



Mills & Boon

STOLEN HEART

Mary Burchell



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"Please, Joanna! You must help me!" Auriel Deane was deeply in trouble. To help her, Joanna - her usually sensible sister - embarked on an incredibly risky adventure. Caught burglarizing an apartment, Joanna found herself a potential murder suspect. Neil Felling, a complete stranger, provided her with an alibi that satisfied the police. But Joanna knew that Neil could only think the worst of her. She had to convince Neil that she was innocent. But Auriel, the only person who could clear Joanna's name, selfishly betrayed her...

CHAPTER ONE

JOANNA set down her tray and stared in astonishment and something like fear at the sobbing figure on the bed.

'Auriel!' She came and hung over her young half-sister. 'What's the matter, darling? Surely the headache can't be as bad as that?'

'It's not—a headache,' came the muffled reply.

'Do you feel ill in some other way, then?'

'No, of course not!' Auriel, who had retired to bed an hour ago with a most effective display of indisposition, now seemed faintly irritated that Joanna should have been taken in by the performance.

'Well then'—Joanna doubtfully stroked the improbably beautiful red-gold hair—'have you quarrelled with John?'

'N-no.' But the impatient twitch of Auriel's shoulder ceased, and she suddenly became unnaturally still.

Not for nothing had Joanna followed the moods, charms, inconsistencies and reactions of her young half-sister for twenty years. She knew that 'no' in that particular tone meant, 'Not exactly, but you're getting warmer, and I'm not sure I want to tell you, anyway.'

'I think you'd better explain, or else I can't help you,' Joanna said, and her tone, though calm and matter-of-fact, was warm with the coaxing reassurance one uses to a child.

The effect was instantaneous. Auriel rolled over and gazed at her with the appealing, dark-fringed grey eyes which made people apt to describe her as 'that lovely little creature', although, in point of fact (and strict measurement) she was no smaller than many another girl who never inspired this flattering description.

Joanna sat down on the side of the bed, and immediately her hand was clutched in a hot, appealing clasp, for it was one of Auriel's special gifts that she could bring every particle of herself to the task of coercion or persuasion when she wanted something done.

'It's not about John,' Auriel explained, in a low, tragic whisper, which somehow made one reflect uneasily that the beautiful sometimes die young. 'It's about—Simon.'

'Simon?' Joanna drew her strongly-marked eyebrows together consideringly. 'Simon who?'

'Oh, Joanna! Simon Gray, of course.'

'Simon Gray?' For a moment contempt drowned out the sympathy in Joanna's voice. 'Auriel, you surely haven't been seeing *him* again, have you?'

'Not willingly, not willingly!' Auriel spoke in a soft, distressful little wail. 'He—made me.'

'What do you mean?—made you? I thought you had seen the last of him a year ago or more.'

'Oh, Joanna, so did I! And you know how happy I've been—I mean, I am—with John. I never wanted to see Simon again. *Never!*' Auriel's voice took on a surprising edge of bitterness and venom for a moment. 'But he's heard about my engagement to John. He knows how important and—critical the family are. And now he's threatening to make—trouble.'

'But there's no trouble he can make. Don't be silly, darling.' Joanna was reassuring and matter-of-fact again. 'You were friendly with him, of course. But it isn't as though there were ever anything serious between you and Simon Gray. No engagement^ no '

Joanna was not quite sure why she stopped. Only something flickered in Auriel's wide, disarming gaze. Some lurking fear and *awareness*, which suddenly cut off the easy assurances that had risen to her lips. There was a peculiar little silence. Then Joanna said, 'Well, was there anything?'

'There was a letter,' Auriel whispered.

Joanna bit her lip. 'What sort of a letter? A love letter?'

Auriel nodded.

'Well, I suppose lots of girls have written love letters to other men before they actually found the one man they really wanted. There's nothing to be afraid of in that.'

But Auriel *was* afraid, Joanna saw. Afraid in a cornered, desperate sort of way which seemed to have no relation to the trivialities they were discussing.

'It wasn't just—a love letter,' Auriel said huskily at last. 'It was a letter making an—an arrangement between us.'

'What sort of an arrangement?' Anxiety and an unusual impatience sharpened Joanna's voice for a moment.

'An arrangement for—for us to go away together.'

'To elope, you mean?'

'No.' Auriel's hand tightened convulsively. 'To go away for a week-end.'

'Auriel!'

'I never went, Joanna! I never went!' Auriel's voice was suddenly shrill in its panic-stricken insistence. 'I—thought better of it. But he's got the letter, don't you see? He's got the letter and he means to use it.'

'Use it!' Joanna felt stupefied by the sudden invasion of their lives by this preposterous element of melodrama. 'Use it? But how? Do you mean he's trying to blackmail you?'

'No, no. At least, not in the sense of demanding money. But it's just as bad as blackmail, the beast!' Again there was that touch of venom as well as fear,

the distilled acid of a sweetness which had gone sour. 'He says he won't let John have me—that I belong to him—that I cheated him and--'

'Did you?' inquired Joanna, with unusual dryness.

'Joanna!—I refused to go away with him after all, if that's what you mean.' Auriel's air suggested a genuine belief in her own shocked virtue, but Joanna, knowing her, wondered how far she had led on the admittedly objectionable Simon Gray. He was not the sort to take kindly to the idea that someone had made a fool of him.

'All right,' Joanna said, in answer to Auriel's wide-eyed gaze, as much as her words. 'All right. Wittingly or unwittingly, you led him up the garden, and very foolishly supplied him with the wherewithal to take revenge. What does he propose to do with this letter? Show it to John?'

'Worse, Joanna! *much* worse. He's going to post it to John's mother.'

Joanna thought of the chilly difficult Mrs Morgan—by no means sure that she wanted her John to marry flighty young Auriel Deane, anyway—and whistled softly.

'Yes—that's pretty bad,' she admitted, with remarkable understatement. 'There's only one thing to do, my dear. You must pluck up your courage and forestall him by telling John the exact truth.'

'I couldn't! I couldn't possibly!' Auriel was white with fear and protest.

'But if you did it exactly as you've told me now. He might be angry, but he would understand and get over it. After all, you did no harm. You were a fool and contemplated doing wrong. But you didn't *do* it. John loves you. He'll believe you.'

'No, he won't.'

'Of course he will, Auriel. Why shouldn't he? It *is* the truth and—and--'

Joanna swallowed suddenly, and for the first time the whisper of an idea came to her that perhaps Auriel had not told her the exact truth. Perhaps there was more to it than she said. Perhaps even--

'No! I won't be hateful and suspicious,' Joanna told herself fiercely. 'Here am I assuring her that John will believe her, and I'm allowing myself a few doubts. I won't!'

But somehow she had no heart for protestations now. She went on holding Auriel's hot hand, and the heavy, pregnant moments measured themselves out silently between them.

'There must be some way,' Joanna said at last, without conviction.

She felt Auriel's fingers stir in hers.

'There—there is, Joanna. But it's rather—fantastic. I was afraid even to mention it.'

'But the whole thing is fantastic. I don't think we need hold back for any consideration of that sort. What other way is there, Auriel?'

'We could get back the letter. Steal it back. He's away at present, I know he is. I heard him making the arrangement at the Patons' cocktail party. It—it gave me the idea. I know where his flat is. It's—it's rather an old-fashioned block, Joanna. There's a fire-escape at the back. It wouldn't even be very difficult. Just to—slip back the window-catch and—get in. Oh, Joanna, it might really be the best way!'

Joanna stared at her usually helpless young half-sister in amazement.

'Are you seriously suggesting that you should burgle Simon's place?'

'Not—not me,' Auriel said faintly.

'*Me!*' Joanna cried. 'Are you crazy, Auriel?'

'Yes, of course I'm crazy!' Auriel snatched her hand away and sat up suddenly. 'Crazy with terror and despair and misery. Why else do you think I'd talk like this? I'm crazy at the thought of losing John—mad with terror, every hour of the day and night, because I don't know when Simon will strike. Of *course* I'm not talking or thinking normally. But isn't it enough to make anyone go out of her mind? I'm terrified, I tell you, and desperate—desperate— desperate. And you sit there saying, "We can't do this," and "I don't like the idea of that." I thought you loved me and would help me. But you won't. You're just sitting there in judgment on me.' And, flinging herself down again, Auriel began to sob wildly once more.

Hardly even noticing the inaccuracies of this outburst or the injustice to herself, Joanna set to work to calm the hysterical girl.

'Hush, Auriel! Mother will hear, and want to know what's wrong. Be quiet—I'll think of something. I'll help you, I promise. There's a way out of this somehow.'

'Oh, no, oh, no,' Auriel sobbed forlornly, but more quietly. 'There's no way out except the one I've said. And you won't do that.'

'Listen, my dear. I'll go and see Simon Gray for you. I'll talk to him and see what--'

'Oh, Joanna, don't be so—so naive,' exclaimed Auriel, and for a moment, in her reluctant understanding of the man they were discussing, she it was who sounded the older of the two. 'Simon isn't a man to yield to logic. If I couldn't persuade him, do you suppose you could?'

Joanna was silent, struggling against even considering the melodramatic suggestion which Auriel had made.

'One can't just—break into someone else's place,' she said uneasily at last. 'Even though the man is a skunk like Simon Gray, burglary *is* burglary.'

'Do you mean you'd feel some scruples about it?' It was Auriel's turn to sound naive—and astonished.

'No, not exactly. It's a sort of affront to one's inner pride to do something so contemptible, I suppose, even in these circumstances. Besides, if one were caught--'

'You wouldn't *be* caught. I tell you, Joanna, it's almost simple.'

'When did you say he would be away?'

'This week-end. Now! This very minute, Joanna!'

'Oh, lord!' Joanna felt her heart give a most uncomfortable lurch, as she realised that the ordeal—if she accepted it—was right upon her.

All the same, it never occurred to her to suggest that Auriel might do her own unpleasant work. Quite apart from anything else she knew it was entirely beyond Auriel's nervous capacity, especially in her present state. She was, however, singularly ready to outline the scheme for someone else.

'I *know* he's away, Joanna. I heard him arranging to go to Brian Glover's place for Sunday and stay overnight.'

'When was this?'

'Last night. He said he would catch the ten-thirty train this morning.'

Joanna bit her lip and looked thoughtfully at the other girl.

'I don't want to sound as though I'm trying to get out of it, but how do you know he didn't post the letter to Mrs Morgan before he went?'

'I'm sure he didn't, because—because he said something about reconsidering the whole thing if I would agree to—to break off my engagement in my own way and—carry out the arrangement suggested in the letter.'

'He said *that*?' Joanna was usually slow to anger, but she felt the blood rush into her cheeks, and in that moment her determination to outwit Simon Gray really began to outweigh both her caution and her scruples. 'Well, then--'

You say it would be fairly easy from the back of the block —by the fire-escape?—oh, my goodness, how *stupid* it all sounds! Like a bad film.'

'My part's like a bad film too,' Auriel's voice quivered slightly. 'Losing your fiancé and being disgraced before his family is just like a bad film. And so is the—the thought of what it would do to Mother and Daddy.'

'I know. I'd thought of them.'

Joanna's tone was still almost matter-of-fact, but in the little hollow under her cheek-bone, a slight pulse had begun to beat. For Auriel's last argument was also the most powerful.

'You realise, of course, that if I were'—she cleared her throat a trifle self-consciously—'caught, our position would be even worse than the present one.'

'It couldn't be,' Auriel retorted with a sigh—and a fine disregard for what it would mean to Joanna personally. 'And anyway, you won't be caught. It's almost easy, really. It's just that it sounds wild and silly in theory.'

'It's going to seem pretty wild and silly in practice too,' Joanna retorted dryly. But she knew—and she knew that Auriel knew—that her consent was as good as given.

Distastefully, but with the same efficiency which characterised her attitude to most things she undertook, Joanna checked over the details of the scheme with Auriel.

For someone who had never intended to play any active role in the plan herself, Auriel showed a remarkable grip of the situation.

'It's on the fourth floor. And the fire escape is right outside the window of a small room he calls his study.'

'How do you know?' Joanna could not help asking.

'Well, I've *been* there in—in earlier days. Only in the study and the—lounge, of course.'

'Of course,' Joanna agreed, and somehow wished that she had not asked the question. 'And you think it's in this— study that he is likely to keep letters of a—of a compromising nature?'

'I'm sure of it, Joanna.' Auriel was almost cheerful in the joy and relief of having gained her point. 'There's a bureau there. You may have to force the lock, but it's pretty flimsy. If you take a strong penknife--'

Joanna found she was not listening in detail to Auriel's ideas on how one picked locks. Instead, she was reflecting how extraordinary it was that anyone so sweet and helpless as Auriel could be the really ruthless one, when it came to the point.

It had always been the same, even when they were children. To outward seeming, Joanna, as the elder, attended to all the organising and planning in their play and personal routine. But somehow it always turned out that they did exactly what Auriel wanted.

Not that Joanna grudged the younger girl first choice in everything. Too young to remember her own mother, Joanna had gratefully welcomed the pretty, gay, charming creature whom her father had introduced to her as 'Mother' when she was three years old, and when in due time, an equally pretty, gay and charming baby was added to the family, Joanna adored her from the first moment she glimpsed her round, sweet face.

Nowadays, Joanna, who was both clear-headed and clear-sighted, had no illusions about her young half-sister. But then one doesn't really need illusions in order to love the Auriel type. Provided one is not in active competition—in other words, of something the same type as oneself—it is enough to be amused and charmed and occasionally shocked by them.

To Joanna, it was as natural to look after Auriel and extricate her from any trouble, as it was to breathe and laugh and do her work—which last she did as a remarkably efficient secretary to a remarkably distinguished architect.

So it was that, once she had accepted the prime necessity to Auriel's happiness of this fantastic undertaking, she proceeded to carry it out, if not without a qualm, at least with grim determination.

While Auriel lay there watching her with wide and darkened eyes, she dialled Simon Gray's telephone number and listened to the persistent ringing for endless minutes, which she counted off by the heavy beating of her own heart.

Then she dialled 'Operator', said she had been having difficulty with this particular number, and waited again until a courteous voice informed her that there was no reply from the number concerned.

'The flat is empty all right,' Joanna said, in answer to Auriel's whispered, 'Well?'

'Then you're really going?'

'Of course.' Joanna glanced at the clock. 'It's just about the right time for—for the job, I imagine. Just before twelve. Enough people about for me to pass unnoticed on the way there, and too late for people to be hanging out of their back windows looking at the view.' And, blowing a reassuringly nonchalant kiss to Auriel, she went out of the room.

Fortunately, she found a taxi quite easily and, since her outward appearance was no more sensational than that of any other girl coming home late from a party or cinema, she boldly demanded to be set down five minutes' walk away from the block of flats.

It was raining when she got out. Thin, cold rain that kept on driving in under the hood she was wearing. But, apart from the discomfort, rain was perhaps an advantage. It would at least ensure that no one was hanging about in the quiet alleyway which ran along the back of the flats.

There was a wall, however, which proved considerably higher than anything Joanna had anticipated, and smooth and extraordinarily uninviting to an amateur burglar. Indeed, but for the thought of Auriel's despair, she would

have accepted, even at this late hour, the idea that the plan was quite impracticable, after all.

And then fate—kind or unkind, it would be difficult to say—presented her with an absurdly easy solution. One of the two or three gates set far back in the wall had been left ajar.

Not a soul was in sight. With hardly so much as a check in her rapid walking, Joanna slipped in, and pushed the gate to behind her. Not so that it completely latched, as she was already beginning to think of her line of retreat and, for all she knew, the door might lock automatically. Probably did, in fact, for some very secure protection would be needed in a place where the fire-escape presented such an easy ascent.

It towered in front of her now, so close that she gasped to think how near she was to her final objective.

Looking up, she saw that not many windows were showing a light by now. But, with another horrid accentuation of her heartbeats, she saw that light was streaming from one window directly on to the fire-escape. Fearfully she counted the windows, and then drew a long breath of relief.

The light came from the fifth floor. She would not have to pass it. Indeed, in contrast, the floor below seemed thrown into even deeper shadow. Fortune seemed to be favouring her again.

Not giving herself time to consider, and sternly disregarding the peculiar sensation in her knees, Joanna began to climb the rather old-fashioned iron staircase. The blood seemed to be making such a strange, pulsing sound in her head that she found it hard to check on the silence of her footsteps. But, softly and lightly, counting the floors as she went, she mounted the steps.

She didn't need to count, really, she told herself. When she reached the window just below the light, she would know she was there.

And, when she reached the window just below the light, she could scarcely believe the consistence of her luck. There was no need to use the penknife yet—no nerve-racking ordeal while she struggled to force back the window

catch. The lower sash was actually a little raised. All she had to do was to push it up further and step inside the room.

Heavy velvet curtains met her outstretched hand, but she was able to push them aside and, almost silently, slip into her blessed shelter.

Like any well-prepared burglar, she had brought a pocket-torch with her. But—never intended for such a job as this—it was quite inadequate. And, having swept the thin line of light round the room, Joanna decided that the safest thing was to concentrate on speed.

The heavy curtains would protect her from any possible suspicion from outside. The simplest thing was to switch on the light and set to work.

It required something of an effort to make herself do this, even though she knew the flat was empty, but the moment the room was fully illuminated, her eye lighted on the bureau which Auriel had described. And, with victory almost within her reach, she felt her fears subside.

Curiously enough, she was almost put out, rather than reassured, to find that the bureau was unlocked. Somehow, everything was being almost too easy. Or was it just that, in her amateurish expectation of melodrama all the way, she had exaggerated the difficulties in advance and insisted on a cloak-and-dagger technique?

In any case, she felt ridiculously self-conscious about that businesslike penknife (masquerading as dagger, presumably) with which she had so unnecessarily provided herself. And, slipping it back into her pocket, she turned back the flap of the bureau, and proceeded to search systematically through the letters and papers she found there.

