forestalled her, laying a firm hand on her arm.:

'For heaven's sake don't expose more of yourself than you must. The insects will make a meal of you.'

'But you're bare-armed.'

He laughed. 'I'm too tough and leathery to afford them much enjoyment, but that white skin of yours would be caviare to them.'

His eyes were on her throat, the only part of her that was exposed to view, with a sort of reluctant admiration, and it occurred to Selina that he was after all human and possibly susceptible. It might be amusing to try to bring him to her feet, but it was hardly worth the effort in that semi-tropical heat.

'And talking of meals,' he went on, 'I expect you could do with some breakfast, though I'm afraid it won't be caviare, but first you would like to wash and ... er ... etcetera. Wait a minute.'

He searched among the articles in the back of the land- rover, and threw her a towel and a piece of soap. Then, taking a machete, he hacked at the enclosing undergrowth. Evidently he knew the spot, though to Selina's untrained eye, it looked exactly the same as all the other jungle, but here the growth of fern and creeper was more recent, and his efforts disclosed a thread of a path into the forest. A little way along it was a pile of boulders marking the position of a fresh spring. Alastair cleared away the encroaching undergrowth, examined ground and trees for any sign of livestock, then beckoned to her to join him.

'Don't be too long,' he warned her, 'and don't, whatever you do, drink that water, also keep in sight. The jungle can be as dangerous as Rodriguez,'

He went back to the road, but she could glimpse his broad shoulders, carefully turned away from her while she performed her ablutions. The water bubbling up from some subterranean source was fairly clear and cool. It flowed away into the forest to join some river. Enclosed by the thick roof of foliage this little oasis was absolutely still and silent, a green light filtering through the leaves. Selina washed hurriedly, for despite Alastair's precautions, the place was teeming with insect and reptile life, though she saw nothing more fearsome than a lizard. She could not resist turning up her sleeves and laving her arms in the spring water. Alastair's near presence through the veil of undergrowth was reassuring, and instinctively she knew he would not intrude upon her unless she called to him. With a little cold trickle down her spine, she saw the sunlight glint on the barrel of the gun he was holding. He was taking no risk of surprise by man or beast. A parrot flew across above her head, uttering a raucous cry, a flash of blue and yellow. It was the only invader of her privacy except the ants and gnats. Her rude toilet completed, she brushed them from her clothes, pulled down her sleeves and glanced curiously at the pile of stones. Someone must have put them there to mark the spot.

When she rejoined Alastair she asked about them and he told her he had done so.

'I camped there one night, and it's a good thing to know where to find water that isn't stagnant. Further in there's a derelict building under the creepers.'

'The remains of some fabulous city?' she asked, half mockingly.

'Too little left to identify it, but anything could lie hidden in these forests.'

Although their departure had been so hurried, Alastair had packed a very comprehensive collection of necessities, as Selina was to discover in the days to come. For the moment the container of food and the thermos of hot coffee was the most interesting. They sat on the front seat of the landrover, while he unpacked it, and when he handed her a maize cake and a leg of chicken, she found to her surprise that she was hungry.

Reverting to the stones, she remarked that she did not know that there were any Inca ruins so far south and asked what he had been looking for.

'On this occasion nothing in particular. I was on my way to Paracos,' he told her. 'It's true the Inca kingdom did not extend beyond the mountains and most of the ruins are north of Cuzco, but Mancu, one of the last rulers, fled down to the Amazon basin, hoping to found a new kingdom away from the Spaniards, and his followers were scattered here and there. Somewhere in these jungles, but probably further north, they built a city, but it has never been discovered.'

'Is that the mythical Eldorado?'

'Might be. There are still regions round here which haven't yet been explored, also Inca treasure that has never been found.'

He told her then the story of the Inca Emperor Atahualpa who was taken prisoner by Pizarro. To save his life he offered to fill a room with gold to the height of his upstretched hand, and his subjects were ordered to collect this enormous ransom. But before they delivered any great quantity, Atahualpa was treacherously done to death. As the news spread through the empire, the captains of the llama trains still on the way hid the treasure they were carrying and none of it has ever been recovered.

'Is that what you're looking for?' she asked.

'Only incidentally, gold has no gre'at lure for me. I get a kick out of surveying these still partly unknown regions, and I like the Indians.'

Selina tried to recall if her father had ever mentioned a wife or a fiancée in connection with him, but could not do so. She cut short her musings with the reflection that Alastair's love life was nothing to do with her. He had undertaken to escort her to La Paz and her sex only made her an irksome burden to him.

She repacked what was left of the food and they continued their journey along the track, but now she sat beside him. There was still nothing visible except forest, the trees behind them cutting off any vista as they did on either side and ahead. Alastair drove in silence, and she sensed his nerves were stretched to detect any alien movement among their surroundings and his eyes went frequently to the driving mirror, as if he feared pursuit. He kept his gun beside him within reach of his hand.

At length she ventured to address him: 'Where are we now?'

'In unnamed country,' he returned briefly.:

'Are we far from the frontier?'

'There's no actual line of demarcation between Titicamba and Bolivia, and it's impossible to police this area.'

She accepted the implication. If Rodriguez's men followed her thus far there was no one to intervene and protect her from them. The enclosing forest with its mysterious rustlings was slightly sinister, jaguars were to be found there, and they seemed to have been travelling for aeons along the tunnel of twisting track.

'When will we come to the mountains?' she asked, for from Paracos they had looked quite near.

He explained: 'I'm having to pursue a diagonal course. The Andes where they come closest to Titicamba are unscaleable, sheer precipice. I'm making

for the pass I know further along and I'm very much hoping we need not essay it.'

'Why? What else can we do?'

I've friends called Miraflores who own an *estancia* and they live not far from the foot of the pass. I've remembered that aircraft sometimes call there, and it occurs to me that we can get a lift out for you.'

'Oh!' Having keyed herself up to face this adventure, such a tame ending seemed a little flat. 'You want to get rid of me?' she inquired, with a provocative sideways glance. Naturally he did, but she wanted to make him deny it.

'My only concern is what's best for you,' he returned shortly.

Disappointed, she said meekly: 'When will we get there?'

'Tomorrow night, I hope.'

'Tomorrow?' she echoed in dismay.

'We'll be spending tonight at a native village where I have another trustworthy friend. I left a cache of petrol with him in case of emergencies and we'll need to fill up with all we can carry. It isn't much farther, and I think you've had enough for one day.'

'I'm not tired,' she lied, 'and shouldn't we push on?'

'We can afford a rest. We've a long start on any possible pursuit. There's no need to overtax your strength, though I'm afraid it'll be a rough lodging for you.'

'I've camped out before today and I'm not exhausted yet,' she said a little tartly, resenting his insistence upon her fragility. She gave a sharp sigh. 'If only I hadn't been so foolish as to ride so far yesterday morning, this wouldn't have been necessary.'

To her surprise, instead of endorsing her folly, as she expected, he told her:

'It was as well your departure was precipitated. Titicamba is no place for you. Apart from amorous upstarts, it's very unhealthy in the wet season.'

She knew he was again wondering why Thomas Stevens had let her come out there, but it was none of his business how she came to be there, so she offered no explanation.

They travelled on, the landrover making slow progress on the bad road. They stopped again to eat and it occurred to Selina that Alastair must be in need of rest. He had been driving steadily ever since they had left Paracos in the small hours and although he looked as if he were made of iron, he could not go on for ever. She said timidly:

'You must be ever so weary. Couldn't you sleep a little? I .. I'm sure I could keep watch.'

'Could you now?' For the first time his glance was kindly. 'Wouldn't you be scared to death?'

'I... No, of course I wouldn't be.'

'Thank you,' he said softly. 'I think that offer took a deal of courage, but I won't take you up on it.' He looked upwards to where the blue sky above them was turning grey. 'I think we're going to have a storm and then this trail will become a watercourse. If we push on we'll just about make the village before it starts and the rain will obliterate our tracks.'

'But surely no one will follow us this far?' she asked anxiously.

'Rodriguez has Indian partisans,' he said tersely, 'and no doubt he's offering a big reward to recover you.'

Information that frightened her. From then onwards she watched the forest apprehensively, imagining she saw brown bodies slinking through the undergrowth. She had left her sophisticated idle life in search of something more satisfying, but her present situation was too raw altogether. Selina

Stevens, the exquisite, the fastidious, was being hunted through a jungle, threatened by a storm, escorted by a grim unimpressible man who appeared to be nearly as primitive as her surroundings. Suddenly she laughed.

'What's so funny?' he inquired, while he tried to urge his machine to greater speed.

'Me and you ... we're an incongruous pair. I was thinking of myself, past and present.'

'Oddly enough, so was I.'

'But you don't know anything about my past.'

'I saw you at the dance,' he reminded her, 'before I had to make my unkind proposition. Cinderella after the godmother had got to work upon her, an entrancing vision.'

Selena experienced a little thrill of exultation at this compliment. So he had not been wholly disapproving!

'But midnight struck,' she said almost gaily, 'and Cinderella was left - well, not in rags, but in pants and shirt.' She glanced at him coyly. 'Would you consider yourself Prince Charming?'

The landrover lurched and he swore, as she was flung against him.

'Would you?' he asked, as he righted it. 'I fancy I belong to another fairy tale, The Babes in the Wood. I look more like one of the wicked uncle's henchmen, but don't be nervous, I won't murder you if I can help it, though this road is doing its best to do so.'

'I'm sure you won't,' she said dully, her animation subsiding as weariness submerged her.

The sky grew darker and a few drops began to fall. Then suddenly the trees parted and they emerged into a wide cleared space dotted with adobe huts,

thatched- roofed, linked together by a rudimentary village street which led up to a slightly larger building with a rude campanile, evidently a church. Beside it was a slightly larger hut surrounded by a bamboo verandah, before which some scraggy fowls were scratching in the dust. Now the mountains were visible, steep slopes ascending into the clouds which veiled their peaks, above heavily forested foothills.

Alastair drove down towards the larger habitation, the poultry scattering with loud protests, but before they reached it, the rain came down in earnest, obliterating mountain and forest in a solid downpour.

As he pulled up in front of the verandah, the door of the house opened to frame the figure of an aged priest in a rusty cassock. At sight of Alastair, his seamed brown face broke into a charming smile.

'Senor Grainger!' he exclaimed in Spanish. 'Welcome, thrice welcome to San Carlos, my son. It is long since you have visited my mission. But come in, come in - my house, such as it is, is yours.'

Alastair jumped out of the landrover and gave his hand to help Selina down.

'Run,' he bade her, 'into the house before you're soaked. I'll bring your bag.'

She obeyed, stumbling up the verandah steps; the priest stood aside to let her enter, while his keen dark eyes went from her to her following escort and back again with frank curiosity.

'*Uii muchacho ?*' he queried doubtfully.

'No, I'm a girl and Alastair's...' Selina stopped, wondering how to describe herself and how far the old man could be trusted.

'Your pardon, *senorita*, I am doubly honoured,' he said courteously, and as Alastair followed her in, he added: 'Is it that you have taken a wife, *senor*?''

Selina felt the hot colour rise in her face and was glad that the interior of the room was too dark to show her embarrassment. Alastair's big frame seemed to fill the small space, with its mud walls, earthen floor and minimum of

crude furniture. She became very much aware of his masculinity, and the priest's misapprehension roused speculations about the outcome of their relationship. Since they would have to spend several days in close companionship, they were bound to become more intimate, and she had not yet met the man who could remain indifferent to her.

Alastair answered the priest's question with what she thought was unnecessary brusqueness.

'I'm not such a fool. Wives are a complication in my sort of life.' He went on to explain how he came to be escorting Selina, and at mention of Rodriguez, the priest nodded.

'I knew he was up to something. He had a hideout near here.' Information which caused Selina to dart a frightened glance at Alastair, who remained unperturbed. 'So he has taken over Titicamba? I suspected that was his intention. You were wise to remove the *senorita*.' He peered at the girl, who removed her hat. 'He would find such fairness irresistible, though I fear she is hardly fitted for such rough travelling.'

'Yes, well,' Alastair's tone was short. 'I hope to reach Santa Loreta tomorrow and then the worst will be over. I think we can find transport from there.'

'And I'm quite tough really,' Selina supplemented a little stiffly. 'I shan't collapse by the roadside.' She spoke bravely, though at that moment she was nearly dropping with weariness.

'You have spirit, *senorita*,' the old man said gravely, 'and that will carry you through. But sit down,' he placed a chair for her, 'and after you have eaten you must sleep.'

Selina flopped down on the hard chair thinking regretfully of the comfortable seating at the bungalow she had left. The padre's furniture was strictly functional.

She looked dubiously round the room, wondering where she was to sleep. There was a second door opposite to the entry which might lead to another room, but was that all the accommodation that was available?

Alastair said he must go and fill up the landrover in preparation for an early start.

'You stay here with Father Xavier,' he bade her peremptorily.- 'And do what he tells you.'

'Oh, really?' A spark of resentment stirred under her fatigue. He had no right to speak to her as though she were a tiresome child!

'Yes, really,' and he went out.

Selina addressed her host. 'I hope we're not imposing upon your hospitality, Padre,' she said in Spanish. 'We have brought our own food.'

He chuckled. 'That is as well, *senorita*. Though you are welcome to all that I have it is but frugal fare.' He turned to the containers which Alastair had dumped by the door. 'Is this it? What can I prepare for you?'

'It's I who should be doing the preparing,' she said reluctantly, and struggled to her feet.

'No, you are my guest, *chica*,' he told her kindly. 'Seat yourself again. We will not wait for Senor Grainger, for you need your rest.'

She could not have agreed more, but all she was able to swallow was a little broth, and that was not from their stores, but the big pot which hung over the primitive fireplace.

'Come,' the padre bade her, when she had finished, and conducted her into the inner room carrying her canvas bag. There was cold water in an earthenware jar, a tin basin on a crude washing stand, with a bucket beneath it, a narrow bed covered by an Indian blanket - that much she noticed, as the priest said:

'I think you will find here all the necessities, though not luxuries. *Buenas noches*.'

He closed the door carefully behind him, and after a sketchy toilet, Selina took off her outer garments and lay down upon the bed. She was almost instantly asleep.

She awoke to find a shaft of sunlight coming through the small unglazed window, covered by gauze to exclude insects. It fell across the foot of her bed and for a while she lay still recalling where she was and what had happened. She was certainly experiencing life in the raw, and surprisingly the knowledge exhilarated her. The little room was no more than a whitewashed cell, containing beside the bed and primitive toilet apparatus a prie-Dieu set in front of a crucifix hanging upon the wall. It must be the padre's bedroom, and she was overwhelmed with contrition as she realized that she had turned him out of his bed. She sprang up and hastily dressed, repacking her bag, and tidying the room. Timidly she opened the door into the living room, to find it deserted. An iron kettle was steaming on the fireplace, but of the two men there was no sign.

She went outside and found the clouds of yestereve had rolled away and the distant peaks of the Andes were clear and sharp, soaring up into the blue sky, their snowclad summits touched to rose by the rays of the newly risen sun.

Tempted by the beauty of the early morning, Selina went outside, without her hat. The sunlight turned her short curls to a pale gold halo. There were Indians working on the patches of cultivation, and as she passed they stopped to stare, leaning upon their hoes, murmuring unintelligible words, one of which sounded like '*viraco-cha*'.

She approached the building with the campanile, which she had noticed upon her arrival and which was, as she had surmised, the church. Reaching it, she pushed aside the leather curtain covering the doorway. Inside it was dark and musty, filled with the scent of stale incense. There were candles upon the stone altar, and Father Xavier, in worn vestments, was performing his morning office. Several Indian women were kneeling devoutly before him. Selina slipped inside and dropped to her knees on a floor which she noticed with surprise was paved, instead of earthen. She gave thanks for her successful escape and prayed for further protection, prayed too for her father who had been left behind. The exercise soothed and comforted her, and she rose to her feet feeling refreshed spiritually as well as physically. The Indian

women filed out, casting half scared, half awed glances in her direction, and then Father Xavier, his vestements carefully folded away, came to join her.

'I am glad to see you here,' he observed. 'So many of the modern young people are completely irreligious.'

'What do you know of modern youth, buried in this jungle?' She asked, smiling, as they passed through the curtain*

'I come out of my seclusion from time to time,' he informed her. 'I have not infrequently been to Paracos, and we have tourists, even here, to hunt and shoot.'

They were standing outside the church, and he looked proudly back at the squat building.

'What do you think of my church? It was built by the brethren of a former Franciscan community, who dragged stones many miles to make the paving and the altar. Once this was a flourishing settlement, but most of the flock have dispersed now. I myself have been offered a retreat in Bolivia, but I prefer to remain here among the remnants of the people. After all, I am only a relic myself.' 'I wouldn't call you that,' Selina disclaimed. 'But how do you live?'

'My wants are small and my parishioners will not let me starve, and I have a small pension.'

They started to walk back towards his house and she saw he was frowning at her uncovered head,

'I should have put on my hat before I went into your church,' she apologized.

'You should,' he agreed, and his eyes strayed to the still staring peons, 'They have never seen a blonde woman, and your hair is like a nimbus.'

'They called me *virachocha* - what does that mean?'

'Oh dear!' He looked rueful. 'I am afraid their Christianity does not go very deep. That is the name of one of their old gods, a white one with yellow hair.'

'I certainly should have worn my hat,' Selina exclaimed, thinking this expedition was becoming more and more bizarre. She had never contemplated being taken for a goddess,

'Never mind, *mi hija*,' the old man said kindly. 'You could not be expected to know that.'

They entered the house, and he produced with a smile a tin of instant coffee.

'A present from your *novio*, *senorita*. You will have some, *si*? You would prefer it to the local brew?'

'The *senor* is not my *novio*,' Selina said with heightened colour.

'Then why does he take so much trouble and risk for you?' the old man asked. 'I was sure that since you are not wed, you must be betrothed.'

'There is no romance between us,' Selina told him firmly. 'He's an old friend of my father's.'

The priest proceeded to fill the coffee mugs. 'That makes it all the more suitable,' he said, nodding his head sagely, 'No doubt it was in your father's mind when he entrusted you to him. The Senor Grainger needs a wife, for he is a very lonely man.'

'Then he will need an Amazon if she's expected to go trapesing round this country looking for ruins,' Selina said tartly, wondering if it were possible her father had considered such an alliance.

'But you told us you were tough,' Father Xavier reminded her slyly. 'As for all this wandering, that is but a palliative to heal a wound. He never speaks of it, but I believe there was a woman for whom he had great affection, but she let him down.'

'You mean she jilted him?' Selina asked with interest.

'*Senorita*, I do not know the facts, I only see the wound.'

'So that's why he despises women,' Salina murmured thoughtfully.

'He does not despise them. Men cannot despise the mothers who give them life, but the heart once hurt builds a carapace around itself. Perhaps you could break through it, *mi hija*?'

'Not me, he thinks I'm a pretty useless specimen,' she said a little bitterly. 'A modern playgirl. Once I'm deposited in La Paz, he'll be thankful to be rid of me.'

Father Xavier gave her a shrewd glance, but said no more. He continued with the breakfast preparations, with which she endeavoured to help him, boiling the eggs which he had collected from his poultry.

Alastair came striding in as they completed their task, looking considerably perturbed.

'Selina, you little fool,' he burst out angrily. 'Were you crazy to go outside? The whole settlement is talking about you!'

'Gently, my son,' the padre reproved him. 'The *senorita* sought the consolation of my church and to pray for a safe journey.'

'I didn't know you were so pious, Selina.' Alastair's wrath was unappeased. He spoke to her in English, of which the priest's knowledge was scant, and his mouth curved in a slight sneer. 'But your piety may cost you dear. Nobody saw you arrive in the rain, and I hoped to get away without your presence being noted.'

Father Xavier handed him a mug of coffee, while Selina wilted. She seemed fated to appear irresponsible in Alastair's eyes.

'Drink your coffee,' the padre said placatingly. 'It seems my so Christian flock,' he smiled wryly, 'regard the *senorita* as a white goddess. As such they will not speak of her to strangers.'

Alastair groaned. 'She couldn't have made herself more conspicuous. They've already learned by Indian grapevine that Rodriguez is in command at Paracos. There was no real opposition. Since one of your servants, Selina, told him you didn't get away before the frontier was closed, he has scouts out scouring the countryside.'

'Titicamba has no jurisdiction over my settlement,' the padre said proudly, 'and my people will not betray you, *senor*.'

'I'm not so sure about that. Rodriguez may be offering a hefty reward for Selina's capture. The sooner you can persuade them their *virachocha* had flown back to heaven, the better I'll be pleased.'

He helped himself to a hunk of bread and two of the padre's eggs, but Selina's appetite had fled.

'Do not fear, my son, the blessed Virgin will protect you,' Father Xavier said uncertainly, and Selina sensed he was not as confident as he sought to appear. The fear of the bull man descended upon her with increased force and she shivered in the humid heat.

'Hadn't we better be on our way?' she faltered.

'When you've eaten something,' Alastair told her, scowling at her. 'I don't want you fainting on me, I've enough to contend with without that.'

His cool contemptuous tone roused an anger in her that was greater than her fear. He was utterly hateful! Bravely she struggled to swallow some of her egg.

Father Xavier was looking thoughtful.

'There is one way you could give the *pequenita* adequate protection,' he announced. 'Even Pablo Rodriguez would hesitate to take your wife.'

Alastair stared at him. 'A drastic remedy,' he observed, 'And who would marry us? You?'

'Why not? You have a church and a priest at your service,' the padre reminded him earnestly. 'True, the ceremony would have to be ratified by a civil contract, but Pablo, for all his sins, respects the church. It would be that sacrament that he would consider binding.'

'You surprise me,' Alastair sounded sarcastic, while Selina regarded the priest with amazement. Marry Alastair? The idea was preposterous!

Father Xavier went on imperturbably: 'I understand that your precipitate flight was necessitated by dangerous circumstances. Nevertheless you and she are in an ambiguous situation, one that I am sure the *senorita's* father will expect you to rectify. A girl of Spain would find her prospects irreparably damaged by it. Have you considered the young lady's reputation?'

Alastair began to laugh wholeheartedly.

'Do you want me to make an honest woman of you?' he asked Selina in English.

'Oh, fudge,' she exclaimed, though her face flamed. 'The padre has old-fashioned notions.'

Not understanding what they were saying, the old man looked from one to the other eagerly.

'*Senor*, you could not have a more charming wife,' he said ingratiatingly.

Alastair stopped laughing and his face darkened.

'Charm is not an essential ingredient to a successful marriage,' he snapped. An inward, brooding look came into his eyes, as if he were recalling some unhappy experience. The girl who had deserted him, Selina suspected; perhaps she had charm but not fidelity.

'I would be honoured to sanctify your union,' the priest added gently.

'It really is not necessary,' Alastair told him, wincing at the word union. 'I am the last person Selina's father would consider a suitable partner for his daughter. He knows I regard her as a little girl, and have accepted her as a sacred trust.'

A remark that caused Selina to seethe. Little girl indeed! She was not a child.

'All the same, she is a woman and you, *senor*, are a man,' Father Xavier insisted. 'At least your position would be sanctified.'

Selina thought it was time to intervene; no doubt the priest meant well, but she was finding his implications acutely embarrassing. 'I'm English, Padre,' she said gently, 'and we British these days don't bother about compromising situations.' She laughed a little forcedly. 'In fact I don't think you can compromise the modern British girl. Senor Grainger is merely escorting me to a safe locality, as he said,' she threw him a provocative glance. 'He regards me as a child, and I'm sure I'm the last person he would think of marrying, or . . . or ...' She stopped trying to find the right words to indicate that it would never occur to Alastair to make love to her.

She saw with some discomposure that his eyes held a mocking glint; she knew he was confident that she would reject the priest's proposition, so that for a moment she thought of agreeing, simply to disconcert him, but that would lead to too many complications.

'I know we decided I'm no Prince Charming,' he observed, relapsing into English. 'But if it would make you more comfortable, Selina, to comply with the padre's wishes ...'

She cut in quickly: 'On the contrary, it would make me feel most uncomfortable to know I was tied to you, even though it wasn't strictly legal.'

The blue eyes gleamed wickedly, as he remarked:

'A pity. It might enhance my standing with the Miraflores if I could present you to them as the Senora Grainger.'

. 'I really don't think that's a good enough reason for taking such a drastic step,' she retorted, thinking she had underestimated him. He was as quick at amorous repartee as any of her former slick admirers, but this was hardly the right time and place for such frivolities. Evidently he was beginning to think so too, for he turned to their host, the mischief fading from his face, which became stern.

'I am sorry, Padre, but I am afraid the idea does not appeal to the lady, even as a protection against the bad bandit, in fact I fancy she considers I'm only one degree preferable to Rodriguez, but it's time we were on our way. Believe me, no one will think the worse of her once she is safe in La Paz. I have the reputation for being a misogynist.'

The old man looked wistful. 'I am sorry, my son. She would civilize you.'

'Ah, but I've no wish to be civilized, and my feelings towards her are entirely paternal.'

A remark which perversely annoyed Selina.

'They may be,' she said coolly, 'but you don't express them in a very fatherly manner.'

That brought her father to mind, his gentleness and consideration, and tears rose in her eyes. She sought to blink them away, but Alastair noticed them, he saw everything.

'For God's sake don't weep about it,' he exclaimed impatiently. 'Come on, pack up. We must be off.'

She obeyed, collecting what was left of their provisions, and stowing them in the containers while Father Xavier watched her compassionately.

'He does not mean to be unkind,' he murmured to her, while Alastair was carrying the packages out to the landrover. 'He is, what do you say, the diamond that is rough. Perhaps you are used to more polished stones?'

'I am,' she told him, with a wan smile, though she was nearly as annoyed by his blundering as she was by Alastair's curt commands. Why on earth did he have to suggest an impromptu marriage, emphasizing an aspect of this trek which was much better ignored? Luckily Alastair did not seem to find her attractive, while she positively disliked him, or so she sought to assure herself.

The padre blessed them as they said good-bye, and she softened towards him as she thanked him prettily for everything - well, not quite everything.

Then the landrover trundled away into the trees on the next stage of their journey.

CHAPTER THREE

THE track had been climbing steadily for some miles and the terrain began to change. The forest thinned out and the rank vegetation disappeared until finally the trees were replaced by bushes and the road approached a grassy hill up which it curved in zig-zags. The air became clearer and cooler and the ramparts of the mountains looked less perpendicular, as if there might be a way through them, as Selina had been told there was.

The change in the atmosphere which was due to their increasing altitude revived her spirits and she looked eagerly about her as the view expanded.

Alastair too seemed to be refreshed. He had shaved off the previous day's stubble during their stay at San Carlos, the lines of fatigue had vanished, and his face looked smooth and brown, his eyes very blue. From time to time Selina threw speculative glances at his profile, the straight nose and firm mouth and chin. She was wondering about the woman in his past, who had according to Father Xavier turned him into a misogynist.

Breaking a long silence, he said at length: 'I hope you weren't offended by the padre's naive suggestion. I'm afraid the poor man has had so much experience of irregular unions that he wanted to make sure any indiscretions we might commit would have the blessing of his church.' He threw her a mischievous glance.