She was completely absorbed. Her heartbeats no longer sounded like hammer-blows. Her breath came evenly, and even her knees felt almost normal. After all, she was alone in the place, with time enough before her. Even if it took a long while--

And then it happened.

Without so much as the click of a lock to warn her, a man's voice spoke, pleasantly but a little dangerously, behind her.

'Would you mind telling me what you're doing at that desk?'

For a moment, she could not even turn round. She could not even uncurl her stiffened fingers from the sheaf of letters she was holding. She could only stand there, rigid and motionless, while her very heart seemed to stand still too.

Then, with an effort beyond anything she had ever achieved, she slowly turned, expecting to see Simon Gray.

The man who leaned carelessly against the side of the doorway, one hand in the pocket of his jacket, was a complete stranger to her.

'Who are you?' she said, with a little gasp. 'And what are you doing here?'

'Don't think me unco-operative,' was the dry retort, 'but I'm afraid those are questions which *you* must answer first.'

'This flat—was lent to me—for the week-end.'

The idea came to her in a flash, as she realised that this must be the explanation of the man's own presence here. Simon Gray must have lent it to *him* for the week-end. If she could pretend there had been a mix-up and the flat lent to two people, she might yet bluff her way out.

'Is that so?' He didn't seem much impressed. 'Do you always come in by the window?'

'Oh'—she managed a deprecating little laugh—'I know it sounds silly, but I—I lost the key.'

'It does sound rather silly,' he agreed. 'Wouldn't it have been simpler to have asked the night porter to let you in?'

Joanna swallowed.

'I wasn't—all that anxious to draw attention to the fact that I—I was having the run of—of a man's flat for the week-end.'

Not very good, she knew. But just possible.

'I see.' His reflective glance went once more to the open bureau. 'Tell me—*who* invited you to stay here?'

'Why, Simon—Mr Gray, of course.'

Whereupon you returned his hospitality by rifling his private papers.'

'Oh--' Again she managed the deprecating little laugh. 'Of course it was awful of me to be so—so inquisitive. But at least I've been well punished. You make me feel a perfect worm.'

'Not at all.' A gleam of irony crept into his unfriendly eyes. 'Presumably this is your own way of making yourself at home. You know Mr Gray very well, I take it?'

'Oh, certainly!'

'And have often visited him in his flat?'

She passed the tip of her tongue over her lips, suspecting some sort of trap here. But she answered, almost without hesitation,

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, I can only suggest that in future when you go visiting you cultivate some powers of observation. Didn't this room seem strangely unfamiliar to you?'

She knew now that somewhere in this conversation there had been a trap and that she had fallen into it. She stared at him wide-eyed and wordless, afraid to say anything else in case she made matters worse.

And then at last he moved from his lounging position by the door and came slowly forward into the room. If the desk had not been behind her, she would have backed away from him. As it was, he came right up to her and stood towering over her in the most disconcerting manner.

'You-know, you're quite a good liar,' he said conversationally. 'But your initial reconnaissance work was poor. This doesn't happen to be Simon Gray's flat at all. He lives in the flat immediately above this one.'

'Oh, no!' Her hand flew to her lips, in a gesture of startled dismay. 'But that can't be true,' she added immediately. 'There's a light burning there. I—I saw it. And he's away. I know he is. Besides'—she glanced round the room, too bewildered and put out now to pretend anything —'this is the fourth floor, isn't it?'

He smiled as he shook his head. But it was not a friendly or understanding smile.

'But I counted the floors—several times. I *couldn't* be mistaken.'

'Not mistaken, perhaps. Just unlucky. You see, unfortunately for you, this block is built on a sloping site. The first row of windows at the back don't belong to a floor of flats at all. They're part of the administrative offices and so on. What is the ground floor at the front of the block becomes the first floor at the back. Too bad. You couldn't really have taken that into your calculations. Unless, of course, you knew the place well, which I'm afraid I don't really believe you do, Miss...?'

Joanna didn't offer to complete her name for him. It was bad enough to find herself in this equivocal position without positively identifying herself.

'I'm very sorry. I—I do most humbly apologise for breaking into your flat like this. But Simon really had lent...'

'No, no, that doesn't bear repetition, you know. It was weak, but might have passed in the flurry of first explanations. You can't use it again. I'm not a suspicious sort of fellow, but I begin to ask myself how much of the rest of the story is invention--'

'I assure you--'

'... And whether my best course wouldn't be to ring up the police and hand over a charming sneak-thief to their further investigation.'

'Oh, no! Please, please don't do any such thing!' In a nightmare vision, Joanna saw her dignified father being summoned to Bow Street in the morning and asked to provide bail for his elder daughter. 'I *swear* to you I wasn't really burg—I mean, trying to take anything from you. It was a letter--'

She stopped.

'Suppose you sit down,' he said politely, perhaps guessing that her knees were buckling under her.

'Th-thank you,' Joanna dropped into the low chair which he pushed forward for her. She wished he would also have sat down. It made her feel terribly at a disadvantage having him stand over her like this. But she thought, glancing at him surreptitiously, that he was not a man to take suggestions or requests very easily.

Good-looking, in a tall well-built, uncompromising sort of way, he might have been a successful doctor or lecturer or—dreadful thought—lawyer. There was nothing at all indulgent about the set of his mouth, and the gleams of humour which he had displayed were sarcastic rather than reassuring. Joanna tried to tell herself that no one with such well-set eyes could be without some sort of human reaction. But then she had to admit, the next moment, that at present they were of an extraordinarily cold, clear grey which she found singularly unreassuring.

'Well?' he prompted at last, possibly in answer to her nervously hopeful scrutiny.

'I think,' Joanna said, again moistening her lips with her tongue, 'that I'd better tell you the exact truth.'

'It's quite a good plan at a moment like this,' he agreed. 'When all else has failed, I mean.'

She swallowed that as best she could. After all, he could hardly be expected to see her in a flattering light.

'Do you know Simon Gray?' she asked, rather timidly.

'Only by sight.'

'Well, he has in his possession a letter—a very compromising sort of letter--' She broke off suddenly, realising from his slight glance of distaste that he thought he was hearing yet more of her undesirable activities. 'It's not *my* letter,' she exclaimed, with more indignation than the doubt of a stranger seemed to call for.

'Of course not.' Again that faint smile which so greatly disconcerted her.

'But it *isn't*!'

'Do you think this is really of great importance?' He infused a quite extraordinary degree of indifference into that.

'To—to me it is,' Joanna muttered, but she knew she was poorly placed for any display of anxiety over her good name. 'Anyway, he proposed to use this letter in a—a damaging way. It would have meant great unhappiness for several people I'm fond of. He—wouldn't yield to argument, so I decided to—steal back the letter.'

'Even though it was not yours?'

'I was taking it straight to the girl who wrote it. And— oh'—she stopped, almost wringing her hands as she recalled Auriel waiting, waiting, hopefully—'I've failed. He can still use the letter, unless--'

She broke off again, and this time real amusement came into the cold, grey eyes which never left her face.

'Don't tell me that you're toying with the idea of going on to the flat overhead, once you've talked yourself out of this one,' the man said mockingly.

'No'—she took that quite literally and answered with a worried frown—'no, I can't. There's a light there, after all. I can't understand it.'

'I'm afraid another minor miscalculation on your part,' he told her regretfully. And, because of the mocking note in his voice, she blazed out suddenly at him, in a way quite foreign to her.

'Oh, it's just an amusing and distasteful incident to you, isn't it?' she flung at him furiously, her hazel eyes suddenly taking on the strange green light which they did when she was deeply stirred. 'Something out of which you'll make a good story. Something which makes *you* feel good and superior and safe, because you know *you* would take care never to be involved in such a thing, but--'

'I've never tried my hand at housebreaking,' he agreed mildly.

'But to the girl concerned it can mean ruin and misery. And to my parents—her parents, I mean—it will be disgrace and disillusionment and a bewildering shock which they won't deserve. They're good, kind, decent people. They have no idea of what's hanging over them. They don't deserve it, I tell you, they don't *deserve* it.'

And suddenly she buried her face in her hands, and caught her breath on one or two difficult sobs, because she could not bear to think how hopelessly she had failed.

'My dear,' the cool voice said, after a moment, 'I'm sorry if you think I'm lacking in sympathy. But the situation is, to say the least of it, a little odd, you know. Just consider--'

But Joanna never heard what it was she was to consider. For at that moment there was a knock on the front door of the flat. A knock so dramatic and authoritative—so incongruous at this hour of the night—that panic assailed her, and she leapt to her feet and would have run (though she hardly knew

where) if the man had not caught her wrist in thin, strong fingers and said, softly but peremptorily,

'Be quiet! Stay where you are.'

'Must you answer it?'

'Of course.'

They were both speaking in whispers now, and she was trembling so that he shifted his hand until it was under her elbow and supported her a little.

As he did so, the knock came again. Insistent, determined, impossible to ignore.

'Stay there.' He pushed her into the angle made by the half-open door and the wall, and went out into the small hall.

Joanna leaned against the wall, and would have closed her eyes, only her attention was caught and fascinated by the spectacle of herself in the mirror opposite.

'Can that frightened girl be me?' she thought wonder-ingly. The hood had long ago fallen back from her head, and her bright fair hair, still sprinkled with rain-drops in front, was more dishevelled than she could have imagined. Her eyes looked dark now, with fear, and her face was whiter than she could ever remember having seen it. Only her lips remained red—dramatically so, as the thin line of her white teeth bit into her lower one.

'I *look* guilty,' Joanna thought. 'No wonder he didn't believe me.'

And then she heard his voice, pleasant, unemotional and completely calm, speaking to whoever was at the door.

'What is it, Constable?'

'Spot of trouble in the flat overhead, sir,' a rather hoarse voice replied.
'Gentleman been found dead. I'm sorry to trouble you at this hour, but we're making routine inquiries at all the neighbouring flats.'

CHAPTER TWO

JOANNA found herself trembling violently. Not so much with personal fear—though in a matter of minutes the policeman would be inside the flat and she would have to explain her quite inexplicable presence. What shook her was a sort of spasm of nervous horror at the sudden explanation of the mysterious lighted window.

She had supposed the only explanation for that light must be the presence of someone in the flat, after all. But in actual fact, that light, streaming out into the night, was silently, significantly advertising the presence, not of the living, but of the dead. Whoever was there had not had time to turn off the light—would never turn off any light again.

And when she had telephoned, and the bell had rung and rung in the silent flat, had the man—Simon, she supposed—been lying there dead all the time?

There was something so ghoulish about the combination of the blazing light, the insistently ringing telephone, and a dead man, that it was no wonder she shuddered.

But, almost immediately, the insistent demands of her own appalling position recalled her to realities. The man at the door, after a short exchange of words which she had not caught, was saying, 'Well, you'd better come in.'

And, as she heard the tread of the policemen entering the little hall, it came to her, with a sense of nightmare helplessness, - that, in a block of flats where presumably murder had been done, she had been creeping about on the fire escape, not half an hour ago, quite obviously 'with unlawful intent'.

Would the man give her away at once? And, if not, how would he explain her? He couldn't introduce her. He didn't even know what to call her. Three sentences, and it would be obvious that he had never seen her before.

Then he came into the room, closely followed by an earnest-looking young policeman. And what he said was:

'This is a nasty business, darling. Someone's apparently done in that chap, Gray, who lives overhead. At least,' he turned to the constable, 'I suppose it's not suicide?'

'Not unless the gentleman's a contortionist, sir,' was the rather stolid reply. 'Stabbed in the back.'

'How—how awful!' stammered Joanna, hoping she was registering sufficient general regret, without sounding as though the information held any personal significance for her. 'You—knew him quite well by sight, didn't you?' Somehow she turned to the man who had called her 'darling' and addressed him in a natural tone.

If he had brilliantly solved the problem of what to call her, at least she must contrive to back him up in his entirely unexpected effort to help her.

The policeman was already writing down particulars about the owner of the flat, and, in spite of his stolid appearance, he was rapid and businesslike about it.

'Now the young lady.' He turned to Joanna, who tried not to feel and look like a detected criminal. 'Name, please.'

'Joanna Deane.'

'Do you live in this block?'

'Oh, no.' She hesitated a moment, but it would be asking for trouble to give wrong information to the police. 'Twenty-two Grandison Place, S.W.7.'

The policeman wrote this down and remarked, 'Quite a way away from here.'

'Yes, I—was just going.'

He looked up then, and, by some extraordinary ocular feat, appeared to take in the fact that there was rain on her hair, that she still had her coat on, and

that the clock registered a very odd hour of the night—or rather, morning—for a social call.

'Just come, too, haven't you?' he said, not at all offensively.

'Not a quarter of an hour ago.' That was the man, interrupting quite cheerfully. 'Miss Deane looked in on me, on the way home from a late film. There were one or two things we wanted to discuss.'

He must have underestimated the time element, Joanna thought. Because once more the policeman's glance went to the clock on the mantelpiece. And, a little ruefully, her involuntary host's glance followed it.

'I say! It's later than I realised,' he remarked with extremely well-simulated surprise.

'It's late for a casual call,' the policeman agreed. And —although this could not have been anything but an unlucky chance—he seemed to look thoughtfully at the window.

Joanna felt her nerves go to pieces. In that moment, she felt almost like confessing exactly what she had been doing, in order to put an end—somehow, anyhow—to this agonising suspense.

'Which cinema did you go to, Miss Deane?' the policeman asked, almost conversationally, as though they were simply going to have a cosy little chat about films.

'The Empire,' Joanna was surprised to hear herself say.

She hadn't thought she had enough self-control left to reply, much less to choose a cinema where she really had seen the film recently.

'Hm—I wouldn't exactly describe this as "on your way home" to S.W.7,' was the dry reply.

'Oh, but—you see--'

Joanna's mind went almost blank. For a moment, she could not even remember where the Empire was, although she -passed it every day on her way to lunch. She was finished, she knew. Perhaps if she just told the exact truth...

'When I said Miss Deane looked in on the way home, it was rather a figure of speech,' she suddenly heard the owner of the flat explaining casually. 'The fact is that she and I are—going to be married quite soon. You'll understand that to an engaged couple there are often things which it seems vital to discuss urgently, though to the—more normal state of mind, shall we say?—they appear perfectly able to wait until the next day. And at such times "on the way home" can be taken to mean a detour of anything up to five miles. It's a bit difficult to explain, unless you happen to be an engaged or married man, Constable.'

An unexpectedly broad smile appeared on the policeman's face.

'Married, sir. About three months,' he explained almost genially. 'And I think I remember what you mean.'

They all laughed then. And Joanna was horrified to find that she had the greatest difficulty in stopping herself from going on and on laughing. Her so-called fiance's hand closed warningly on her arm, however, and somehow she checked herself. And then, presumably to cover the movement, and to substantiate their degree of affectionate intimacy in the eyes of the police, he put his arm round her and drew her against him, with an air of casual affection.

'Well'—the policeman turned back to his notebook— 'there are just one or two more things--'

He paused to flick over a page, and as he did so, there was a completely unexpected interruption. Into the flat, whose front door had apparently and inexplicably been left ajar, there swept the striking figure of an elegant middle- aged woman in evening dress.

'Neil! What *is* all this? I saw the police car outside, and couldn't help coming to inquire. The porter says there's been a murder, and now I find the

police'—she cast an interested glance over the annoyed constable—'right inside *your* flat. What does it *mean*?'

'Aunt Jessica, where on earth did you come from at this hour?' asked the owner of the flat rather disagreeably, at the same moment as the policeman said:

'Madam, please--'

'From Dorothy Meredith's silly party.' The visitor evidently believed in taking first things first. 'I don't know really why I go there. She always has such stupid people, and they all say exactly the same things, and far too many times.'

'Madam, please--' This time the policeman insisted on capturing her attention—'you are interrupting an official inquiry. Will you please kindly step outside, or else sit down and let me do the talking.'

'Oh, well --' Choosing the lesser of two evils, the woman addressed as 'Aunt Jessica' dropped gracefully into the most comfortable chair in the room and proceeded to fix her curious and slightly prominent gaze on her nephew and the girl in the circle of his arm.

'Now, sir'—the policeman turned back to the man and Joanna—'if you and your fiancée'—Aunt Jessica made a movement which almost took her out of her chair again, but no one appeared to notice—'would kindly go over the events of the evening. You particularly, sir, because the young lady says she hasn't been here long in any case.'

'I'm afraid I came in only an hour ago, too,' the man explained pleasantly. But he obligingly went over the minor happenings of that hour. They included nothing which could possibly have been connected with the flat overhead, and also omitted any reference to a girl arriving unexpectedly through the window and proceeding to rifle his desk.

'Well, thank you. I think that's all for the moment, sir.' The policeman closed his notebook and thoughtfully slipped a rubber band over it.

'May I go now?' That came out much too eagerly, Joanna knew.

'I'd be obliged if you'd wait just a little while longer, Miss Deane. I don't think it'll be more than half an hour before we've completed all inquiries.'

'Very well.' She wondered distractedly what Auriel was suffering, but it didn't do to think along those lines.

'Don't you want to ask me any questions?' Aunt Jessica seemed faintly disappointed at having no part in all this.

'Not unless you live here, madam --'

'Oh, no.'

'Or have visited here during the evening.'

'Oh, no. I told you, I was at that stupid—oh, well, never mind.'

'Then I don't need to ask you any questions, thank you. And there is no necessity for you to stay. Unless, of course, you want to,' the policeman added rather heavily. Having said which, he went out, closing the door very deliberately behind him.

'Neil!' Aunt Jessica sprang up at once. 'What *is* all this? And is this dear child really engaged to you? I can't tell you, my dear, how glad I am that someone has caught him at last,' she added cordially to Joanna. 'I was beginning to think ----- '

'We're not engaged, Aunt Jessica. And you're very much embarrassing Miss Deane,' stated Neil unequivocally.

'But that police sergeant --'

'Constable.'

'—Constable, then, but they all look alike in that nice uniform. He said Miss Deane was your fiancée.'

'We had told him so for the purposes of—explaining Miss Dean's presence here and shortening the inquiry.'

'But I don't understand. At least, I don't think—I mean I *hope*—I don't understand.' Aunt Jessica's expression of friendly congratulation had undergone a subtle change. She was not shocked, her doubtful, rather knowing smile seemed to say. Oh, dear, no—she was much too much a woman of the world for that. But the pretty girl she had found in her nephew's flat at this hour of the morning was quite obviously being taken out of one mental pigeonhole and put in another.

'No, Aunt Jessica, you do not understand,' her nephew assured her dryly. 'There really isn't any need for you to understand. And I'll be obliged if you won't start guessing or asking questions. If you really wish to enhance your reputation as a likeable relative and a woman of the world, you'll go home now and go straight to bed and forget you ever dropped in here at the wrong moment.'

'Well, of course, dear. If that's what you really want --'

'That's what I really want.'

A struggle appeared on Aunt Jessica's handsome face. Devouring curiosity prompted her to stay and ask more. Real affection for her nephew bade her do just what he asked. To her credit, her affection won. And, without saying goodnight to Joanna—a subtle distinction which showed what little value she attached to her nephew's reassurances about his pretty visitor—she allowed Neil to usher her out into the hall and, after an energetic whisper or two, out of the front door.

When he came back into the room again, Joanna had sunk down in the chair Aunt Jessica had vacated, and before he addressed any word to her, he brought her something to drink.

'Try that. You'll feel better.'

Joanna took the glass without speaking.

'I'm sorry, I'm afraid I didn't succeed in establishing your respectability with my aunt. But as you're never likely to meet her again, perhaps that doesn't matter.'

'Of course not.' Joanna brushed Aunt Jessica's views on her morality aside. There were other, more important things to discuss. 'Why—did you do it?' she asked baldly, staring across the room at him.

'Disillusion Aunt Jessica?'

'No, no! Why did you save me from the police?'

'I don't really know. I suppose you *hadn't* been shoving a knife into Gray's back, had you?' he said conversationally.

'Of course not!' She shuddered. 'But if you'd told that policeman how I came into your flat and—and what I'd been doing, he would certainly have suspected me, and there'd have been all sorts of dreadful inquiries and publicity and *anything* could have happened.'

'Well, I suppose that's what I thought at the back of my mind,' he agreed reflectively. 'It seemed a damned shame to let you in for that, even if you had been a little idiot, playing fast and loose with the wrong sort of man.'

'I hadn't!' she exclaimed. But he made a slight gesture of his hand and smiled dryly.

'Now, you can't expect three credulous people in one evening,' he told her. 'You must be satisfied with hoodwinking my aunt and one constable.'

'Oh, but --' She stopped suddenly. What did it matter, anyway? Let him despise her, in that casual, smiling way. Like Aunt Jessica, he was never likely to come her way again. He had saved her. That was the principal thing. Even if he did despise her, he had helped her to the extent of playing her fiance for ten minutes. Not many men would have done that in the circumstances.

'Well, I'm very grateful to you, anyway,' she said a little stiffly. At which he inclined his head and smiled a trifle mockingly.

'But it hasn't got you any nearer recovering your letter, I'm afraid.'

'Oh --' For a moment her expression froze into one of terror again. Then, as it slowly dawned on her that the person who had proposed to use that letter would never lay plans again, the tension relaxed. 'It doesn't—matter now.'

'Not even if the police find the letter among his papers?'

'N-no, I don't think so.' She frowned as she tried to remember what Auriel had told her about it. 'It's quite— quite out of date, anyway. It refers to—something more than a year ago.'

'I see.' Again that slightly mocking smile, which made her desperately anxious to justify herself, even though he meant nothing to her personally.

There was a short silence. Then she said:

'I'm sorry to put you to the nuisance of—housing me while the police complete their inquiries.'

'Not at all. Where else should my fiancée pass the time while she's waiting?'

In ordinary circumstances, she would have smiled at that and made some amused reply. But, knowing what he thought of her, she could not help suspecting unfriendly sarcasm.

Indeed, she was almost relieved when there was another knock—not quite such a peremptory one this time—at the front door. Though her heart began to beat uncomfortably again at the very thought of further questioning.

'I really can't --' she began helplessly.

But he silenced her with a not unkindly pressure on her shoulder as he passed her chair on the way to the door.

Perhaps out of consideration for her, he pulled the study door closed after him, so that she could hear only a murmur of voices when he opened the front door. In a way, that was almost more harrowing than hearing what actually was said. But she had no strength left to go nearer and listen.

At last, after what seemed a cruelly long time—though it could only have been two or three minutes—the voices ceased, she heard the door close once more, and the man called Neil came back into the room.

'All right.' He stood by the door and looked at her, as he had in the first moments when he had discovered her, only this time his smile was faintly reassuring. 'You can go home. The police-surgeon's been, and established that Grey has been dead for nearly twenty-four hours. That lets you out.'

'Nearly --? But how horrible! It must have been just after --' She caught herself up before she could make any reference to Auriel's having seen him the evening before. 'Then the light'—her voice faltered—'the light must have been on all day.' Somehow that seemed the last touch of horrid incongruity.

'Yes. I expect that's what first drew attention to the place. That and an inquiry by some friends he was expected to visit today.'

'Oh, yes—I know,' she murmured.

Then she saw him glance at her curiously, and she wished she had not shown any further knowledge of Simon Gray's movements.

'Did you say I could go now?' She looked at him eagerly, as though the question of her release lay with him personally.

'Certainly. I'll come and see that you get a taxi.'

'Oh, you needn't!' Somehow it embarrassed her dreadfully to think of his performing this small act of courtesy for her, when she had forced herself on him in such a peculiar and questionable circumstances.

He paid no attention to her protest, however, and accompanied her downstairs to the main entrance. Here a porter undertook to signal a taxi for

them, and filled in the waiting moments by saying, 'Terrible business, this murder, isn't it, sir?' But with such an air of enjoyable importance that Neil's perfunctory 'Terrible' seemed all unworthy of the drama of the moment.

'It's me that had to identify him.'

'Is that so?' It was impossible to deny him his little moment of stardom. 'He was stabbed, I understand.'

'Oh, yes, sir. Good and proper. Such a sight--'

Joanna made a wordless sound in her throat, and immediately Neil put his arm round her and, firmly shaking off the porter, took her out into the open air, to wait for the taxi.

'Don't think about it.' His voice was calm and impersonal.

'I'm trying not to.'

'Good girl. Here's your taxi coming.' Then, as the cab drew up at the kerb, he said quietly and firmly. 'Now, whatever he meant to you, remember you've had a lucky escape. It's over and done with, and you'll do no good harrowing yourself about how it ended. Be a sensible girl in future, and don't ever write silly letters again.'

'But he didn't mean a thing--' she began angrily.

He was handing her into the taxi by now, however, and she doubted if he even heard her half-protest, as he leaned forward to give the driver the address.

'Good night.' Standing back, he gave her a half-smiling, half-mocking little salute. And the next moment the taxi had driven her away.

Joanna remembered very little of the drive home. She lay back against the cold, shiny upholstery of the taxi and, shutting her eyes, let her tired mind go blank.

It was over. This horrible, nerve-tearing adventure was over. She must try to forget it. She couldn't even remember the man's name, as it was, though she must have heard it when he gave it to the policeman. All she could remember was that he was called 'Neil'.

But that she would not forget. Whenever she heard that name in future she would see him standing there, tall, sceptical, a little mocking, sizing her up as a pretty fly-by- night, whose indiscretions had caught up with her.

She wished she could have convinced him.

Oh, it didn't matter, really. She would never see him again. Only—to have *anyone* look at one like that--

The taxi stopped with a jerk. She paid the driver, let herself silently into the house, and, feeling almost weak with relief, tiptoed softly up the stairs.

There was a fine of light still under Auriel's door. How long had she been waiting, poor child?

Joanna went into the room, and a tousled, shadowy-eyed Auriel shot up in bed.

'It's all right,' Joanna said quickly.

'You've *got* it?'

'No, but everything's all right, because--'

'Everything can't be all right, if you haven't got it!' Auriel's voice ran up into a perilous wail that sounded appallingly loud in the silent house.

'Be quiet! He's dead.'

She hadn't meant to say it like that—in that horrible bald, unprepared statement—but she was afraid that Auriel would turn hysterical if left in doubt any longer.

As it was, the shock strangled any other protest in her throat.

White-faced, and with her eyes staring, Auriel dropped back against the pillows.

'Did you say—dead?' she asked hoarsely at last.

'Yes.'

'You mean you—killed him?'

'Oh, Auriel, don't be such an idiot!' With a weary little laugh, Joanna sank down on the side of the bed, and ran her hands through her hair as though even that weighed heavily on her aching head. 'No, of course I didn't kill him. I suppose'—she hesitated, and then said lamely—'someone else did.'

'I don't understand.'

'No, nor do I really. Nor do even the police, I think.'

'The—police,' Auriel said faintly. 'Were *they* there?'

'Yes.'

'And found you there in the flat!'

'What? Oh, no. I broke into the wrong flat,' Joanna explained almost absently.

Auriel leant over and shook her.

'Are you crazy, or—or hysterical or something?'

'No. Just tired out, and so nerve-racked that I hardly know what I'm saying. But listen—I'll tell you what happened.'

And, crouching there on the bed beside Auriel, she told the story of that incredible evening, in short, whispered phrases which seemed to gather

added drama from the fact that the two of them were awake in a silent, sleeping house at a preposterous hour of the morning.

'And what about all his papers?' Auriel asked at last. 'Will the police take charge of those?'

'I—suppose so.'

Including my letter?'

'Yes, but it won't mean anything to them. An—arrangement made a year ago. How did you sign it, Auriel?'

The younger girl frowned in concentration for a moment. Then a great light of relief broke over her face.

'Just with his nickname for me—"Sweetness".'

A look of distaste passed over Joanna's face at the fatuity of allowing a man of Simon Gray's type—or indeed any type—to call one that. Also, as another thought struck her, she said sharply:

'Then it would hardly have had much significance for Mrs Morgan? Don't tell me this terrible evening wasn't necessary after all?'

'She knows my writing,' Auriel said.

'But I suppose at least you had the sense not to put an address?'

Auriel hesitated just a second. Then she insisted eagerly that she was sure there had been no address.

'Not that it could matter, I'm sure,' Joanna said soothingly 'It's a year old—and couldn't have any significance for the police.'

'Of course not. Oh, Joanna'—suddenly Auriel lay back and yawned in a kitten-like manner—'how lovely it is to feel safe again!'

'It must be,' Joanna said slowly, wishing she could banish from her mental vision a brightly lighted window in a darkened block of flats.

How strange that sweet, helpless Auriel could have loved a man enough to want to go away with him, and one year later mark his passing with a yawn.

'It's not that she's callous,' Joanna tried to tell herself. 'She's like a child. Her sense of values just isn't adult. One can't blame her, exactly. And, in any case, it's natural that relief should be uppermost in her mind.'

Suddenly she felt appallingly, aching tired.

'Goodnight, my dear.' She dragged herself to her feet, and bent to kiss Auriel.

'Goodnight, darling, darling Joanna! Didn't that man think you were wonderful to do all that for another girl?'

'He didn't believe me. He thought I was putting up a clumsy story to hide my own indiscretions.'

'Oh--' Auriel laughed doubtfully. 'What a shame! But it doesn't matter. He's a stranger. You'll never see him again.'

'That's true,' Joanna said. 'Goodnight.'

And she went to her room, dragged off her clothes and, falling into bed, slept like the dead. Though that was not a simile she would have chosen to use herself, in view of the evening's events.

When she wakened the next morning, she felt incredibly fresh and energetic. For a few moments she even failed to recall the terrible events of the previous evening. Then recollections came sweeping back on her, but in an unreal and impersonal way, as though she were remembering something she had been told, rather than something she herself had lived through.

'It's because none of it has any real relation to my normal life,' Joanna told herself as she bathed and dressed. She even found herself humming quite

gaily as she turned on the shower. And then she stopped herself and wondered guiltily if she were really as irresponsible as Auriel.

In her office, however, there was nothing to remind her of her disturbing adventure. With more than usual satisfaction, Joanna glanced round her charming, businesslike room, with its two Anderson etchings and its distant but exhilarating view of the river.

She was unusually happy in her work, having an employer whose courtesy and pleasant ways made most people describe him as 'of the old school, you know'. By which they meant that in the world of the common man, in which all claimed to be equal, one must not expect a very high degree of politeness and consideration.

Sir Henry Gilmore, the distinguished head of a distinguished firm of architects, was remotely related to Auriel's future father-in-law. And, although Joanna felt she would never like the Morgans (with exception of John himself) she did feel very real gratitude to them for the introduction which had secured her this enviable position as Sir Henry's secretary.

On this particular morning she was not expecting him in until eleven o'clock, so she had plenty of time to open the post and attend to anything which was her own particular province.

Absorbed in her work, she forgot about everything but the immediate present, and, when Sir Henry's bell summoned her to his office, she was surprised to see that it was already so late.

He looked up and smiled as she came in, greeting her exactly as he would have greeted a valued client. Then his glance dropped once more to the newspaper he had been reading.

'I see most of the Benwood Side Estate is coming into the market. We built it, you know—twenty years or more ago. Dear me, dear me, when one compares prices then and now—well, it doesn't do to try to. The world's gone mad, I fear --' And he was about to push the newspaper to one side when something else caught his attention.

'Why, how extraordinary!'

Joanna sat down and waited, a little indulgently, for his further comments on the day's news.

'It seems there was a murder at Killigrew Mansions last night!'

Joanna actually felt her breathing stop. Then she forced herself to look and sound normal.

'But there are always murders happening, according to the papers,' she said, rather stupidly.

Her employer laughed.

'That seems a somewhat pessimistic view of present-day life and press-reporting, Miss Deane,' he said. 'But I dare say you're right. I don't usually notice these things. Only this happens to be the block of flats where my nephew lives. He's coming in to see me this afternoon. I must ask him about the odd neighbours he seems to have.'

CHAPTER THREE

'DON'T be so ridiculous!' Joanna kept on telling herself feverishly, all the while she was mechanically taking down dictation from Sir Henry. 'There are dozens—probably hundreds—of people living in that block of flats. It's goodness knows how many chances to one against its being the same man. Why *should* it be?'

But a dreadful sense of fatality kept on telling her that this was part of an inescapable pattern.

'I *know* it's the same man. It's the sort of thing that would happen, after all the misfortunes of last night. I'm simply fated to be harrowed and humiliated over everything to do with that wretched block of flats.'

She was hardly even surprised—only indescribably dismayed—when her employer said, as she rose to go:

'I wonder if you could make a point of being back from lunch rather promptly today, Miss Deane. I find that I may be delayed, and I'd be glad if you could be here to explain to my nephew and make my apologies.'

She ought to have had the presence of mind to plead a very special lunch engagement herself. Instead, she heard herself say pleasantly, 'Why, of course, Sir Henry.' And then, because she *had* to know as quickly as possible, 'What is your nephew's name?'

'Oh—Conway. On my wife's side, you know,' Sir Henry explained obligingly. And Joanna simply had not the effrontery to ask if his other name were Neil.

She went back to her room in a condition as near to resigned despair as she had ever known. And then—because the subject had a horrid fascination for her, even while it repelled her—she took out her morning paper, and looked through it carefully for some news of Simon Gray's death.

She wondered now why she had not done this before. It seemed childish of her just to have tried to dismiss the whole thing. True, there had been little

opportunity to study her newspaper intensively while she stood in the swaying Tube train. But surely as soon as she had reached the office --

There it was!

Just a short, unemotional paragraph, headed, 'Man found stabbed in Hampstead flat.'

'In the early hours of this morning, Simon Gray, a well-known man-about-town, was found stabbed to death in his flat at Killigrew Mansions. Attention was drawn to the scene of the crime by inquiries from friends who had expected Mr Gray to spend Sunday with them. It was then remarked by George Thomas, a porter employed at Killigrew Mansions, that a light had been burning continuously in the deceased's flat for nearly twenty-four hours. Failing to obtain any answer to their repeated knocks, the police broke in, and found the dead man. Developments are expected.'

Never before had that last stereotyped little sentence carried any threat or alarm to Joanna. But the uneasiness which came over her as she read it now could hardly have been greater if she *had* been vitally concerned in the murder of Simon Gray.

In her excited fancy, she imagined hawkfaced detectives —quite unlike the stolid policeman of the previous night— combing through every paper and letter in the dead man's flat. And, when they came to Auriel's silly little bit of indiscretion, would it appear to have some bearing on the crime? Would they read into it some mysterious assignation which needed explaining?

It was all very well for Auriel and herself to talk blithely of its being a year old. Did one usually put the year when dating a letter of that kind? Might it not equally well apply to a date just a few weeks ago?

Impatiently, Joanna told herself not to build fears and dangers where none existed. But the unpleasant coincidence revealed by Sir Henry's casual remark seemed to discredit all common sense, and make the unpleasantly improbable much more credible than any normal development.

Joanna had little appetite for her lunch. And, by the time she returned, she would not have been surprised to find Neil sitting in her office.

There was no sign of him, however, and—because she really had a great deal of work to do—Joanna doggedly settled to the most urgent of her tasks, and tried not to let her thoughts wander to what she should say when Neil finally did put in an appearance. In a way, it would be better, of course, to have him arrive while Sir Henry was still at lunch. At least that would obviate any surprised and involuntary recognition on his part taking place in front of his uncle.

'If I can have a word with him first--' thought Joanna.