'It was rather a reflection upon our morals to imply that we could be tempted to commit indiscretions,' she returned drily. 'But though he may know you, he doesn't know me at all.'

Her returning glance was arch. She suspected his allusion to indiscretions was an attempt to draw her, and her response was possibly not what he expected. He was, after all, a personable man and she wanted to shake him out of the paternal role he had assumed, which was no compliment to her femininity.

'Meaning you think he doesn't trust me?'

'Meaning that he knows you're a man.'

'I don't know what you're trying to suggest by that. Of course I'm a man, but one who's far too hard-bitten to be carried away by the proximity of a young woman, even one as charming as yourself.'

'So you consider I have charm?' she asked demurely, pleased by the compliment. 'You're coming on.'

'You know you have, but don't try to flirt with me, young woman, you'd be wasting your time.'

In spite of this rebuke, warning, or whatever was intended, Selina was unabashed. He was, she thought, more susceptible than he wished to admit. She was conscious of elation, a feeling of well-being, of escape, not only from the threat of Rodriguez, but from the trammels of her old life, and no snub from Alastair could quench it. In the clearer, cooler air, the depression she had felt upon the previous day had completely evaporated.

'This is wonderful,' she enthused. 'I feel liberated. You know, I've always been swaddled in luxury until I seemed to be wrapped in cotton wool. The primitiveness of San Carlos, and now this .. .' she waved an arm to the stretch of country around them, 'is all so new and exciting and real. I'm so sick of artificiality!'

He glanced in wonderment at her eager face. That a pampered young socialite could find San Carlos' lack of amenities exciting was an unexpected point of view.

'I suppose it makes a change,' he said prosaically.

'It's much more than that. I'm like a bird that's got out of its cage.' She looked at the jagged range of mountains in the distance. 'Must we stay with your friends? Can't we climb the pass? I'd like to, I'm sure it would be a wonderful experience, and much more thrilling than going in an aeroplane.'

He was sorry to have to damp her enthusiasm, but he doubted that she had the stamina for such an expedition.

'We'll have to stop at the *estancia* to refuel anyway,' he told her, 'and I'm afraid the journey up to the Altiplano might be a bit too much for you.'

'Oh, no,' she insisted. 'Once and for all, I'm not a feeble tenderfoot.'

'It would be very cold,' he informed her, 'and the air is very thin.' He hesitated. 'Perhaps after a few days at Santa Loreta, which stands quite high, you might become sufficiently acclimatized. If for any reason the air service isn't operating, we might try it.'

'Then I hope it isn't!'

Presently she asked:

'Do you know all this country?'

'Not all of it, by any means; it's vast, but I've roamed over it for a good many years now.'

'Does it content you, Mr. Grainger?' she asked impulsively. 'I mean, all this wandering about, don't you ever feel you want a home?'

A peculiarly bleak expression crossed his face.

'What's a home without a family, and I've neither kith nor kin.' He paused, then added more lightly: 'Please don't be so formal. My name is Alastair, which my intimates shorten to Alec.'

'Am I promoted to being an intimate?' she inquired provocatively.

Alastair grinned.

'As Father Xavier pointed out, our circumstances are somewhat so,' he observed drily.

Recalling the padre's remedy for that, Selina coloured faintly.

'Well, yes, I suppose they are. Are you Scottish?'

'Partly, my mother was English. She's dead now,' he said flatly.

Sensing a tragedy, she murmured: 'I'm sorry.'

'Peritonitis,' he told her bitterly. 'They didn't operate in time.'

So he had loved his mother, perhaps the only woman he had loved, and obviously the subject was a painful one. She would have liked to have elicited some information about the girl who had disillusioned him, but knew it would be impertinence to probe further. He drove for a while in silence. They had reached the hill top and were traversing undulating country sparsely vegetated and strewn with boulders, some of which impinged upon the track, forcing them to make a detour.

'Tell me,' he asked suddenly, 'what made you come to Titicamba? Surely it's a bit off the map for a girl like you.'

'I wanted to be with Daddy,' she explained. She hesitated, then went on with a burst of candour: 'I don't know if Daddy ever told you, but he and Mummy are separated. They weren't compatible.' Was it fancy, but had his body stiffened and the set of his mouth become stern? Perhaps he was puritan enough not to approve of separations? Having begun, she decided she had better go on and try to make him understand. 'Mummy is an actress and rather a frivolous sort of person, and she loathes the sort of places where his work takes him.'

Alastair laughed. 'Like South America? She's not the only one. Few wives can stomach such exile.'

'Exactly.' She was relieved. 'Well, I was left with Mummy. At first she enjoyed dressing me up, and showing me off to her friends as if I were a pretty doll. I even appeared in a film with her, but now I'm grown up,' Selina's eyes grew sad, 'she's resenting me. I make her feel old.'

'Poor kid,' Alastair said so softly that she wondered if she had heard him aright. She flashed him a grateful look, sensing that he appreciated the predicament that she had been in.

'I thought that if I came out to join Daddy, I should meet a different sort of crowd,' she went on. 'And he's doing a worthwhile job, but it's been disappointing. He doesn't expect me to take an interest in what he's doing, and the people he introduced me to were as superficial as Mummy's set.'

'All the same, I wonder he let you come, knowing the country was disturbed.'

'I'm afraid I didn't consult him. I just came, meaning to give him a surprise.'

Alastair chortled, 'I bet you did that, but weren't you a bit rash? He might have ... er... formed another attachment.'

Men separated from their wives in foreign countries usually found consolation.

'I wouldn't have minded if he had. I'm very broad- minded.'

'No, but he might.' He smiled ironically and Selina hoped he did not think she meant that she was permissive.

'What will you do when you get to La Paz?' he inquired.

'Go back to Mummy, I suppose.' She sighed. 'She'll say I told you so. I suppose I can't return to Titicamba?'

'Not while Rodriguez is in the saddle, but he'll probably get bumped off sooner or later,' he told her grimly.

'Ugh! Well, I wanted to experience real life, but I didn't expect to stumble into a melodrama.'

'Beautiful blondes are apt to create drama out here,' he informed her, and she had an intuition that it was not herself he was referring to. 'Didn't you know that South Americans are Latins and inflammable?'

'So it seems,' she acquiesced. 'Do you think it would be an advantage if I stained my face and dyed my hair?'

'Don't suggest such sacrilege!' he exclaimed so violently that she jumped.

'I would do that and more if I could convince you that I'm not just a blonde dolly bird,' she assured him earnestly. Exactly why she said that, she did not know. Alastair Grainger was a nomad, whom she was unlikely to meet again once he had delivered her into safety. His opinion of her, if he had one, was unimportant, but she had an inexplicable desire to win his approbation.

'My dear little girl,' he said gently, 'why try to convince me of anything? You and I are the proverbial ships that pass in the night and I'm a bit of a battered freighter at that. But you're up against stern realities now, and if you go on as you've started, and come through this adventure without whining, I certainly won't consider you a dolly bird.'

'Oh, I shan't whine,' she declared, 'whatever happens.'

He gave her a long, considering look.

'I don't believe you will,' he conceded.

They reached the top of another rise and found themselves in an area of broken country composed of stony ridges and coarse grass, and here they stopped for a meal.

Alastair had with him a picnic stove and a can of fuel for it, on which he was able to heat coffee. Below them, Selina could see the way they had come, a wavy ocean of green trees that reached to the Amazon basin, and most of it was virgin jungle. She turned about to look towards the mountains.

'Can you see the Estancia Santa Loreta from here?' she asked.

'No, because it's at the bottom of a sort of canyon.'

'And is this the only road to it?'

'This and a rough track to join the one that goes over the pass. But they depend upon aircraft for most of their communications. Don Diego

Miraflores is a Bolivian of Spanish extraction, but his wife has more than a dash of Indian blood. It's mixed well in the daughter. She's a beauty.'

Information which Selina found depressing. She had a moment of absurd regret for not having accepted Father Xavier's suggestion. As Alastair's supposed wife she would have been able to hold her own against this wilderness lovely. But why should she want to hold her own? Alastair was nothing to her, and there might have been all the embarrassment of a double room, though perhaps he would have enjoyed that. He had rather a sardonic sort of humour.

A brilliant blue butterfly settled on a plant at a little distance from them, an escapee from the warmer regions below them. Selina, her thoughts diverted from Alastair and his reactions to an improbable situation, watched it entranced. Then a black shadow swooped down out of nowhere and all that was left of the lovely creature was two broken wings.

'Oh, how dreadful!' She was strongly affected by this minor tragedy.

'The fate of so many lovely things,' Alastair said. 'Fodder for the appetite of a predator.'

He lit his pipe while Selina continued to stare blankly at the spot where the pretty fragile thing had rested. It seemed too cruel that it should be so ruthlessly destroyed.

She was unaware that Alastair was studying her. In spite of her casual garb, her long limbs and fineness of bone enabled her to preserve a suggestion of grace and elegance. She had taken off her hat and her head was outlined against the distant blue background, with the delicacy of a cameo, the sun gilding her hair. Her narrow hands clutched her hat brim to her small breasts, her soft lips were parted and her grey eyes limpid with distress. She had the exquisite quality of a piece of porcelain.

As his pipe began to draw, Alastair observed: 'Butterflies are fragile creatures, and can be maimed by a clumsy touch.'

Selina shivered. Was he drawing an allegory between the insect, herself and Rodriguez? But she had been saved from that ruffian's clutches and she was safe with Alastair; he would not permit anyone to maim or mar her. She gave him a sweet, shy smile as she voiced her thought aloud:

'I'm safe with you.'

A magnetic current passed between them as grey eyes met blue, and Selina felt a warm glow run through her body, but an almost savage glint came into Alastair's eyes.

'Don't be too sure of that,' he said harshly.

Startled, she stared at him blankly, and with an abrupt movement he gained his feet.

'Time to go,' he announced, and began to pack up their picnic things. In silence she assisted him, wondering what had come over him, but when she was ready to enter the landrover, he lifted her on to her seat, saying:

'Disregard that last remark of mine. Of course you're safe with me. I was only teasing.'

He went round to the other side of the vehicle to take his place at the wheel while Selina sat demurely waiting for him. She had been surprised by the remark which she had been bidden to ignore, but she did not think he had been teasing; it signified that Alastair had been for a moment off his guard and had seen her as a woman, and she was immensely gratified. So he was not entirely the block of granite he tried to appear. She glanced at him from under her lashes as he started the machine, but his profile was turned towards her, sternly aloof.

'Do you often visit these Miraflores with the beautiful daughter?' she inquired.

'Now and again,' he said absently, ignoring the reference to the daughter. 'The further side of the *estancia* comes up against the mountain wall and there are mineral deposits there which interest me; there might even be a

lode of gold, but whether it's worth mining I couldn't say.' He glanced at her uneasily. 'Better put your hat on. We don't want any more of that *viracocha* nonsense.'

She obeyed with a little mischievous smile, guessing that he wanted her to be eclipsed. It was not only the Indians who reacted to her uncovered head.

But soon all conjectures about their destination, Alastair's reactions or anything else were swamped in waves of fatigue. The landrover jolted, bumped and ran over ruts and through potholes. Selina was thrown from side to side, Alastair being much heavier was not so easily displaced, but he did not appreciate being used as a cushion and kept cautioning her about the gears. Occasionally they passed Indians leading pack mules or driving primitive carts, who regarded the travellers with indifferent apathy, Selina's bright hair being covered by her hat. Selina would sooner die than complain, but she wondered desperately when Alastair was going to call another halt, feeling she could not endure much more.

As if he sensed her thought, he said:

'You'll be getting exhausted, but we must press on to reach the *estancia* before dark. This country isn't too healthy after nightfall.'

She did not ask him to elucidate, but her lively imagination envisioned bandits, predatory animals, or even Rodriguez's men, until she became so weary that she would not have cared if a jaguar had appeared in their path.

At long last, the landrover topped a ridge overlooking a valley, and Santa Loreta lay below them. It was a gash in the hillside made aeons ago in some cosmic upheaval of prehistoric times. Sheltered by the mountain walls on one side and the gentler slopes on the other, it was a long narrow level space with a river running through it, filled with cultivations, maize and fruit trees, and corrals containing horses, cattle and even a few llamas. From the vantage point of the travellers, it looked like a South American Eden, glowing in the last rays of the sun.

Alastair drove slowly down a zigzag path with hairpin bends. Selina noticed among the native huts, a fairly large-sized house, built on a slight eminence

in the middle of the valley. It had a tiled roof and was surrounded by a verandah. Behind it was stabling and work sheds. - Peons working in the fields noticed their approach, and one of them ran to inform his master. The landrover negotiated the last bend, and came on to a paved road leading up to the house. As Alastair stopped in front of it, Don Diego Miraflores came out to welcome them. He was of middle height, with a black imperial and fine dark eyes. As Alastair jumped out of the landrover, he reached up and kissed him on both cheeks in the continental manner.

'Bienvenida, amigo rnioP he exclaimed. 'To see you delights mine eyes.' He glanced towards Selina drooping on the front seat and the dark eyes narrowed. *'Una mujer?'* he asked doubtfully.

Near exhaustion as she was, it did register with Selina that neither of Alastair's friends seemed very enthusiastic about her appearance. She hoped this one was not going to jump to any embarrassing conclusions like the priest had done.

Alastair was explaining their need of a resting place. La Seniorita Stevens, he said, was upon a journey and he was acting the role of courier and guide.

'A safari?' the Don suggested.

'You might call it that.'

The Bolivian laughed. 'You choose rough country. But come in, come in, *la pobrecita* is overcome by fatigue.'

Alastair lifted Selina out of the vehicle, and she had been sitting so long that her legs crumpled under her as she reached the ground. He picked her up and glanced at the Don.

'This way,' that individual said, and led them into the house. After that her impressions became blurred. Don Diego's wife, a florid handsome woman, came to greet them, her slanted Indian eyes looking obliquely at the girl in Alastair's arms. She took them into a room with a large window on to the verandah, the house was one-storeyed, and Alastair laid Selina on the bed. The Senora said she would send a maid to attend to her.

'I think she should go, straight to bed,' she suggested. 'Maria will undress her and bring her some food.'

As Alastair left the room, Selina heard someone, a woman, give a joyful cry. '*Amigo! Querido!*' and his reply:

'Buenas dias, Lola, como es?'

Lola?. The beautiful daughter of the house.

A native girl, the one the Senora had called Maria, helped Selina to undress and put on the pyjamas which she had stuffed into her bag. Though they were made of silk, they were thick and unrevealing, the least flimsy of the nightwear she possessed, and that was why she had selected them. Legs and tunic were adorned with butterfly motifs, which seemed to amuse her attendant, and which, Selina reflected wryly, Alastair would deem appropriate. Maria spoke a patois which was unintelligible to her, and combed out the tangles in her bright hair almost reverently. Indicating that she did not want any food, she collapsed on to the soft bed, so very different from the hard one in the priest's house, and immediately sank into oblivion.

Selina slept until late the next morning. She awoke wondering sleepily where she had got to now, staring round the unfamiliar room a little blankly. The furniture for the most part was of bamboo, the floor covered by Indian mats. There was a handsome Spanish chest in one corner and her bedstead too was of wood. The sun was shining outside, and after a dismayed glance at her watch, she pushed aside the mosquito netting surrounding her bed, and scrambled out of it. She still felt stiff and a little sore from the jolting of the landrover on the previous day, but she had recovered most of her energy. Going to the window, she stared at the magnificent view across the valley to the mountains opposite to her. They were bare and treeless, reaching halfway up to the zenith, their slopes steep and precipitous, the grey shale mingling with yellow ochre rocks and the green of copper. They looked impregnable, so that it was difficult to imagine there was a way through them.

Although Selina had made no noise, Maria must have been on 'the alert for her awakening. Now she appeared with a tray on which was a pot of

steaming coffee, a boiled egg and some crisp rolls. She carried it across to a table set before the window. Selina smiled at her, thanking her in Spanish which Maria appeared to understand, though she did not speak it, and sat down to her meal.

She had finished it and was wondering where and how one washed, when her hostess knocked on the door and came in. She inquired how Selina had slept somewhat perfunctorily and her manner was cold, from which it would seem that for some reason Senora Miraflores resented her presence. She indicated that there was a bathroom, whence Selina followed her, thankful that her pyjamas were unrevealing since she had no wrap. The room was fitted with a shower and the water was hot. Amazed to find such amenities in such an out-of-the-way spot, Selina revelled in her ablutions. Upon her return to her room, she found her trousers had been brushed and sponged while she slept and a pair of rope-soled sandals, which were quite a good fit, had been substituted for her boots. Putting on a clean shirt - she had packed several - she brushed her short hair until it shone and feeling refreshed and cleansed, went out in search of Alastair.

She found him seated on the verandah outside the entrance door, and he too looked clean and spruce. He was lounging in a low wicker chair and for the first time since they had left Paracos, his rifle was not beside him.

Selina's heart gave a queer little lurch at the sight of him, followed by a rush of gladness. He was the one familiar object amid a slightly hostile environment, for she sensed that the Miraflores had not been pleased to receive her.

'Good morning,' he bade her as she tentatively came towards him, his blue eyes scrutinizing her carefully. 'Excellent, you seem none the worse for your journeyings.'

'Oh, I'm fine.' She sat down at a little distance from him and smiled. 'You see I'm not so soft after all.'

'You've done very well, and now the worst part is over.' He took out his pipe. 'Did you have a shower?'

'Rather. It was lovely. How do they manage it?'

'There's plenty of water in the river and Don Diego was able to get hold of a good plumber.'

Recalling the Senora's manner earlier that morning, Selina said: 'I'm afraid they regard me as an imposition.'

'Nonsense, you're being fanciful. They're the most hospitable people in the world.'

But later a reason for their coolness suggested itself. A girl came along the verandah towards them carrying a tray of drinks and glasses, which she set down on the table beside Alastair. As she saw Selina her face sharpened to dislike as she threw her a careless good morning, but when she looked at Alastair her expression changed to melting softness. She was a very pretty girl with a golden skin and dense black hair. Her lustrous dark eyes were slightly tilted at the corners, and that, with her sinuous body, was derived from other than Spanish blood. She wore a full scarlet skirt and a white blouse, a red rose tucked coquettishly behind one ear. She poured out a drink for Alastair, her low voice as she questioned his requirements sounding like a caress. He, however, seemed quite impervious to this subtle wooing.

'Would you like something?' he asked Selina.

She declined, saying she had just breakfasted.

'I don't think you've met Lola,' he went on. 'Don Diego's daughter. Lola, this is Selina Stevens.'

So this was the girl he had described as a beauty, and Selina had to admit he was right, though there was something about Lola's face which repelled her, a slyness in the dark eyes and a discontented droop to the full crimson lips.

She held out a flaccid hand to Selina, murmuring, '*Come sta?*'

Selina touched the brown, supple fingers. It was obvious what was the matter with Senorita Miraflores - she was jealous. Anxious to dispel any

misapprehensions, Selina hastened to explain that her connection with Alastair was merely temporary and related the circumstances that had led up to her flight.

During her recital, Alastair looked a little grim, and when she had finished her story he remarked repressively:

'A very comprehensive account of the situation,' and it flashed into her mind that he had not told their hosts the whole details. She looked uncertainly from him to Lola, who smiled not very pleasantly.

'It seems to me that it would not be too hard a fate to be mistress of the Presidencia at Titicamba,' she remarked pensively. 'I am thinking that you flew in the face of providence, *senorita*. Since you are a British lady of some consequence, I am sure that Pablo Rodriguez would have agreed to marry you.'

'Oh, no!' Selina exclaimed, horrified at such a suggestion.

'And that,' the girl went on, 'would have furthered your father's interests and saved yourself a tedious journey. Or did you hope by flight to increase his passion for you? I suppose it is not too late to return to him.'

She continued to smile insolently, and Selina looked helplessly at Alastair, but he said nothing, smoking contentedly with an air of indifference.

'I would die sooner than go back!' she said vehemently. 'What you suggest is quite impossible.'

Alastair's eyes flickered over both girls with a sardonic gleam of amusement.

"You are self-willed, *senorita*?" Lola inquired. 'Here many girls are expected to accept the husbands their families choose for them.'

Alastair chuckled. 'Not nowadays,' he pointed out. 'And you, Lola, I'm quite sure will insist that you choose your own mate.'

'Only with my papa's approval,' Lola returned, giving him a languishing glance.

Selina reflected that if her choice was Alastair, she obviously had that, and the coolness of her mother's manner was explained. She feared Selina might prove to be a rival for his favours. She searched Alastair's impassive face for a hint of his feelings, but it remained expressionless.

'My father would never even suggest that I married a man I loathed,' Selina told them with a bright spot of colour on either cheek. 'And Senor Grainger was insistent that I leave.' Lola's eyes narrowed. 'He has been ... very kind.' Alastair smiled ironically. 'But once I'm on a plane to Europe we're unlikely ever to meet again.'

She hoped this assertion would satisfy the Bolivian girl and wondered why the prospect of never seeing Alastair again had suddenly become so depressing.

She watched him a little wistfully as he puffed at his pipe and sipped the drink Lola had poured for him. The creeper climbing over the verandah shaded his face, making it look more youthful, and though he reclined relaxed in his low chair, his body suggested unbounded vigour and hard muscles. There was not an inch of superfluous flesh upon his person. Could the luscious Lola pierce the carapace Father Xavier had declared enclosed his heart? He did not seem to be much impressed by her, but it was impossible to gauge what went on behind the brown mask of his face.

At her assertion that they were unlikely to encounter each other again, he laughed merrily.

'She's dying to get away from me, Lola. Like yourself, she resents discipline.'

'You mean she had to do what you say?' Lola opened her eyes very wide.

'Definitely.' His challenging glance met Selina's. 'For her own good,' he added.

Lola gave Selina a look of dislike.

'It is ungracious to oppose you when you do so much for her,' she observed.

'But I don't,' Selina returned, her eyes glinting mischievously at Alastair. 'I wouldn't dare.'

'I would always be subservient,' Lola murmured, lowering her quite magnificent dark lashes.

'I take both your remarks with a pinch of salt,' Alastair told them. 'You'd only be subservient, Lola, when you thought you'd something to gain by it, and Selina I'm sure is used to having her own way. She only goes my way because it's fallen to my lot to lead her out of a trap. Under other circumstances,' his eyes gleamed, 'I shouldn't find her so compliant.'

'Possibly not,' Selina agreed, 'but I'm very lucky to have had such a competent protector.'

'You were,' Lola cried fervently. 'Alonso is a man in a million, so brave, so clever.'

'Spare my blushes,' Alastair murmured, regarding his admirer quizzically, while Selina queried:

'Alonso?'

Alastair laughed again. 'My Scottish name is too difficult for her Spanish tongue. A little more soda, *quer- idita*,' he held out his glass. 'I'm always telling her,' he said to Selina, 'she glorifies me because she has met so few men. I'm not in the least heroic.'

'I am content to have met only you,' Lola murmured.

'Nonsense,' Alastair told her a little sharply. 'I'm old enough to be your father. You wait until your *padre* takes you to Lima or La Paz. The young men will come to you like bees to honey.'

Lola pouted. 'I do not like the young men,' she declared. 'I will always love my Alonso best.'

'Well, that's very sweet of you,' Alastair spoke lightly, but he threw a slightly embarrassed glance at Selina. 'Perhaps you will honour me by making me godfather to your firstborn.'

Lola gave him the look of a wounded doe.

'I would rather you were the father.'

Then her mother called to her and she reluctantly had to leave them.

Alastair wiped his face with his handkerchief.

'She doesn't suffer from maidenly shyness,' he said wryly. 'Of course it's only a schoolgirl's crush.'

But Selina, recalling that Latin women and certainly Indian women matured early, thought he was being optimistic. Moreover, these daughters of the sun could be vengeful if they were scorned. That is if he were really indifferent to the girl's obvious adoration. She looked at him speculatively. 'Is she the only child?'

"Yes, Santa Loreta will be hers some day.'

'A pleasant place for a retirement,' she suggested.

Alastair gave her a penetrating glance. 'So you're turning matchmaker? But she's too young - besides ...' He did not finish his sentence, and a shadow crossed his face.

'Otherwise you might be tempted?' Selina persisted. The thought of a union between these two was unwelcome to her, and perversely she continued to probe, as one probes an aching tooth, to derive a morbid satisfaction from the dart of pain.

"Drop it, Selina,' he said gruffly.' You women never can bear to see a man without a noose round his neck.'

'Is that how you regard marriage?' she asked archly. 'A noose round your neck?'

Yes,' his tone was repressive. 'And nooses, my girl, can be damned uncomfortable.'

'How do you know if you haven't tried?'

He gave her a bleak stare, which made her feel she was being impertinent. She had no right to be inquisitive about Alastair's love life. Possibly some mistress awaited his return from his frequent expeditions, a woman who had not managed to put a noose about his neck, but was none the less necessary to him. She had boasted to him of her broad-mindedness, but she found she did not like that idea at all.

He broke into her thoughts, saying:

'It was rather a pity you were quite so frank with Lola. I had told the Miraflores I was taking you away because the country was disturbed. I didn't mention friend Pablo.'

"You don't trust them?" she asked anxiously.

'I'd trust Don Diego with my life, and what's more important, yours too, but women ... tattle.'

'Then aren't we safe here?'

'Oh, absolutely,' he said emphatically, a little too much so.

Selina's speculations about him vanished with the return of her apprehensions. She did not feel comfortable in the atmosphere at Santa Loreta, she knew she was unwelcome, and now it seemed it might hold some menace for her.

'Alec, let's go on,' she said impulsively. 'I ... I don't want to wait for this plane. We could start at once, couldn't we?'

He shook his head. There were faint smudges under her eyes which emphasized her fragility. She had had as much as she could take.

'You aren't sufficiently rested, my dear,' he said gently. 'And the plane will come soon. I've checked with Senor Miraflores. It's due any day now.'

News which aroused no enthusiasm whatever. She realized that parting with Alastair was going to be something of a wrench, and a return to her mother was not an inspiring prospect. Nor was she consoled to be leaving him in Santa Loreta, with the beguiling Lola, who was intent upon capturing him if she could. During their short acquaintanceship she had come to appreciate Alastair Grainger's good character; his reliability, his occasional gentleness, even his sardonic humour attracted her. Dimly she recognized that here was a completely genuine personality, without the artifice and pretence that marked her mother's associates. He was the sort of man that she could have learned to love, given time, but there was no time. In a day or two, perhaps only a few hours, they would part never to meet again.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Miraflores adhered to the Spanish custom of midday lunch, siesta and dinner late in the evening. Although the *estancia* stood much higher than Titicamba, it was so sheltered by the high walls of hills surrounding it that it was hot during the hours of sunshine; at night the air would turn chill.

When they were all assembled for their *colazion*, Don Diego renewed his offers of hospitality. The aircraft was sure to come soon; meanwhile they must regard his house as theirs, relax and enjoy themselves. There were horses they could ride if they so wished, but they had better not go too far into the jungle; some of the Indian tribes were inclined to be hostile to strangers, and of course the Senorita Stevens must not venture forth alone.