Then a pleasant, deeply-tanned young man put his head round the door and said:

'Oh—I'm sorry. This isn't the general office, is it?'

'No, it isn't.' Joanna spoke more sharply than she usually addressed casual callers, but she was nervously afraid that Neil would arrive at any moment. 'The general office is at the end of the passage, and is clearly marked.'

'Oh, I'm—sorry,' the young man said again, but in a much more crestfallen tone that time.

Joanna's really kind heart smote her.

'That's all right. Whom did you want to see?'

'My uncle, Sir Henry Gilmore.'

'Oh --' She jumped to her feet, incredulous pleasure and relief in every line of her. 'I didn't realise—are *you* Mr Conway? Do come in. I was told to keep a look-out for you.'

She had held out her hand to him in unnaturally cordial welcome before she realised what she was doing. Indeed, she could have fallen on his neck and kissed him, just because he was Mr Conway, but his other name wasn't Neil.

'That's very kind of you.' The young man was evidently both surprised and gratified by the sudden change of front. 'I expect you get a lot of dopes putting their heads in here. It's because your door is the nearest to the lift.'

'Yes. But it doesn't matter a bit. Do sit down,' Joanna said eagerly.

'Well, it's nice to be made so welcome.' He grinned at her, as he dropped into a chair, and a little self-consciously fingered the blue tie which was the exact colour of his very frank eyes.

'Oh!' Joanna blushed scarlet, suddenly realising that he most probably attributed her changed manner to some snobbish regard for any relations of her employer. 'You must think me impossible --'

'Not in the least!'

'But I was expecting you to be someone else.' He looked justifiably puzzled.

'I mean—I'm so glad you weren't the person I was expecting.'

'Well, so am I. Though it's still a bit obscure.' They both laughed then, and Joanna pushed back her fair hair from her forehead with a gesture of mingled relief and exhaustion.

'I don't think I can explain. It's one of those sentences that come out wrong whichever way you put them.'

'All right, don't worry. If the sum total is that you're glad to see me, I don't much mind how you arrive at it,' the young man assured her. 'What a nice place you have here.' He glanced round the office approvingly.

'Yes, it's very pleasant, isn't it? I love working here,' Joanna assured him.

'Get on well with my old man, you mean?'

'If your old man is Sir Henry, I certainly do. No one could help liking him,' Joanna declared warmly.

The blue eyes glanced over her approvingly again.

'I'm glad you think so. Not everyone appreciates the quiet, elderly people nowadays. My aunt's just as sweet, you know.'

'I've never met her. But Sir Henry very kindly said I must come down to their place in Surrey one week-end.'

'Did he? Then I'll see he makes it a week-end when I'm there. I'm home on six months' leave from Hong Kong, you know,' the young man added, as though Joanna would most probably know all about him.

'I didn't know. I thought you lived in Killigrew Mansions.'

It was a perfectly idiotic reply, of course, but his place of residence had assumed such enormous proportions during most of the morning that her mind simply rejected the idea of his having been anywhere else at any time.

'Well, so I do.' He looked both amused and puzzled. 'I've got a furnished flat there—was lucky enough to step straight into it when I came home a month ago. How did you know about it?'

'Oh'—again she felt herself blushing, which was not at all like her, as her composure was usually excellent—'your uncle happened to mention the fact. In—connection with—the murder that happened there last night.'

'Good lord! Was there a murder? And I missed it.' He sounded as regretful as a schoolboy. 'I was away for the weekend. Do tell me—was it a very sensational affair?'

'A man was found stabbed.' She wondered if she sounded as reluctant about discussing it as she felt.

'Don't tell me it was with a peculiar dagger, obviously from foreign parts,' said Mr Conway with relish. 'That might let *me* in for something. I collect them.' 'I don't know what—what was used. There wasn't much in the newspaper but—developments are expected,' she was fascinated into adding.

'I say! You said that exactly like a B.B.C. announcer,' remarked Mr Conway admiringly.

'I did not!'

'Oh, don't be cross about it. I was only teasing.'

'I'm not—cross.'

'Upset, then.'

'No, really I'm not. Why should I be?'

'I don't know,' he said frankly. At which she felt bound to say again,

'I'm not a bit angry.'

'Like to prove it?'

She laughed a little doubtfully and said, 'How?'

'Let me take you out one evening this week. My uncle will tell you I'm an awfully nice, respectable sort of chap who usually waits to be introduced properly and all that. But I seem to have lost connection with so many of my crowd during the years I've been away. Or else they're married, and wrapped up in their family affairs. Going around on one's own does pall after a bit, and though I'm excellent company, I'm no novelty to myself.'

Joanna laughed again, but not doubtfully this time.

'Of course I'd love to come,' she said sincerely. And she meant it. For there was something so normal and cheerful about this good-looking young man that he seemed the perfect antidote to her recent adventure.

They fell to discussing dates and shows then. And, by the time Sir Henry returned from his prolonged lunch, he found his nephew and his secretary on excellent terms. A situation which seemed to afford him considerable satisfaction.

'Excellent, excellent,' he said when he heard—as Joanna insisted on his hearing—that they were going out together.

But whether he meant that Joanna was in good hands, or that his nephew was, did not appear.

The two men retired to Sir Henry's office, Roger Conway—it transpired that his name was, quite safely, Roger—having first made a firm arrangement with Joanna that he should collect her from the office the following evening at six o'clock.

After that, Joanna returned to her work with an amazingly lightened heart. Her fears had been so completely set at nought that to entertain any others—or to invent them, as she had before—seemed the height of absurdity.

Auriel, too, she found on her return home, had succeeded in banishing every trace of the harrowing few days through which she must have passed. Fresh, calm, unruffled, she appeared to have no anxieties at all, except those pleasant ones connected with her wedding day, which was now not more than a month distant.

Indeed, she seemed to have no wish even to discuss with her sister what they had been through together. This curiously disconcerted Joanna, even though she knew it might well be the most sensible line to take. But somehow, to be able blandly to ignore what had been the most terrible and dramatic happening of their lives argued a degree of insensitiveness and irresponsibility which seemed unnatural.

There was no one else to whom Joanna could even say, 'I wonder if they'll ever discover who really killed Simon.' And it faintly irritated her that Auriel's blankness denied her even this verbal indulgence.

When Roger Conway came to fetch her the following evening, however, she deliberately put all worrying thoughts from her mind. He was, she found almost at once, one of those rare and fortunate creatures with natural capacity for achieving and dispensing happiness. It was not so much that he was cheerful—though he had an unforced gaiety of manner which was

endearing—but he had that calm, reassuring confidence which belongs only to those who have never had to fear to-morrow.

It was so striking that, when they had become very friendly over dinner in a quiet Soho restaurant, Joanna was actually fascinated into remarking on it.

He didn't look puzzled or laugh off her remark. He looked at her thoughtfully and said:

'I think I know what you mean. There are only two things which impart it. One is colossal and prolonged good fortune, and the other is the sort of upbringing which makes you understand that life's something to be lived through, not avoided.'

'What a—nice way to put it.' Joanna's heart warmed to him suddenly with a degree of sympathetic approval which verged on affection. 'And, in your case, I take it, it was the latter?'

'Oh, yes. We were amazingly fortunate in our upbringing, I think.'

'We?'

'My cousin and I. We were both brought up by my uncle and aunt. Curiously enough, we were both orphaned in the same yachting disaster and my uncle—Sir Henry, I mean—and my aunt took us both on. They had no children of their own, and we were always regarded as their own sons.'

'And does your cousin still live with them in Surrey?'

'Oh—no.' For the first time there was the faintest hesitation in Roger Conway's frank flow of speech. 'It was a damned shame, really. He got entangled with some woman. I suppose one would call her undesirable. But, as it all happened while I was away, I'm not quite sure how undesirable she was or how far he got entangled. I know Uncle Henry and Aunt Helen were a good deal upset about it. Of course there was no melodramatic break or anything of that sort. That isn't their way. But, when people who have been very close suddenly disagree violently on essentials, there's bound to be a

drift away. He just moved to town and I'm afraid they haven't seen anything of each other for nearly a year now.'

'Oh—what a pity!' Joanna thought she understood now why there was sometimes a faintly melancholy air about her likeable employer, 'Don't you think the breach could be healed?'

'Well, between you and me, I'm going to try my skilful hand at the job,' Roger told her with a sudden grin. 'Wish me luck.'

'Indeed I do!' Joanna smiled approvingly, and privately thought how fortunate it was that at least the Gilmores' had this charming and satisfactory nephew to compensate for the other one.

As the evening progressed, she found herself more and more in tune with Roger Conway's reactions and outlook. What she had taken at first to be youthful exuberance, she realised now, was a matter of temperament, not age. When he was sixty, he would still give that impression of fresh, enthusiastic outlook, and one was the better and happier for being with him.

To her infinite pleasure, she found that he assumed this evening to be only the first of many, and by the time he left her at her own door, they had made tentative plans for an evening's dancing, another visit to the theatre, and, at the first fine, free week-end, a day on the river.

During the rest of that week, Joanna saw a considerable amount of her employer's nephew. Either he dropped in quite casually for the avowed purpose of seeing his uncle, or else he made a definite arrangement to take her out to lunch or in the evening.

Joanna experienced a few nervous qualms lest Sir Henry should think that his secretary was making a little too free with his family connections. But any doubts of that sort were dispelled when he brought her an extremely pleasant though rather formal note from Lady Gilmore, inviting her to Gilmore Manor for the week-end.

In any circumstances, she would have been charmed and gratified. In the knowledge that Roger would also be there, she accepted the invitation with double pleasure.

'This week-end, did you say?' exclaimed Roger, when she told him. And something in his tone made her raise her eyebrows and laugh.

'Yes. Do you mind?'

'No, of course not. It's a wonderful idea. It might even'— he frowned and seemed to consider something—'be providential,' he finished rather surprisingly.

Joanna laughed again.

'I hadn't thought of myself as an instrument of Providence,' she said. 'Where is the connection?'

'Never mind.' A most unusually secretive air descended on Roger—the more remarkable because his manner was so completely open in the ordinary way. 'Just something I'd thought out. But it's better if you come fresh to it.'

And although Joanna teased him amusedly on this sudden air of conspiracy, he obstinately refused to explain himself further. She was driven to the by no means displeasing conclusion that he was planning some charming and amusing surprise for her.

Her own family were unfeignedly pleased with the invitation. And Auriel—who was already unwisely on terms of veiled hostility with her future mother-in-law—exclaimed:

'Oh, I'm so glad! John's mother thinks the Gilmores the last word in everything distinguished and desirable. To hear her talk, you'd suppose Sir Henry would never have considered you even as a secretary if it hadn't been for her personal recommendation. She'll *bristle* at the idea of your going down there for the week-end.' 'It's no business of hers,' Joanna said. 'I shouldn't even mention it to her, if I were you.'

'Of course it isn't her business,' Auriel agreed impatiently.

'That's why she'll concern herself with it. And I certainly shall mention it. I wouldn't miss her chagrin and annoyance for anything.'

'Oh, Auriel'—Joanna looked doubtfully at her sister— 'she *is* John's mother, you know.'

'So what?' Auriel shrugged impatiently. 'I don't have to like all his relations, just because I'm marrying him.'

'No. But it's wiser not to antagonise his immediate family, quite apart from any—feeling in the matter.'

'What sort of feeling?' Auriel brushed that off with an air of genuine surprise. 'Anyway, I shan't make myself nasty. I'll be perfectly sweet and *purx*, about it.'

Joanna gave a half-vexed little laugh. It was no good arguing with Auriel when she was in that obstinate mood, she knew. She had made her protest, and now she proposed to enjoy her week-end with a quiet mind.

On Friday evening she drove down with Sir Henry. And because Joanna was so genuinely fond of him, there was nothing of the strain which sometimes exists in the employer and secretary relationship, once the office has been left behind. They both enjoyed the drive, and once Sir Henry actually called her 'my dear' when he was explaining a particular favourite feature of Byzantine architecture.

They were both surprised when the car slowed down slightly and then turned between two moss-grown pillars which flanked the entrance to a short beech-bordered drive.

'Dear me, we're home! I hadn't noticed,' exclaimed Sir Henry. And at that moment the car stopped before an English manor house, so beautiful in design and setting that Joanna exclaimed aloud at the sight of it.

'Yes, it's quite a gem.' Sir Henry handed Joanna out of the car, and then stood regarding his own house as though he saw it for the first time. 'Quite a gem. Late eighteenth century, but with none of the usual massiveness of that century. Foreshadowing the Regency. Most interesting, most interesting. Come in, Miss Deane, and meet my wife.'

They went into the house and, in a pastel-tinted, elegant drawing-room, they found Lady Gilmore. She greeted Joanna charmingly, but with that hint of formality which had already been evidenced in her letter—and which, Joanna could not help thinking, was delightfully in keeping with the house.

'I thought Roger was coming down with you.' Lady Gilmore turned to her husband, with the faintest suggestion of disappointment in her manner, but not before all ceremony due to the guest had been discharged.

'He'll be along later. I expected him to come with us too. But he telephoned this afternoon to say that he would be down after dinner,' her husband explained. And Joanna, as well as Lady Gilmore, was glad to have that news, for she had experienced a slight twinge of disappointment on her own account when she found that Roger was not coming with Sir Henry and herself.

But if he were coming later, that was all right. The weekend was going to be perfect in every detail.

The room which had been assigned to Joanna for the week-end was quite the most attractive she had ever had. Through the open windows streamed the bright rays of the evening sun, lighting every corner of the room with a mellow glow and picking out in a riot of warm colour the flowered chintz of the hangings and bedspread and the delicate sheen of light mahogany and tulipwood.

Lady Gilmore had herself conducted Joanna upstairs, and Joanna turned to her now in genuine enthusiasm.

'What a perfectly lovely room!'

'It's nice, isn't it? This is how I should have liked the room to be if we had had a daughter,' Lady Gilmore explained, quite simply and without any false sentimentality.

'And you never had any girls?'

'No. Only the two boys,' Lady Gilmore replied, and Joanna suddenly wanted to hug her for the natural, affectionate way she said that. However much the cousin might have erred, it was evident that Lady Gilmore regarded both him and Roger as sons.

'I know only Roger, but he must be a great pleasure to you,' Joanna said, speaking so obviously with the same simple earnestness as her hostess that Lady Gilmore smiled.

'Yes, indeed, Roger is a dear boy.' Then because either her heart or her sense of justice prompted her, she added, 'But so is Neil a dear boy really.'

Joanna swallowed something hard in her throat.

'Did you say—Neil?' she asked and, try as she would, her voice sounded a little strange even to her own ears.

'Yes—my other nephew. Now I'll leave you. But come down as soon as you're ready. I'm sure my husband will want you to have some sherry with him before dinner.'

Joanna supposed she made some suitable reply. But, as the door closed quietly behind Lady Gilmore, she sank down in a chair by the window, and drew one or two quick, frightened breaths.

'It's not such a terrifically unusual name,' she told herself eagerly. 'It isn't certain that he is the same man. But of course, there's the odd business of Roger living in the same block of flats. He spoke about being lucky to get a flat there. If his cousin were already there, he might well have some sort of preference.'

Remembering suddenly that she was expected downstairs quite soon, Joanna got up and began to change. But her movements were purely mechanical. Her mind was still busy with the problem of the Gilmores' other nephew.

At least this was the last place where she was likely to meet him. That was one blessing. According to Roger, he had not been near his family for a considerable while. Even if he did turn out to be the same man—and it was hard to resist the idea that he must be—the chance of any unfortunate contretemps arising from the connection was remote.

'I've been letting this business get on my nerves,' Joanna thought, confidence and reassurance beginning to flow-back into her and conquer the chill of unwelcome discovery. 'The likelihood of our ever meeting again is as remote as ever.'

Indeed, she even indulged in some personal curiosity about the man who had crossed her path so strangely, now that she began to see him in the part of Sir Henry Gilmore's other nephew.

'I wonder what the exact truth was about him and this— undesirable woman,' thought Joanna, as she changed to her graceful leaf-green dinner dress with the silver girdle.

No girl who knows that she is looking her best is ever at a complete disadvantage, and Joanna's nerves were in admirable order once more as she went out of her room and along the short passage leading to the light, upper hall.

As she reached the end of the passage someone came running up the stairs, two steps at a time and, with a shock of pleasure which really rather surprised her, she saw that it was Roger who was now coming across the hall to meet her.

'I say! You look marvellous,' he exclaimed, at the same moment that she said:

'I thought you weren't coming until after dinner.'

'Nor were we. But we got away earlier than I expected.'

Taking both her hands, he held them slightly apart, so that he could admire her with smiling openness.

'Who is the other part of "we"?' she inquired, smiling at him in return.

'Oh'—immediately he was recalled to something which was evidently of paramount importance to him—'I was just coming up to tell you, as a matter of fact. It's about Neil— my cousin, you know.'

'Yes. I know.' Joanna passed the tip of her tongue over suddenly dry lips. 'What about him?'

'I told you I had a plan for this week-end. I made him come down here with me --'

'Oh, no!'

'Yes, I did. A bit bold, I know,' admitted Roger complacently, obviously misinterpreting the feeling behind her exclamation. 'But *someone* had to make a move, and I thought it should be me.' Joanna tried desperately to hide her nervous dismay behind an air of smiling interest. 'Why did you make it this week-end, of all week-ends?'

'Oh, well, that was the best part of the idea. You see, I was certain that if I could once get Neil home again and on easy terms with Aunt and Uncle, the breach would be healed. There had never been a violent break, or anything of that sort. Just a fatal drifting apart until Neil felt too proud to invite himself home, and they felt too much hurt and on their dignity to press him to come. Obviously if there were guests—or a guest—in the house there couldn't be any heart-searchings or dangerously emotional scenes. But, equally obviously, one couldn't have just anyone there. I felt you were ideal, Joanna.'

'Why?' she asked rather faintly.

'Because you're almost one of us. Uncle Henry thinks you're the nicest and most tactful girl he's ever met, and I think'—he hesitated and then grinned at her—'much the same. You know a certain amount about the family situation anyway. And—well, as I told you before, the whole thing seemed providential.'

Joanna looked at him almost sombrely for a moment.

'Well, I'm glad if you see the hand of Providence in this,' she said rather dryly at last.

'I say! you don't *mind* being pressed into service like this, do you?' For the first time Roger's confidence seemed to falter. 'If I'd thought--'

'No,' Joanna told him almost gently. 'No, I don't mind in the least.' And because a desperate sort of courage had come to her in that moment, she added, 'Don't you think we ought to go down?'

'Yes, of course. I just thought I'd prepare you a litde.' 'I'm prepared now—for anything,' Joanna said. But she was wrong. She was not entirely prepared for the way her heart began to beat when Neil looked up from the hall, where he was standing with his uncle, to watch her descent of the stairs, with a smile in which mocking incredulity and reluctant admiration were almost equally mixed.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOANNA felt a little like someone making a difficult stage entrance, as she came down the stairs of Gilmore Manor. And then she saw Neil come forward to the foot of the flight, also like someone taking a stage cue, and, looking up at her, still with that dry little smile, he said, quite calmly:

'Hello! I didn't know I was going to meet you here.'

She wanted to say something very light and casual in return. But it was Roger, catching his breath in amazement behind her, who spoke first.

'Do you mean to say you two know each other?'

'We have met before,' Joanna said, fascinated into giving her hand to Neil. 'Once,' she added.

..'Was it really only once?' he retorted, as his fingers closed round hers for a moment. 'I feel somehow as though I know you better than that.'

'But you never told me that you knew Neil, Joanna!'

'I—I didn't know it was he.'

'But the name,' protested Roger. Sir Henry had joined them now, looking interested too, although it was obvious that the mild curiosity of the moment was not the chief emotion with which he was contending. 'Neil isn't from my side of the family. He's a Gilmore—like Uncle. It's not a very common name. I'm surprised you didn't guess the connection at once.'

Joanna bit her lip.

'I didn't know him as anything but—Neil,' she was forced to admit. And when Roger, not unnaturally, looked surprised, it was Neil who explained gravely:

'We met at the sort of party where surnames aren't much in evidence, didn't we, Joanna? Come to think of it, I don't remember your other name either.' And there was a glint of dangerous amusement in his eyes.

'It's Miss Deane,' Roger put in, and looked unaccountably annoyed for a moment.

Sir Henry spoke then, but a little stiffly, Joanna noticed, as though he were not yet able to address Neil with quite the old intimacy of affection and association.

'Miss Deane is my secretary and my right hand at the office.'

'Is that so?' Neil seemed courteously interested. 'If she will allow me to say so, she struck me as a resourceful and capable person the first time we met.'

Slight colour streaked Joanna's cheeks at that, but she said, not without humour :

'I have been known to make mistakes.'

'Not in the office,' Sir Henry insisted kindly. 'I can't recall any serious error on your part in the office, Miss Deane.'

'She keeps any indulgence of that sort for out-of-office hours,' declared Neil, as he handed Joanna a glass of sherry.

And then Lady Gilmore came downstairs and, to Joanna's relief, the conversation no longer centred on herself.

Evidently the first difficult meeting between Neil and his uncle and aunt had taken place while Joanna was still upstairs, and, however surprised or put out Lady Gilmore might have been then, it was obvious that she had adapted herself to the unexpected circumstances much more quickly than her husband. Formal and self-controlled she might be in the ordinary way, but her delight in Neil's return was beyond question. She came straight over to him and, slipping her arm into his, smiled and said to Joanna:

'I'm glad both the boys were able to come down while you were here.'

She spoke as though Neil, like Roger, were in the habit of dropping in at week-ends, and this was so obviously her way of saying that all was forgiven and forgotten, that Joanna found herself smiling warmly in return and saying: 'So am I.'

It was the truth, she discovered with some surprise, as they went in to dinner. Neil Gilmore's presence might be embarrassing—it might even, in the circumstances, be dangerous—but she knew that she was stimulated and intrigued by his personality.

Most of the time he talked to Lady Gilmore, answering her inquiries with a faintly indulgent smile which affectionately conceded her right to question him, and more than once he glanced at her with an air of amused tenderness which curiously fascinated Joanna.

Roger, for his part—having accomplished the delicate task of reconciliation to his satisfaction—was inclined to relax and take his reward in the enjoyment of Joanna's company. She found herself, therefore, talking mostly to him and Sir Henry, and only an occasional word from Neil came her way.

This was just as well perhaps, because when he did speak to her or look at her there was such a degree of speculative mockery in his manner that she felt nervously sure everyone else at the table must notice it. She even wondered if Roger were going to ask her searching questions afterwards on the subject of her previous encounter with his cousin.

She need not have worried, however. After dinner, Roger was only too happy to stroll round the extensive gardens with her and talk contentedly of themselves. An altogether charming and absorbing topic, Joanna would have considered at any other time. But just now her thoughts were very much with the three they had left behind in the drawing-room.

'You aren't paying the least attention to me,' Roger reproached her laughingly at last. 'You're completely wrapped up in some idea of your own, and I believe you're just finding me a bore.'

'Oh, no!' Joanna assured him. And at that moment, as though to provide her with an excuse, the long preliminary trill of a nightingale sounded across the darkening garden and, putting her hand on Roger's arm, she spoke in a whisper.

'Hush—listen to that. I thought I heard a faint sound of it before.'

He stopped immediately, putting his hand over hers as it lay on his arm. They were very close, as they stood there, silent in the warm, scented dusk, while the romantically beautiful sound rippled and cascaded round them. Behind the dark mass of trees from which the enchanted notes were pouring, a pale gold crescent of moon was rising in the purple night sky, and when Roger quietly slipped his arm round her, Joanna felt it was simply the last touch to a scene of romantic perfection.

She even leant her head against his shoulder for a minute or two, for there is something in the spell of the perfect but fleeting moment which touches our hearts and makes us reach out to every other human creature near us.

In that moment Joanna felt she loved all the world. And because Roger was nearest, she loved him best.

She was not surprised when he kissed her. Only indescribably happy and satisfied, and quite naturally she returned his kiss, with warmth and sweetness, and a touch of passion born of the night and its beauties. It was the first time she had ever kissed anyone like that, and the experience shook her. She wanted to hold on to the moment with both hands, to know more of it—and of herself in this mood. But just as Roger, in an eager, unsteady voice, had begun to say something, there was a crisp step on the gravel behind them, and Neil's voice said rather dryly: 'You're wanted on the phone, Roger.'

The veils of magic were torn to shreds, and as they turned almost guiltily to face Neil, the beauty of their moment dissolved in embarrassment and an annihilating sense of foolishness.

'The—phone? Good heavens, couldn't you have taken a message?' demanded Roger with most unusual irritation.

'No. It's a long-distance call—personal.'

Roger muttered something. Then with a quick, 'Forgive me,' to Joanna, he strode off towards the house.

She stood there alone before Neil now. The nightingale was silent, a cloud had covered the moon, the garden was an ordinary, nice garden, growing slowly chilly in the cooling air of night.

'Have you-known Roger long?' inquired Neil casually, and the moment of inexplicable romance took on a slightly manufactured and calculated value.

'What's that to you?' demanded Joanna angrily.

'Why, nothing. Except that he's a nice boy, and I'm attached to him.'

'Meaning that you take it on yourself to keep him out of the hands of designing females,' retorted Joanna, her anger and sense of insecurity making her say the most extraordinarily ill-judged and ugly-sounding things.

'My dear,' said the rather cold voice out of the dusk, 'there's an old saying about wearing the cap if it fits. Why are you so frightened and so angry simply because on finding you kissing my young cousin in the garden I ask if you've known him long?'

'It was the—way you asked,' she said breathlessly.

'There was also the way you replied,' he reminded her. 'That said rather more than your words, you know.'

'Stop making the whole thing sound so—so cheaply significant!' she cried wretchedly, and suddenly she found she was very near tears. 'It was simply--'

But how did one explain the delicate and inexplicable? Particularly to a man who had already seen one in such a strange and unfavourable light.

'Why should I explain myself to you?' she exclaimed angrily.

'Why indeed?' he agreed a little mockingly. 'I'm sure I should find it most embarrassing and unnecessary. And it's really the last thing I should ask of you. I'm sorry that my simple query should have led us into such verbal complications. Forget it, and let's go in now. It's growing cold.'

She began to walk slowly towards the house, because there was nothing else to do, and he fell into easy step beside her.

For a few minutes she was silent. Then, though she could not imagine why, she said:

'I met Roger the day after I met you.'

'Is that so?' He was casual and polite. 'Not very long ago, was it?'

'No.'

She wanted quite desperately to put that scene in the garden in a better, more dignified light. But she could not give it a significance it might not possess. She hardly knew herself if she and Roger had been swept away by deep feeling, or simply enchanted by circumstances. She could not claim that it was a great love scene, but still less could she mutter, 'It didn't mean anything, really.'

She sighed, more deeply than she knew, simply because she could not find words to say what she meant.

The man beside her laughed softly.

'Don't take it so much to heart. Roger isn't the only charming man who will respond to you very willingly. I think you're simply delightful myself, and if I hadn't happened to have some bitterly instructive experience of that line quite recently, believe me, I should be deeply impressed.'

'How dare you say such a thing to me!' She spoke quite softly this time, because she was ashamed of having cried out at him before, but the very

quietness of her voice added intensity to what she said, and he made a slight gesture of surprised protest.

'Was it so unjust?'

'Completely so. I know appearances seem against me, but--'

'Appearances have a habit of seeming against you,' he reminded her, and the note of regretful amusement in his voice would have drawn a laughing response from her in any other circumstances. Now it was just part of the inexplicably unfortunate impression she always seemed to make upon this man.

With a considerable effort, she pulled herself together, and said:

'Aren't we making rather heavy weather of a very small matter?'

He paused to hold open the garden door for her, and, as she passed him, he said:

'Perhaps we are. No doubt the best thing is to forget the entire incident.'

She knew his voice contained a note of warning. That, in fact, he was telling her to forget about Roger too, in any sense that mattered. But because it was impossible to launch on fresh argument and explanation, she could only incline her head slightly in apparent acceptance of his view.

Roger hurried towards them, as soon as they appeared in the hall, and exclaimed with rather transparent disappointment :

'Oh, you—didn't want to stay out any longer?'

'We thought it was turning cold,' Neil explained calmly, before Joanna could say anything. 'Besides, haven't we left Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry on their own long enough?'

.Roger muttered, with unusual ill-temper, that Neil himself could surely have kept them company. But, as Neil appeared not to have heard that,

Roger recovered his customary good humour, and they all went into the drawing-room together.

Everything seemed very charming and harmonious on the surface after that and, by the time she went to bed, Joanna thought she had almost forgotten the unfortunate incident in the garden.

She was wrong, however. As soon as the light was out, she lay there, wide awake, watching a patch of moonlight move slowly across the floor, and back into her mind came the exact inflection of Neil Gilmore's voice as he summed her up as cheap and amusing and not at all a suitable friend for his young cousin.

Joanna was not quite sure what it was that hurt and infuriated her most. The idea that her delightful friendship with Roger might be ruined. The fear that, after all, her employer and his wife might come to hear of her unfortunate escapade. Or, quite simply, that Neil Gilmore should think so contemptuously of her.

'There's no real reason why I should care what he thinks, of course,' she told herself. 'He's nothing to me, and my conscience is clear.'

But, though a clear conscience is a fine thing, so is the good opinion of a forceful and attractive man. Joanna found herself tossing and turning angrily, and wishing with quite ridiculous fervour that somehow she could make Neil think well of her. Or at least not class her—as he appeared to do—with the woman who had alienated him from his family.

Her thoughts took a different turn then. She wondered very much what there had been between Neil and this woman. He had sounded disillusioned enough when he spoke of 'some bitterly instructive experience'.

'Serve him right!' thought Joanna, with unusual malice. 'It would do him good to find out that he could be mis-taken. I wish I had thought to tell him that he didn't appear to be such a good judge of women that he could afford to judge me on appearances.'

And faintly comforted—as which of us is not?—by having thought out an admirable retort, albeit some hours too late, Joanna fell asleep at last.

She woke to a superbly beautiful morning, and, dressing quickly, she ran downstairs quietly, through the silent house and out into the garden, where the dew was only just beginning to dry on the grass.

The subtle magic of evening was missing, but there was a delicate radiance about the place now, a freshness and translucence of colour, which was enchanting. And for a long time Joanna wandered happily up and down the gravelled paths, stopping every now and then to examine some specially beautiful flower, or something which had not previously come into her rather limited garden experience.

She was just straightening up from one of these examinations when she found Neil standing a few paces away from her, watching her with that half lazy air of amusement which she found both intriguing and annoying.

'Hello,' she said, a little pertly. 'Come to keep an eye on > me and see I don't cause any mischief?'

'No. As a matter of fact, I came out to look round a very familiar and favourite place which I haven't seen for a long time,' he informed her coolly.

'Oh'—she was faintly ashamed—'you've been away from home a good while, haven't you?'

'Too long,' he agreed, looking over the garden, with an air of nostalgic pleasure which she found curious in one she had judged to be essentially cynical.

'Well, I suppose you—you'll be coming down here more often now?' she ventured. 'I mean--'

'Yes? What did you mean?' he inquired, rather unkindly making her define her uncertain views.

'Why, I—gather from Roger that there's been some sort of reconciliation, after a—family break.'

'Dear me, you and Roger are on confidential terms, aren't you?' he said mockingly. 'What else did he tell you?'

Joanna flushed, and because she was so nettled by his tone, she decided not to spare his feelings. She wanted to penetrate his armour of cool amusement, even if she had to take a sledge-hammer to do it.

'He told me that you made a fool of yourself over some undesirable woman,' she retorted sharply, 'which rather suggests you're not quite such a good judge of women as you seem to think. I assume, since you're back home again, that you've got over that piece of foolishness, which was what I meant when I said I supposed you'd be coming here more often now.'

She paused, a little breathless with her own rush of angry words, and the silence in the garden became so profound that she had difficulty in not clapping her hand over her mouth and looking remorsefully dismayed.

He didn't say anything at first, and when she found courage to glance at him, he was looking away from her, thoughtfully but not with any sign of disgust or anger.

'I didn't get over her,' was what he said at last. 'She married someone else.'

'Oh'—Joanna was indescribably put out by the unexpected candour of that. 'I—I'm sorry.'

'For what?' His glance did come back to her then, and though it was faintly amused again, it was not unfriendly.

'For having spoken the way I did, I suppose,' Joanna said reluctantly. 'Besides, I suppose it—hurt, losing her that way. When was it?—that she married, I mean.'

'The day you came burgling my flat.'

And when she exclaimed again at that, he laughed rather bitterly and said:

'Yes, it was quite a day, wasn't it?' Joanna stared down at the path.

'I know one never believes it,' she said slowly at last, 'and of course it's always easy for the other person to offer cheap consolation, but I'm sure it's true that one does gradually get over that sort of infat—that sort of feeling.'

'Yes, of course. One does get over everything,' he agreed, with an impatient sigh. 'It's difficult to like the process, though. And one so hates the—*waste* of it all. The planning and hoping and agonising—the hurting other people—Aunt Helen, for instance. And for what?—for what?'

'She doesn't think about being hurt now,' Joanna said. 'She's so happy to have you back.'

'I know. But someone else's generosity doesn't make one feel any less of a worm.'

Joanna smiled at that.

'I didn't know you were capable of feeling a worm,' she said briskly. 'I thought it was always the other people who were worms, with you.'

'Good lord!' He looked genuinely surprised. 'Do I really sound so self-satisfied?'

'Not self-satisfied exactly. Censorious.'

'Oh!' He gave a scoffing little laugh. 'You can't forgive me for interfering between you and Roger, can you?'

'At least I think it unpardonably impertinent of you.'

'Oh, Joanna, be fair!' He was mocking again. 'Do you expect me to stand by and watch Roger make a fool of himself, the way I did?'

'Roger is in no such danger.'

'And do you think'—his voice suddenly became harsh and charged with feeling—'that I'm going to let Aunt Helen and my uncle go through with Roger what they went through with me?'

'But you have such a ridiculous idea of me!' she cried exasperatedly. 'You know hardly anything of me except--'

'Except that you write compromising letters to fellows like Simon Gray, and don't stop at burglary in order to retrieve your position, and stage passionately romantic scenes with naive young men, on the strength of a week's acquaintance. Come, I know quite a bit about you, you know,' Neil protested. 'And in spite of all that,' he added reflectively, before she could reply, 'I rather like you. I'm not sure why.'

'Thanks a lot!' Her cheeks were flaming by now. 'Who wants your liking, anyway? Not I, I can assure you.'

'Well, I won't press it on you,' he assured her with a laugh. 'Come on, there's the breakfast bell.' And, putting his hand lightly round her arm, he turned towards the house.

She had the ridiculous and childish desire to struggle and drag her arm away, but something stopped her. She told herself it was a sense of dignity which forbade her to give him that satisfaction. But, in her heart of hearts, she knew she reluctantly enjoyed the feel of those strong, firm fingers round her arm.

'Hello! You are early birds,' exclaimed Roger, as they came into the house. 'Have you been round the garden already?'

'Joanna was earlier than I,' Neil said calmly. 'I found her contemplating the beauties of nature a quarter of an hour ago.'

Once again Roger shot a curiously dissatisfied glance at his cousin.

'I wish I'd known,' he said to Joanna. 'I'd have come out too.'