'Oh, I won't,' Selina promised earnestly, with lively recollections of her unfortunate meeting with Rodriguez. With that in mind, she asked anxiously: 'This is Bolivia, isn't it?'

Miraflores shrugged his shoulders. 'It is no man's land,' he told her. 'Though officially we come into the Beni Province.'

As she knew nothing of Bolivian provinces, this did not convey anything to Selina.

Having listened to these offers a little sourly, Lola observed acidly:

'Nevertheless, Papa, you do not wish to get on the wrong side of the President of Titicamba. If anything goes wrong with the air service, it is our most accessible outlet, and I enjoy my visits to Paracos.'

'*Bastal*' her father roared, 'do you put such frivolities before the comfort of our guests? Are you implying some renegade in Paracos shall dictate whom I entertain?'

'But you say the aircraft will come soon,' Alastair intervened placatingly, 'then we need put you to no further inconvenience.'

'Inconvenience!' their host snorted. 'It gives me great pleasure to have you here, Alonso.'

But not me, Selina thought aware of the inimical glances of his wife and daughter towards her.

To change to a more congenial subject, Alastair made some inquiry about the mineral deposits which he believed existed in the slope of the mountains incorporated in the *estancia*, and they discussed whether they were worth developing.

You should consult Selina's father about that,' Alastair told the Don. 'He's an expert, I'm only an amateur.'

'*Por dios*, but I am stupid!' Miaflores exclaimed. 'Of course I have heard of Thomas Stevens, and he is the man I need.' He beamed at Selina. 'I did not realize he was your father, *senorita*.'

Selina looked at him eagerly. 'Could Daddy come here?'

'Oh yes. Pedro Montes, he is the pilot of the freight plane that serves us, often flies on to Paracos when he has been here. He could bring him out on his return journey if Senor Stevens can get leave.'

This information cheered Selina considerably. She did not feel so cut off among strangers. If this Montes person could fly her father out from Paracos before she left, she might be able to see him before going on to La Paz, but when she voiced her thoughts, Alastair shook his head.

'You must be gone before he comes, Selina. If Rodriguez gets wind of your presence here, we'll have him arriving instead of your father.'

A remark which caused Lola to look thoughtful, while Selina shivered. So long as she was on this side of the mountains, she would be unable to escape from the shadow of the bull man.

After the meal, Senora Miraflores insisted that Selina must rest, since she was sure she had not yet recovered from the rigours of her journey. Selina

acquiesced, not because she needed a siesta, but Alastair was going with his host to inspect the runway, and she had no wish to be left alone with the two women.

Senora Miraflores came with her to her room, ostensibly to make sure that she had all she needed, but in reality to question her.

Once inside, she asked: 'Alonso is not your *novio*, Senorita Stevens?'

Again Selina had to correct this mistake, and she did so with a faint reluctance. Almost she wished that she had accepted Father Xavier's offer and allowed him to forge a bond between her and Alastair. That would have given her a definite standing among these Miraflores, who, she suspected, were eyeing her relationship with Alastair suspiciously. But though Alastair had jokingly said he was willing, he had only done so because he was certain that she would refuse. She hastened to emphasize his friendship with her father.

The Bolivian woman looked relieved.

'So you will not be in touch with him, after you have returned to Europe?'

Restraining an impulse to ask what it was to do with her, Sflina replied in the negative.

'It is Lola,' the Senora explained. 'We wish to place her in the care of someone trustworthy. She will be a rich woman one day, and could be the prey of fortune- hunters. We have always hoped that Alonso will marry her eventually, he would be for her most suitable.'

'Isn't he rather old for her?' Selina blurted out, finding herself reluctant to accept her companion's plans for Alastair's future.

'Not at all. Lola needs a man of years to guide and control her,' the Senora declared. 'It is the duty of good parents to select the right sort of man to curb a girl's youthful follies.'

Selina thought this was a painfully old-fashioned viewpoint. She herself would not appreciate a husband that had been chosen for her to keep her in order, and nobody had ever controlled her. Her father had always been remote and her mother had never taken much notice of her in the holidays from her expensive boarding schools. Crystal Stevens had been on the stage prior to her marriage, and had returned to it when she separated from Tom. When Selina had been a pretty child, she had more than once been used for juvenile parts, but she had no real talent and had not wished to follow her mother's profession a decision that Crystal had applauded, fearing that she might if she persisted become a rival. In fact when the girl grew up, she found her something of an embarrassment. Not being much of a success, Crystal spent her time between her infrequent engagements relaxing at Riviera resorts. She told her daughter she could do as she pleased, so long as she did not try to annex any of her men friends, which Selina certainly felt no inclination to do since she did not care for the gigolo type, but unfortunately they sometimes preferred her, which led to humiliating scenes with her mother.

Thomas paid them both substantial allowances being a man of means; it was not necessity that had brought him to Titicamba. Since the failure of his marriage, he had been able to indulge his liking for out-of-the-way places, but he had stipulated that Selina should stay with her mother in the mistaken idea that they were necessary to each other.

After leaving school, Selina had at first enjoyed the glamour and amusement provided by her mother's coterie, but as time went by it palled. She formed no lasting friendships, she rarely spent enough time in one place to do so, and when she had impulsively decided to join her father, she had grown very tired of the trivial, egotistical types surrounding her and their aimless pursuit of pleasure. She would have liked to take up some sort of work, but she had not been trained for anything, though she did make a half-hearted attempt to learn to type. She had meant to consult her father about that, but he had pooh-poohed the idea; she was so pretty she was sure to marry.

Eventually, she hoped, she would, for she wanted children, but the kind of man she would choose was still nebulous in her mind. Someone who would be a comrade as well as a lover and definitely not tyrannical. Lola, being a Latin, probably would expect to be a doormat. She had told Alastair she

would be subservient to him, but that was not Selina's idea of marriage, neither did she want to be handed over to a man of her parents' selection.

But would Alastair be too overbearing? Idly she began to speculate about his age, between thirty and forty, she supposed, and nearer to the latter figure, actually in the prime of life. Naturally he would expect obedience from a young wife, but he would not be a despot. Undoubtedly he would be a very suitable husband for Lola Miraflores, in spite of the gap in years, for the *estancia* needed a mature man to run it when the Don was past it and he was very interested in its potentialities. She could appreciate the Senora's point of view, and doubtless Alastair would come round to it in time. She sighed as her hostess took her leave, wondering why the prospect was so unwelcome to her.

'I mustn't be a dog in the manger,' she told herself firmly. 'I don't want him, so why should I mind if she gets him?'

But she did mind, and she was not being quite honest when she disavowed her own interest in him, but since she had no *estancia* behind her, and he regarded her as a playgirl, she was not in the running.

Having brought only necessities as she had been instructed, Selina had nothing to wear for dinner, for which she surmised her hosts would change. She had one decorative garment with her, a handsome poncho, so she improvised a costume using her pyjama top which had short sleeves, with the poncho hanging in folds from her shoulders. She looked ruefully at her feet in the inelegant sandals, and the legs of her trousers, recalling her array of fancy shoes left behind in Paracos. But they were on the other side of miles of jungle track, so it was no use regretting them.

As she had expected, the Miraflores had dressed up, with Lola appearing like something out of 'Carmen' in red frills and a Spanish shawl, all dark glamour, contrasting with the English girl's fragile fairness, but not wholly to her disadvantage, for the delicacy of Selina's features made the other girl look a little coarse.

'Am I not beautiful?' Lola asked, pirouetting in front of Alastair.

He looked dour. 'It's a relief to see a woman in a skirt.'

A tactless remark, Selina thought, seeing that she had no option, but once her offending legs were under the table, she decided that she could not be looking unattractive, for his eyes more often sought her face than Lola's, much to that lady's annoyance, though, as he questioned her about her fatigue, it might merely be that he was anxious about her fitness to continue travelling.

Don Diego remarked that as the weather was so fine, the pilot would most likely arrive on the morrow.

'Doesn't he work to a schedule?' Alastair asked.

The other man laughed. 'This is Bolivia, *amigo*, all schedules are approximate.'

'Is he an admirer of yours?' he inquired of Lola, and she pouted provocatively.

'Of course, but he would like to be much more.'

Senora Miraflores said hastily: 'Lola has too much sense to encourage Pedro Montes. He is a wild one and too fond of women.'

Selina felt a stab of dismay. This was the man to whom she was to be entrusted! She looked at Alastair and saw that he was frowning, but he said nothing. Possibly he thought that if Montes was enslaved by Lola, she would be in no danger from unwelcome attentions, and after all, the journey would be short.

As foretold, the plane came next day. Alastair and the two girls had gone for a ride. Lola rode superbly, but Selina was no novice. They cantered round the confines of the *estancia*, which extended for a considerable length along the side of the mountains, divided from them by the river, which Lola told them sometimes flooded many acres during the rainy season. The runway was down the centre of the valley, and the aircraft dropped like a hawk out of the cloudless blue sky shortly after they heard its approaching engines.

Several of the peons went to receive it as it settled on the runway. The three riders continued their progress towards the house, while Selina's heart sank lower and lower as she realized that the inevitable parting with Alastair was only hours away.

An Indian boy came running to take their horses. Pepe was devoted to Alastair, who occupied a position in his hierarchy next to his god, and whenever he visited Santa Loreta, he followed him like his shadow.

As Selina dismounted, she said despondently:

'I suppose I'd better go and pack.'

Pepe had been taught some English by his patron and he told her:

'No mees, Senor Montes, he stay, one, two days. Ze bird machine 'as ze broken bones.'

Selina had forgotten he could understand her and was a little taken aback that a servant should know so much about her arrangements, but the Indians knew everything. Pepe must have been among the reception committee when the aircraft arrived, and somehow he had learned that she was to return with it.

Alastair said to Lola with a quizzical smile:

'Montes intends to make the most of his opportunities.'

'Did not you hear the boy? His craft needs repair,' she returned coolly.

Though the pilot was staying in the house, Selina did not meet him until dinner time. She heard a good deal of giggling on the verandah during the afternoon and surmised that in spite of her expressed disdain, Lola was enjoying his company. Alastair had gone out with Don Diego to look at some stock.

Senora Miraflores belatedly awoke to the fact that Selina's wardrobe was of necessity depleted. She arrived in her room with a dress which she offered to

lend her. 'It is one Lola had before she grow so big,' she told her, displaying a green linen dress. Lola was taller and broader than Selina. 'I know you cannot have brought much with you, and if it is too small, you can let it out and perhaps Maria will sew it for you.'

It was not too small; it fitted close to her slender waist and fell in graceful folds to below her knees. Selina was thankful to be rid of her trousers, which Maria promptly confiscated to wash and press. She clasped her hands delightedly as she surveyed the transformed Selina, then shook her head over the canvas shoes. Laying a finger to her lips, she glided away, to return shortly with a pair of green kid slippers. From where she had purloined them Selina did not ask; she was only too pleased to borrow them.

When she appeared in the dining-room, she was introduced to Pedro Montes and her heart sank again. He was a dapper little man with a narrow olive face and black hair, and an unmistakably roving eye. He also looked a little shifty. He bowed from his waist as his appraising glance swept over her.

'*Senorita*, I salute you, and I understand I am to have the honour of taking you back with me to La Paz. Ah, that will be a journey most memorable.'

She did not like the way he said that; he seemed to be implying a double meaning. Catching Lola's glance, as she stood watching them, she noticed a gleam of triumph in the black eyes. Naturally the Bolivian girl would be pleased to be rid of a suspected rival, but she sensed an undercurrent of understanding between her and the pilot.

She murmured that she was glad he could accommodate her, and took her seat with an increasing uneasiness.

'When do we start?' she asked a little anxiously.

'The morning after the next day. Tomorrow we have to finish unloading and to make a slight repair. Oh, do not fear, *senorita*, my machine will be perfectly okay when we are ready to leave.'

So Pepe's information was correct, and she had another day's respite to spend in this Andean Eden where Alastair played an indifferent Adam to her

Eve. He was sitting opposite to her across the table, next to Lola, while she had Pedro beside her. He was smiling indulgently at the Bolivian girl's sallies and Selina recollected that he had made no mention of his own plans. Apparently he intended to make an indefinite stay with his friends, after she had been packed off to La Paz. He seemed to take a great interest in the *estancia*, discussing with Don Diego ways and means of developing it. Did he regard it with the eyes of a potential owner? Though he had indicated that he was not impressed by Lola's schoolgirl crush, was he proof against the temptation of acquiring all that went with her if he made her his wife?

Pedro began to pay her fulsome compliments, which became more so as the wine circulated. Her dislike of him increased. That she was destined to take a journey with him alone became a more and more disturbing prospect. True, he would be fully occupied in flying the aircraft, but were there not such things as automatic pilots which could take over, and at the airport, which was a long way out of the town, she would be dependent upon his guidance when they landed, having no friend or acquaintance there to whom she could turn for aid. Her experience with Rodriguez had shaken her confidence in her ability to handle anything male. She had sent many amorous playboys about their business, but they had been predictable, and she had always been careful never to allow them to take her at a disadvantage. But here she was in totally alien surroundings, in a more primitive society. She glanced despairingly at Alastair and saw he was watching her with a disapproving air, as if he thought she was welcoming the pilot's attentions and was censuring her conduct; But surely he could not believe that she had any use for that slimy individual?

Pedro touched her bare arm, seemingly by accident, and Alastair's blue eyes glittered menacingly. Relief flooded through her; she had been wrong, it was Pedro who was causing him to frown. Though Alastair would be thankful to see the last of his charge, she was sure that he would never let her down. Somehow she must contrive to be alone with him, confide in him her doubts and fears respecting this flight and ask if he could not devise another means of conveying her to La Paz.

She had thought that it might be difficult to detach him from Lola, but it proved unexpectedly easy. As if fearing that she had exposed her admirer to another influence too long, Lola disappeared with Pedro after dinner to look

over some new records which he had brought for her, she announced airily. Senor and Senorita Miraflores went into a huddle over some domestic crisis and Selina was free to steal away and search for Alastair.

She found him in a dark corner of the verandah, where fireflies sparkled in the creepers, and a few brilliant stars were visible through the gaps in them. He was only a dim shape, blazoned by the scarlet tip of the cigar he was smoking, one of Don Diego's - to keep off the mosquitos, he excused himself. Selina stood before him like a little grey ghost, all colour drained from her by the absence of light. She was glad he could not see her face, it would make what she had come to ask easier to say.

Dismissing his apology, saying she liked the scent of a cigar, she began hesitantly:

'Alec, I'm not happy about going on a flight with this ... this strange man. I don't know him at all, and I don't think he's trustworthy.'

'Nothing could happen on a short flight, little one,' he said in the indulgent tone he might have used for a nervous child.

'I ... I don't know about that. Something could go wrong. He might have to make a forced landing, I'm told crossing the Andes can be tricky. Alec, couldn't you come with me?'

She sensed rather than saw his start of surprise.

'Haven't you had enough of me?'

'Of course not. Don't be absurd. You've been wonderful.'

'Don't, you sound like Lola.'

'I didn't mean to be fulsome, but you've been such a standby, Alec, I always feel perfectly safe with you.'

He laughed sardonically. 'I'm not sure that's entirely a compliment.'

'It ought to be. It means I trust you, and you're not a South American.'

'Poor little one, you haven't been given much cause to rely upon the natives.'

She advanced to the side of his chair, and said coaxingly:

'Since I've been defrauded of my trip over the pass, I think the least you can do is to accompany me. Didn't you promise Daddy to see me safe to La Paz?'

He reached for her hand, and felt the slim fingers tremble in his clasp.

'It's true, I did,' he admitted, 'and quite frankly I'm not impressed by Senor Montes.'

'There'd be room for you, wouldn't there?'

'I expect so.'

He was silent, considering, absently stroking her hand. The action was caressing, and hope rode high in her, surmising he would not desert her. It did not occur to her that it would be very inconvenient for him to fly to La Paz. He would have to return to Santa Loreta to collect the landrover and he might have to wait some time for transport thither.

Selina sat down on the arm of his chair.

'Please!' she coaxed.

'Now, now, don't start practising your siren's wiles on me, I'm impervious to feminine charms.' But his tone was very kind, and since her perch on the flimsy arm of the bamboo chair was precarious, he slipped his arm around her to anchor her there. It was hard, muscular and infinitely comforting. She said with a catch in her voice:

'I'm not trying to wheedle you, Alec, but I *am* frightened of this flight.'

His arm tightened a little. 'Surely you're used to flying?'

'Yes, in proper planes, but this machine doesn't seem to be awfully reliable.' But it was not the aircraft she was scared about.

'I guess it's only out of action when it suits Senor Montes' plans,' he mused.

'Wasn't it damaged?'

'Only a loose strut, but he wanted an excuse to see something of Lola. I'm surprised at this sudden attack of nerves, Selina, you've been very brave up to now, and it would be a lot worse if you'd had to cross the mountains in the landrover.'

'But I wanted to do that, and I'd have been with you.'

'You've a great, though possibly misplaced confidence in me,' he remarked a little drily, but he did not withdraw his arm.

'I don't think so.' She leaned nearer to him, until his head was level with her chest. Lowering her face, her chin brushed his hair. Though it looked so thick and stubborn it was soft and silky to touch. 'Please say you'll come,' she murmured.

He said in an amused tone: You seem to have changed your opinion of me. You thought I was a bit of an ogre when I made you dance with me in the ballroom at Paracos.'

She recalled her original antipathy towards him with a sense of wonderment. She had been annoyed by his brusque manner, his obvious contempt, his insistence that he was only helping her for her father's sake. Up to then men had esteemed it a privilege to serve the lovely Selina Stevens, hoping to ingratiate themselves into her favour. Alastair had not wanted anything from her and had regarded her as a nuisance. She had been piqued because she had been unable to make any impression upon him, until the very fact of her failure had drawn her towards him. Instinctively she knew that he was not a man who would indulge in light amours, and he would scorn to use their association as an opportunity to flirt with her. When he loved, it would be deep and true, and he had loved, so much so that his life had been blighted. What a fool that woman, whoever she was, had been to throw him away, and

how much Selina would like to be in a position to bring him healing and solace.

In a sudden flash of illumination, she became aware of the truth of her sentiments towards him. She had never been so happy and so secure in the company of any man before, except her father, but she wanted much more from him than paternal solicitude. She desired passionately to re-awaken love within him, to wipe out the bitter past, and win response to the kindred emotion which had come to birth in her own being. That was why she had felt so resentful of Lola's claims upon him, but she had little hope of winning his regard, for with the humility that true love breeds, she saw herself as he must see her, a vain, frivolous little creature who had never done a worthwhile thing in her life.

'I didn't know you, when you talked to me that night,' she pointed out. 'And you didn't try to project a very attractive image of yourself.'

'I didn't fancy my task,' he returned. 'I had to try to persuade the belle of the ball to venture into the wilds with someone she thought only one degree better than Rodriguez, but I gather I improve upon acquaintance?'

'Very much so, but we're wandering from the point.' Now it seemed desperately important to her to keep him with her if only for another day. Throwing all the seduction she knew how into the honey of her voice, she went on: 'You won't desert me now, Alec? I ... I need you. You told Father Xavier I was a sacred trust.'

'And so you are.' He gave a sharp sigh. 'And you think I won't be fulfilling it, if I don't come with you?'

Misinterpreting the reason for his sigh, she tried to withdraw herself, while she told him haughtily:

'If I'm such an imposition, I'll not ask you again. I daresay I'll be all right.'

'You misunderstand me. I don't regard you as an imposition, but as something quite different.' His arm pressed her waist.

'Such as?' she breathed.

'Never you mind, but you're right. I mustn't let you go alone with Montes. Anything might happen on the mountains.'

'Thank you, Alec.'

He lifted his head as if he wanted to see her face, and before she could withdraw her own, their cheeks touched. A little thrill ran up her spine at the contact with lean, leathery skin.

'Oh!' She gave a little gasp as she drew back.

'What is it, little one?'

'I ... I thought you despised me as a useless playgirl. You do like me a little?'

'Silly child.' He turned his head and kissed her, a very gentle kiss as if she were indeed a child, and she found it completely unsatisfying. Then abruptly he withdrew his arm so that she had to clutch the chairback to avoid falling.

'Perhaps the padre had a point after all,' he said gruffly. 'You'd better go to bed before you make a complete fool of me. Don't worry, Selina, I'll see you through to the end.'

'Thank you.' She was chilled by the rebuff in his changed tone, and stood hesitating, reluctant to leave him. The fireflies continued their interminable dance among the leaves, and from inside the house the strains of a modern popular song reached them from Lola's radiogram.

Alastair stood up. 'Good night, little one,' he bade her with finality.

'Good night, Grandpa,' she said pertly.

He took a step towards her.

'Now that was uncalled for,' he told her sternly. 'I'm not Methuselah, Selina, and if you wish to continue under my protection, it would be as well if you

remembered it. As Father Xavier said, we're a man and a woman, and I should hate any harm to come to you through me.'

She had to restrain an impulse to tell him that the only harm he could do her was to desert her, that she was hungry for his embrace, and she did not care for the consequences. But that would be madness. Though she had come to recognize the possibility that she had fallen in love with him, there was no future for her with him, for if he married anyone it would be Lola, to gain Santa Loreta. Because he had softened towards her tonight, promising to see her through, and hinting that he did not find her undesirable, it was no use building an airy castle in the air without foundation. She had gained a reprieve, but the final parting must inevitably come when he had installed her in the Bolivian capital.

'Thanks for the warning,' she said with assumed carelessness. 'It's nice to know, though, that you're human.'

'What did you think I was?' he asked almost violently. 'A lump of granite?'

'Sometimes you seem like it, but granite is durable. Good night, Alec.'

As she came in from the verandah on her way to her room, she encountered Lola standing just inside the doorway. The girl gave her a malevolent look as Selina bade her '*Buenas noches*'. It flashed into her mind that Lola had been eavesdropping, but luckily she had not been mentioned, though she probably would not like the idea of Alastair accompanying her to La Paz.

But he'll be coming back to her, she thought, when I've gone on to Europe, and no doubt she'll get him in the end.

A reflection that she found anything but comforting.

Alastair did not disclose his intention of accompanying Selina to the Miraflores next day, and she more than half suspected he was keeping the information until the last moment to avoid any protests from the family.

Not that they had any reason to object. It was natural that Alastair should wish to see her safely on her way to Europe, and Lola, she was fairly certain

already knew of his intentions. She meant to tell him that, but there was no sign of him when, after eating the breakfast that was always brought to her room, she went out on to the verandah in search of him.

It was a beautiful day, this her last at Santa Loreta, with a cool breeze blowing down from the mountains dispelling the warm humidity that sometimes was oppressive. She was disappointed to find herself alone, for she had hoped they would be going for another ride. She sat down in the chair Alastair had occupied on the previous evening and vaguely wondered what she would do when she arrived back in England. Her mother could be located through her bank, but she was reluctant to rejoin her, well knowing she would not be welcomed. She could alternatively try to find a job, in which endeavour her knowledge of Spanish might help her. As Alastair had suggested, she had been a butterfly creature, without depth or purpose, but she was resolved to change all that. She would prove that she could if necessary earn her own living and make herself of some use in the world. Thus far had he influenced her life, and it was the desire to show him that she could be someone worth while which was secretly motivating her. Not that he would ever learn of her metamorphosis, unless her father informed him. That thought cheered her. As long as both men were in the same continent, they could meet, probably would, since they were such old friends, and thus she could still preserve a tenuous link with Alastair, for her father might pass on the information that she gave him in her letters about her proceedings.

At lunch time, Alastair came in with Don Diego, but made no reference to their departure on the morrow, both being deep in a discussion of the possibility of mining the cliff.

'The track up to the road going over the pass could be engineered to accommodate trucks for the necessary transport,' Alastair suggested.

Miraflores shook his head. 'I will leave such developments to my heirs. I am content with what I have. You can do what you like with it when it is yours, Alonso.'

At these words, Alastair started and looked faintly embarrassed.

'I don't want riches either,' he stated. 'It's only the search for them that's exciting. As for owning this place, I'm not contemplating buying it, *amigo*.'

Lola said: 'No need to buy, it could easily be yours in another way.'

Her dark eyes glowed as she searched his impassive face. Pedro had been delayed and in his absence, Alastair was receiving the full treatment.

He stared at his plate. 'I'm a wanderer,' he announced. 'I don't think I could settle in one place.'

'But the time must come when you will feel the need of a home and family,' Lola persisted. 'A man cannot roam for ever.'

The bleak look with which Selina was familiar came into his face as it always did when home and family were mentioned.

'There are still many places I wish to see,' he returned harshly. 'I fancy I'll meet my end on the trail,' and he abruptly changed the subject.

Selina, watching, saw the Bolivian girl's face darken at what had been a definite rebuff.

'I will not be passed over,' she muttered, and threw Selina a baleful glance. It occurred to Selina that Alastair had agreed to accompany her to gain a respite from Lola's advances. She would have been better pleased to think he was doing it for her sake, but since he had come to Santa Loreta to find a refuge for her, she should not complain. Any other man would leap at an opportunity to acquire an estate full of rich potential combined with a beautiful and loving wife, but it seemed to have no attraction for him. Selina looked at him wistfully across the table where he sat on his hostess's right hand. The padre had said he had been let down by a woman. Had the wound gone so deep he would never trust his future to another?

Pedro came in full of apologies for being late; he had not noticed the time. After he had been served, he turned to Selina and asked her about her travel documents. Had she been granted an exit visa from Titicamba?

'No, but does it matter?' she asked, hoping he had not been told the circumstances leading to her departure. 'I'm in Bolivia already.'

Pedro smiled wryly. 'You came, in through the back door, so to speak, there are no frontier guards in the jungle. But we don't want you to be arrested as a spy.'

'Nonsense,' Alastair was brusque. 'Does she look like Mata Hari? It will be all right.'

Now surely was the time to mention that he would be going with her, but he said no more, though she looked at him appealingly. Since on a former occasion he had rebuked her for disclosing too much, she did not like to remind him in front of all the family. There was something in Pedro's manner which she could not interpret; he seemed to be subduing an inner jubilation and his eyes, when he looked at her, had a cunning leer.

As soon as the meal was over, she tried to intercept Alastair, seeking reassurance, but he eluded her. As the afternoon wore away, her uneasiness increased. Had he changed his mind about accompanying her and that was why he was avoiding her? She looked apprehensively towards the runway, where the aircraft squatted like a fantastic bird, and wished heartily it would disappear without her.

Selina wore her green borrowed dress again for dinner, at which everyone was present, but Alastair seemed withdrawn. Lola, with true Latin femininity, flirted outrageously with Pedro, seeking to make her laggard suitor jealous, and the glances he threw in their direction were so inimical that Selina decided she was succeeding. Her spirits sank to zero. Say what he would, Alastair did not intend to let Lola and the *estancia* slip through his fingers. This sojourn at Santa Loreta had shown him anew their value. Perhaps his Scottish blood made him canny, and he did not wish to be hustled into an engagement until he was certain what he would gain by it, hence his keen interest in the place's mineral products. When he came back to claim his landrover he would clinch the bargain, that is if he really meant to take her to La Paz. Almost she wished he had changed his mind, for continued association with him could only bring her pain, until she caught Pedro's sly glance and was sure she would need his protection.:

After dinner, he again avoided speaking to her alone. Saying he had something he must do outside, he bade her a curt good night, and told her to go to bed as she would have a trying day to face on the morrow. Yet as he reached the door, he turned to give her a long, enigmatical look and she gained the impression that he wanted to tell her something, but could not speak out with all the others present.

Lola's eyes had a triumphant glitter as Selina said good night, and she went to her room feeling certain that the Miraflores girl had prevailed upon Alastair to let her go on to La Paz alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

SELINA had gone to her room, but sleep was far from her thoughts, she was much too uneasy. She checked her money and papers. Her father had said he would arrange for her to draw funds from a bank in La Paz for her fare home. She took off Lola's dress and folded it carefully, ready for Maria to wash and press it before returning it to its owner.: She packed her bag, all but her pyjamas, but instead of putting them on she dressed fully in her shirt, trousers and boots. When the house was quiet, she meant to find Alastair, whose room was next to hers. She had not heard him return, and she intended to waylay him when he did. Listening intently to the noises of the night, she fancied that she heard the landrover starting up and the terrifying thought occurred to her that he had gone, leaving her to deal with Montes alone, but she could not credit that he would do anything so mean. Nevertheless his evasiveness all day worried her; why had he not said straight out at dinner that he was going with her and would see her through the immigration control at La Paz? Did he fear to offend Lola? But Lola would have to know eventually, and she did not think Alastair was easily intimidated by a woman's tantrums. She could not sleep until she had his reassurance that he did not mean to desert her.:

She stood by the window watching the lights go out in the peons' huts. It was not a French one, but the sill was low and she could easily climb over it without disturbing the rest of the house. Faint moonlight illuminated tire valley, silvering the distant peaks. She heard footsteps and laughter from the verandah, but not Alastair's deep voice. So he was still out. At long last, the *hacienda* sank into sleep, and Selina cautiously opened her window. Climbing over the sill, she moved to Alastair's window and stood listening for a sign of occupation. There was no light on, nor sound or movement from within. Then, starting violently, she wheeled about, as a dark figure loomed up silently behind her.

'Alec!' she gasped, recognizing him with relief.

'Hush,' He laid a finger to her lips. 'What are you doing here?'

His voice was a toneless whisper,

'Looking for you,' she whispered back.

'Can't do without me, eh?' She heard the satisfied purr in his voice; Alastair was not without human vanity. 'Is your bag packed? I'm afraid we must leave at once.'

So it was not her imagination that had been frightening her, there was something wrong, but her faith in Alastair was implicit, as long as he was there she could come to no harm.

'I'll get it,' she murmured.

He helped her back over the sill. She thrust her pyjamas into the top of the canvas bag, drew the string tight, and handed it out to him. Noiselessly she rejoined him, feeling absurdly like a schoolgirl bent upon some nocturnal prank. He pushed the window to, but could not fasten it from the outside. Then taking her bag upon his arm, and her hand in his, he guided her along the verandah, down the steps and into the night.

'Are we going over the pass?' she asked eagerly, as he turned towards the river.

'Yes.' He walked so fast that she had to run to keep up with his long strides, but when they had passed out of sight of the *hacienda*, he slackened his pace and told her:

'That little bitch Lola has played a nasty trick upon us. She's arranged with Montes to fly you to Paracos.'

'Oh, no!' A cold trickle ran down her spine, and her hold upon his hand tightened. 'But ... but weren't you coming too?'

'They didn't know that, and I purposely didn't tell them unless they thought up something else, but I couldn't have risked a fight with Montes in mid-air when I found he was going in the wrong direction.'

'But Lola did know. She was listening that night when I asked you to come.'

Alastair whistled softly. 'I wonder how they planned to dispose of me. Poppyseed in my morning coffee, perhaps, to make you believe I was drunk and incapable. Montes was tempted by the huge sum Rodriguez is offering for your capture. You're a valuable commodity, my sweet.'

She thrilled to hear him call her that, and he was here, by her side, ready to continue her journey with her. Her spirits soared. Almost she could have blessed Lola and Pedro for necessitating their flight.

'But how did you find out?' she asked.

'Thanks to Pepe. He heard them manufacturing their charming scheme while he was servicing the aircraft — they didn't notice he was there. Unfortunately I can't fly a plane or I'd be tempted to commandeer Montes' machine. It'll have to be the landrover.'

'I much prefer the landrover,' she declared enthusiastically. 'But where is it?'

'Across the river, that's the way we have to go. Pepe and I got it over after dinner, luckily without mishap. The ferry is a bit primitive.'

So that was what he had gone to do, when he had bade her go to bed, and she had been thinking he intended to desert her. She had seen the ferry, a flat wooden platform between ropes strung from bank to bank, which could only operate when the river was low: during the rains it became a raging torrent.

'I wonder how you managed it.'

'Well, it was a bit tricky, but the contraption will bear more weight than you'd believe possible. Now it's our turn to sample it.'

They had reached the river bank and a dark shape emerged from the shadows which was Pepe.

'*Senor?*'

'*Si, Pepe, y la senorita.*' Alastair dropped Selina's bag in the middle of the platform and took her arm. 'Don't be alarmed if it wobbles.'

'I won't. I'm enjoying this.' She was thankful to be leaving Santa Loreta where the atmosphere had oppressed her, for she was always aware of her hosts' silent animosity.

Pepe joined them on the raft-like structure, propelling them across with a long pole. On the further bank Selina saw the landrover, and her spirits rose still higher. She had wanted to cross the mountains with Alastair and now she was about to do so. As the ferry touched the opposite bank, she ran lightly ashore, while Alastair paused to say something to Pepe. Some exchange passed between them, and then the boy pushed off on his return journey. The house on its slight knoll showed no gleam of light. Their departure had been unobserved.

'Good-bye, Santa Loreta,' Selina cried gaily as Alastair started up the landrover's engine. 'Am I glad to be leaving it!' Then thinking that perhaps her words were a little ungracious, she added: 'I'm sorry, I know they're friends of yours, but they didn't like me.'

'You're jumping to conclusions, but I'm afraid they were under a misapprehension regarding you as Father Xavier was,' Alastair remarked drily.

'But I told them there was nothing between us.'

'Possibly they didn't believe you.'

Because her relief was so great and the silvery moonlight had gone a little to her head, she returned provocatively:

'Then they must think you're a cold fish, for your attitude throughout was particularly unloverlike.'

'Wasn't that the way you wanted it? Since you declined Father Xavier's offer, I decided I'd better keep my distance.'

'But you wouldn't really have wanted to pass me off as your wife?'

'Such a situation might have had its rewarding moments.'

He shot her a quick glance out of blue eyes that had a wicked glint in them, and Selina blushed. Lola, she thought, would have probably tried to stick a knife into her. Immediately Alastair's attention was claimed by the road. This was a zigzag stony track up an almost vertical green slope, and the landrover was crawling up it grunting and groaning.

'Will she make it?' Selina asked anxiously.

'Oh, yes, she's a grand old bus, though I wish I'd had time to give her an overhaul before taking this trip, but as you know, I didn't foresee it. The going will be easier once we've topped this little molehill.'

His spirits too seemed to have lightened, both felt in a holiday mood. The moon had sunk behind the ranges, but behind them dawn was flushing the east. They reached the top of the 'molehill,' and the track continued a meandering course through bush and scrub.

'We'll strike the road going over the Andes shortly,' Alastair told her, 'and that'll be a little smoother. This is what you might call the back door out of Santa Loreta and it isn't often used.'

The sun came up, for dawn was brief in that latitude, but the air was fresh and cool, much more so than in the valley, which had sunk out of sight. Ahead the mountains were stark and formidable, the ribbon of the route they were to take winding into their heart. The bushes ceased, to be replaced by grey scrub, which in turn gave place to bare slopes denuded of vegetation. By the time they joined the road coming up from the Beni province, they had entered a lunar landscape.

Alastair halted under an overhang of rock.

'I expect you could do with some breakfast. I filled a thermos with coffee. No, stay in the landrover,' as Selina made to get out. 'We'll eat it here.'

He unpacked the familiar container and she was about to say that she wanted to stretch her legs, when the reason for his caution became apparent. A plane zoomed up from the valley, climbing rapidly, and passed overhead.

'There goes Montes,' said Alastair,

'Do you think he saw us?'

'No.' He pointed to the rock above their heads. 'Not that he could do anything if he did, but I prefer not to advertise our whereabouts.'

'But wouldn't Don Diego have thwarted him if you'd told him?'

'Of course, but he's been good to us. I would hate to have to tell him of Lola's treachery. Also, short of lynching him, I couldn't stop Montes flying to Titicamba and telling Rodriguez where you were. That might have made trouble for Diego. Evidently, now we've gone, Montes has given up and flown back.' He nodded to where the plane had disappeared into the dark blue sky.

'This is becoming more melodramatic every moment,' Selina said cheerfully, 'but now the baddie has been circumvented and all's set for our triumphant entry into La Paz.'

But Alastair did not respond to her bright mood, and the gaiety died out of her face, as she recalled that there was no chance of the conventional happy ending to their story.

Frowning, Alastair remarked:

'What gets me is how a nice girl like Lola could do such a beastly thing.'

'Well, she's Latin and a bit primitive in her outlook,' Selina excused her, 'and she was jealous because you were coming with me instead of staying with her. But she would never have made me believe you could be drunk and incapable.'

'I have been drunk upon occasion to find oblivion,' he told her harshly, the bleak look settling on his face again.

Sensing some past tragedy, Selina longed to ask what had caused his need to forget, but knew he would not tell her, even if she had the impertinence to put her question. Instead, she said sadly:

'She had no cause to be jealous of me, I didn't try to come between you, but I suppose she couldn't understand why you weren't ... er ... more forthcoming,' and she stared into the green depths far below them.

He put out a hand and turned her face towards him. She dropped her eyes before the questing look in his, her lashes making dark crescents on her porcelain cheeks.

'Please get this, Selina. There was nothing between us, she was a victim of her own foolish fancies.'

'But don't you see, that's what made her so mad.'

'It's impossible there ever should be.'

She smiled wanly. 'Why not? Wouldn't you like to be the master of Santa Loreta?'

He dropped his hand, and his eyes blazed.

'Do you think I'd take her on to get the *estancia*? What do you think I am? A fortune-hunter?'

'It's not my business,' she retorted coolly, 'And does it matter what I think?'

He seemed about to make some explosive protest, but checked himself, and now his eyes were glacial.

'A timely remark,' he observed enigmatically. 'And now we must be getting on.'

The route continued to climb. On either side the scenery became starker and more dramatic, the air thinner and clearer. To her horror, Selina began to feel sick and dizzy. A hairpin bend brought the way they had come into view.

The road seemed to plunge into an ocean of dark green forest. The Indians of the Altiplano called it the edge of the world.

Alastair drove with grim concentration, wanting to cross the mountains well before dark. He had noticed Selina's increasing pallor and feared its cause *Soroche*, the mountain sickness, could cause a total collapse.

Then the engine failed. They had met nothing so far going up or coming down; their luck was out. Wind howled about the mountain crests above them and funnelled, down the pass, and Selina started to shiver. Alastair wrapped her in the blankets from the back of the landrover, gave her a tot of spirits and cursed himself for not having procured an oxygen cylinder. He set about repairing his vehicle. The trouble was nothing very serious, but it took time to locate, and when the machine was in order it was growing late. Selina refused any offer of food; she had already parted with her breakfast, to her intense embarrassment. Now she was too far gone to care, she sat slumped on the front seat, giddiness succeeded by moments of partial blackout. Alastair pressed on. Approaching the summit, the narrow road had been cut across a granite cliff, on which it was the only projection; below was a sheer drop of two thousand feet, above a vertical wall that faded into cloud. Selina took one glimpse and shut her eyes as the landrover crawled along this corridor above infinite space. The traverse completed, they became enveloped in thick cloud, through which jutted up the grey crags that formed the backbone of the continent. Then the bonnet of the landrover dropped. They were over the pass.

But there was still a steep descent to make to reach the central plain, the Altiplano, thirteen thousand feet above sea level. At Cuzco, the great Andean chain splits into two parallel ranges, both running almost due south. They enclose a vast, high plateau, which is so huge the peaks on either side sink to the horizon. It is on this expanse that three-quarters of the population of Bolivia live.

The clouds did not clear; they became a thick mist which lay over the road like a grey shroud, while daylight faded. Again the landrover's engine began to give trouble, indicating that there was further damage which Alastair had not located. Finally it showed signs of petering out altogether, thus

prohibiting any hope of reaching a village before nightfall, and unless some other vehicle came their way they would be marooned for the night.

Selina, in her semi-conscious state, was unaware of their predicament. When the landrover finally halted with a jerk, she did register with relief the cessation of its jolting.

Alastair was speaking, but she did not take in what he said.

'I've remembered a derelict hut hereabouts that I've used before. It's a miserable refuge, but it has three thick walls and the remains of a door, and being under a rock it will give some shelter from the wind. We've just made it.'

She had no knowledge of being lifted out of the landrover and carried into it.

She revived sufficiently to notice her surroundings after Alastair had moistened her lips with a little warm water mixed with spirits. The kerosene picnic stove gave a feeble warmth, but water would not become really hot in such high altitudes, where the boiling point was low. Alastair's torch, for which he had prudently procured several spare batteries, cut a swathe of light through the blackness of the hut. She found she was lying on the blankets and covered by all their spare clothing. Alastair had taken off her boots and was rubbing her feet, examining them for frostbite. She stared at his hunched figure kneeling beside her, and was aware of a surge of affection towards him, as she glimpsed his intent face. How unfailing good and solicitous he was towards her and what a feeble person she had proved to be, but she had not reckoned on the intense cold and the *soroche*. Tears of weakness rose into her eyes, but she blinked them back; he disliked tears, and she must not let them fall. She still felt sick and darkness kept descending before her eyes, but she was relieved to no longer have to endure the jolting of the landrover.

'Where are we?' she murmured faintly.

'We've crossed the top of the pass,' Alastair told her briskly, hoping to hearten her. 'The worst is behind us now. In the morning, we're sure to find someone who'll take us on to La Paz.'

Selina shook her head dumbly. Her weary limbs could face no more travelling and an icy chill was creeping over her. All she wanted was to be allowed to sink into unconsciousness from which she need never wake.

'I'm cold,' she whispered. She was shivering.

Alastair put her boots on again and wrapped her feet in her poncho, which he had taken from her bag. He lay down beside her on the hard, earthen floor, wrapping one of the blankets round them both, and encircling her with his arms, pressed the length of his limbs against her, seeking to warm her with the heat of his body. Gradually her shivering ceased and she revived a little. Raising her head, she looked about wonderingly,

'What's happened to the landrover?'

'I'm afraid it's given up the ghost. Luckily this hut was near.'

Her gaze wandered round the shadowed walls and came back to him. If he had not been impeded by her weakness, she supposed, incorrectly, he would have continued on foot. The small space of the hut was like the inside of a tomb - her tomb.

'You should have gone on, Alec, There's no reason why we both should perish.'

'Neither of us is going to perish,' he told her firmly.

'I can't go any further, Alec. This is the end of the road for me.' She smiled wanly. 'I'm sorry I couldn't make it after all.'

'You've been heroic,' he responded swiftly. 'Even strong men succumb to mountain sickness.'

'But not you. Nothing can defeat you, can it, Alec?'

'I have my limits.' She felt the sudden tenseness in his body, as if he were recalling a contest he had lost.

Afraid he would withdraw, she snuggled closer to him, whispering his name. Whatever the past had done to him, the present was hers, although the future was blank.

'Hush, little one,' he bade her tenderly. 'Don't waste your breath trying to talk. Go to sleep.'

'But I want to talk,' she told him fretfully. 'And if I go to sleep, I shan't wake up again.'

'Rubbish,' he declared energetically. 'We're nearly there; darling, you mustn't give up at the last lap,'

Holding her close with one arm, he began to rub her back with his other hand. Selina sighed and closed her eyes. He had called her darling, so he was not wholly indifferent, but she would not permit oblivion to overcome her. These moments in his arms were too precious to be lost in sleep. Though she was still dizzy, the nausea seemed to have passed. She was unaware of her body, it seemed numb, but her brain was clear, and she was convinced that this would be the end.

'I shan't live to get to La Paz,' she murmured, "You know that, don't you, Alec?"

'I know nothing of the sort,' he returned vigorously, while an icy fear gripped him. He muttered distractedly: 'I'd give my right arm for a canister of oxygen.'

Some of his vitality seemed to have seeped into her, for she moved in his arms and gave a shaky laugh.

'One thing you overlooked - and I thought you were infallible!'

'I didn't think we'd have to do this, or that the land- rover would fail us.'

'It doesn't matter,' she said consolingly. 'I'm very happy.'

She was; she had been granted this last unexpected joy, to die in his arms, there would be no more frustrations, no more problems, no dreaded parting with the man who held her, who had called her darling.

She started to speak again, her voice a little stronger.

'Nobody will grieve very much for me. Daddy has his work, and Mummy her career ... and her fun. I've been such a useless person, Alec. My only regret is that I wish I'd done more with my life.'

'Little one, please don't talk like that.'

She smiled faintly. 'It's true, Alec. It wasn't until I met you that I really began to live...' Her voice died away.

He reached for the diluted spirit and held it to her lips. She swallowed a little and lay quiet against him, collecting her strength, for there was something that she wanted to tell him before it was too late.

'Such a short life,' she resumed in a toneless voice. 'But it's been so wonderful being with you.' She laughed soundlessly. 'It had to take a bandit to open my eyes to real things!' She looked up, trying to see his face. The light from the torch cast weird shadows on the mud and stone walls, and touched the edges of his russet hair with bronze, it caught the gleam of his eyes, but his features were obscure. 'I love you, Alec.'

It was out, the secret she had never meant to reveal, but in this primitive place, with no hope of survival, she could speak without shame of what was in her heart.

'Little one...' Alastair's voice broke.

She took her hand away from its nest against his chest and touched his cheek. She felt moisture there and her eyes widened in surprise.

'Are you grieving for me, Alec? You won't grieve long, you'll soon forget me.'

'Never so long as I have breath.'

How often had she heard a similar declaration from some young adorer in the throes of sudden passion, who had forgotten her a week later when she proved to be unavailable. The sunny, distant days when she had followed Crystal Stevens around from one exotic Mediterranean resort to another passed through her mind like the patterns of a kaleidoscope. Blue skies, azure seas, brash young men sun tanned by the hot sun who had pursued her with their cheap amorousness. How trivial her existence had seemed, even while she experienced it. Fun, that was the operative word among all that set. But she had sickened of fun, reaching out for something more genuine, more satisfying. Now she had found it, among the grey crags and bitter winds of this Andean pass, the knowledge that she could endure hardship and was capable of strong and lasting emotion. Though she had no reason to suppose that Alastair would be any more faithful to her memory than those seaside playboys had been, it was the depth of her feeling for him that was important to her.

'Love never meant much among the boys I used to know,' she murmured, still moving through her past. 'All they were out for was a moment's gratification, but I was always sure it should mean much more than that. Now I know it does. My love for you, Alec, is the biggest thing I've ever experienced. I want to tell you so, before I go.'

He gathered her closer, her soft hair against his cheek.

'Darling, little one, you can't go and leave me desolate.'

An eager light came into her shadowed eyes at the urgency in his voice.

'Alec... do you mean... you care?'

'God help me, I do, though I've no right to say it. I love you, Selina.'

'Really, Alec?' She could hardly credit what he was saying. He might be seeking to save her humiliation by telling her that her emotion was returned. It would be like him to do that, but there was no need, for she had felt no shame in making her admission. In ordinary circumstances, she would have

shrunk from self-betrayal, but here in this eerie place, perched on top of the world, which seemed to be a halfway house between life and death, all that mattered was the truth.

'Yes, really,' he said earnestly. 'You've crept into my heart, you little fragile pretty thing, though I strove to bar you out.'

She gave a long, ecstatic sigh.

'I'm glad you've told me. Now everything is perfect.'

He shifted his hold a little, easing her head into the hollow of his shoulder.

'You've a strange idea of perfection,' he observed drily. 'There'll be problems to be solved when we get out of this, but I'll tell you now...'

She laid a finger on his lips.

'Don't say any more, Alec,' she told him with a gleam of mischief. 'I shan't ... get out of this, so you needn't perjure yourself.'

'Oh, Selina,' he protested. He kissed her finger, then, restraining a leap of passion, bent his head to kiss her lips very tenderly. 'One thing you must always believe - whatever malicious stories you may hear about me, I love you as I've loved no other woman.'

'Thank you, darling.' She would never hear those stories, she did not care whom he had loved, what he had been. At that moment he was all hers, and she was content.

She lay still and quiet for so long that he anxiously reached for her pulse. Aware of his action, she raised her head and murmured:

'This is my happiest hour.'

There would be no more heart-searchings, no more doubts; she had attained her moment of fulfilment. It was, in a sense, her wedding night.

'To die upon a kiss,' she went on. 'Who said that?'

'Othello, I believe, when he'd killed his wife.' In a burst of self-accusation, he cried: 'If you die, I shall have killed you.'

'It isn't your fault, Alec.' The anguish in his voice had roused her. 'We hadn't any choice, and I wanted so much to come this way with you. It's just bad luck I'm such a feeble creature. You must never, never reproach yourself.'

'How can I not?'

'Because I say you mustn't. Alec, you do love me? Even if it's only for tonight?'

She wanted to hear him say it again, to keep on saying it, she could not hear it often enough. She was filled with exultation to learn that he, who had been so aloof, contemptuous almost of her delicacy, had admitted that he cared.

She had watched him stall Lola's advances, but had believed he would succumb in the end. That morning he had told her that there could be nothing between him and the heiress of Santa Loreta. Even then she had not been wholly convinced. Now it seemed that she had prevailed over the Bolivian girl and it was on her account that Alastair had repudiated her. But she felt only pity for her rival, and when she had passed on Alastair might return to her for consolation, and find in the living love what he had lost in the mountains. For though he was reserved and self-sufficient, he was not the misogynist that he was reputed to be, but it had taken this perilous journey and her utter collapse to make him reveal his feelings. She had felt moisture upon his cheek, sure evidence that granite hard as he normally appeared to be, he could and was deeply moved by emotion.

She had been eager to undertake this journey with him, with no presentiment of how it would end, but she did not regret it, it had been worth all the discomfort and sickness to find this culmination in his arms.

Since she believed her time was short, the durability of their love would never have to stand the test of time. She had only this one night, and its brevity gave it added poignancy.

As she asked her question, the query countless lovers, seeking continual reassurance, have made again and again throughout the ages, the light touched her hair with glints of gold, making of it a halo, while the waxen pallor of her face had the purity of a marble saint. Only her darkly fringed eyes had life. She gazed at the beloved face beside her thinking with a sort of quiet rapture that it would be the last thing she would see before her sight faded for ever.

Fervently Alastair answered her:

'For always, darling.'

Selina smiled. A safe promise, for she would only be a frail wraith to be remembered at longer and longer intervals when he was feeling sentimental.

'Hang on, little one,' he besought her desperately. 'Only a few more hours, then the sun will come up and it'll be warmer.'

'I shan't see the sun again, but you're my sun, Alec. Kiss me again.'

She was too far gone to feel any active emotion, but she found his arms and his protestations infinitely comforting. Like a tired child she lay heavily against him, and like a child, she lifted her face for his kiss.

He touched her lips again gently, dismayed to find them so chill. His mouth wandered over her cheeks and throat, striving by its pressure to instil some warmth into her cold flesh.

Actually the worst of their journey was over, but she had taxed her strength to its limit during the days on the road, and the halt at Santa Loreta had been too heavily charged with conflicting emotions to really rest her. In the end the thin air of the high altitude had overcome her. Alastair was blaming himself bitterly for exposing her to it; he should have found some alternative, but she had been so game, so eager for the adventure, he had not wanted to disappoint her.

Selina began to mutter; she was wandering and thought Father Xavier was there and Lola, beautiful and seductive in her red frills. 'Marry us quickly,'

she said to the priest, 'before she can stop you.' But her words were unintelligible murmurings.

Suddenly she said quite clearly:

'It's a very steep pass, Alec dear, up to the perilous peaks, and the chasms are very deep, but together we'll make it.'

Then a long shudder ran through her and she was still.

'Little one,' Alastair cried in agony. 'Little one!'

She made no response, her lashes closed over her eyes and her body was limp in his arms. The torch dimmed and flickered, needing a new battery, and outside the wind had become stronger and was howling over the mountain crests. It dispersed the last rags of the enveloping mist, disclosing the brilliant stars. There was nothing Alastair could do. The landrover would go no further and by dawn there would be only the shell left that had housed the brave spirit which had so uncomplainingly faced the hazards he had presented to her.

A fan of light poured in through the cracks in the wooden door of the hut and the sound of a labouring engine drowned the noise of the wind.

A vehicle was coming up the pass.

CHAPTER SIX

LA PAZ, the capital city of Bolivia, lies in a bowl on the eastern side of the Altiplano under the triple peaks of the giant mount Illimani. Coming to it from the direction of Lake Titicaca, and Peru, the city is invisible until the last few yards. Then the road curves round the lip of a canyon and the whole town is spread out two thousand feet below, hundreds of buildings, scattered like confetti between a circle of white peaks. It has, for the most part, avoided the development of multiple stores and the businesses and shops are small and discreet. There are baroque mansions still standing in the Prado with its statue of Queen Isabella, and many ancient churches with carved facades, their interiors furnished with dim naves and silver-crowned virgins, amid the smell of stale incense and guttering candles. A large percentage of the population are of Indian descent, but there is a hard core of persons of European origin.

Selina sat in the garden of the hotel to which she had moved since spending a few days in hospital. There were trees in the garden, which could only be preserved in that altitude with much care and attention, and bright beds of flowers. She could see the three peaks of Illimani over the surrounding buildings, and admired their majesty, while she enjoyed the bright sunshine. She had recovered from her bout of mountain sickness. The military truck which had rescued them carried medical supplies, including a supply of oxygen which had saved her life. Alastair had been to see her in hospital and had been highly relieved to find that she was recovering and would be none the worse for her adventures. He had found her accommodation at this hotel, and helped to transport her hither, but they had had no opportunity for intimate conversation. He had reverted to his former aloof manner and neither referred to the night in the hut, and of that and the latter part of the ascent of the pass Selina's recollections were hazy.

She was haunted in dreams by the road between the precipice and the mountain heights in all its dramatic majesty, though at the actual time she had been too ill to absorb more than a vague impression, which had been eradicably fixed in her subconscious. But of the ensuing journey through mist and cloud, all memory was obliterated. She did recollect very clearly lying in Alastair's arms and her conviction that she was dying. She had been desperately anxious to persuade him that he was in no way to blame for her

condition. She had always wanted to make the trip over the Andes and he could not have foreseen that she would prove so susceptible to altitude. People varied in that respect, and it was sheer bad luck that she had been so affected. But she knew that she had said a great deal more than that. Believing that she was not going to survive, she had shown him her heart, and it was only on that night of supreme realities that she had discovered how much she loved him.