'We have all day,' she reminded him with a smile. At which he cheered up and said:

'Yes, of course. I was wondering—would you like to take a picnic lunch and come out for a drive with me?'

Joanna was tremendously aware of Neil, standing just behind her. She tried to resist the unspoken force of his warning opposition, but something stronger than herself made her reply:

'I should—only I don't think we ought to leave your uncle and aunt so long. After all, it was they who invited me down here.'

'Oh, well'—Roger reluctantly abandoned his cherished plan—'maybe you're right. It's true that we do want everything to go smoothly this particular week-end.'

'Up to now, everything has gone splendidly,' remarked Neil with what Joanna considered inexcusable satisfaction. And after that they went in to breakfast.

Lady Gilmore was not one to insist that her guests should go to church, just because she herself liked to do so. But somehow it seemed the only completely suitable way to spend a Sunday morning when one was at Gilmore Manor.

On the way home, Roger contrived to get her to himself, and they laughed and talked as they had on so many occasions before. If they thought of those moments in the garden, they felt no constraint or embarrassment because of them, and Joanna was suddenly completely happy in the realisation that Neil had done nothing to spoil the occasion in Roger's eyes at least.

'I hope you'll be coming down here often in future,' Roger told her, and he took her hand and swung it lightly as they walked along together.

'I hope so too.' She glanced ahead to where Sir Henry and his wife were walking on either side of Neil. 'If they ask me, I shall come.'

'Oh, they'll ask you. I'll see to that,' Roger declared confidently.

'Neil will try to see they don't,' she said on impulse. 'He doesn't like me, you know.'

Even as she said that, she remembered his declaring laughingly that he did like her.

But Roger scouted the notion.

'Oh, you mustn't take any notice of him! He's feeling a bit sour about women altogether just now, you know. He took a bad toss over the one I told you about. Don't bother about anything he says.'

'Is that the line to follow?' she asked, with a smile, and was considerably reassured when he replied:

'Why, of course.'

'Oh, Roger, you're such a comfortable and reassuring person,' she exclaimed, and laughed.

'Not the most glamorous way to have oneself described,' he protested with a grin. 'But I'm glad if I make you feel that way.'

And she thought then that she had been harrowing herself quite unnecessarily. There was something between her and Roger which would take a great deal of destroying.

Most of the afternoon she spent with Lady Gilmore. Though Joanna was used, in her own stepmother, to something much gayer and flightier and more amusing than her quiet hostess, there was something about Lady Gilmore which appealed to her immensely.

'When I look at you,' Joanna said with a smile, as she watched Lady Gilmore stitching in a leisurely, competent way at her tapestry frame. 'I wonder why I worry about half the things I do.'

'But I should not have thought you were the worrying sort.' Lady Gilmore gave a kindly little glance in Joanna's direction.

'Oh, I'm not, to an excessive degree. Only somehow, lately--' She stopped, sighed, and then went on again: 'I think sometimes one strikes a bad patch, and then all sorts of things assume ridiculous proportions. But I don't expect you know what I mean.'

'Of course I do,' Lady Gilmore actually laughed. 'Do you suppose I haven't had my worries, too?' 'Oh, I'm sure you have! But you—you rise above them, don't you? I can't imagine your being put out by small things.'

'Really, you have a very odd and flattering idea of me,' Lady Gilmore declared, still smiling. 'In fact'—she stopped and listened attentively for a moment to the sound of someone arriving in the hall—'in fact, I think you're going to have a demonstration almost immediately of the fact that I can be put out by small things. I'm afraid I hear my sister-in-law arriving, and frankly, Joanna, she puts me out quite unbearably, although, poor dear, she is kind and affectionate and means well. Oh, dear!'

And, with an unexpectedly humorous grimace, Lady Gilmore pushed her tapestry frame aside and stood up as the door opened.

Joanna got up too, though not with the sense of impending crisis. She had lulled herself so beautifully into a false sense of security that even the reference to a sister-in-law had not sounded any warning bell in her consciousness.

She almost deserved the shock, she told herself the next moment, though it was a cruel one. For the woman who surged into the room crying: 'Helen dear!' and bumped her cheek gently against Lady Gilmore's in simulation of a kiss, was the same who had invaded Neil's apartment on the night of the murder.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONTROLLING an almost overwhelming impulse to turn and flee, Joanna stood in the background, waiting for the flurry of greetings to subside. And when Lady Gilmore finally turned to include her in the conversation, she came forward with an astonishing degree of outward calm.

'This is Miss Deane,' Lady Gilmore began.

'Why, how extraordinary!' The woman known to Joanna as Aunt Jessica interrupted immediately. 'Is Neil here, then?'

'Neil is here,' Lady Gilmore admitted in considerable surprise. 'How did you know?'

'Well, since Miss—Deane is here.' Aunt Jessica paused, bit her lip, rubbed the bridge of her handsome nose with a slightly agitated forefinger, and then burst out, 'Really, Helen, I'm a little surprised—but I suppose it's your own business.'

'I don't know quite what you are talking about, Jessica,' Lady Gilmore said crisply. 'But Neil certainly is here, I'm happy to say. And, as I was telling you, this is Miss Deane, Henry's invaluable secretary. Joanna, my dear, this is Mrs Eldon, Sir Henry's sister.'

'Henry's secretary?' Jessica Eldon swallowed rather hard, and her fine but slightly prominent eyes became more prominent. 'But I thought --'

What she thought was fortunately left unsaid for the moment, because just then Sir Henry came in and, almost immediately after him, Neil.

'Good afternoon, Jessica.' Sir Henry spoke in the manner of one who recognised the demands of family ties, without having any great enthusiasm for them just then. 'This is a nice surprise.'

'My dear Henry, you aren't the only one to be surprised,' his sister retorted, with some significance.

'No, I suppose finding Neil here is unexpected for you,' Sir Henry agreed, not very affably.

At which Neil came forward and kissed his aunt in the most charming manner possible.

'Hello, Aunt Jessica. How clever of you to choose this week-end,' he said imperturbably. 'Much pleasanter circumstances than those of our last meeting, aren't they?'

'They are indeed,' his aunt replied rather sharply. 'I didn't know you were going to be here.'

'No, of course not. I didn't know myself until Roger made the suggestion a few days ago.'

'Well, of course'—Jessica Eldon's gaze shifted doubtfully to Joanna once more—I suppose you'd been seeing a certain amount of your uncle lately, anyway.'

'Oh, no.' That was Sir Henry, his sense of exactness overruling his desire to tell his sister to mind her own business. 'This is the first time I've seen Neil for—quite a long while.'

'Then'—Mrs Eldon's air of bewilderment began to give way to a sort of annoyed suspicion that she was being hoodwinked—'then what was Miss Deane's part in all this?'

'Miss Deane?' exclaimed both the Gilmores together, and then Lady Gilmore added: 'Do sit down, Jessica, and stop asking strange questions. Tea will be here in a minute.'

'I asked a perfectly straightforward question,' retorted Mrs Eldon, under the impression that she really had done so. 'I don't know what all this mystery is about, Helen, and no one could call me inquisitive. But if Henry didn't send Miss Deane to see Neil, what was she doing in his flat after twelve o'clock at night?'

The silence which succeeded this pertinent question was so complete that one could almost touch it. Then, from the doorway, Roger spoke in a rather strained, though deliberately light tone.

'Isn't that Miss Deane's own business?—and Neil's?'

'Of course,' agreed Lady Gilmore, in a thin, polite tone. 'Ah, here is tea. I am sure you must be longing for a cup, Jessica. Roger dear, hand round the scones, will you, please?'

Incredibly, Roger handed scones, Lady Gilmore poured tea, and the conventional social ritual began to fall into place.

The tea dragged itself out in all its social completeness. Joanna supposed she took some part in the conversation though she could not remember afterwards a single thing she had said. She only remembered that Roger was specially nice to her, while he looked at her with a troubled bewilderment in the back of his eyes which he could not disguise.

When Mrs Eldon finally rose to go, no one sincerely pressed her to remain. All the same, she lingered maddeningly, remembering snatches of news she wished to impart, while unnatural smiles congealed on bored features and, from time to time, Sir Henry made instinctive and suggestive movements towards the door.

By the time she had made her round of farewells—not ignoring Joanna this time, but confining her words to the minimum—Joanna at least felt ready to faint. Only, when the door had closed behind the unregretted guest, she knew she must seize the initiative, if she were going to repair her position at all. And, turning desperately to face the room, she exclaimed a little hoarsely:

'Please let me explain. It was not at all as she thought. You see--'

'My dear,' Lady Gilmore said, gently but with a remoteness she had not shown to Joanna before, 'it isn't at all incumbent on you to explain your actions to us, you know.'

'But I *want* to, because--'

'Don't you think we'd better leave things as they are, Joanna?' Neil's voice said dryly behind her. 'Some things are better left unsaid. Or, if an Aunt Jessica insists on saying them, better left unadorned.'

'That's not true!' She swung round angrily on him. 'You know perfectly well there's a great deal to be said.'

'If Joanna wants to deny Aunt Jessica's silly story, I think she has every right to do so,' Roger put in firmly. 'You go right ahead, Joanna dear.'

'I—I'm not denying it, exactly.' She faltered rather, unnerved by the generosity of Roger's support.

'You mean you *were* in Neil's place at some late hour of the night?'

'Yes,' she said steadily. 'But it was a—mistake. I went to see someone else.'

'Someone else?' They all looked justifiably surprised. And Roger asked: 'Who?'

'Joanna, it's not a good story,' Neil interrupted almost lazily. 'Give it up. You'll be saying next that you were going to visit the man who was murdered in the block that night.'

'*Oh!*' She swung round on him again. 'Why don't you help me? Why do you let them think badly of me—and of you too—when I'm trying to clear us?'

'Because, my sweet, I'm a better loser than you are,' he said, smiling down at her dangerously. 'It was bad luck that Aunt Jessica called when she did and started talking. But since she did'—he shrugged—'let's leave it at that. I never did like complicated stories about mistakes and unknown people whom one can't produce.'

Joanna fell back from him almost literally.

'You—swine!' she said. And then thought how perfectly appalling that sounded in Lady Gilmore's elegant drawing- room.'

Perhaps Lady Gilmore thought so too, because she said quietly, but very firmly:

'I do think we're all getting rather too excited about this. I can't help feeling it would be a good idea if we left the subject just now, and went to get ready for dinner.'

With unshakable dignity, she rose and, with her husband, went out of the room. For a moment complete silence reigned among the three left behind, then Roger said :

'Joanna, don't be so upset. If you'd just--'

'Upset!' cried Joanna wildly. 'Upset? I never believed anything so—humiliating and horrible could happen. I don't want to stay! I don't want ever to see any of you again! I wish--'

'Joanna—dear -- ' Roger put out a hand to stop her, but she thrust him aside and, wrenching open the french window, ran out into the garden.

She was not quite sure where she was going, or even from what she was running away. She only knew that she must be alone, because she was going to cry, dreadfully and humiliatingly, and she had had as much as she could bear for one evening.

When she finally dropped down on the grass in the furthest corner of the garden, she knew she must have been crying for a long time, because the collar of her dress was wet with the tears that had streaked down her cheeks and neck. Besides; she was sobbing less heavily now and shivering with the utter depression of exhaustion.

'I must go in,' she thought at last. 'Roger will certainly come for me unless I go in.'

But she went on lying there, with her face hidden. And presently it was Neil's voice, not Roger's, which said:

'Do you hate me very much, Joanna?' And she knew that he was sitting on the grass beside her.

At first she refused to look up. But he did not touch her, and presently she struggled into a sitting position and said, huskily:

'Why did you *do* it? Why didn't you let me justify myself?' 'Did you want them to know what you'd really been doing?'

'I was going to—to compromise. To give some explanation that would rule out what they were thinking.'

'Difficult.'

'You didn't even let me try!'

'No.'

'But why, Neil? Why? Did you *want* them to think the worst of us both? If you have some spite against me, why, in heaven's name, did you want them to think badly of you too?'

'I have no spite against you,' he said slowly, and she had the curious impression that he weighed each word. 'I think you're charming—and dangerous. You already have—already had,' he corrected—'a place in this household and in Roger's affections which my previous knowledge of you tells me is quite undeserved.' She tried to say something, but he stopped her. 'My dear, don't let's argue that again. I'm not judging you or condemning you. As I'm sure you are longing to tell me, that isn't my business. But this family *is* my business, and, knowing what I do, I'm determined that you shall not find a place in it.'

Though he stopped speaking abruptly, she did not reply at once. Then she said slowly:

'You deliberately discredited me in their eyes—in Roger's eyes—because of that?'

He shrugged as though something about her expression slightly stung him.

'I tell you—the actual truth was not much more creditable,' he exclaimed impatiently. 'You must have been pretty deeply involved with Gray to risk what you did.'

'You don't want to believe anything but your own obstinate theory, do you?' she said. But she spoke wearily without heat, so that his eyes widened and, for the first time, she saw a flicker of doubt and something like dismay in them. 'You hardly even listened when I told you that the letter I went to steal back was no letter of mine. Can't you let yourself suppose, just for one moment, that perhaps I was telling the truth?'

'It's not very credible,' he retorted impatiently, but she knew she had penetrated the armour of his certainty at last, and the discovery faintly comforted her, in spite of everything.

'None of it is very credible,' Joanna said, with a sigh. 'There was nothing very credible about your deliberately involving yourself like that. Why did you do it? What did you gain by it?'

'Gain?' He frowned, as though repudiating the word. 'I didn't gain anything, exactly—except to make them believe what I wanted them to believe. But then I didn't lose anything either, from a personal point of view.'

'Not the good opinion of your uncle and aunt?'

'I'd lost that before,' he said dryly.

'Oh—and now I've lost it too,' she exclaimed sadly. 'They—they liked me and respected me—all of them. Now--'

He got up suddenly as though he had had more than enough of this conversation.

'Now they don't know what to think,' he said almost savagely. 'It hasn't gone any further than that. I suppose you could still convince them of your innocence almost as easily as your guilt.'

'Only *you* won't be convinced. And if you're not you're determined that they shan't be either. Isn't that it?'

He stared down moodily at her, and she thought that in that moment he rather hated the role he had so arrogantly assumed.

'If you thought you could convince me--' he began.

Then he broke off.

Joanna was surprised at the eagerness and hope which rose in her.

'Do you even *want* to be convinced?'

'If the truth is as you say--'

'Oh, it is! It is!' She clasped her hands together earnestly. 'If you'll give me a chance to prove it. *Please* do!'

For suddenly the idea had come to her that there was no reason why he should not hear the truth from Auriel herself. Whatever his obstinate determination might be to keep his own family free from entanglements, the Morgans were nothing to him. Auriel's early indiscretions would be of less than no interest. Nothing more than a request to treat the whole thing in confidence would be required.

'When are you returning to London?' she asked, frowning in concentration.

'To-night.'

'Oh, I wish I were going too!' cried poor Joanna, suddenly seeing the long, harrowing evening stretch in front of her.

'Well, come with me, then. I have my car here.'

'But—the simpleness of the solution seemed almost deceptive—I was supposed to go back with Sir Henry tomorrow morning.'

'Never mind, you can make some excuse. In the circumstances, Aunt Helen won't press you to stay. She's the soul of tact where other people's distresses are concerned.'

'Meaning that she'll understand that I feel I can hardly look them in the face,' said Joanna softly and resentfully.

Neil didn't take that up. He said, almost impatiently: 'Well, are you coming?'

'I—I think so. Can you drive me right home?'

'Certainly.'

'And come in and see my sister?'

'If that's part of the idea.'

'It's an essential part.'

He looked at her curiously and said: 'All right, then.'

Joanna got slowly to her feet, ignoring the hand he put out to help her. She felt stiff and exhausted, but her heart was indescribably lighter. It would all be quite simple, once he had seen Auriel. He would *have* to believe her then—and make the others believe too.

And, if he had a spark of generosity in him, he would feel unspeakably remorseful for the pain he had caused her.

The thought of a remorseful Neil gave her an extraordinary sense of satisfaction. It sustained her even through the difficulties of explaining to Lady Gilmore that she thought, after all, that she had better return to town that night.

'With Neil?' was all Lady Gilmore asked, but she looked withdrawn and unhappy, so that Joanna was forced into saying:

'Lady Gilmore, it isn't at all as you think. I'm going back with Neil because it's the simplest way. But he isn't anything to me, not anything at all. I wish I could make you believe that.'

'My dear, I shouldn't dream of giving you the lie to your face,' Lady Gilmore replied gravely. 'But I don't pretend to understand in the least what is going on. Only this at least I will say—don't make Neil any more unhappy than he has been.'

A faint flutter of indignation made Joanna catch her breath. At the moment she could not help thinking the unhappiness was on her side, and Neil was most shamefully responsible. But, because she was already fond of her hostess, she swallowed her wrath, and said:

'I promise you I won't.'

The difficult goodbyes were said at last—and in these Neil's cool manner certainly helped a good deal—and then, to Joanna's unspeakable relief, they were driving out of the gates of the Manor, and she had nothing to do now but put up with his company until they reached London.

He didn't talk to her at first. Then presently he said:

'We'll stop somewhere on the way for dinner. I'm afraid I did you out of your evening meal.'

'Oh, that doesn't matter.' And then, rather resentfully: 'I don't think we're quite on those terms, anyway.'

He laughed, however, and said:

'Nonsense. The worst is over. Relax, now, and pretend I'm taking you out for the evening.'

'It isn't a thing I should dream of letting you do,' she replied dryly.

'You never know.' His mood seemed to have changed sharply again, and he was inclined to show a sort of gaiety and humour which she had not associated with him before. 'If we hadn't crossed swords so violently, we should probably get on rather well together.'

Joanna opened her lips to repudiate that scornfully. But something held her silent, and she slid down a little further in her seat and wondered reluctantly how Neil Gilmore would have appeared to her if she had met him quite casually at a party.