It was extraordinary that love should have been born in her after their unpropitious beginning. At Paracos she had thought she disliked him, and she had been offended by his' lack of polished manners, but since then she had learned the fundamental genuineness and sincerity of his character. Not that these characteristics were lovable in themselves. Worthiness never had any great appeal to a woman from a sexual standpoint, but Alastair complemented herself. He possessed a rugged male strength that was an irresistible appeal to her feminine weakness.

It would seem that unless her memory were playing her tricks, he had told her he reciprocated her feelings. Moreover, he had appeared quite devastated by the thought of losing her. Though she had been too feeble to accomplish that climb, he thought none of the worse of her for that, and after all, she had not done so badly. She had come through several days of strain without faltering; it was only the final ordeal that had defeated her, and she might have managed to bear up through that, even without the opportune arrival of the truck, if the landrover had not broken down.

Alastair had not been to see her since she had been installed in the hotel. He had told her that he had recovered his vehicle, and it was being overhauled, but he had not spoken of his future plans. Selina was confident that they would include her. He was only waiting until she was fully recovered to discuss them with her. Had he not told her, and that she remembered very clearly, that he loved her as he had never loved any other woman?

She began to dream about their future. She supposed he would wish to continue to live in South America, since all his interests were in that country. They would have to have a home other than the landrover, perhaps here in La Paz. Presumably he had some sort of means, but she did not mind how small they were, even if she had to live in an adobe hut like Father Xavier.

She had a moment's anxiety as it occurred to her that Alastair might think she would expect a luxurious way of life. She would have to convince him that she was not afraid of poverty. She had had her fill of luxury and soft living while she had been with her mother. She smiled as she recalled Crystal. She would not be pleased with her son-in-law, he was far too forthright to appeal to her, who liked flattery and flirtatiousness from her men. She would consider her daughter had thrown herself away, but that would not trouble Selina, who meant to follow her heart. Her father would be pleased, for he thought a lot of Alastair Grainger.

She had that morning found the bank where Mr. Stevens had an account and drawn some money. She bought a crimplene outfit at one of the shops, a sleeveless dress and matching jacket - Alastair had seen her far too long in shabby clothes. She had had her hair shampooed and set. It was her first expedition into the town, and she was feeling a little tired. She had also bought some books on Inca history and was perusing one now. She had become enthralled by the descriptions of their culture. Perhaps Alastair would take her to see the great ruins of Machu Pichu in Peru, that last stronghold of imperial power, built on its perpendicular hills surrounded on three sides by the turbulent Urubamba river, that Hiram Bingham had laid open to the wondering eyes of the world at the beginning of the century. And the Gateway of the Sun at Tiahuanaco, the enigmatical calendar inscriptions of which had set a fine problem for archaeologists since the date they disclosed seemed to relate to the pre-dawn of history.

So she dreamed and planned amid the flowers and trees, under the hard blue sky, and waited for Alastair to come to her.

The afternoon advanced and he did not appear. She had been sure that he would come today and had dressed in her new clothes to receive him. She glanced uneasily at her watch and wondered why he delayed. She did not know where he was staying, and a painful thought flashed into her mind. He might have left. Perhaps, fearful that he had compromised himself he had gone without seeing her and without a word. But she was sure he would never be so cowardly. Although there was an airfield near La Paz and she was quite capable of booking her flight to New York or Rio, and thence to Europe, she was confident that he would not let her go without saying

good-bye, even if he had not meant what she had thought he did in that hut on the Andean pass.

When at length he did come, he moved so silently and lightly that he came upon her unawares. Hatless she sat in the shade of a tree, her hair pale gold, shaped and curled about her head, the book open upon her knees, and her eyes full of dreams. Her blue dress sheathed her slender limbs, and though by no means a couture model, Selina's natural elegance always made her clothes look better than they were. She had bought a pair of white shoes, and her total ensemble was a complete contrast to her appearance during their trek. She looked as she had done in the ballroom at Paracos, sophisticated, perfectly groomed, a society butterfly. Unconsciously he sighed.

Selina looked up and saw him; a glad light came into her grey eyes, while a delicate colour suffused her face.

'Alec! I was beginning to think you'd deserted me.'

You know I'd never do that,' he returned sombrely, and there was no answering light in his face. He asked her conventionally how she felt and whether she was entirely recovered.

'I'm fine, and I've become acclimatized to the air of the Altiplano,' she told him brightly. 'But sit down, Alec, don't stand glowering over me, you make me feel nervous.'

For his face was grim and unsmiling and her confidence began to ebb, while uneasiness stirred in her. What had she done to offend him?

Since there was nowhere else, he sat down on the seat beside her, but as far from her as its limits allowed. He glanced at her book, which she closed and laid between them.

'A serious tome for a convalescent. Haven't you had enough of this country?'

'I'm just beginning to discover how interesting it is, and I'm not a convalescent, I'm perfectly well.'

'In that case you're fit to fly home.'

'Home? You know I haven't got a home.'

'Well, England then, or wherever your mother is. Isn't that home?'

'I don't want to join Mummy.' She did not even know where she was, though she knew she could trace her through her bank or the film studio. She thought distastefully of the frivolous life she had escaped with its round of parties and empty gaieties. Only when she was actually on set did Crystal Stillbright, as she was known professionally, curtail her amusements, and Alastair wanted to send her back to that. She turned in her seat to face him, and said pleadingly:

'Alec!'

The blue eyes regarded her coldly. 'Yes, Selina?'

'Oh!' She put her hand to her cheek, feeling as if he had struck her. 'Didn't you mean any of what you said that night, when I was so ill?' she asked desperately.

A spasm crossed his face. 'I think we should forget about that,' he told her quietly. 'We were neither of us quite our normal selves.'

She lowered her hand, staring at him incredulously.

'I can't forget,' she said in a low passionate voice. 'I don't want to forget. You said you loved me and now you want to end me away.'

'Selina, no, I don't want to send you away, but it would be wisest. You can't stay here.'

She turned her head away, the colours of the flowers swam before her eyes in a blurred rainbow.

'I see you don't want me,' she said quietly. 'I... I made a mistake. Forget it, Alec.'

Seeing her hurt, his face softened. 'Selina, little one,' he began gently, 'what I said to you, when I feared the worst, was true, but I shouldn't have said it. We were, as the padre said, a man and a woman alone in unusual circumstances.' He smiled sadly. 'But now all that is over. You don't belong to my world, I've nothing much to offer you, and you've been used to the best of everything...'

'Please,' she interrupted him, her eyes shining with renewed hope. You _{s c s} you underestimate me. I can cope with hardship and poverty, I could endure anything so long as we were together. You once told me you'd neither kith nor kin, and I could make a home for you, however humble, and I want you to show me all this strange country that means so much to you and teach me to love it too.'

'You'd come to hate it,' he told her harshly. 'It's primitive, even savage. Girls like you can't stick it for long, that I know only too well.'

In her eagerness she did not notice the significance of his last phrase. 'You mustn't judge me by others,' she reproved him. 'You still think of me as a sort of playgirl, but I'm not, and if we love each other,' her anxious eyes searched his face and saw no softening in it, 'surely we could make out?' she finished uncertainly.

'I'm too old for you, little one,' he said more kindly. 'I'm hard bitten and disillusioned. Because I got you out of a jam and we've shared an adventure, you've glamorized me, but your romantic attachment wouldn't last, little one, and I'd be a cad to take advantage of your infatuation,'

'Infatuation?' she took him up, her voice quivering. 'Is that all you think it is?'

'You haven't known me very long.'

'Is that so important? I've learned to know you very well during the time we've been together. Such circumstances show what a man is made of ... also a woman. Is it because I flaked out at the top of the pass that you've got such a poor opinion of me?'

'No, Selina, not that at all. You've been as gallant as they come, but. «He leaned forward and took her slight wrist between his lean fingers. "You can't help the way you're made. Look at that." Numbly she glanced down at her hand which looked pale and fragile in his grasp. "That hand was not made to cook and scour, but to wear jewels and arrange flowers."

She snatched it out of his grasp while her eyes filled with tears.

'You're cruel, Alec, to keep harping upon my uselessness, but it can be remedied. I'm not incapable. I can learn to be ... practical.' Her voice grew eager. 'I can cook... a little already.'

His mouth twitched ironically. 'Fancy dishes, I don't doubt, but not how to clean fish and pluck game.'

Involuntarily she flinched, and he smiled.

'Little one, that's something I'd never expect you to do, but that's what we live on in the wilderness, the fish and fowl we catch.'

'But is your life all spent in wild places? Do you never live in a house?'

'Oh yes, I possess one in Lima.' He looked away from her over the garden, seeming to withdraw from her. His face had the bleak, hostile look she had seen before, as if he were recalling some painful memory.

'An old Spanish house,' he went on, 'that was once gracious, but has been desecrated. It's like a mausoleum now. I only go back there when I'm ready to write another book and that keeps me too busy to notice ...' He broke off abruptly and brought his gaze back to her. Seeing the surprise in her face, he went on: 'Oh yes, I write about my adventures. Some of my books have done quite well.'

She was astounded by these revelations; he was showing her a totally different side of himself. She would never have connected him with literary effort.

'So you're an author? You're really quite civilized.'

She wished she had paid more attention when her father had talked about Alastair, but sensing her lack of interest in a man she did not know, Mr. Stevens had not said very much.

Suspecting where her thoughts were tending, Alastair moved restlessly. 'Not civilized enough for you,' he said shortly. 'Look, darling,' she quivered as he let slip the endearment, 'mine is not a life I could ask a woman to share and certainly not a highly ornamental product like yourself. You'd become bored stiff, for when I'm writing I'm as grumpy as a bear, and other times I'm sent off on assignments in remote places, for that's my bread and butter, and you'd be left alone in a foreign land.'

It seemed to her that he had some precedent in mind, perhaps that first love of his who had failed him, but she would not be alone, not if they were blessed with children, but that she could not mention, not in the face of his obvious reluctance. All her bright dreams were fading. He did not want or need her, what she had thought she had glimpsed in the mountains had been an illusion.

'I understand,' she said quietly. 'You don't want to give up your bachelor freedom.'

'Little one, it's for your own sake...'

'Please don't give me that. I'd rather you were honest.'

'I'm trying to be honest. I mustn't spoil your life, which you've barely begun. You deserve a young man's first love, with whom you can grow up, not the dregs from a used wine cup. For life has used me, Selina, and not kindly. It would be pure selfishness to allow you to link your life with mine, even if it were possible, which it isn't.'

'Of course it's possible, and how could you spoil my life when I love you?' Desperate because she saw her happiness slipping away in the face of his obstinacy, she threw maidenly reticence to the winds. 'Alec, you're everything to me, and since you're being honest, you may as well admit that you won't make a place for me in your life because you don't want me.'

'Want you?' She had stung him beyond his self-control. 'Oh, God, little one, how I want you!'

Thrilled by this admission, she leaned towards him, her eyes beseeching, and unable to resist the invitation expressed in every line of her yearning body, he caught her to him. They were alone in the garden; the flowers, the sunshine, the blue sky were all theirs and theirs alone. Alec was not gentle, it was as if a flood long dammed by his restraint had broken loose and was pouring over her. His kisses were hard and urgent, the arms encircling her bruising in their fierce grip, but she gloried in his strength, giving herself with increasing rapture as her body took fire under his caresses.

The first force of his passion spent, Alastair suddenly pushed her away from him and sprang to his feet. He walked away from her and stood with his back towards her, his eyes fixed unseeingly upon the distant snows of Illimani. Selina watched him exultantly. She had won him now; he could not send her away after such a demonstration. His scruples and doubts could not withstand the passion which burned in both of them and which her pleading had brought to violent eruption.

She waited with held breath for him to turn round and announce his capitulation. Now he had shown in no uncertain terms how much he desired her, she expected a confirmation in words, and a formal proposal.

But when at length he did return to her, it was no ardent lover who stood before her, and the questing gaze she raised to his face, met only ice in his blue eyes.

He dropped his gaze, as if unable or unwilling to see the love shining in hers, and said awkwardly:

'Forgive my roughness. I must apologise for being so lamentably lacking in self-control.'

She could not believe that he meant to withdraw and she laughed gaily:

'Still on the fragile flower theme? But you haven't braised me, darling - at least not much; I'm still intact.'

'It mustn't ever happen again.'

There was no mistaking that he meant what he said, and a cold stricture settled round her heart.

'But, darling ...'

A muscle in his cheek twitched. 'And don't call me darling. God, Selina, I'm only a man and human ...'

'That's what I want you to be.'

'Little one,' his voice softened, 'I didn't want to have to tell you this. I hoped your own good sense would show you the unsuitability of ...' he swallowed convulsively, 'a union between us.' He slowly clenched his brown fist. 'The fact is, Selina, I can't ask you to marry me because I'm not free.'

'Not free?' Stupidly she echoed the word, trying to grasp its implication. A wandering breeze from the snowfields stirred the tree above them, and she shivered at its chill. 'Do you mean you're contracted to Lola?' she asked.

'Lola? Good lord, no! I have a wife.'

She saw an indescribable expression of pain and bitterness cross his face, before he turned away from her to stare again at Illimani's frozen peaks which were no less frigid than his face.

Selina drew a quivering breath. So this was the explanation of Alec's past, the woman Father Xavier had said had broken his heart! But the padre did not appear to have known that he had married her, and where was she, what had she done?

'But., but why is it a secret?' she asked, bewildered.

His gaze still on the mountains, he said shortly:

'It's no one's business except mine.'

'Do you love her?' Involuntarily the question broke from her.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'A young man's infatuation. She was very lovely, and very frail.'

Was, not is, and frailty could mean she was delicate, or something else. 'Can't you tell me about it?' she pleaded.

He turned from his contemplation of the distant summits, and lines she had never noticed before were drawn in his face.

'No, Selina, I'd rather not. Perhaps I've acted like a knave, or only a fool, but it's not a story I want to tell you. Anyway, I'm bound.' He passed his hand wearily over his face. 'When we were in that hut I forgot everything except you. I said things I shouldn't have said. You thought you were dying and I was ready to use any means to sustain you. But you didn't die, little one.' Tenderness flashed into his face, obliterating the bitter lines. 'For that I'll be eternally grateful to the powers above, but you must not become involved any further with me. I must expiate my folly in my own way.'

Selina felt that she was entitled to more explanation than he seemed inclined to give her, and asked:

'You've no family?'

He had told her that he had no kin, but now he had admitted to a wife, the homeless picture he had drawn of himself was incorrect.

'No, thank God,' he said so fervently that she was shocked. She had thought that Alastair was a man who would love children. Continuing with her catechism, she inquired:

'Your wife lives in your house in Lima?'

'Yes.' His tone was curt.

'Where you seldom go and you said had become a mausoleum.'

The implication was obvious, but although she looked at him questioningly, he said nothing. Bitter words, bleak looks whenever home and family were mentioned in connection with himself could only have one interpretation. This marriage had been a disaster, and he regarded his house as the graveyard of a dead love.

'Alec,' she began tentatively, making patterns on the grass with the point of her shoe, while hope raised its head in her heart, 'is there no way in which you can gain your freedom?'

She held her breath, knowing he would understand what she was suggesting and she was fearful that he would take offence.

Yet when he answered his voice was gentle. 'Not with honour.'

'Oh, honour! Who bothers about that nowadays?' she flashed.

Certainly not the frivolous crowd she was accustomed to, when such scruples stood between them and their desires.

'I do,' he said simply.

The quiet finality of those two short syllables quenched her. Alastair was not like her erstwhile companions. She had known all along he was a man of integrity, and she realized that she was up against rock.

She rose to her feet, shaking out her skirts, the pretty outfit which she had bought to please him.

'I suppose I'd better leave for Europe,' she said tonelessly.

'It would be your wisest course.'

She looked up at him, he was so much taller than she was, and saw torment in his eyes, though his face was quiet. Something broke inside her. She threw herself into his arms, uttering incoherent words. She loved him, she couldn't bear to leave him, and he had said he loved her. His wife was in

Lima, hundreds of miles distant. Why did he want to send her away? Couldn't they find happiness together if it were only for a little while?

Very gently he soothed her, one arm encircling her shaking body, the other stroking her head. Gradually she became calmer, and wondered if she had been mad, it was the prospect of final separation that had moved her so. Glancing quickly up at his still face, she knew he would not respond to her wild suggestion.

She -drew away from him it seemed to her the garden had become very dark, though the sun was still shining brightly.

Mechanically she smoothed her rumpled dress, and tidied her hair, while he watched her in silence.

'I'm sorry, Alec,' she said at length, and was glad that her voice sounded steady. 'Of course I didn't mean any of that. I'm afraid I'm an unbalanced, hysterical sort of creature.'

Curiously he winced. 'Not you,' he said quickly, 'I should say you were particularly sane.'

'Only silly enough to fall for a married man,'

But then he had never given her any hint, not that there was any reason for him to do so, except on that one night, when she had been too far gone to accept such a revelation, her need being for the comfort which he had given her.

'Do the Miraflores know?' she asked suddenly, for in view of Lola's advances that seemed unlikely.

'No, why should I discuss my domestic affairs with them?' He smiled wryly. 'Part of their attraction for me is that they don't know about my past.'

She returned: 'But is that fair? Haven't you aroused expectations in that quarter which you knew couldn't be fulfilled?'

'If you mean Lola, she will get over her crush. She too needs a younger man. However, as I feared Don Diego was getting ideas, I meant to avoid them for some time, but your need came before such considerations. I prefer to keep my private life to myself. I only told you, because I must.'

A proud man and reticent, shrinking from possible pity or condolences from his friends. Was it his fault or his wife's that his marriage had failed? Selina wondered. Did she resent his absences, or was she rushing to conclusions and they were both content with their semi-detached partnership?

Doubt assailed her, for after all she had not known him very long, and could not judge of his sincerity. The words he had spoken on the pass and the tenderness he had shown could possibly have been only the reaction of a strong man who cherished weak and helpless things. Those few ecstatic moments in his arms a short while ago could have been the natural upsurge of sex too long repressed, but he jibbed at a permanent connection. The unknown wife from whom he was obviously estranged could be a very useful weapon to counteract the embarrassing overtures of importunate females. Like so many others she had known, he enjoyed his bit of fun but did not want to have to pay for it.

Selina looked wistfully at his lean, brown face and keen blue eyes. She did not wish to believe that he could be so calculating, but his real love was the inaccessible regions of the earth, and women would be merely incidental, though those who termed him a misogynist were wrong.

'Well, thank you for the belated information,' she said, her tone sharp and brittle. 'I'll give it to you that you've always been most circumspect, until just now, but I suppose I provoked you by revealing my schoolgirl crush,' she laughed forcedly. 'I shall of course get over it, as Lola will, but tell me, just as a matter of curiosity, if I had agreed to fall in with the padre's wishes, would you have really presented me to the Miraflores as your wife? Would that have fitted in with your sensitive honour, or was it your idea of a joke?'

'No, little one, certainly not a joke.' He looked a little shamefaced. 'It wouldn't have been legal, and it would never have been consummated, but...'

He paused, and she suggested: 'It would have cooked poor Lola's goose?'

'That didn't occur to me. No, the truth is it would have given me a bitter-sweet satisfaction to claim you as mine, if only for a few days. A foolish fantasy and unworthy of my years.'*

She turned away, biting her lips to still their trembling,

'However, you had more sense than to agree. You refused to contemplate such an equivocal situation,' he went on more lightly. 'And it would have led to complications.'

'Oh, definitely,' she agreed.

He stood looking at her averted face, the pitiful droop of her head upon its slim neck like the broken stem of a flower.:

'Poor butterfly,' he said softly, 'but you'll forget.'

'Oh yes, I'll get over it,' she assured him, clutching at the remnants of her pride. 'Butterflies don't have very deep feelings, do they? I'll find plenty of volunteers to console me when I get back to my gay life in Europe.'

He made an inarticulate sound, whether of relief or despair she did not know, then went on to ask if he should book her flight home. She refused, saying she would arrange that herself.:

'I think I'd like to stay here for a few days longer,' she told him.:

'But I shan't be here, I've been asked by the Peruvian Government to survey part of the Urubamba valley, and I'll be leaving tomorrow.'

Selina knew that was many miles away in Peru, and her heart felt like lead.

'I can take care of myself,' she said proudly. 'You've done your part in getting me here. You've no further responsibility for my welfare.'

'I should have preferred to see you safely on to the plane.'

'It's not really necessary, Alec. I'm not quite helpless, you know, and if you don't mind, we'll say good-bye here and now. I can't stand protracted farewells, can you?'

A flicker of admiration showed in his eyes.

'As you wish, little one.'

The last two words nearly unnerved her, how often had he called her that in moments of tenderness.

'Please go,' she whispered, while every nerve in her body was crying out to him to stay.

The harsh sunlight of the Altiplano made a nimbus of her uncovered hair, her pale face looked translucent, while her eyes were big with unshed tears.

'*Viracocha*,' he murmured, his eyes alight with blue flame.

'Ah no!' Memory smote her. The morning in the priest's house, Alastair's anger, which was succeeded by that curious scene when Father Xavier had wanted to bless the love that had not yet blossomed between them, the love that in the full flower of its glory must be cut off to wither and die.

Alastair gave a deep sigh.

"Don't stay here too long,' he said harshly. 'Go back to your playgrounds, and forget South America is on the map. This isn't your place, Selina, the sunlight is too harsh, the winds too keen, the life too primitive. You were born to wear Parisian dresses, ride in sleek cars, not land-rovers,' he grinned but without mirth. 'Your milieu is chromium plating, jewels, gilded youths and all the other things that make for gracious living. You'll find the *dolce vita* doubly attractive since you've been deprived of it so long.' He flung the words at her almost savagely, as if he resented their truth, even while he advocated her return to her old life.

'How wonderful you make it sound,' she murmured, but she knew it would not be wonderful, was not what she wanted.

Alastair took two steps towards her, lifted her limp hand and pressed his lips upon her fingers.

'Good-bye, my ...' He bit his lip, turned abruptly upon his heel and strode out of the garden - out of her life.

Selina remained where he had left her, tracing with her other hand the place where his mouth had touched her. She had been unable to speak those so final words, had let him go without an adieu. She was seeing again in her mind's eye a gorgeous butterfly sunning itself on a wilderness plant and its sudden swift destruction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SELINA wandered out into the street with no definite purpose except that she felt she could no longer remain in the garden which was so impregnated with the pain of her parting with Alastair. There was no one about, for her hotel was in a quiet part of the town whose inhabitants, those who were not still at work, were foregathering in the Prado for the evening promenade of girls and youths and the pleasures of the cafes.

She was drained and empty, as if all her vitality had gone with Alastair. In spite of her boast that she had become acclimatized to the altitude, the thin air took its toll of her energies.

Among the many hurts that he had inflicted, Alastair's persistence in regarding her as a playgirl rankled the most. Surely she had proved to him that she was something more? A chromium-plated sex kitten, she thought bitterly, recalling the impetuosity with which she had flung herself into his arms. That was what he secretly believed her to be, a being too superficial and comfort-loving to be able to share his life. For though the convenient wife could be evoked as a barrier when necessary, she was sure the bond between them was slack enough to be severed if he so willed. But he did not so wish; he talked of honour, which might mean anything. Possibly he took his marriage vows as irrevocable; there was a streak of the puritan in him - he might even have religious scruples, but instinctively she knew that neither was his real motive for clinging to his wife.

Selina was a girl belonging to the modern generation and she did not consider that a marriage should continue when the parties concerned were incompatible, and Alastair had said they had no children. But then, she did not know Mrs Grainger's point of view. She might still care for her husband, although she saw him so seldom. Selina began to speculate about her. She could not be very young, for apparently they had been married some time. She might have grown fat and lazy, as so many women did towards middle life, and Alastair no longer found her attractive. She might even be a nagger and unsympathetic towards his work, which would account for his bitterness.

Selina was tempted to write off to her father and ask him what he knew about Alastair's wife, for as far as she could recall Tom had never mentioned her, but then she herself had not shown any interest in the old friend whom she had not expected to meet. Conversation about unknown people could be boring to the one who was uninitiated, and with his own domestic arrangements being suspect. Tom would not want to be too loquacious about his friend's marital travails.

But a request from his daughter for information would surprise him, and such an action on her part would amount to spying upon Alastair's privacy. Nor could she account to her father for her sudden interest without risking betraying its cause, and he was quick enough to guess what had prompted it, however discreetly she worded her epistle. He might think that Alastair had betrayed his trust, and that he had not done, quite the reverse, and it would be even worse if she had to confess that she had been rejected.

No, she could not refer to her father for light on Alastair's marriage, and it would be much wiser to try to forget the whole affair and turn her mind to the consideration of her future.

She was extremely reluctant to leave South America. Dimly she was aware of a passionate urge to prove herself anew, show Alastair that she could accept life in the country of his adoption and endure its roughest elements. Not that he was ever likely to learn of her efforts, nor was it probable that any opportunity would occur to help her to attain her ends, but life being unpredictable, there was always a chance that both seemingly impossible eventualities might happen, and Selina was an optimist.

Lost in reverie, she had only strolled a few yards down the street when an odd figure coming towards her caught her attention. It was that of a middle-aged woman lugging a heavy battered suitcase in her left hand, her right one being encased in plaster. She wore a safari suit, rather the worse for wear, a man's felt hat pulled down over her wispy grey hair, and her deeply seamed face was burned to the colour of mahogany.

Seeing Selina, she called, 'Hi!' and set down her case with an air of relief. Then she demanded where the damned hotel had got to.

Astonished by such a forcible description, Selina told her it was only a few yards further along.

'Thank the good Lord for that!' the lady ejaculated, and proceeded to explain. 'My driver's taken my truck in for overhaul, and as I was told there was a hotel just round the corner, I didn't bother to get a taxi, nor a porter, I don't trust them, they're all thieves, but I've walked around at least six corners, looking for the place. Can't trust Indians either, they always misjudge distances. Well, if that really is a hotel...' She bent to pick up her case.

'Let me,' Selina offered.

'It's heavy, and you look only a wisp of a thing.'

'I'm stronger than I look,' Selina insisted for what seemed to her to be the hundredth time, and hefted the case. It was quite a considerable weight and she had much ado not to stagger, but at least she had both arms free, and she tried to look as though she was carrying a featherweight.

'My name's Doctor Whiteman,' the woman proceeded to introduce herself as they moved towards the hotel entrance. 'Professor of ethnology, and I'm just back from the Southern Altiplano. Godforsaken country it is too, not a proper road in the whole region, but it's the habitat of some dying tribes that I want to study before they're extinct. Pre-Inca, you know, very interesting.'

'I'm sure they are,' Selina said perfunctorily as she stumbled up the steps into the hotel vestibule, 'but surely you don't go alone?'

'I've got an Indian driver for my truck.' The strange person laughed throatily. 'Nothing's likely to happen to me, I'm too old to be raped.'

Selina rather liked her breezy style. The eventuality she mentioned was the least of her hazards, in a land where floods, storms, starvation and accidents were commonplace.

The receptionist took the stranger's odd appearance as a matter of course, and the formalities completed called a porter to carry up her case. Doctor Whiteman linked her uninjured arm through Selina's.

'Come up with me,' she requested. 'It's nice to meet someone British here, and I haven't spoken English for the past two months.' For the doctor, it transpired, was of that nationality.

'Originally,' she supplemented. 'I'm naturalized Peruvian now.'

She certainly made up for lost time, for she was voluble. Selina learned most of her history during the first hour of their acquaintanceship. Having seen her room and approved of it, she insisted that the girl must accompany her to the lounge for a drink. Her tipple was whisky.

'Weak watered stuff they give you here,' she complained, 'but it's better than *chica*. Ever drunk that, Selina?' She was calling her by her first name. 'It's a native brew and potent, but I don't recommend it for novices.'

Doctor Whiteman confided that she was a widow; both she and her husband were well known in their circle, which included anthropologists, ethnologists, archaeologists and various other ologists. South America was their hunting ground, but her poor Bill had perished from food poisoning and she had had to soldier on alone, needing further data to complete a book they had been compiling together.

'It's to be his monument,' she declared with a slight moisture in her small, dark eyes, but whether it was caused by the memory of Bill or her plentiful potatoes, Selina was not sure. 'I regard it as a sacred trust.'

Selina winced; she herself had constituted a very different sort of trust to someone else. It occurred to her that Doctor Whiteman might have heard of Alastair Grainger, and tentatively she put her question.

'Oh, yes, I know Alec,' her new acquaintance declared. 'We used to live next to the Graingers years and years ago, but wherever did you run across him?'

Selina said he was an old friend of her father's.

'Since he's an archaeologist, I thought you might have met him,' she said vaguely.

'Bit' of an amateur,' Doctor Whiteman said disdainfully. 'His books are more travelogues than authorities. Sell better I don't doubt, but his real work is prospecting and surveying.'

'Oh, is it?' Selina had no intention of admitting that she had recently spent some time in his company. But she wanted information and thought this garrulous lady might provide it, and if she betrayed her own association with him, she might become reticent.

'I liked Alec,' Doctor Whiteman told her, 'and so did Bill. Pity he made such a hash of his marriage, but even the most sensible of men make fools of themselves over a pretty face.'

'Oh, is he married?' Selina's casual tone was beautifully done. 'I've heard Daddy talk about him, but he never mentioned a wife.'

'You father mayn't have known she existed, most people don't. We did because we lived in the same street. Of all the unsuitable matches! A little bit of fluff, my dear, as we used to say, all big eyes, fair hair and a nitwit.' She stared at Selina. 'Rather like you. Oh, no offence meant,' as Selina involuntarily recoiled. 'I don't suppose you're like her in character - I hope not!' She guffawed. 'It's only that you have the same fragile looks. Could you get me another drink?'

Selina went to the bar, glad to escape her companion's observant eyes. So she was the same type as Alastair's unsuitable wife, and that was what had initially prejudiced him against her. She returned with the doctor's glass, and after making some derogatory remarks about Bolivian hotel service, her companion returned to the subject of Alastair, who seemed to have made a great impression upon her.

'Naturally, since you haven't met him, you couldn't understand how surprised and dismayed we were when he brought Pamela out to Peru. He became acquainted with her when on leave in England, and married her on the spot. The blind impetuosity of youth! Well, he paid for his rashness, for

she hated South America from the start, and then he had to leave her for three months - he was offered a commission by the Government to make some excavations in the mountains at an altitude which would have killed her, which would have been a good thing, because she was a useless creature, and not to be trusted on her own. Of course with him away the inevitable happened with a girl of her flirtatious tendencies. Shall we go in to dinner?'

Selina, absorbed in the doctor's revelations, started at this abrupt change of subject. She realized that dinner was being served, and her companion was probably hungry. Reluctantly she stood up, feeling defrauded, and wondered if it would be possible to reintroduce the subject over the meal, then felt ashamed of herself. She was deliberately prying into Alastair's past life, trying to extract the facts which he wished to conceal, not only from herself but from his friends, and had led the unsuspecting doctor on in the belief that he was unknown to her.

'The inevitable' and Doctor Whiteman's description of Pamela suggested that she had had an affair with another man, but that being so, why had not Alastair taken the chance to free himself? No honourable scruples need keep a man tied to a faithless woman. But perhaps at the time of Pamela's indiscretion he had not wanted to be rid of her, had forgiven her and repented later of his leniency.

She looked hopefully at the doctor across the table, for if she continued with her saga, she could not be blamed for listening, but Doctor Whiteman had no more to say about Alastair, and Selina was too scrupulous to prompt her. Instead she discoursed about Indians.

As far as Selina was concerned, an Indian was an Indian and that was that, but apparently there were many different varieties. The Quechuans of Peru were the descendants of the old Incas. The Aymara, or Collas, of the Altiplano had never been wholly subjugated by their neighbours and many bitter battles had been waged around Lake Titicaca in pre-Spanish days. Further south in the desert there were remnants of much older peoples, and they were the lure that drew the ethnologist into the wilderness.

'And most of them don't welcome strangers,' the doctor said with her throaty chuckle. 'A sullen, antagonistic lot. I sometimes think I'll meet my end by a knife in the dark.'

Selina listened politely while she cut up her new friend's food for her. The doctor possessed an intrepidity which she could not emulate. Her hopes of a worth while job did not include the menace of Indian knives, and she must be excused from drawing the line somewhere.

Her injury, Doctor Whiteman told her had been the result of falling down a deserted mine shaft. There were the remains of silver workings all over the southern desert, which had been abandoned, though there was probably still silver there. Selina reflected that she would soon have gathered enough material to write a book herself.

'It's a damned nuisance,' the doctor said in her forthright way, referring to her broken arm. 'I'm going home to Cuzco now, where I live, and I've pages of notes to write up.' She looked at Selina speculatively. 'I suppose you wouldn't care to come along?'

That reminded her that she had been so full of herself -that she had not inquired what Selina was doing at La Paz.

Selina explained that she had been evacuated from Titicamba because of the political unrest and was waiting for a flight back to Europe.

'But I don't particularly want to go,' she confessed. 'So if you're serious, I could come along with you. Perhaps I could act as a sort of secretary?'

The doctor seemed to be repenting of her impulsive offer, for she began to look dubious.

'Can you type?' she asked.

'Very amateurishly, I'm afraid, but I'd improve with practice.'

'You look a bit delicate.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' Selina exclaimed with exasperation. 'I've survived a revolution in Titicamba and the journey up here, which wasn't exactly a picnic, and I've got used to the rarefied air. I shan't fall down on you, if that's what you're afraid of, and I'd love to see Cuzco, Doctor Whiteman.'

'Fair enough,' the doctor capitulated, 'and please call me Emma. That's my name.' Her eyes were wistful. 'Do you know that since Bill went there isn't a soul in the world to use my first name? I've almost forgotten what it sounds like.'

'All right, Emma.' Selina held out her hand. 'When do we start?'

In Cuzco she would be in the same country as Alastair and within measurable distance of the Urubamba Valley. The thought was comforting, though she knew she would be wise? to go right away. She had been offered a job, the first she had ever contemplated, and she felt the initial step had been taken in the transformation of Selina the sybarite into one of the world's workers.

They went by rail. Doctor Whiteman's truck was still undergoing repair and she decided that she would leave it in the care of her driver and collect it on her next journey south.

The train ascended a winding track out of the bowl which contained La Paz on to a green, level plain. The country was almost featureless, stretching to the far distance where the gleaming peaks marched along the horizon. This was the Altiplano, across which Selina had been brought from the pass when she had been in no state to notice her surroundings.

They crossed Lake Titicaca by boat, the highest navigable lake in the world and the place where the Inca race is fabled to have originated on an island amidst its wide expanse. There was no wind, and the still waters seemed to radiate their own light under the great inverted bowl of the sky.

At Puno there were customs and immigration to be faced. A gaunt unshaven man pasted labels on to their cases, and their passports were taken away, read from cover to cover and returned with a stamp.

A second train carried them over miles and miles of monotonous green plain above which the shades of night were gathering. The stars in that clear, thin air always looked bigger and brighter than in northern climes. The train rumbled up over a range that separated them from Cuzco, the watershed in which the Urubamba rises to travel four thousand miles to reach the Atlantic, though the descent on the western side was only two hundred miles to the Pacific. At its birth this much travelled stream is called the Vicanota. A last quarter moon lighted the top of the pass, three miles above sea level where boiling water bubbled up from fissures in the ground and clouds of steam drifted across the track - the same moon, some fortnight younger, Selina recalled with a nostalgic pang, had shone on her departure from Santa Loreta. A steep descent on the further side brought them back on to a plain.

Much of the plan of Cuzco is similar to that of the original Inca city, for many of the houses are built on the old foundations. Beneath a colonial church are the walls of the Temple of the Sun, and many of the alleys and streets retain the Inca walls. The Indians built for solidity and though earthquakes have shattered the rest of the city, their walls stand unmoved. There is nothing graceful about Inca architecture - they never discovered the arch; a doorway was two solid blocks with a third one placed horizontally across them, but at wall building they were unsurpassed. Solid blocks of unmortared stone were so perfectly fitted that the joins were almost imperceptible. On one of the hills which circle the city the great fortress of Sacshuaman contains a triple ring of walls, the outer one enclosing the top of the hill. Steps and passages were shoddy and have not worn well, roofs have fallen in, but the uncompromising walls still stand much as when they were built.-

Cuzco was once almost inaccessible, but it is now connected by air with Lima. Tourists flock up during the dry winter season to gape at the Inca walls and go on to Machu Pichu and other ruins.

Doctor Whiteman lived in a balconied colonial house, upon an Inca foundation near the main plaza, which was overlooked by the Roman Catholic cathedral and decorated with grass and flower gardens. Selina was charmed by the old Spanish house and her own balconied bedroom. The doctor seemed to be comfortably off, and there was no lack of amenities. Their wants were filled by impassive Indian servants and the furnishings of

the rooms were handsome, even luxurious if a little heavy and old-fashioned.

The doctor put aside her safari suit and appeared during the day in trousers and handsome sweaters, but in the evenings she became really magnificent. For dinner she wore gowns in silk and velvet with Indian and Spanish shawls, covering her grey locks with a lace mantilla.

Dazzled by one particularly gorgeous shawl in scarlet, blue and orange on black, Selina asked her:

'Are you partly Spanish?'

'Not a drop of Latin blood, but Bill always liked bright colours. I know I've got a dial like a wizened monkey, but if my clothes are sufficiently decorative my friends don't get as far as my face.'

Her friends were mostly elderly people with kindred interests, who treated her with flattering deference as she sat at the head of her table in her gaudy clothes, with Selina beside her to help her with her food. Selina had bought herself a white simple dress and looked like a pale moth beside a brilliant parakeet. The conversation was often far above her head, and though they discussed well-known people, no one ever mentioned Alastair Grainger.

There was a library, where in the mornings Selina wrestled with an antique typewriter transcribing Emma's notes. Since the doctor's calligraphy was anything but clear, she had a good deal of initial difficulty, until she learned to decipher it.

One evening, after dinner when they had no guests, she was searching through the shelves for something to read when she came upon one of Alastair's books. She turned the pages eagerly, and found a portrait of the author among the many photographs. It was that of a much younger and more boyish-looking man than the one she had known. She studied it avidly, noticing that the mouth, which she remembered more often than not was set in a grim line, looked sensitive and vulnerable. Alastair before the mysterious woman had disillusioned him. Emma came in and saw the book in her hands.

'Ah, Alec's first book,' she remarked. 'Let me see, you said you'd met him, didn't you?'

'No, I said he was an old friend of my father's.'

'Yes, of course. He's altered since that was taken.' She sighed. 'He'd changed a lot when last I saw him, which is some time ago. Lost all his joy in life. That's Pamela's work. A shame a fine man should let himself be bedevilled by a woman.'

'What did she do?' Selina asked, unable to resist the question, and striving to sound casual.

'Didn't I tell you? Ran out on him with another guy while he was away. A slimy devil he was too, but nearer her own age, and a womanizer. Ramon Suarez, he was called, but he paid for his sins, if she didn't.'

Selina sat down in a leather armchair, wishing the doctor would stick to the point.

'She fell in love with him?'

'If you can call it love - I don't. She wanted continual flattery and admiration. Got it too, she was a lovely-looking creature, but flighty as they make 'em.'

'But what happened?'

'They got as far as Quito, and met an earthquake. Ramon was killed, that much I do know. Alastair couldn't hush up the elopement. He was sent for, of course, and brought Pamela back to his house in the Calle de Santa Maria, where we lived next door. Whether she suffered some injury in the earthquake, I don't know, but she never during the time we were there left the house again. He comes and goes as he pleases, of course, but she never goes anywhere. She was always under the surveillance of a grim-looking attendant, so perhaps she was ill, perhaps he pretended she was. Maybe he forgave her, but it's possible he never did and this incarceration is his revenge.'

'Oh, no!' Selina was appalled. 'He couldn't be so cruel. To practically imprison the poor woman for life because of one lapse! I never thought Alec was vindictive.'

'Love betrayed can twist a man's nature,' Emma observed, glancing at Selina oddly, for the girl had let slip that she had known Alastair.

Unaware of her lapse, Selina sat in the big chair twisting her hands together. She did not really know Alastair, and she was remembering the bleak look in his face whenever he spoke of home and family. Vengeance could not compensate for infidelity, but it could give satisfaction. Had Alastair been a Spaniard she would have understood, for when their pride was affronted the Spanish could be ruthless, but he was not. He was Anglo-Saxon and capable of kindness. The civilized thing to do would have been to divorce Pamela and allowed her to seek a more congenial way of life, but he had chosen to keep her shut up in Lima while he enjoyed his own freedom, accepting tribute from girls like Lola and herself, though he knew perfectly well he was not free to reciprocate. Not surprising he had been so cagey about his marriage. Selina's vivid imagination pictured a pale, pretty girl eating her heart out in the old Spanish house, and she remembered that Alastair had said it was a gracious house that had been desecrated. Desecrated by her lack of faith and trust and so he had made it into her prison. But could he really be so inhuman? Granted his pride had been wounded, his love scorned ... If he had loved her, but he could not have done that. A young man's infatuation, he had said, but not love. Love suffered all things and love forgave.

'That all happened ten years ago,' Emma told her. 'They may have become reconciled, or maybe she's become resigned.'

The former did not seem to be likely, with Alastair roaming the country and suppressing all mention of his marriage. As for resignation, Pamela must be getting on; she might have found consolation, perhaps in religion, and if so, that would make her inimical to a belated divorce.

Selina closed the book and went to put it back in the shelf, striving to regain her composure. She had been deeply shocked by the doctor's disclosures.

When she turned, she found Emma had produced an old album and was turning over its leaves.

'That's Pamela Hudson.' She indicated a faded photograph. 'Bill took it when Alec first brought her to Peru.'

Selina looked at the delicate features and pretty, almost childish face, set above slim, fragile neck and shoulders. Pamela might have been her younger sister. Men are often attracted by similar types and perhaps Alastair had identified her with his erring wife. A tremor ran through her, for she was identifying herself with Pamela. How awful it must be when he returned from his expeditions to be greeted with forbidding coldness, and how forbidding Alastair could look, she knew very well. Did he completely ignore her, shutting himself away to write his books? Surely Pamela must hate him as much as he hated her, for only a cruel and vengeful hate could sustain such a situation.

Doctor Whiteman was watching her with faint amusement.

'Are you quite sure you've never met Alastair Grainger?' she asked.

Selina met the shrewd dark eyes, dropped her own and blushed vividly.

'You gave yourself away just now,' the older woman went on. 'You're very naughty, Selina, you led me on to talk about him, for I'm quite sure he never mentioned Pamela to you.'

'He did ... once,' said Selina, and because she was very unhappy, very heart-sore and needing sympathy, she poured out all her story.

Emma listened in silence until she had finished, then she told her:

'He was quite right, you know, he is much too old and embittered for you, but I know young girls often have a yen for an older man. Besides, you're too much like Pamela, you would always remind him of her.'

'I shall never love anyone else,' Selina declared passionately. 'It's too cruel that he should condemn me because by a freak of nature I look like somebody else.'

'I'm sure he doesn't condemn you. Alec is just if hard, but as he told you, he isn't free. You're still very young, Selina, and I doubt you're wise to stay out here. You'd forget more quickly in Europe.'

'I've got to stay.' Selina was stubborn. 'I've got to prove to myself at least that I can stand life in South America and I can become a useful person.'

'I don't see that's going to get you anywhere,' the doctor observed practically, 'and you're not likely to meet Alec again.'

Selina's golden head dropped. 'I didn't think you'd be able to understand.'

Emma looked commiseratingly at the bright bent head, but said nothing; there was no comfort she could offer. In time Selina would realize the folly of her obsession and go home. She did not know that the girl had no home to which to go.

Selina received letters from her parents. She had written to Tom and his was in answer to hers. He was relieved that she had reached La Paz safely, and he also was leaving Titicamba. Rodriguez was despotic and unpredictable and he was being transferred to Chile, but it would be inadvisable for her to join him there. He was glad she had found such a good friend in Doctor Whiteman, whose name was known to him, and he would continue to pay her an allowance by drafts which she could cash in Lima or Cuzco, but he hoped she would eventually return to her mother; a girl's place was with her mother.

Which is all you know, Selina thought a little bitterly, and opened her mother's epistle which had been forwarded from Paracos. Crystal was full of her own affairs. She had landed a good part in a television series, and she hoped her daughter was finally settled in South America, a plain hint that she did not want her back again. Selina folded her correspondence and smiled wryly. Neither parent wished to welcome the prodigal daughter.

That night she examined her face closely in the mirror belonging to the handsome Spanish dressing table in her room. It seemed to her that she looked older and more serious and the likeness to Pamela Grainger was less apparent. The lines of her face had lost a little of their youthful contours and her mouth was set in a firmer line.

'By the time I'm forty, I may look like a mature woman instead' of a dolly-bird,' she addressed her reflection. Forty! Eighteen years hence; by then she would surely be able to look back on her younger self with patronizing pity.

The stormy, rainy season passed, and with the onset of clear sunny days and blue skies, Emma became restless. Her arm had healed satisfactorily and she wanted to be back in the Bolivian desert. Selina's tentative suggestion that she might accompany her was sternly vetoed.

'My dear, you may have survived crossing the Andes,' she told her, 'but you can't conceive what the Southern Altiplano is like. Most of it is unoccupied desert and some of the tribes are hostile. I don't doubt your courage, but I couldn't risk it. It doesn't matter what happens to me, the sooner I join my Bill, the better I'll be pleased, but you're too young and pretty to leave your bones in a Bolivian salt lagoon.'

Selina could not shake her decision, and while she was wondering what to do, for Emma had not suggested that she could stay on at her house in Cuzco, she met Jo Gar- side.

Jo belonged to an international organization, the object of which was to teach the Indians to help themselves to a better way of life. With a band of dedicated young people she had come to Peru and was working in an isolated village some miles from Cuzco where she was attempting to instil some modicum of education into the illiterate Indian young.

Doctor Whiteman had invited several members of the organization to dinner one night, while Jo was on leave in Cuzco and Selina was instantly attracted

by the dark, rather intense young woman, who was ready to give up her life to the service of the poor and deprived.

When she confided to Jo that she was at a loose end and wanted something worthwhile to do, the other girl suggested that she should join her, as she could do with an assistant at her school. There would be certain formalities to be gone through, but she did not think they would raise any insurmountable difficulty.

'Of course you must realize that it's pretty grim out at Quimpala,' she told her. 'And we only have the barest necessities. Do you think you can stick it?'

'Stick it? It's just what I want,' Selina cried eagerly.

'H'm, you haven't tried it yet.' Jo looked doubtfully at Selina's white silk dress, and the skilful make-up on her face. She stretched out her roughened hands in which the dirt was ingrained from all her scrubbing and the nails were broken.

'That's what it does to you,' she said succinctly.

Selina felt ashamed of her own well manicured fingers and tried to hide them in the folds of her dress.

'I shan't be content until my hands look like yours do,' she declared.

Jo laughed. 'You're an odd girl, Selina.'

'No odder than you. Why do you do it, Jo?'

Jo's dark eyes became thoughtful. 'Well, you see, kid, I guess young folk today have been getting themselves a bit of a tarnished image, what with their permissiveness and their militancy. Maybe I want to show that we've still got ideals of selflessness and service.'

'That's what I've been thinking. I've led a frivolous life up to now, and I want to do something worthwhile.'

'Okay, kid, you're on,' Jo told her.

When consulted Emma poured cold water upon the idea. Selina, she insisted, did not know how appallingly primitive life in an Indian village would be, but Selina refused to be intimidated. If Jo could endure it, so could she. Sire would not admit even to herself that she was still being motivated by a desire to impress Alastair and win his praise. Although she deplored his treatment of his wife, for which she was sure there must be some further explanation of which Doctor Whiteman was unaware, she could not wholly stifle her hankering for him.

She cherished a little secret hope that one day fate would bring him back into her life, and he would accept once and for all that she was not, and never had been, the butterfly creature he persisted in believing her to be.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SELINA stood at the entrance to the school house on a cold misty morning doling out breakfast to the scholars as they filed in. The breakfast was Jo's idea, a free meal for a day's schooling, for her pupils were under no obligation to come to class. She had increased her attendance by eighty per cent by means of this bribery. She worked on the principle that the end justified the means and if she could still instil even the minimum of education into the young of Quimpala, she felt it would be worthwhile.

Selina looked compassionately at the avid dark eyes, the brown clutching fingers seizing the mugs of hot sweet milk and bread rolls. Used to semi-starvation, the children could hardly believe in their good luck. Wrapped in ragged ponchos or shabby anoraks, these descendants of a once proud race were an unprepossessing lot. Oppression and exploitation starting with the *conquistadores* had shrivelled their spirit and they took refuge in sullen apathy.

Jo waited inside to direct her charges to their benches and collect the mugs. Her dark face was full of tender solicitude, and Selina had marvelled at her dedication. She herself had often been revolted by the dirt and disease among their proteges and had scolded herself vigorously for her fastidiousness. Children were children the world over and these were the victims of poverty and dearth. Deliberately she made herself wipe their snotty noses and deal with their minor ailments, dressing unpleasant sores, cuts and bruises. It was not easy to love and succour repellent objects as many of her patients were, but their need of her compassion and tenderness was all the greater because they were so unlovely, and in time she ceased to notice unpleasant details and saw only the dark eyes which had all the pathetic patient endurance of dumb animals.

She had also had to make herself accept her primitive lodgings and the general discomfort. If anyone had told her a year ago that she could live without a daily shower, an elaborate array of cosmetics, her manicurist and her hairdresser, she would have been incredulous, but she had learned that such indulgences were unnecessary trimmings to the essentials of living. She slept on a narrow camp bed, washed in cold water, ate the plainest of fare and existed permanently in jeans, sweaters and thick boots. She was

proud of her powers of endurance, her renunciation of creature comforts, and her deprivation was completely voluntary, for her allowance from her father came regularly every month, but she used it to augment Jo's slender resources, refusing to spend a penny upon luxuries for herself. She was upheld by the determination to prove she was as tough as Jo, and as ready to dedicate herself to the service of others.

If ever she met Alastair again, he would have to admit that she was far from being a chromium-plated doll, and meet him again she might, for beyond the squat church at the end of the long winding street, the ground fell away to a river valley, which opened into the Urubamba Gorge, with its dark towering cliffs, the tops of which were visible over the lip of the plain on which the village stood. Often her eyes turned towards them, while she wondered if he were still working in their vicinity.

She had grown thinner since she had come to Quimpala, though her muscles had hardened. She was tanned by exposure to all weathers, and her hair had darkened to the colour of ripe red wheat. Her bulky clothes - only at midday was it ever hot at Quimpala-could not wholly disguise her natural grace, and her eyes shone with a serenity which had been absent during her days of affluence.

Selina and Jo were the only white people in the village, for the priest was of mixed blood. Jo, with her black hair and brown skin, was accepted without curiosity, but Selina's golden hair pierced even the Indian's normal apathy. They called her the Daughter of the Sun, much to the padre's annoyance, who, like Father Xavier, suspected pagan backslidings, but he had less tolerance than his colleague. Selina had attended service at his church, and though he preached in Quechuan, of which language she knew only a smattering, she gathered his religion was of the hell fire variety, which possibly was more easily understood by his congregation than the tenets of loving mercy, for they had met little clemency in the course of their history.

Actually the modern Indian has no connection with his past. The huge ruins wake no response in him, the fertile terraces the Incas made on the hillsides are shunned by him as unlucky. The Empire has gone, the gold has gone, the gods have gone, all that remains alive is the Quecha language, which his ancestors spoke.

Quimpala was an obscure village, some fifty miles from Cuzco, and a thousand feet higher. It was approached by a lane that was only the rutted trail left by the trucks which visited it monthly with supplies and in the wet season it was often cut off entirely. It constituted a double line of houses strung along the village street, constructed of adobe and thatch in many cases windowless. On the bare bleak plain the only beauty was a distant lake, where upon clear days the far-away peaks were mirrored.

The villagers were poor but tough and independent.

The men wore shabby jackets and trousers, but the women were clothed in wide skirts which they wore even when working in the fields, their heads protected by large round straw hats.

Selina had already spent several months in this primitive place. She and Jo occupied a mud-walled house next to the school, which only contained two rooms, one for sleeping, the other for eating. The furniture was rudimentary, while for warmth and cooking they used a kerosene stove. Jo's stint was for two years, and Selina, officially her assistant, was determined to serve for the same term. This took all her resolution, for sometimes her longing for a shampoo and set, becoming clothes and above all a hot bath was almost more than she could bear.

Jo, with an impish grin, told her:

'It's the first six months that are the worst. After that you don't miss the fleshpots.'

Selina had looked at her work-stained hands and broken nails, and said: 'Roll on the first six months!'

The breakfast distribution completed, Selina set to work upon washing up the mugs. She only took a class in a dire emergency, for she was not qualified to teach and her employment consisted mainly of domestic chores and acting as general dogsbody for Jo.

The sound of a vehicle labouring up the village street caused her to pause in her task, wondering what was coming, for no supply truck was due. Looking

out she beheld a battered landrover approaching. Landrovers were in common use, the terrain being too rough for cars, but Selina knew this one, and her heart seemed to stop and go on again at an increasing rate. The improbable meeting was about to take place. Alastair had come.

The landrover halted by the paling surrounding the school yard and its occupant climbed out, but he had barely set foot to the ground before Jo and her pupils surrounded him, for the arrival of a stranger was an unusual event. Over the youngsters' heads Selina could see his advance. He had a dirty bandage round his head, a luxuriant growth of reddish beard, and he moved with a limp.

Selina was incapable of going out to greet him. Tumultuous emotions were surging through her, recollections of their parting and its pain, and joy to see him again, followed by misgivings. At La Paz she had been well groomed, and elegantly dressed, Tom Stevens' dainty daughter, and she had no illusions about her present appearance. How was Alastair going to react? Perhaps instead of earning his praise, he would consider that she had again been a fool.

Jo pushed the children aside to reach the stranger, and as she approached him, Alastair swayed and nearly fell.