'Well,' he said finally, 'what's the verdict?'

'About what?'

'About the possibility of our having liked each other in other circumstances.'

'I should never have liked anyone who judged so hastily and interfered so unpardonably,' she declared.

'But we're supposing we met in circumstances which precluded my wishing to judge you,' he retorted quite good- humouredly.

'Are there such circumstances?' she inquired, a little bitterly. 'I thought you took it on yourself to judge most people.'

'Oh, Joanna! Do I really give that impression?' He laughed protestingly. 'It's not true, really. I'm not so proud of my own record in the last twelve months that I feel able to go in for wholesale criticism. It's just that with you--'

He stopped, again apparently assailed by the curious un- sureness which had come upon him in the garden.

'All right,' she said. 'We'll keep it general. You can talk about the particular when you've heard what my half-sister has to say.'

'Your half-sister?' He glanced at her. 'Is she your witness?'

'She is.'

'And I'm going to see her to-night?'

'I hope so. Though she may be out with her fiance.'

'In that case, the longer we give them to come in, the better,' he declared. 'Look, I'm going to draw in here. They do rather good cold suppers.'

He was so calmly confident of her agreeing to his planning, that again she had that desire to pierce his armour by any means. So that when they were sitting together presently at a charming, secluded corner table, she said almost conversationally:

'Is this where you used to bring your unsuitable girl friend?'

'Catty child,' he said, without looking up from the wine list, which he was studying with a slight smile. 'I did bring her here sometimes.'

'It must be full of memories,' remarked Joanna, picking up the menu, and thinking idly that she sounded just like Auriel when she said that.

'Of course,' he said. 'Are you trying to turn the knife in the wound?'

'At least I feel I have the right to pay you out for some of the things you've done to me,' she retorted with spirit.

'Well, I suppose that's fair,' he agreed, and then looked up and smiled straight at her in the most extraordinarily disconcerting manner.

'Oh, I wish--' Joanna began.

'What?'

'Nothing. Except that I don't know why I spoke like that,' she said unhappily. 'Hurting people is always horrid, and hardly ever justified.'

'Please don't,' he begged amusedly, 'or I shall have to begin wondering if you're really a thoroughly nice girl.' And he returned to his study of the wine list.

On an impulse she could not explain, she suddenly leant forward and drew the card away from him, so that he looked up, slightly startled, full at her once more.

'What would you do,' she asked him, 'if you found I *was* a thoroughly nice girl?'

'What would I do?' he repeated. 'What could I do? Grovel, I suppose, in view of all the horrid things I've done and said to you.'

'Oh, I'd love to have you grovel,' she declared, with such charming candour that he laughed more heartily than she had ever seen him laugh before. And then, somehow, they chose their meal in an atmosphere of peculiar harmony and good humour.

It was quite absurd, of course, but in some subtle, undefined way, Joanna found that she was enjoying herself. They had only suspended hostilities, it was true. But, knowing as she did that in a few hours' time Neil would probably have the truth from Auriel, she could afford to be generous and even a little friendly, in anticipation of the time when he would be shamed and disconcerted by the realisation of his injustice to her.

As for him, though he glanced at her from time to time as though she puzzled him slightly, he was evidently prepared to accept the amusement and charm of the moment, without delving too deeply into motives and reasons.

By the time they resumed their drive it was already growing dark, and Joanna had no difficulty in persuading herself that Auriel would almost certainly be at home when they arrived. So of course would her parents, in all probability.

But in her present mood of inexplicable optimism, it seemed to her that it would not be any great problem to arrange that Neil and Auriel saw each other for a few minutes without the presence of her parents.

'I'll arrange something,' Joanna assured herself. 'It will be all right as soon as we get home.'

But, when they arrived at Grandison Place, number twenty-two was in darkness, except for a light in the hall. And, in almost unbearable disappointment, Joanna cried:

'Oh, I believe she's still out.'

He gave her that amused, speculative glance, which always meant that he was measuring up the possible untruthfulness of her remarks. But he simply said:

'Then are you going to ask me in, to wait?'

'Please—yes.'

She opened the front door with her key, and as she led the way into the hall, their very competent au pair—her stepmother had the peculiar genius of frivolous people for acquiring domestic help which no one else could ever find—came from the back of the house and said:

'Why, Joanna, I didn't know you were coming home tonight.'

'No, I didn't, either, Trudi. Is Auriel in?'

'No. She won't be home for another half-hour.'

'And my parents?'

'They went to dinner with the doctor and his wife. They won't be long, I expect.'

'All right.' Joanna glanced at the light which was coming from the drawing-room at the back of the house. 'Is someone here, Trudi?'

'Yes.' The girl came a little nearer, and Joanna saw, for the first time, that she was slightly disturbed. 'He asked for you first, and when I said you wouldn't be home tonight, he said he would wait and speak to Auriel.'

'How odd! Is it someone I know?'

'I don't think so, Joanna.' The girl's demeanor became even more peculiar. 'When I said it wasn't for me to let strangers into the house when the family was away, he said' —her voice dropped apologetically—'he said he was from the police.'

CHAPTER SIX

AT the word 'police', Joanna felt as though someone had dealt her a blow over the heart. She literally backed away from Trudi, and came up almost immediately against the hard support of Neil's arm.

She had forgotten his presence in her momentary shock, but now she looked up at him, over her shoulder, as though he were her most natural source of strength and advice.

'What shall I do?' she asked, in a whisper.

'See him, of course,' was the matter-of-fact reply. 'It's just a routine inquiry. Come along, I'll back you up.'

She had never thought to be so thankful for Neil Gilmore's presence in all her life. There was no one in the world whom she would rather have had with her at this moment. And, steadied by his manner, she said calmly: 'All right.'

And then she and Neil went into the drawing-room together.

The pleasant, middle-aged man who got up from her father's favourite armchair introduced himself as Inspector Curtis. And, as Joanna in her turn presented Neil, he said:

'Oh, yes, I remember. Your fiance.'

Surprised denial trembled on Joanna's lips, but she remembered, just in time, that this had been her role on the night Simon Gray was murdered. So she inclined her head and murmured something non-committal, and they all sat down a little uncomfortably.

'There are just one or two further questions we wanted to ask you, Miss Deane,' the Inspector explained courteously, without specifying exactly who 'we' might be. 'I don't know if you'd rather I asked you these in private, or if you prefer Mr Gilmore to be present.'

'Oh, he can stay,' Joanna insisted eagerly. To be deprived of Neil's steady presence was the last thing she wanted just then.

'Very well.' Inspector Curtis took out an innocuous-looking sheet of writing-paper from his wallet. 'In going through the papers of Mr Gray, we came upon this letter, written from the address which you gave to the police as yours. From this address, in fact,' he amplified. 'The letter is signed only with a—er—term of endearment—a nickname, I assume. But since you had given this address as yours, it seemed there might well be some connection. I should be glad, Miss Deane, if you would look at the letter and tell me if you can identify it. If, in fact, the letter was written by you to the deceased or by someone else.'

Very slowly she took Auriel's ill-fated, scribbled note from the Inspector's outstretched hand.

In that moment of crisis and panic, she ought to have been completely confused—bewildered—uncertain what to do next, or what the consequences of any action would be. But, on the contrary, she saw every facet of the situation crystal-clear, as though they were presented to her, quite deliberately, so that she could make no mistake in her choice of action.

She could say, quite calmly and frankly, that the letter was her half-sister's, and by simply writing a few lines in her own handwriting, she could clear herself in the eyes of the law and, what seemed almost more at this moment, in Neil's eyes too. Nothing could be more complete than such a proof presented to him. It might almost have been timed and arranged on purpose.

But, if she did that, the courteous Inspector would go on waiting until Auriel came in. And she would almost certainly come in with John. She would be confronted with the letter in her turn. Auriel—who was so unprepared and so foolish that she had actually lulled herself into believing that she had written the all-important letter on unaddressed writing-paper.

On the other hand, Joanna could say that the letter was hers. She could make light of it, insist that it was written more than a year ago. With luck—and an air of frankness—she might well put off the Inspector for the time being. At any rate until Auriel was married and safely off on her honeymoon. She

could gain precious time that way. Time for Auriel to straighten things out frankly with John, time for her to present her case in the best, instead of the very worst, light, time for her to rescue her marriage and her happiness from the dangers which now threatened them with indescribable urgency.

Joanna looked down again at the sheet of paper in her hand. She drew a long breath and said:

'I wrote the letter. I'm not very proud of it—but I wrote it.'

'Thank you,' the Inspector said, 'for being so frank. The letter was written about a fortnight before Mr Gray's death, wasn't it?'

'Oh, good heavens, she even dated it!—but incompletely,' thought Joanna, glancing once more at the letter, and for a moment she wondered why she loved Auriel.

'No. It was written about a year ago,' Joanna explained a little hoarsely.

'Oh,' the Inspector said, and he took the sheet of paper in his turn and looked at it. 'There's nothing to show that, is there?'

'Might I say something here?' inquired Neil's voice calmly, and they both turned to look at him.

'Certainly—if it has any bearing on the matter in hand,' the Inspector agreed.

'It's about this letter,' Neil smiled and, putting out his hand to Joanna, took her cold fingers in his. 'I noticed you were considerate enough to give Miss Deane the opportunity of being questioned about the letter without my being present. You thought no doubt that my being there might cause both trouble and embarrassment.'

'Well--' conceded the Inspector, but non-committally.

'You needn't have worried, though we both appreciate your attitude. I know all about the letter. I presume it's the one which refers to an—indiscretion on my fiancée's part, where the dead man was concerned.' Joanna found that

she was digging her nails into Neil's hand, and with a murmur of apology she slackened her grip.

'I think it might help you to fix the real date of the letter,' Neil went on quietly, 'if I point out that Miss Deane told me about the whole incident some months ago, and we'd both managed to put it sufficiently behind us for us to be happy in our engagement and look forward to our marriage. There would hardly have been time for us to have achieved that exact state of mind if the—arrangement in that letter dated from a fortnight before Gray was murdered.'

'No, I think we can concede that,' the Inspector agreed, though it was quite impossible to tell from his expression whether or not he had accepted Neil's quiet, plausible statement at its exact face-value. He did, however, add, 'Thank you, Mr Gilmore,' which seemed hopeful.

He turned to Joanna again.

'Then do you mind telling me when you last saw the deceased?' he said.

'Oh, not since then!' she exclaimed eagerly. 'The—the arrangement in that letter was never carried out. We—there was a break, and I never saw him again. I—didn't want to,' she added with a shudder which was genuine.

'You didn't have any occasion to visit him on the night of his death?'

'Oh, no, no! It was just the most horrible coincidence that he happened to live in the same block as Neil,' Joanna pleaded, with such genuine fervour that her manner carried unmistakable conviction.

'I see.' The Inspector returned the letter to his wallet, and got up. 'Well, I'm sorry I had to rake up something which no doubt you wish to forget. But you'll understand that we have to follow up everything in a case of this sort.'

'Of course,' agreed Joanna faintly, hardly able to believe that the ordeal was suddenly over. 'The—the letter won't have to be produced in court or anything, will it?'

The Inspector smiled slightly.

'Not unless—which seems unlikely—it should subsequently appear to have some bearing on Mr Gray's death. Don't worry, Miss Deane,' he added kindly. 'We don't make trouble unnecessarily, you know, and we prefer not to bring in anything irrelevant, particularly if it would cause pain to innocent people.'

Inspector Curtis took his hat then and, having wished them both a pleasant 'good evening', left the house.

Joanna, who had accompanied him to the front door, came slowly back into the drawing-room, where she found Neil also preparing to go.

She stood just inside the doorway and looked at him.

'You're not staying, then?'

'To see your sister?' He smiled faintly and dryly. 'There isn't much point in my doing so, is there?'

'You mean you wouldn't believe anything she said now?'

'Joanna'—he gave an exasperated little laugh—'what are you-asking me to believe this time? I take it that the letter which the Inspector produced was the one you tried to steal back?'

'Of course.'

'And it was very compromising—made some assignation, or something of the sort?'

'Yes.'

'My dear, I've just heard you, with my own ears, solemnly declare that the letter was your own. I've even—heaven forgive me if I'm being a fool—added some artistic details to the story myself.'

'Yes,' she said heavily. 'It was nice of you to help me over that. Why did you do it?'

'I don't know.' He sounded almost angry. 'Except that I know you didn't knife that fellow, whatever you had against him, and I suppose I can't stand by and watch the evidence pile up wrongly against you, when it comes to a charge like that. Even if you did write this confounded letter only a few weeks ago...'

'I never wrote it at all.' But, even to her own ears, her tone carried no conviction. 'The letter was from Auriel.'

'Then, in heaven's name, why couldn't you have said so?' he demanded impatiently.

'Because, if I had, that Inspector would have gone on sitting here until Auriel came in. She wouldn't even have been prepared for him—and she'd almost certainly have with her the man she's going to marry in less than a fortnight.'

'Oh, damn it! you have an answer for everything,' he cried, and, to her astonished ears, it seemed that there was distress as well as anger in his voice. 'You're asking me to believe that, if I stay here until your sister comes in--'

'Listen!' Joanna held up her hand suddenly, and relieved colour flooded back into her face. 'There she is. I heard her key in the door, and'—she listened again and gave a little cry of delight—'she's alone, I think.'

Joanna started towards the door, but Neil caught her arm peremptorily and held her back.

'No, I don't want you speaking to her first.'

'But I must convince her that it's safe to tell you the truth!'

'Then you'll convince her in front of me,' he retorted grimly.

'I only thought----' began Joanna. And then Auriel came into the room, bright-eyed, radiant, ready to be charming to any man whom her dear Joanna had brought into the house.

'Lo, darling! I didn't know you were coming home tonight.' She kissed Joanna in her sweet, brief, flower-petal way, and looked with smiling interest at Neil.

'No. It was unexpected.' Try as she would, Joanna could not immediately change her manner to fight-hearted casualness. 'This is Neil Gilmore, Auriel--'

'Oh, how nice! You're a friend of my fiance's, aren't you?' Auriel gave him her hand and seemed to brush him with the wing of her smiling favour.

'Am I?' Neil returned the smile, irresistibly.

'Why, yes. He's John Morgan, you know.'

'Is that so?' They both sounded so pleasantly social, while Joanna stood by suffering silent agonies of anxiety. 'I knew him very well at college, of course, though I haven't seen him for some years.'

'There was something Neil wanted you to tell him,' interrupted Joanna, and even to herself she sounded abrupt and ungracious.

'Oh?' Auriel looked mildly inquiring. 'But why don't we all sit down?' she dropped down gracefully on to the settee and drew up her feet under her, like a child.

Joanna sat down too, but stiffly, as though the spring had gone out of her. And she gripped her hands together in her lap, like someone who had to hold tightly to something in order to keep quite calm.

'It's about Simon Gray,' she said, quietly but with a lack of preparation which was dramatic.

'Who?' Auriel had been carelessly turning the end of her belt round her finger, but at that she became completely still. 'Oh, yes—I remember.'

'Neil knows that a little while ago I attempted to get back a very important letter from him—from Simon Gray,

I mean. Auriel, it's—it's vitally important to me that Neil—who is the soul of discretion—should be told who really wrote that letter. Will you please—tell him?'

'I don't think I know what you're talking about, darling,' Auriel said, with a slight frown. 'What letter?'

In all the years she had known her, Joanna had never suffered deliberate betrayal at Auriel's hands. Minor injustices, perhaps, or light-hearted displays of selfishness. But not this—not this!

'Auriel'—Joanna had gone very pale—I did stand by you when you needed me. Will you please stand by me?'

It was a powerful appeal, and for a moment Auriel's fingers curled tightly in on themselves. But something inflexible touched the sweetness of her exquisitely pretty face, and she said, with a touch of impatience,

'But of course, Joanna, dear! I'll stand by you in anything. It's just—I don't know what you're talking about.'

Joanna stood up and drew a long breath.

'I'm sorry,' she said to Neil. 'I seem to have miscalculated.'

She thought he was almost sorry for her humiliation. At any rate, he started to say something. But Auriel sprang up at that moment, and cried, in a tone faintly sharpened by relief:

'Here are Mother and Daddy! Oh, good'—as Mr and Mrs Deane came into the room—'now they'll be able to meet Neil. Mother, this is Neil Gilmore. He's a wonderfully brilliant architect, you know—Sir Henry's son—no,

nephew. John will be so glad to have found him again. Mr Gilmore, you must come to the wedding. Yes, really, I insist. John would never forgive me if we lost sight of you again.'

To all appearances Neil was her acquisition, rather than Joanna's, and both the older Deanes greeted him as such.

To Joanna, the scene had taken on the quality of an inescapable nightmare. Events were out of her hands. She had been struggling, for hours it seemed, to create an exact impression. With tremendous effort she had succeeded in doing just what she had planned to do—and the results were completely and horribly the opposite of what she intended.

Her father put his hand on her shoulder and said:

'You're very pale, child. Aren't you well?'

'Not—exactly.' She seized at the chance of escape. 'I have a most frightful headache. That's really why I came home. And if—no one minds, I'm going to bed now.'

'Darling, I should!' Her stepmother made attractive little sounds of sympathy, her father said: 'Certainly bed's the best place,' and Auriel added kindly: 'If you want aspirin, you'll find some in my top drawer.'

Only Neil expressed no concern. He stood squarely in front of her as she would have escaped from the room and said:

'I'll come and see you at the office tomorrow.'

'Oh, no! Please don't.' She spoke urgently, but softly so that the others should not hear. 'There's nothing—nothing left to say.'

'There's something I want to say.' He sounded so grim that she had a panic fear that he would start to upbraid her in front of her own people. 'When do you go out to lunch?'

'It's no good --'

'When?'

It was impossible to continue the argument further. She must put him off by some other means.