'No mi siento bien,' he muttered.

'Hold up, mate,' Jo bade him, inserting her muscular shoulder under his armpit. 'Guess you've been in trouble. Come with me, I'll soon fix you.' She called over her shoulder to Selina. 'Take the kids inside, Sel, and make them get on with their writing.'

Selina heard Alastair murmur: 'English?'

And Jo's brisk correction, 'No, American.' Then they disappeared into the house, Jo still supporting him.

She felt an unreasonable throb of jealousy, but she knew that her colleague was a great deal more conversant with first aid than she was, and Alastair was in good hands". She called to the children to return to class, and since

they were much more in awe of her than of Jo, they obeyed with alacrity. She was the Daughter of the Sun, and something direful might occur if they disobeyed her. "

After some time Jo came to join her.

'He's asleep,' she told Selina in answer to her query. 'He's exhausted, but his injuries are only minor. He said he was trying to get down to Lima when he ran into a landslide. The road will be blocked for days.'

Information which excited Selina, since it meant Alastair might have to stay at the village for some time.

'I don't know what made him come up here instead of going back to Cuzco,' Jo went on. 'Possibly he wasn't coming from Cuzco, but I don't know what he'd expect to find in Quimpala.'

'Certainly not me,' Selina said with a laugh. 'I ... I know who he is. He's Alastair Grainger, a friend of Doctor Whiteman's and quite a well-known character in Peru.'

'Another of her ologists?' Jo grinned. 'Personally I'm more interested in the living than ruins and moribund tribes. All the Inca monuments in Peru can't produce a loaf of bread.'

'Ah, but man cannot live by bread alone,' Selina quoted. 'The mind needs food as well.'

'Quite.' Jo looked at her pupils, most of whom, during this conversation, had taken the opportunity to fall asleep. 'I must get on with striving to push such nourishment into their thick skulls. Perhaps you'd go and clear up after me? The invalid is in your bed as you put clean sheets on it this morning. I hauled mine into the living room. He'd only got a sleeping bag with him and I couldn't put an injured man on the floor. Oh, and put the crock on the stove again, I used all the hot water.'

Selina left her, smiling to herself. Her sheets were her one concession to comfort. She could not bear rough blankets round her face, and a village

woman washed them for her. Jo, the Spartan, scorned them. She was glad that Alastair should have the benefit of them. How she and Jo were going to manage with one camp bed between them, she did not know. Possibly she could have Alastair's sleeping bag.

She tidied up Jo's debris, folded up the bed and put on some more water to heat. There was no sound from the other room. Selina hesitated, then noiselessly lifted the latch and looked inside. The small bed was inadequate for Alastair's long length, but he was sleeping peacefully. The red fuzz of his sprouting beard made him look a little barbaric. Selina had once asked him why he bothered to shave in the wilderness, where lack of facilities made it difficult and he had told her:

'Since facial hair is almost unknown among the Indians, I don't want to be mistaken for a hairy ape when I go among them.'

His clothes, except for the vest and pants which he must be wearing, were neatly folded on a chair. Again Selina felt a prick of jealousy that Jo and not herself had rendered him such service, and gave herself a mental scolding. Their relations being what they were, both she and Alastair would have been embarrassed by such intimacy, whereas since Jo was a stranger, he would have accepted her ministrations as a matter of course.

After watching him for a few moments with yearning eyes, Selina closed the door and went back to join Jo.

School over, and the children dispatched to their homes, Selina was aware that her heart was beating fast as she approached the house, though in all probability Alastair was still asleep. Jo entered first and uttered an exclamation of surprise. Alastair was awake, washed and shaven, and was filling the crock to reheat on the stove. The removal of his beard made him once more familiar, and Jo had replaced the bandage with a strip of plaster, but he still limped. 'I'd better be on my way,' he told Jo, 'that is if the landrover is all right. It got a few bumps from flying stones. You seem a little cramped in here and I don't want to inconvenience you.'

Noticing how pale he was under his tan, Jo demurred, assuring him they could manage if he liked to stay for a few days, and she did not think he was fit to travel.

Selina hovered outside the door, waiting for a suitable moment to present herself; sooner or later Alastair must identify her and she was uncertain of his reaction to her work. She hoped for his approval, it was what she had wanted to gain, but if he raised objections they might be difficult to counter.

Apparently he was weaker than he would allow, for he accepted Jo's offer with a little deprecatory laugh.

'It's not like me to have to give in, but I daresay you're right, and in any case the road won't be cleared for a day or two.'

He went out to look at his vehicle, not noticing Selina who drew hastily aside. She went in to help Jo prepare their simple meal. This was usually composed of eggs and vegetables, but Jo insisted upon opening a can of meat from their stores, since, she said, it was an occasion. She lit several candles to light the feast and put coffee on to heat. When all was ready, she called Alastair to come and join them.

'Dinner is served, Mr. Grainger. Will you bring the chair from your bedroom? We've only one and a half in here.'

The half being a high stool fetched from the school house.

Alastair came in and obediently went to procure the required piece of furniture.

'This is wonderful!' he exclaimed, sniffing Jo's coffee. 'A real feast after the rations I've been on during the last few days.'

'Meet my colleague,' Jo told him, pushing Selina forward. 'Sel Stevens, she tells me she knows you.'

Alastair sat down abruptly on the chair he had brought in and stared at Selina as if she were an apparition.

'Good God!' he ejaculated. 'I thought you were in Europe. What on earth are you doing here?'

'Working,' Selina told him briefly. 'I hope you're feeling better, Alec.'

His eyes slowly travelled round the primitive room with its minimum of bare furnishings, and came back to her with puzzlement in his gaze.

'But, little one ... why?'

At the familiar diminutive her heart gave a lurch, but she managed to answer coolly:

'Social conscience.' Which was not wholly true.

'Come on, let's eat before my culinary efforts cool,' Jo broke in, while her dark eyes darted from one to the other, suspecting that there was a great deal more between these two than Selina had revealed. She had always wondered what had driven a girl like Selina to take up such arduous labours and had more than once thought that an unhappy love affair was the explanation, but neither of them gave her any information. Instead Selina started to chatter lightly about the school and their organization, appealing to Jo for corroboration, while Alastair listened and watched them both with a slightly puzzled air. Finally when the subject was exhausted, he said: '

'But I thought you were all set to go to Europe, Selina. How on earth did you get mixed up with this .. er ... outfit?'

She told him of her encounter with Doctor Whiteman and he looked disconcerted, ejaculating: 'That chatterbox!' From that she passed on to her meeting with Jo and her determination to join her.

'You were crazy,' he told her.

'I've never been more sane,' she retorted.

He frowned. 'I must get you out of it.'

'You needn't, Alec. I'm happy here. I'm being useful at last.'

His eyes fell upon her hands, roughened with toil, and he winced.

'Your pretty hands!'

Selina looked at her fingers, then very deliberately she looked Alastair straight in the face.

'They're the hands of a worker and I'm proud of them. I'm not a playgirl any longer, Alec, I no longer need a chromium-plated setting.'

'Did you have to go to such lengths to prove that?'

'Yes,' she said simply.

'Sel's been a tremendous help to me,' Jo intervened, sensing tension. 'I don't know how I managed before she came.'

Alastair's mouth twisted wryly. Selina thought he must be thinking that she must have changed enormously to be of any use to Jo, and a little wave of elation ran through her. Out of all the villages among the Cordillera, fate, coincidence, what have you, had brought him to the one where she was living and had enabled him to see her in action. It was the culmination of all her efforts. Then it was that she fully realized what had been motivating her when she undertook this exacting task. She had wished to dispel entirely Alastair's previous conception of her, to show him of what she was capable, and had almost prayed that fate would bring him back into her life. Now he was here, seeing her toil-worn and without any of her former trimmings, and Jo had commended her. It was the peak of her ambition, but when he had gone, she would have nothing left to sustain her, except the social conscience that was not nearly as strong as her feeling for him.

Jo steered the conversation towards Alastair's own activities. Where had he been and what had he been doing? He told them he had finished the prospecting job in the Urubamba Valley with results that might or might not please the government. There were plenty of valuable mineral deposits, but extraction would be very costly. When he became involved with the

landslide he had been on his way back from a local wedding at another village, which would provide an incident for his next book.

'You were going back to Lima to write it?' Selina asked with seeming innocence.

He met the challenge of her grey eyes with a grimace.

'Where else? It's where my typewriter lives.'

Also his wife.

'Don't you carry a portable?' Jo asked.

'Even if it didn't get stolen, it would be soon ruined in the landrover,' he explained. 'I only take notes en route, the actual writing is done when I'm in residence, and unlike Doctor Whiteman, I can't run to a secretary.'

Selina saw a question in his eyes and suspected he was wondering how much Emma had revealed to her, but she betrayed nothing.

The meal concluded and Jo's coffee praised, she insisted that Alastair must go back to bed, he needed rest. Selina would clear up and she herself must return to the schoolhouse where there was something she wanted to do. Alastair obediently returned into the other room, and Selina soon completed the washing up. She took her anorak off a hook by the door, intending to go out and fetch Alastair's sleeping bag which would be needed since he had her bed. She thought she would derive some pleasure from using what he had used, even though the mud floor would be hard.

There was a half moon, and the night was still and clear. The lake was a silver mirror reflecting the jagged peaks, and there was frost in the insubstantial air. Selina walked up to the landrover and looked at it nostalgically. However long she lived, she would never forget the days she had spent journeying in it. She swung herself lightly up on to the broad front seat and leaned over the back to rummage among the articles behind it.

The beam of a torch suddenly illuminated her figure, and whipping round, she saw Alastair standing below her.

'So it's only you,' he remarked. 'I thought I'd caught a thief. What did you want?'

She started to explain about the sleeping bag, but he did not seem to be listening.

'Come down,' he commanded. 'I want to talk to you.'

'If you're only going to object further to my job, I'll stay where I am.'

'Then I'll have to come up to you.'

He made an awkward movement and she remembered he had hurt his leg.

'No, don't. I'll come.'

She started to clamber down and found herself in his arms.

'This isn't necessary, I ... I could have managed,' she gasped, for his hold was close.

'Little one.' His mouth sought hers and she gave herself up to the sheer rapture of his nearness, his kiss. For a while they clung together oblivious of anything except the bliss of reunion. Then Selina tore herself away.

'No, Alec, no!'

'Why not? Little one, I've missed you so, and since we've been brought together again . . . with only one bed between us, don't you think it would be a shame not to make the most of the fortuitous circumstances?'

For a moment she wavered as her blood clamoured for this opportunity of fulfilment, until she realized that either he was joking or insulting her.

'You've changed your tune, haven't you, Alec?' she cried scornfully., 'Have you forgotten our great renunciation scene? Does your precious honour permit you to seduce me? Go back to your wife in Lima. According to Doctor Whiteman you keep her there for your pleasure.'

He leaned back against the landrover, folding his arms.;

'So Emma Whiteman's been talking,' he observed. 'She always did yap too much, but she only knows one side of the story. Pamela is no wife to me, Selina,'

'Whose fault's that?'

'Must you allot blame to one or the other of us? The initial fault was mine, that I admit. I should never have married her, never brought her to Peru. What followed was fate. But I'm still responsible for her, Selina, I can't abandon her.'

'Perhaps it would be better for her if you did. I'm told you shut her up alone.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' he said savagely. 'If she's alone, it's her own choice.'

Silence fell between them, while Selina gazed yearningly at the tall figure standing beside her. She wished he would be more explicit, but obviously the subject of Pamela was a painful one and he did not wish to enlarge upon it. If he did keep his unfortunate wife imprisoned, he certainly would not tell her so, but she found it difficult to credit that he could be so unkind.

Presently he sighed, and unfolded his arms.

'Selina, let me take you away,' he said urgently. 'I hate to see you in this ... this dump, and looking so ...' He paused, seeking the right word to describe her.

'Drab?' she suggested, and laughed. 'Rodriguez would be no menace to me now.'

'You always look beautiful to me,' he said simply. 'But this . . .' he indicated the mud huts the bare, bleak scene ... 'isn't the right setting for you. Besides, you'll kill yourself if you stay here. Let's go to Rio, that's an exciting place. I'll take good care of you, Selina, your welfare will be my first concern. I've plenty of money saved and I can think of no better way of spending it than upon giving you a good time.'

Selina drew a quick breath. A vision swam before her eyes of warm blue seas, tall white buildings and conical hills. Rio was one of the most beautiful harbours in the world. A place for a honeymoon, but this honeymoon would have no wedding to precede it.

The thought uppermost in her mind was the pleasure she would derive from a hot bath.

She gave herself a mental shake. Rio was a pipe dream without substance. Much as she loved Alastair, she could not surrender her integrity and she was surprised that he had asked her to do so.

'I couldn't be your kept woman,' she murmured sadly.

He made an impatient gesture. "What a horrible way to put it! I only want the privilege of taking care of you, my darling. Do you set such store upon conventional morality? The world has moved on during the last decade,

and no one considers the fulfilment of love a deadly sin.' He took a step towards her. 'In the garden at La Paz you told me that you loved me and begged me not to send you away, but I wouldn't listen, because I thought what you felt was only girlish infatuation and it wouldn't be fair to take you up on it.' He stared down into her face, pale pearl in the moonlight, 'It is much more than that, isn't it?'

'What's convinced you at last?' she asked curiously.

'The way you kissed me just now, and the fact that you're here instead of amusing yourself in Europe. I don't believe in the genuineness of that social conscience.'

Drawing away from him, for his close regard was disconcerting her, she said loftily: 'You're kidding yourself if you imagine I stayed because of you.'

She saw him smile, a flash of white teeth in the moon" light.-

'You're trying to kid me,' he returned. 'Of course you did.'

'It was only that I didn't want to leave South America.'

'Because I was here.'

She hung her head. Alastair was too astute, he read her like a book.

'Is your father still in Titicamba?' he demanded, and she started at the abrupt change of subject.

'No, he's been moved to Chile,' she told him. 'He ... he thinks it's inadvisable that I should join him.' The quiver in her voice betrayed how much that phrase had hurt her. She was very fond of her father.

'Does he know what you're doing?'

'He knows I'm in Peru. He ... he wouldn't be very interested in what I'm doing.'

Alastair said something below his breath which did not sound very complimentary to Tom Stevens. That he was arriving at a totally wrong conclusion about her circumstances never occurred to her.,

'So you've been abandoned,' he stated, 'But you've still got me, if you want me. Won't you come to Rio with me?'

"It wouldn't be right.'

'Because of Pam?'

She said brokenly: 'If only you were free!'

It was not only that he was technically bound, but she sensed something peculiar about his relationship with his wife. She could not forget Doctor Whiteman's comments. Why, if she were no wife to him, could he not let her go? She meant if only he could free himself from his obsession about her, whatever it was.

Alastair it seemed was thinking along totally different lines. Leaning against the landrover again, he said earnestly:

'Little one, marriage between you and me would be a terrible mistake. Do you realize that I'm twenty years older than you? God knows I'm not an advocate of permissiveness, and if I could match your shining youth, I'd find a way to make you mine and tie you up so securely that you'd never escape from me. But I'm over forty, darling, and I couldn't bear to fetter you to an ageing man.'

'That's all nonsense,' Selina retorted. 'You'll be vigorous when you're ninety. I love you, my love will last.'

He shook his head and said harshly:

'You'd wake up one morning and realize that your lover had become an elderly bore, that Peru is a goddam awful country and wonder how you could endure another hour of it, and me. Whereas if you're free you can fly back to Europe the moment you've had enough.'

'Oh, Alec, please don't talk like that,' she cried desperately. 'I want you for keeps.'

'So you think now, but inevitably youth turns to youth. You would fall in love with a younger man.'

Inevitably? Who had spoken of the inevitable? Doctor Whiteman when she was describing Pamela. But Pamela must be Alastair's contemporary, and there was no age complex there. But she had hated Peru, and had turned to another man. So Alastair was speaking out of his own bitter experience, identifying her with his flighty wife, believing she would in her turn betray

him. She was convinced that her own love would stand the tests of time and climate, but she could not convince him.

Alastair moved to take her in his arms again, but she evaded him.

'Mayn't we snatch a little happiness?' he asked pleadingly. You'll be taking nothing from Pam. I'm still responsible for her, that's all. I'll be responsible for you too, and I'll make sure you're provided for, whatever happens, You can trust me. I haven't had much happiness, little one, nor do I think you're very happy at the moment. Rio would be a nice change from this.' He glanced round the village.

Selina was strongly tempted. There was no one in the world to whom she was accountable, in fact her mother would call her a fool not to take what was offered to her. But Alastair's reluctance to accept a permanent tie was wounding. Once again it seemed to her that he was making a convenience of his marriage. He wanted to retain his own liberty, and a liaison would not satisfy her, for she wanted children, and Alastair's children, but he had thanked God that he had not got any; he certainly would not welcome any of hers.

She remembered that he had described marriage as a noose and he did not mean to be ensnared again. Yet if she rejected him, he would go and never return; the thought of losing him was desolation. But if she yielded, for how long would she be able to hold him before the call of the wild, or Pamela, claimed him again?

She said suddenly: 'Didn't you ever love your wife?'

'Not as I love you, and now she's become a burden.'

A burden from which he did not wish to be relieved, so that she doubted his profession of love for herself entirely.

'In time you might find me another one,' she suggested.

'Sweetheart, you could never be that.'

'You sound very confident, but I'm not.' She looked up into the starry heavens above them. In the thin air the stars shone like white lamps. Only an overwhelming mutual love could justify his proposal, and his was not that. Regretfully she made her decision,

'I'm sorry, Alec, I can't come with you.'

'Is a ring more important to you than love?' he asked bitterly*

'Yes, for I don't think we mean the same thing by love.'

He turned away from her, and she sensed that she had hurt him, but what she had said was true. He was only seeking a temporary gratification, respite from his domestic strife, while she would be putting her whole future into his hands. His offer to provide for her implied he was prepared to pension her off ... when he was tired of her. Had there been others who had been similarly discarded? She had met men before who made capital out of supposed unhappy marriages.

Alastair turned back to her and said quietly: 'Nevertheless I can't leave you here. You're thin as a rail and look as if a strong breeze would blow you away. Will you permit me to install you in a hotel until you can find a more suitable occupation? No strings attached, of course.'

'Thank you,' she said, touched by his solicitude, 'but I couldn't desert Jo. I must finish what I've begun. I'm not destitute, you know. My father pays me a handsome allowance, which I've barely touched.'

Incredulously, he asked: 'You mean you could live in comfort if you chose?'

'Yes, but Quimpala is my choice.'

'You little stiff-necked idiot!' he burst out. 'And here was I thinking you were here because it was the only opening you could obtain to enable you to stay on in Peru.'

'Hence your kind offer.' She laughed, though she was thinking that his real reason for wanting to take her away was because he believed that she was in

wretched circumstances, and the love theme was merely incidental. Naturally he would expect some payment for his generosity, and he had thought she would be unable to resist the glamour of Rio. Their association would only have lasted until he felt the call of the wild again. He knew that perfectly well, and his love talk was eyewash.

'Don't worry about me, Alec,' she went on. 'Go back to Lima and write your book.' She noticed then how white and wan he looked in the moonlight and compunction struck her. 'Hadn't you better go and lie down?' she asked anxiously. 'You've been standing out here far too long.'

He smiled quizzically. 'And to no purpose, it seems, but my deepest wound isn't visible.'

'What do you mean?' Her anxiety grew; had he an internal injury that he had not revealed?

'A little private plaint,' he sighed. 'I'm afraid I quite misunderstood you, Selina. When I found you here, I thought... I dared to imagine you were waiting in the hope that I might come this way. My masculine vanity misled me into making a proposition which I fear you found offensive ...'

'No ...' she interrupted, suspecting he was trying to salve his pride.

'Forget it,' he went on. 'I won't trouble you again.' He smiled ironically. 'I'll leave you to your social conscience. If you would be so good as to hand me down my sleeping bag, I'll ask the priest to give me shelter. I couldn't help but notice that your quarters are limited.'

Selina climbed into the landrover again and passed the bag out to him.

'Jo will be furious,' she said, as she descended, 'And really we could manage to put you up.'

'It's better we shouldn't be under the same roof,' he observed drily. 'Give my thanks to your friend. Good-bye, Selina.'

He did not offer his hand, and started up the village street towards the priest's house, dragging his leg, his head bowed like an old man's. Selina watched him with a lump in her throat, longing to run after him and tell him that she would go with him anywhere he wished and upon whatever terms he liked to impose. But something, she was not sure what, restrained her, an innate chastity, a dignified pride which made her shrink from a situation that was far too similar to her despised former associates' casual affairs.

Alastair had gone a little way when he turned back to call:

'And don't stay here too long, little one, or it'll be your death.'

At that moment she felt she would welcome death.

She spent a sleepless night in the bed that he had occupied revolving over and over again all that he had said. Alastair was still in Quimpala. She had only to tell him that she had changed her mind and she could leave this dreary spot and go with him to light, warmth and gaiety. Whatever hazards the future held, they would have had a precious time together, a week, a month, perhaps much longer. Her body was crying out for his arms, her mouth ached for his kisses. She rose with the first light, ready to run to him and make her surrender.

While she was scrambling into her clothes, shivering in the chill dawn, she heard the landrover starting up, and paused half in, half out of her sweater to listen in dismay. Alastair could not be leaving, he was not fit. Perhaps he was only going to move the vehicle up to the priest's house, but he should not be out so early, he should be resting.

She finished dressing and hurried to the door. Looking down the length of the long village street, she saw the back of the landrover at the end of it; then as it passed the last house it gathered speed and was soon lost in the mist rising from the plain.

She was too late. Weary and wounded though he was, Alastair had driven away, whither she did not know, rather than run the risk of encountering her again.

CHAPTER NINE

SELINA was half reclining on the leather-covered chesterfield in Doctor Whiteman's sitting-room, while Emma poured out coffee for her and Jo. The doctor had returned unharmed from her last trip and the two girls had dined with her.

Selina wore the white dress which she had left behind when she went off so blithely to Quimpala. The case of garments she had discarded, she had asked Doctor White- man to dispose of for her, but Emma had had no time before setting off for Bolivia, and upon her return she had done nothing about it because she expected that Selina would need her things again, and her anticipations had proved only too right.

For Selina had not the stamina to continue with her self-appointed task. She had no energy, suffered from breathlessness, and dizziness. The doctor whom she consulted diagnosed a variety of causes, including anaemia, and told her she should not remain in such high altitudes, or her heart would become affected. At first she had ignored his advice, but after she had fainted once or twice, Jo told her kindly but firmly she must resign herself to giving up.

'You are too great a responsibility,' she had said. 'Neither I nor my organization can risk you dying on our hands.'

Selina had been bitterly disappointed. Both of the two improbabilities she had contemplated had come to pass. She had found the work she wanted and she had met Alastair again. Both had failed her, or more correctly she had failed them. She had not had the courage to take the escape Alastair had offered her, and her physical frailty had lost her her job.

'I'm sure it's my name,' she had said peevishly and unreasonably to Jo. 'Had I been called something that could be shortened to Jack or Harry, like you, Jo (Jo's full name was Joanna), I might have been tougher, but Selina's such a soppy name. It was Mummy's choice, of course.'

'You're being silly,' Jo had told her patiently. 'There's nothing in a name,' and quoted, 'That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'

'Not for everyone,' Selina insisted. 'If a rose was called an onion, a lot of people would smell onions when they sniffed it,'

'Auto-suggestion?' Jo smiled. "But if it's any consolation to you, Sel, there was a Selina Bracebridge who went to the Crimea with Florence Nightingale, and that was a tough assignment if you like.'

'Was there?' but Selina's interest had faded as a wave of dizziness swept over her. 'God, what a miserable specimen I am!' she had murmured despairingly.

You tried,' Jo had told her. 'Nobody can do more than that,'

But Selina refused to be comforted.

Now she was on her way to Lima, which was on a lower level than Cuzco. There she would decide what to do next. Jo had arranged for her to stay for a while at a hostel where her colleagues were accommodated in transit. On the following morning she would be leaving the Andean Highlands for ever,

Jo and Emma were watching her with affectionate concern, for both had become fond of her. She was so thin there seemed to be nothing of her at all, and the blusher she had put on her pale cheeks made her look a little hectic, while her eyes were dark-ringed and appeared enormous in her wan face. She did not look up to taking a long journey alone,

'Have a good rest when you get to Lima,' Jo told her. 'You needn't go on, wherever you're going, for some time. Where will you go, Sel?'

'I haven't thought. England, I expect.'

The doctor cleared her throat, 'You're all right for funds?'

Selina smiled at her gratefully, knowing what had prompted the question, but at least she need not borrow from her friends.:

'I've saved most of my allowance,' she told her.

Money that she had meant to bestow upon Jo's school, and now would have to be expended upon her useless self. She laughed bitterly.

'The chromium-plated sex kitten will return to her former habitat and resume her aimless existence.'

'Sel, what a horrid expression!' Jo exclaimed.

'It's how Alastair Grainger described me.'

'I'm sure Alec never called you anything like that,' Emma declared, shocked. 'He's much too kind,'

'I don't think you know him as well as I do,' Selina told her, her eyes gleaming feverishly. 'Actually he didn't use those words, but he did tell me I belonged to a chromium-plated environment, and I'm sure he's always thought I was a sex kitten.'

The sort of girl who would jump at a holiday in Rio, and had shamelessly proclaimed her love for him when she found herself alone with him on top of a mountain pass, a confession which had naturally led him to suppose she was his for the taking. Sick both physically and mentally, her imagination took a dreary satisfaction in distorting the facts. Meanwhile Jo and Doctor Whiteman exchanged glances. Jo had told Emma of Alastair's visit to Quimpala, but she did not know what had transpired between him and Selina. Nothing to his credit, she was sure, and she believed the emotional crisis involved had contributed to Selina's breakdown.

Doctor Whiteman tactfully began to talk about something else.

Before Selina left, Emma asked her to do a small commission for her. The couple who were living in her old home had just had a baby. Carita Lopez had been a sort of protegee of Bill's, being an orphan, and Emma, childless herself, had interested herself in the girl. When Carita had married Jose Lopez, she had arranged for them to lease her house in the Calle de Santa Maria. Carita occasionally wrote to Doctor Whiteman, whom she picturesquely called, '*Mi senora angelica*,' which showed she was grateful for kindnesses received. Emma had procured presents for them in honour of

the infant's arrival, which comprised a shawl of homespun llama wool, a vicuna rug, and an Ekeko, the Bolivian Mannikin, a pot-bellied little figure with a peaked cap and his tunic sewn with pots and kettles. He was supposed to be a symbol of good fortune. She asked Selina to deliver these presents for her, and told her:

'The Lopez are a nice young couple. I've informed them that you'll be calling and they'll make you very welcome. You don't know anyone in Lima, do you? You won't feel quite so friendless if you make their acquaintance.'

Selina thanked her, though at that moment she did not feel inclined to form new friendships. But she remembered that this house was next door to Alastair's residence."* Emma seemed to have forgotten that fact, or perhaps she was sure he would not be there. Selina's interest quickened, as she realized that the Lopez family would provide her with an excuse to visit the Calle Santa Maria. She might even manage to glimpse the mysterious Mrs. Grainger, who seemed able to retain such a hold over her husband. She stowed the gifts carefully in her suitcase. They were her passport to discovery,

The flight down to Lima was short and uneventful. Once arrived there, Selina found herself back in the stir and bustle of a big cosmopolitan city, which was almost frightening after so many months in less populous places. It took her a little while to become accustomed to the wide tree-lined, flower-scented avenues with their murderously fast-moving traffic. Here again she found the towering office blocks and modern hotels embellished with glittering glass and chromium plating with which she was familiar in other cities. There were still to be found churches and old colonial buildings among the new structures, looking sadly ancient, though actually only five hundred years ago there had been nothing on the site of the town except desert. Behind the town towered the ramparts of the mountains, and ten miles away was the Pacific, Callao being Lima's port.

Jo's hostel was situated in one of the beautiful suburbs, and after driving there in a fine American taxi, Selina spent her first few days recovering her breath - literally - for though Lima stands high above sea level, the atmosphere was much less rarefied than that of the Andean uplands.

She located her bank and bought some necessary clothes, for she was once again the stylish denizen of civilization. Though the hostel was not luxurious, there was a shower, and she enjoyed having her hair shampooed and set, and her nails manicured. Over these the assistant exclaimed in horror. How had the *senorita* come by such misfortune?

'Merely trying to live the simple life,' Selina told her, and the girl looked baffled.

She also bought unguents and cosmetics. Her skin had suffered from the cold winds, but soon began to recover its bloom. Looking at herself in her mirror, she saw again the girl who had gone out to Titicamba and won Rodriguez's unwelcome admiration. She smiled at her reflection a little scornfully, How easy it was to slip back into the butterfly mould; her experiences had left no mark upon her - but in that she was wrong. The glass did not show her the almost spirituelle look which enveloped her, the new depth behind her eyes. Nobody meeting her now could doubt but that she had lived and suffered.

At length she decided that she was sufficiently renovated to present herself at the Calle de Santa Maria, and taking Emma's gifts, she drove thither in a taxi to avoid the probability of becoming lost, for Lima was a big city. This proved an unnecessary precaution, for the distance was so short she could have walked it. Before the city had spread, the Calle had been a quiet retreat for Peruvian notables, and a double row of white Spanish houses stood facing each other across a broad road lined with palm trees. Selina dismissed her taxi and walked down it, carrying her parcels. The houses were detached, with wrought iron tracery at doors and windows; some of them had small balconies in front of the upstairs windows, which had once been covered by the Spanish *rejas*, but the iron bars had been removed and window boxes substituted, which were filled with flowers.

The Lopez house was the last one on the left-hand side, before modernity impinged in the form of a high block of flats which was being built athwart the end of the road, so there was no doubt about which was Alastair's. Selina stood under a dusty palm tree and looked at it. A gracious house it might have been once, but now it looked a little neglected and forbidding with all its shutters closed. It was the one house from which the *rejas* had not been

removed, the iron bars which had been originally placed to separate the young *senoritas* from their ardent wooers. Over the front door a balcony protruded, also of wrought iron, its protecting bars ending in a marble slab which roofed it in, decorated with two marble urns. Some desiccated cactus, the green and yellow sabre-leaved agave, which has become so common in southern Europe, grew along the gravel sweep up to the entrance.

The sun was setting, for Selina had timed her call for the early evening, knowing the Lopez family would be sure to dine late. The facade of the house was illuminated by its last rays, and as she surveyed it, Selina caught her breath. The doors behind the balcony over the front door opened slowly and a figure stepped out on to it. She appeared to be a lissom girl, dressed in white with a white mantilla over her bright hair on which the sun glinted. The dress was long and clinging, and she might have been dressed for a bridal. She clung to the imprisoning bars with the tenacious grasp of one who longed to rend them apart, giving Selina the impression of a bird beating against imprisoning wire. Selina was near enough to see that her gaze was fixed on the opposite house, but though she turned and looked at it, she could see nothing there except empty windows. But the girl's eyes had a curiously blank expression; it was possible she was not seeing anything concrete.

There was a movement in the aperture behind her. Someone dark in black clothes approached the figure clinging to the grille and seemed to be expostulating with it. Brown sinewy hands detached the white clutching fingers, and the dark woman - it was a woman - propelled the girl back into the room behind them. She closed the doors firmly on their exit, and a Venetian blind descended behind them, as the sun sank below the level of the buildings. Shadow fell across the front of the house, causing it to look faintly sinister.

Selina rubbed her eyes, doubting her own senses. She thought she must have been having a hallucination. Pamela Grainger must be a much older woman than the girl she had just seen. Had her preoccupation with the Graingers caused her to visualize something from the past? She must have glimpsed a re-enactment of some scene from Pamela's tragic life, when she had been a young bride. Her agony had left an impress on the atmosphere which had been picked up by her own over-sensitive nerves. The house now looked

unoccupied, though she had every reason to suppose that its mistress was still lodged in it.

Feeling shaken, she walked the length of the street and back again to recover her poise before encountering the Lopez family. Unwillingly she recalled Doctor White- man's suggestions about Alastair. Could it be possible that he had kept his young wife in custody because of her infidelity? There had been about that slim figure such a desperate desire for escape that it made his action, if that was what he had done, sheer, deliberate cruelty. But Alastair was not a cruel man - or was he? If Selina had gone with him to Rio, what would have become of her, when he had tired of her? Or if she had, as he had declared she would turned to a younger man, what punishment would he have meted out to her? But she had not accepted his offer, and realizing that her imagination, stimulated by the apparition or whatever it was she had seen, was leading her into dark surmises which might have no grounds, Selina tried to dismiss the subject from her mind, and retraced her steps towards the Lopez house.

She threw an apprehensive glance towards Alastair's home as she repassed it, but there was no light or movement from within.

Carita and Jose Lopez were a friendly couple, and seemed delighted to see Selina, and have the latest news of Emma. Carita showed Selina with pride her new son, a black-eyed, black-haired, brown-skinned baby. Nothing repelling about him, he was as clean and sweet as a newly opened flower. They spoke of Doctor Whiteman with affectionate indulgence, describing her as a kindly soul, but a little mad. It was a shame she had had no family, for children would have kept her from courting death in the desert.

Carita swung the mannikin before the baby's face, and the black eyes followed it with interest.

'Your good fortune, *mi pichonito*,' she crooned. 'It is to bring you luck.'

The family and the visitor were gathered in the nursery, and although according to Selina's western notions it was an hour when the child should be asleep, it appeared this was a nightly ritual when Jose returned from his work.

'All women should have babies,' Jose announced, with a sly glance at Selina. 'It is their fulfilment. Deprived, they all become peculiar, like the *pobrecita* next door.'

'That is only your supposition,' said Carita, while Selina caught her breath. 'You are piqued because you have never been able to speak to her.'

'I only wished to be neighbourly, but she is a great mystery. I am not sure if the dour-faced gentleman who appears from time to time is the father or the husband. Whoever he is, he keeps her closer than any Spaniard under the eye of her duenna.' Selina said nothing. Not to these strangers could she reveal her knowledge of the inhabitants of the house next door, but what they said seemed to corroborate her own conclusions.

She explained that she had been staying with the Doctor and was on her way back to England. Jose admitted that he had never been to Cuzco, and Carita declared that she had no use for ruins.

'You must think we do not appreciate our heritage,' she said apologetically, 'but I am all for modernity and bright lights.'

Looking round their comfortable, charming home, Selina agreed she had a point. She declined an invitation to stay to dinner, saying she did not care to be out late. Jose called a taxi for her and bade her *hasta la vista*, saying she must come again before she left. Selina was non-committal; privately she did not think she would. The sight of the young couple and their baby was a little painful. She so much wanted a child of her own, but only if Alastair was the father. Though the street was brightly lit and most of the houses were showing lights, as she drove away, Alastair's remained shuttered and dark.

Though she did not visit the Lopez family again, Selina was irresistibly drawn to the Calle de Santa Maria. She found there was a short cut from the hostel, past the building site which brought her out into it. Several times she walked down its length, but she never again saw the lady in white so that she became convinced that she had seen a vision. Then one morning she saw the landrover parked in front of the entrance and knew that Alastair had come home and she must not come there again.

Since she was feeling quite well again she had no excuse to linger longer in the Peruvian capital. Crystal informed her that she was living in London and suggested rather grudgingly that she might care to join her for a short while now that she had left her father. She had known all along that that would never work, and she did not think her daughter should be wandering round South America alone. This unusual maternal solicitude touched Selina and she decided to fly to London via New York and when she arrived there, she would take a commercial course to improve her typing and try for a secretarial position.

But before she left, Lima was shaken by an earth tremor; it was not a full-scale earthquake, but several buildings were badly damaged and fires were started. It happened in the early evening after a close, heavy day. The hostel was a one-storeyed building and escaped injury, but the voluntary helpers staying there were eager to be of service. There was a rumour that several houses were down in the Calle de Santa Maria, which was one of the worst hit districts. Selina received this news with dismay, her thoughts immediately winging to Pamela and Alastair; she could not rest until she was sure they were unharmed. She attached herself to the little group from the hostel, changing into inconspicuous trousers and sweater.

The streets were filled with the people who had run out of the buildings as soon as they felt the ground shake, and they had some difficulty in getting through the crowd. The damaged area had been cordoned off, but their leader had some sort of official badge, which gained access for them. A house in the middle of the road seemed to have lost its upper storey, and there was an ambulance and police in front of it. Here the volunteers halted, but Selina went on, unobserved in the darkness, for the street lighting had been turned off, but something was burning on the building site, which cast a ruddy glow over the upper end of the avenue.

The Lopez house was untouched, and as it was shuttered, probably the family were away. Alastair's also presented its usual dark and shuttered appearance, but as Selina stopped to stare at it, the white figure appeared again on the balcony illuminated by the reddish glow. Selina's heart began to beat fast as she gazed at it; was it real?

There was a sudden rumbling roar as if a dozen old- time steam locomotives were hurtling by. The earth rocked beneath her feet. She clung to the trunk of a tree, while dust and din surged round her, and the flames leaped from the fire at the end of the street. Above this inferno was another rending noise, and she saw to her horror the iron balcony upon which the figure was standing collapse, cut off sheer from the front of the house as with a knife.

Without stopping to think, Selina raced up to the stricken house, for here surely help was needed. She saw what looked like a bundle of white rags lying among the twisted ironwork, and from the front door a woman emerged, wringing her hands.

'Quick, get help,' Selina said in Spanish, and knelt beside the white figure.

'It is useless,' the woman said. '*Ay de mi*, my jewel, my precious one is dead!'

'Not quite,' Selina told her with her fingers on the slender wrist, in which she detected a thread of pulse. The girl lay on her side, one corner of the marble slab against the small of her back. Selina pushed the surrounding debris away and took the victim's head on to her knees.

'Where is your master?' she asked.

'He went out before the first shock,' the woman told her.

Selina looked down at the face resting upon her knees; she disentangled the white mantilla, and wiped the dust from it, with it. In the flickering light it was that of a young girl, surrounded by golden hair, and yet paradoxically it did not look young at all, in its marble stillness it had the antiquity of a statue.

Selina wished someone would come, or the woman go for aid. She did not know what she could do. She was aware that in the case of serious injury an amateur should not attempt to move the victim. She felt the pulse again; it was very feeble.

The woman was continuing to wail and beat her breast, and Selina was just about to tell her to go and fetch some water, when quick footsteps approached, and she stopped.

'*Senor!*' she gasped in Spanish. 'It was not my fault. She escaped on to the balcony, the earthquake excited her, and ...'

'*Bastante,*' Alastair told her curtly. 'The ambulance is down the street, go and fetch it, *pronto.*'

The woman vanished like a dark shadow, and Alastair bent over his wife. He pushed back the heavy marble slab which was pressing on her spine, and ran his hands over the recumbent form. Turning his head, he recognized Selina.

'Good God, you of all people!' he exclaimed. He passed his hand across his face. 'Are you real?'

'Oh, yes, I'm quite real,' Selina told him, but feeling this was not a time for lengthy explanations, she asked:

'Is she badly hurt?'

'I think her back is broken. Thank God she's unconscious.'

'Can't we do anything?'

'Best wait for the experts to move her. They'll be here at any moment.'

Both looked at the still face lying on Selina's knees. She must be dreaming, Selina thought; none of this could be real, she could not be sitting in front of Alastair's house, with his wife's head upon her knees. But was she his wife? This white, unlined face, that looked no older than her own. The long lashes fluttered, and opened to disclose blank blue eyes.

'She's coming round,' Selina whispered.

Alastair crouched beside her and took the slight fingers in his own.

'Pam,' he said urgently. 'Pam, it's I, Alec.'

So she *was* Pamela Grainger. Selina held her breath, sensing by the urgency in Alastair's voice that he had made more than an ordinary request for recognition.

'Pam.' There was entreaty in his tone. 'Speak to me!'

The blue gaze went beyond him, and Pamela made a slight movement to withdraw her hand. Alastair instantly relinquished it.

'Pamela,' he said again, but he spoke without hope.

Watching, willing her to speak to him, Selina saw a sudden light shine in her eyes, but it was not Alastair whom she saw. Her hands moved feebly as if she wanted to raise them in greeting. In a clear voice, she cried: 'Ramon! Ramon, at last!'

Her head fell back and she went limp.

Alastair felt for her pulse. 'She's gone,' he said dully.

They heard the sound of a vehicle stopping and quick footsteps coming over the gravel, as men appeared carrying a stretcher. Alastair stood up, and told Selina harshly:

'For ten years she has neither spoken to me nor looked at me, and she died with her lover's name on her lips.'

He turned away, while the men lifted the body on to the stretcher. Released, Selina stood up, and watched him longing to give some comfort, but not knowing how. The woman had returned with the ambulance, and it was she who went up to him, laying her hand on his arm.

'*Senor*, it will be better for her now. The blessed Madonna and the holy saints will care for her.'

Alastair gave her a singularly sweet smile. 'Si, Lucia,' he said. His eyes went to Selina. 'Pam was never herself after I brought her back from Quito. She was... unbalanced.'

'Oh, Alec,' Selina whispered. 'Why didn't you tell me? Couldn't you trust me?'

'It wasn't that,' he said proudly. 'I didn't want your pity, for her or me.'

The men raised the stretcher on which Pamela lay, her white mantilla spread over her face, and spoke to him in Spanish.

'I'm coming,' he told them. 'Lucia, take the *senorita* into the patio, that will be safe if there's another tremor, and give her a drink. Please, Selina,' as she made a movement of dissent. 'You need a restorative and Lucia needs you.'

He followed the men carrying the stretcher.

The woman Lucia led Selina through the house and out at the back. Here there was a paved patio, enclosed by a high wall which excluded it from curious eyes. It was a charming place, with a fountain in the middle and tubs of orange and lemon trees. The house on this side was unshuttered, the doors to the lower rooms set ajar. Selina had caught a glimpse of polished wood and handsome hangings as she passed through. A gracious house after all.

Lucia insisted that Selina was seated well away from the house, in case of further damage. She brought out candles in a branched candelabrum, since the electricity was still off, and they burned steadily in the still air. She also brought out glasses and a decanter.

Selina knew then why Alastair had asked her to stay for Lucia's sake. Ministering to her took the sharp edge off her grief, and the woman badly needed someone to whom to talk.

'This is where *mi senora* spent her days,' she said, as she poured out a glass of wine. 'It is a pretty spot, *si?*'

'Very,' Selina agreed, and added wonderingly, 'She looked so young, but she was not a girl?'

'She had thirty-five summers, but time stood still for her. It could leave no trace upon her, for it is living that marks our faces and hers was a death in life. I was her maid when she first came here, such a pretty creature she was, *senorita*, and so gay.' She shook her head. 'Too gay for her own good. You know that she ran away?'

'I have heard so.'

'She did not like Lima. When the Senor brought her back, she took no more notice of him than if he had been a shadow. We were all shadows to her, I think. Her days were spent waiting and watching for the one who was gone.'

'But didn't she know he was dead?'

'No, *senorita*, she never accepted that. She insisted that the master was keeping her from him.'

She went on to talk of Alastair. He, she declared, had behaved like an angel out of heaven. Such patience with his wife's affliction. If only *la pobrecita* could have appreciated it, but her darkened mind was filled with her obsession. Because she believed her husband was keeping her lover from her she could not bear to have him near her. It was not surprising that Alastair went off into the wilderness from time to time, and the sad part was that every time he returned he hoped for some change, a word of greeting, but he was met by blank stares and a mute tongue. Yet it had wrung Lucia's heart to witness Pamela's endless vigil, for of course she would never see Ramon again.

. 'But she did see him before she died,' Selina told her. 'He came to her at the end.'

Lucia crossed herself. '*Por dios*, that was a great miracle, for he was not a good man.'

'Who dare judge anyone?' Selina asked, for she had misjudged Alastair. 'No one is perfect.'

'The Senor very nearly is,' Lucia said seriously. She went on to tell how Alastair's doctor had urged him to have Pamela certified and put into an institution, deeming he had assumed too great a burden, but this he had steadfastly refused to do. She was his responsibility and his house was her home, though there were times Lucia could see when he found the burden irksome.

'He is a man who needs a home and children,' she declared. 'And all he had to come back to was a crazy woman.' She looked at Selina eagerly. 'Did she speak to him at last before she went?'

Selina bowed her head, shaking it sadly, and Lucia sighed.

'*Ay de mi*, that was a sore pity.'

She seemed to suddenly become aware of Selina as a person and not merely a pair of ears. Her black eyes ran curiously over the girl's dusty clothes and lingered on her bright head.

'But maybe the good God will send the Senor consolation,' she said significantly.

Selina did not wait for Alastair's return, though the barrier between them was now removed and Lucia's comment had given her fresh hope. She felt that she could not intrude upon his grief, or would it be relief? A decent interval must elapse before she saw him again. But she left a message with Lucia, asking her to give him her love and sympathy and a note of her address.

So once again she delayed her departure and waited in mingled anticipation and doubt, while Lima recovered from the earthquake and the victims were buried. Would Alastair come to her or would he be unwilling to forgo the freedom he had found at last? His remark about marriage being a noose began to worry her anew. The creature that escapes from a trap is wary of further snares. She could make no move, the choice must be his, and if he

did not come, she would know that he no longer wanted her. With the jealousy and uncertainty that besets all lovers she remembered Lola and her rich heritage of the *estancia*. He had repelled her overtures because he knew he could not wed her, but now Santa Loreta could be his if he so wished. Lola could never remind him of his dead wife, but she herself bore towards her an unfortunate resemblance, As the days dragged by, each morning bringing renewed hope and each nightfall its death, and he sent her no word, Selina became more and more convinced that she was wasting her time by staying on in Lima.

She was a little hurt that neither Jo nor Doctor White- man had inquired after her safety, until she remembered that they would think she had gone on to Europe. The Lopez family, she discovered, were away and were still in New York.

On the very morning that she had decided to make arrangements about her flight, Alastair came.

He arrived, not in the landrover, but in a fast modern car, wearing a tropical suit and looked so unfamiliar in his neat tailoring and panama hat that for a moment she did not recognize him.

'Come for a spin,' he greeted her. 'I can't talk to you among all these do-gooders.'

Selina was glad that she was wearing a dress, though it was a flimsy nylon affair, and she was afraid it emphasized her fragility. However, he was looking at her with obvious approval, and he said as he opened the car door for her:

'Nice to have my butterfly back again.'

'I thought you were never coming,' she said as he slid in beside her.

He gave her an impish grin. 'The best things are always worth waiting for.'

'I was on the point of booking my flight to Europe.'

'What was the hurry? You knew I'd come, but I've had a lot to do. Didn't you want to see me?'

'I... I wasn't sure you'd come.'

'But you couldn't wait to find out? You were so anxious to get out of the country. The social conscience was only a passing phase, wasn't it? I ran into Doctor Whiteman and she told me all about it. Incidentally, I hope you're quite recovered?'

'Oh, quite.'

Emma would have presented her actions from the wrong angle, Selina thought, and this longed-for meeting was going all awry. She had started off on the wrong foot by being caught in flimsy attire, which indicated a reversion to former days. Alastair's light, bantering tone was not what she had expected. He was seeing her as a frivolous butterfly again without the stamina or the determination to face up to the rigours of the task she had undertaken.

The car was speeding down an avenue lined with gardens full of brilliant flowers, canna lilies, frangipani and poinsettias, too bright and garish for her despondent mood.

'Cheer up, little one,' Alastair bade her gaily. 'Pretty women like yourself don't need consciences, they're put into the world to give us men something nice to look at.'

Selina disdained to respond to this masculine appraisal. They came to the stone bridge over the River Rimac, one of the few watercourses that flow from the Andes to the Pacific. It was an unimpressive stream, but the bridge was massive.

'Three hundred years old,' Alastair told her, indicating the bays above the stone buttresses. 'Those niches were a favourite place for assignations with the gallants of Lima in past days.'

Information which Selina received in cold silence, while she strove with her increasing disappointment; she did not want to be instructed about ancient bridges.

The car sped on down the principal street of a suburb seething with a population of every colour from pink to black, mestigos, Spaniards and Negroes, lined with old houses, from the fretted wooden balconies of which washing was hung out to dry. It was not a part of the town she would have dared to explore alone.

'Rather less salubrious than the Calle de Santa Maria,' Alastair observed. 'But I find the people with a capital P more interesting than the upper crust.'

'Better copy?' she suggested.

'I don't write about the Limanese.'

They had reached the confines of the city and were out on the arid open land, travelling towards the brown foothills.

'Where are you taking me?' Selina asked. She was puzzled by Alastair's demeanour. He seemed almost light-hearted and was whistling softly, a popular air. He appeared younger than she had ever seen him look, and completely carefree. Why had he come for her unless he had something important to say to her, instead of making impersonal conversation about the place and its people?

'Nowhere, we're just having a run around,' he told her airily. 'It's a treat to drive a car after the landrover.'

'I suppose it is,' she said flatly.

'What are you going to do when you get back to Europe?' he asked.

With a sinking heart, for he seemed to have accepted the fact of her departure without regret, she told him she was going to her mother and was contemplating taking a commercial course.

Alastair shook his head. 'Not you at all. Why must you persist in punishing yourself? Wouldn't modelling be more in your line?'

'Oh, no, I want to do something useful, Alec, not ... not flaunting myself.'

'Such an earnest little soul!'

'Please, Alec, don't mock me.' She was near to tears. He might at least consider her prospects seriously, even though he took no personal interest in them.

'I'm not mocking, but I don't think you show much discrimination in your choice of jobs. First Quimpala which nearly killed you, and now a stuffy office. I could visualize you in some salon looking perfectly ravishing in the latest couture models.'

'I bet you could, you've always regarded me as a sort of clothes-horse, but believe it or not, models have to be tough.'

'You'd be equal to it. The air of Paris isn't thin.'

She could not stand much more of this.

'I think we've gone far enough,' she told him frigidly.

'I quite agree.'

The road had ascended to a fair height, and he turned the car off on to a rocky lay-by overlooking the town. Lima lay spread before them, and beyond the city the flat brown land stretched to the sea. They could see the cars like busy ants speeding down the road to Callao, and the round towers of the old fort guarding the port, the Real Felipe.

'I'm surprised you take such an interest in my future since it doesn't concern you,' Selina said a little bitterly.

'I'm not so sure about that. What about that holiday in Rio before you embark upon this strenuous course? I think we've both earned it.'

Selina's heart seemed to stop, and then increase its beat. This was not what she had hoped to hear. When Alastair had previously wanted to take her away, he had not been free, but now he was, the invitation was insulting, though she was gratified to learn that he still desired her. She turned in her seat to face him and found he was studying her quizzically, his mouth curved in a mischievous smile, but in the depths of the blue eyes there was a flicker of flame. She said coolly:

'I'm not a light woman, Alec, and I've no use for honeymoons without wedding rings.'

His smile vanished and he frowned.

'I could give you one, little one, but I'm not getting any younger.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, don't start all that again!' she cried distressfully. 'At this moment you look little more than a boy, and . . . and the gap in years needn't worry you, if... if . . .'. She turned her head away, unable to proceed and stared at the barren landscape.

'If what?' he asked teasingly. 'You're not going to suggest monkey glands or some toxic rejuvenator?'

'Can't you be serious?' She was becoming exasperated.

'Oh, but I am. This is a very serious matter. Don't for God's sake cry, Selina,' for her shoulders shook. 'Tell me what you think could shorten the years between us.'

Summoning all her resolution, Selina turned round to face him again, determined to make a final bid for her happiness.

'Alec, once I heard you thank God you had no children. Did that mean you. . . dislike them?'

His face became very grave. 'So much so that I shrank from other people's because I thought I could never have any of my own. You see, I discovered

that there was mental illness in Pam's family, so that even if she recovered, I daren't take the risk.' He gave a long sigh. 'I've so longed for a son.'

Selina's heart lifted, she knew now that her instinct had been right, Alastair's friends had been right; what he needed was a real home and a family, but it might be a little difficult to persuade him that she was the right woman to provide them for him.

Folding her hands demurely in her lap, and keeping her eyes cast down, she said:

'Please excuse my boldness, Mr. Grainger, but that's possible to obtain now, and I think a growing family would keep you young and be a mutual interest for our declining years.'

Alastair sat perfectly still, his face inscrutable, and Selina wondered desperately if she had gone too far. She had been banking upon the genuineness of his pronouncement, but perhaps all he wanted from her was the temporary affair he had proposed.

At length he said uncertainly: 'I've been given to 'understand that modern girls, gay, pretty girls like yourself, weren't keen on having babies, they find them too much of a tie.'

'I don't know where you got that absurd idea from,' she exclaimed indignantly. 'Alec dear, I want children too.' She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders. 'God willing, I would be only too happy to give you that son you want so badly.'

His hands came up to cover hers. 'Would you, darling?'

She shook him. 'Alec, don't be so difficult. Have I got to do the proposing myself?'

He stared down into her upturned face.

'You realize that you would have to live in Peru? That there will be times when I may have to leave you?'

'That's all immaterial if you love me. Do you love me, Alec?'

'Like hell I do, but...'

He was still hanging back; she tried to withdraw her hands, but he held them firmly against his shoulder.

'What fresh difficulty have you thought of now?'

'You look too delicate and fragile, little one, to be the mother of sons.'

Stung beyond endurance, Selina wrenched one of her hands free, and smacked his face. It was a good stinging slap, muscles hardened by her stay in Ouimpala giving strength to her arm. Her hand left a scarlet mark on his brown-cheek and he drew back, rubbing it ruefully.

'That'll show you how fragile I am!' she said fiercely.

'I would never have believed ...' Then he seized her and during the moments that followed he showed no regard-for her fragility at all.

Breathless, laughing, she at length drew away from his seeking mouth and inquired: 'Are you satisfied now?'

'Completely. Little one, will you be my wife?'

'Of course. That's the question I've been trying to make you ask for the past twenty minutes.'

'Brazen hussy!' He was laughing as he drew her closer. 'Little one, though you offered me a son, the greater gift is your sweet self.'