'One-thirty,' she said and, almost pushing him aside, she ran out of the room.

Once in her bedroom, she burst into tears—but not for long. Tears seemed so futile and pointless now. And when, half an hour later, Auriel came to the door and said softly: 'Can I come in, Joanna?' she sat up and looked more or less normal.

'Yes—come in.'

She half expected a subdued and remorsefully tearful Auriel. But the girl who came in showed no sign of remorse.

'Are you crazy, Joanna?' she said softly—even reproachfully. 'What on earth made you ask me to give myself away to a perfect stranger? I nearly died with terror and shock when you thrust that scene on me.'

'I *told* you—he would never have said a word,' Joanna insisted.

'But he's a perfect stranger.'

'No, no, I know him very well.' She even thought she did, in that moment. 'He was the man whose flat I burgled.'

'That doesn't make you know him well.' Auriel was singularly brisk and matter-of-fact for her. 'Besides, he knows John. He might have told him anything. How *could* you have let me in for such a thing?'

'It was necessary—in order to clear myself. Didn't you understand, when I told you it was vitally important to me? I thought--'

'But why "vitally important"?' Auriel's beautiful eyes looked wide and astonished. 'There couldn't *be* anything vitally important with a man you'd hardly ever seen before. The vital importance was on my side. What would it

have meant for me if I had told this man the truth and he chose to pass on the information to John?'

'But he wouldn't.' Joanna could only reiterate that, with desperate obsdncacy. 'Look, Auriel, no harm has been done. He hasn't any suspicion of you. There's no fear of his telling Joan anything.'

That was not quite the end of the discussion. Auriel stayed and lavished a few forgiving phrases on Joanna before she kissed her and drifted off to her own room. And not until Auriel had gone quite a long time did Joanna remember that she had never mentioned Inspector Curtis's visit.

'Oh, well, it doesn't matter,' she told herself. 'At least *he* believed what I told him.'

And that time she did laugh—but in a convulsive little way which ended in something like a sob.

It was raining when she woke the next morning, but that was only a minor detail in the general weight of depression which made her long to hide her head under the bedclothes and pretend to herself that there was no need to get up and face life as usual.

To her profound relief, Sir Henry was not in the office that day. She could arrange things as she pleased, and she deliberately went out to lunch an hour earlier than usual.

It was nearly half-past two by the time she returned to the office, and she thought nervously, as she entered the building: 'Even Neil wouldn't wait as long as this, surely. I'm safe.'

She worked doggedly through the afternoon—even a little later than her usual time because her long lunchtime had put her behindhand with her work. She heard the others go. She put everything away neatly, sorted one or two papers for immediate attention in the morning, and, with a curious feeling between relief and disappointment which she could not explain, went to the mirror to put on her hat.

As she did so, the door opened and Neil came in.

'Neil!' She swung round to face him. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to see you, of course.'

'But I didn't want to see you. That's why I went out early at lunchtime.'

'I realised that.'

'Then it wasn't very polite of you to come back and force yourself on me now. I don't want to see you. I don't want to hear anything you have to say. It was enough surely that Auriel proved me a liar to your satisfaction last night. Do we have to have a conference about it now?'

She put up her hand, as though she would literally push him away. But he determinedly came forward, caught her hand lightly in his and said:

'Don't be such a little idiot. I came to say I was sorry for misjudging you. Auriel was obviously lying last night. That letter couldn't have belonged to anyone but her.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOANNA actually staggered slightly. Until then she had never quite believed that mental distress could really make one feel faint. But she had been through a great deal in the last twenty-four hours, and at this sudden reversal of all she had feared—and indeed, accepted—a sort of blankness seized her for a moment, and she was glad that Neil had her by the hand.

'What's the matter?' she heard him ask sharply.

'N-nothing.' The room began to seem right and normal again. 'Except that I was—surprised.'

'So was I, when the truth finally dawned,' he admitted grimly.

'But—how *did* it dawn? What made you think Auriel wasn't telling the truth? I thought she was awfully good and convincing,' Joanna said rather sadly.

'She was extraordinarily good and convincing,' he agreed. 'But you were more so.'

'I was?' She stared at him. 'I thought I must have looked the picture of guilt—stammering and not knowing what on earth to say next.'

'I know. Whereas she was completely self-possessed and slick about it all. But though she looked so calm, her hands gave her away.'

'Oh, you couldn't presume guilt just on the evidence of restless hands!' Joanna protested.

'No, it wasn't only that, of course. It was also the way you looked, so white and—betrayed, when she pretended not to know what you were talking about,' he said slowly. 'It wasn't the expression of someone whose neat plan had miscarried. You looked as though someone you loved had failed you.'

'That was very—quick of you.'

'Oh, lord, Joanna, don't talk about my having been quick in any of this. I was abominably, inexcusably slow in coming to the truth. And now that I have--' He broke off. Then he added with a wry little smile, 'I told you I would grovel if I found I'd misjudged you--'

'Whereas the first thing you really did was to come and address me as "little idiot",' she recalled with some spirit.

'I--' He looked unexpectedly put out. 'Did I?'

'You did.' Suddenly a dizzy sense of enjoyment began to take possession of her. 'And all because I reserved the simple right to see you or not, as I chose.'

'Oh, Joanna—please.' To her surprise, he actually drew her towards him, by the hand he was holding, so that she was almost against him. 'I'm so horribly sorry and ashamed. Don't be as hard on me as I deserve.'

She wanted to laugh aloud in her joy and her relief. She supposed it must be the delicious incongruousness of it all which made her feel so light-hearted and light-headed.

But though it was supremely gratifying and piquant to have her accuser turn suppliant like this, she found when she looked up into his face that she did not altogether enjoy the anxiety and unhappiness she saw there. It was a dark, proud face by nature. Something generous and romantic in her winced before the idea that he should be humbled, however deservedly.

'It's all right.' She touched his arm a little awkwardly. 'It isn't very reassuring to have a girl break into your flat, I guess. Besides'—she hesitated, then went on, though diffidently—'you had just been through a pretty disillusioning and miserable time before all this happened. I don't expect you were in a very tolerant or trustful mood.'

'Oh—that?' He made a slight face. 'To have made a fool of oneself with one woman is a poor excuse for behaving badly to another. I don't think I'll plead that one, Joanna. But are you going to forgive me and come out to dinner with me?'

'Yes,' she said simply.

Joanna didn't even ask him where they were going. In a mood of glowing contentment—which she could only attribute to her sudden reinstatement as a nice, respectable girl once more—she was content to let him decide everything.

He hailed a taxi, and they were driven to a quiet, engagingly French place in Soho which she remembered having heard Auriel speak of.

'I've never been here before.' She looked round smilingly.

'Haven't you? I used to come here pretty often.'

'Oh, yes?'

'With Vivien,' he added, with a mixture of defiance and self-mockery.

'I wasn't going to ask that.'

'You were pretty quick on that inquiry when I took you to that place on Sunday,' he reminded her.

'I wasn't feeling in a very good temper then,' Joanna retorted serenely. At which he laughed.

But when she glanced across at him, she thought his expression moody and unhappy. Joanna watched him thoughtfully, but not until the waiter had taken their order and gone away did she speak. Then she said, almost casually:

'Are you going to tell me about her?'

That did make him look up—surprised, even startled.

'Do you want to hear about her?'

'If you would like to tell me.'

he waiter brought their meal, and for a while they ate in silence. It was, curiously enough, a companionable silence, though what she had just said might well have made it a strained one. And when Neil finally began to speak, he did so as though they were merely continuing a subject they had already started.

'It's difficult to describe the attraction of some people, Joanna. She wasn't—isn't, I mean—outstandingly beautiful. Not, I suppose,' he said reflectively, 'as beautiful as you.'

'I'm not beautiful,' Joanna put in, smilingly but without affectation.

'In a way, you are.' He spoke almost impersonally. 'With Vivien it's more a sort of blazing vitality. And the hell of it is that, though I have no illusions about her as a person, I would willingly drug all my critical faculties again, just to bask in that uneasy glory once more. Oh, I don't expect you understand at all what I mean.'

'Yes, I do,' Joanna said, thinking how much easier it was to understand the reactions of other people than it was to account for one's own. 'I also,' she added briskly, 'think it was a remarkably good thing that she went and married someone else.'

He smiled dryly and said:

'You don't expect me to second that, I suppose?'

'Well, on a strictly commonsense basis --'

'These things are never on a strictly commonsense basis, my charming Joanna.'

She glanced at him again, and her tone softened as she asked: 'Was it a complete shock when she married someone else?'

'Pretty grim.'

'Were you—hoping she would marry you?'

There was quite a long silence. Then he said:

'If you want a completely honest reply to that—no. I think I knew she never intended to do anything but play around with me. I was neither rich enough or powerful enough for her to think of marrying me, however much she might dangle the prospect before me. But one never quite faces these things, Joanna, so long as there's hope.'

'I see.' She tried to imagine any girl—woman—having so much power over Neil, and failed. 'How long beforehand did you guess? That she was going to marry the other man, I mean.'

'I didn't guess. She presented me with the accomplished fact. She telephoned in the morning, married him at noon, and flew off to Egypt on her honeymoon in the evening.'

'Oh,' Joanna said soberly. 'That was really shabby.' Then, having thought things over, she added: 'And that was the evening I—came?'

'That was the evening you came,' he agreed with a smile.

'You must have felt like wringing my neck for intruding on your troubles.'

'No,' he said judicially. 'You were rather a welcome diversion, as a matter of fact. Only, as I think you remarked earlier in the evening, I was not exactly in a trustful or tolerant mood.'

'But you went to a lot of trouble to divert suspicion from me, when that policeman came.'

'Ye-es, I'd forgotten that.'

'I hadn't,' Joanna said earnestly. 'Nor the time you backed me up before the detective. In some ways, you've been rather nice to me, Neil, in spite of everything.'

'Oh, you generous, absurd child!' He clasped her hand for a moment, as it lay on the table. 'Roger is a lucky fellow.'

'Roger?' She was genuinely surprised, until she remembered the scene he had interrupted in the garden at the Manor. 'Oh'—she coloured, to her extreme annoyance— 'that was pardy the nightingale and the—the moon and everything,' she explained confusedly.

He laughed a good deal at that, and said that nightingales and moonlight were among the very best romantic effects.

'But I promise you,' he added more seriously, 'that I'll see Roger is put right on the subject of Aunt Jessica's insinuations.'

Joanna wanted very much to say that the good opinion of Sir Henry and Lady Gilmore mattered just as much. But, while she was wondering whether that would sound unnecessarily coy and unnatural, she saw Neil look beyond her, with an expression of interest and amusement.

'What is it?' she asked, resisting the desire to turn. 'Someone you know?'

'Someone we both know. Your sister has just come in with John Morgan.'

'Oh, Neil! You musn't say a word, you know. About Auriel and that letter, I mean!'

'Of course not. Don't be silly,' he soothed her. 'Morgan's affairs are no concern of mine.'

And then the other two saw them and came over to speak.

Everyone was very gay and sociable, but Joanna, who knew Auriel so well, guessed that her sister was uneasy. It was true that she had airily invited Neil to come to her wedding. But Joanna was perfectly sure that Auriel had never intended to confirm the invitation to one who had come so near suspecting her of something John did not know.

And now here were two men exchanging friendly reminiscences, and, before five minutes were past, John was repeating Auriel's invitation, but in a tone which did give a very positive character to the invitation.

'Are you going to be bridesmaid?' Neil asked Joanna.

'Of course,' she smiled.

He turned back to John.

'Thank you very much. I shall be very glad to come.'

'Well!' It was Auriel who gave that laughing exclamation. 'Are we to believe that's a case of cause and effect? Are you coming to my wedding just because you like the bridesmaid?'

'I do like the bridesmaid very much,' he said, with a deliberate little smile. 'I find her an altogether delightful and trustworthy person.'

'He's giving you an excellent reference, darling,' remarked Auriel to her sister, but her glance fell before his smiling one.

'He means that he'll be glad to have Joanna to look after him when we've gone off on our honeymoon,' John declared. And on that laughing note, they separated.

'You shouldn't have said that,' Joanna told Neil reproachfully, when the other two had withdrawn to their own table.

'Drink up your coffee and don't worry about trifles,' Neil retorted. 'She deserved it.'

'But you frightened her badly.'

'I meant to.'

'Oh—you sound rather—ruthless when you say that.'

'Not at all. I simply administered a well-deserved scare to someone who has behaved very badly to you.'

'It wasn't necessary for you to constitute yourself my champion,' Joanna said, but she smiled a little.

'Not necessary perhaps, but enjoyable,' he retorted. 'What play would you like to see?'

'Oh, are we going to a play?'

'Unless you would rather go and dance somewhere.'

'No. I should like to go to the theatre. I'm not really dressed for dancing.'

After a short discussion they decided on a play they both wanted to see, and they left the restaurant together.

When they came out of the theatre again, he wanted to take her to supper. But Joanna insisted that she had been out late enough for an evening when she had expected to go straight home from the office.

'Phone and explain,' he suggested.

But Joanna shook her head. Secretly, she was growing anxious to see Auriel and reassure her, and the very fact that she had enjoyed herself so much weighed a little on her conscience.

Neil yielded to her further persistence then, and took her home. He refused her suggestion that he should come in, and she was not sorry for that. If Auriel were already home and were to see him again, she would be more difficult than ever to convince that there was nothing to fear.

'Goodnight, Joanna.' He held both her hands and looked down at her. 'Have we already signed the peace? or is it only an armistice?'

'Oh, I don't bear you any grudge for your mistake, if that's what you mean.' She glanced down at their hands and laughed rather shyly. 'We're friends now—if you like.'

'I do like,' he said, and smiling, kissed one of her hands quite ceremoniously.

'Oh, Neil'—she was half amused, half touched—'I've never had anyone kiss my hand before.'

'Well, the occasion called for something, you know,' he told her. 'And as I couldn't provide nightingales and moonlight I thought I'd better stop short at this.'

'You're quite absurd!' She laughed and pulled her hand away. But, as she called: 'Goodnight,' and ran into the house, she found herself regretting that there had been no nightingales and moonlight—or whatever it was he required to make him say goodnight in an even more romantic manner.

Her parents were not in, but, as she went upstairs, humming softly to herself, Auriel pulled open the door of her room and exclaimed:

'Joanna, how late you are!'

'Am I?' Joanna glanced at her watch in surprise. 'No, I'm not. We came straight on from the theatre.'

'Oh, so you went to a theatre with him?'

'Yes, certainly. Why not?'

'You know perfectly well why not.' A sort of nervous exasperation sharpened Auriel's tone. 'Joanna, what's come over you?' And she turned and went back into her room, leaving the door open, with the obvious expectation that her sister would follow her.

For a moment, Joanna had an almost overwhelming impulse to ignore Auriel's questions and go on calmly to her own room. She didn't know what had come over her, and she had no wish to discuss whatever it was with Auriel. But then she remembered that she was happy and secure, while Auriel was not, and she went into her sister's room and closed the door.

'There's no need for you to be afraid, Auriel.' She leant against the door and looked across at the other girl, standing moodily by the dressing-table combing her hair. 'Neil isn't even interested in your affairs.'

'But he's a friend of John's—on intimate speaking terms with him. And he knows about—that letter, doesn't he?'

'Knows it was really yours?—yes.'

'Did you spend the evening convincing him?' cried Auriel angrily.

'No. He knew you were lying last night. He told me so.'

'I don't believe it!' Auriel was visibly shaken by the idea that her act might not have been so convincing as she supposed.

'It's true. But there's no need for you to harrow yourself. This thing is getting out of all proportion, Auriel. It isn't as though John were his brother—or even his cousin,' she added with seeming irrelevance. 'All he knows is that there's been some half-glimpsed indiscretion on your part. Apart from any assurance he has given—and he gave me an absolute assurance of his silence—he isn't even *interested*. Why should he be? John is a nice, casual friend of his. It can't matter to Neil what sort of girl he marries.'

Auriel nervously ran her thumbnail down the teeth of her comb.

'But he knows too much, Joanna. Of all the men you could run around with, why do you have to choose *him*?'

'I didn't. He chose me. At least, he chose to take me out to-night. I tried to avoid it, as a matter of fact,' Joanna said, remembering that with some surprise.

'Because you knew there was an element of danger in going,' Auriel exclaimed triumphantly.

'No, for quite other reasons. But never mind them now.'

'Anyway, you do see that it would be better to drop him gradually, don't you?' A coaxing note had crept into Auriel's tone. 'It isn't only whatever he may guess about that miserable letter. He actually found you breaking into his flat. He may not be shocked about that any more—in fact, I'm sure he's

not because I'd say he takes a lot of shocking. But it's an odd experience—a good story, Joanna. And, after a while, men can never resist telling a good story.'

'He won't tell it, I promise you.'

'You don't *know* he won't. Why are you so obstinate? It's something so unimportant, weighed against something so important. Just a casual acquaintance and a date or two weighed against my safety and peace of mind.'

'You're exaggerating,' Joanna said coldly. And because she had never answered an appeal of Auriel's like that, she felt she must sound incredibly harsh.

'I don't understand you, or what's come over you!' Auriel repeated her initial cry. 'Are you in love with the man or something?'

'I? Certainly not. It's just a nice friendship which I'm enjoying and am not prepared to drop.'

So sensible—so plausible. But the strangest sensation had come to her when Auriel hurled that accusation at her.

'I've never known you not want to help me before, Joanna.' Auriel's tone changed suddenly from anger to appeal. 'You know how scared and worried I am, and you won't even do this little thing to help me. It's not like you.'

But Joanna had learned something of relative values in the last few days.

'Auriel dear,' she said a little dryly, 'if you'll look back over the last two weeks, I think you'll find that / haven't done the failing. I did my best to recover that beastly letter for you—I went through a great deal of unpleasantness to do so. And, though I haven't told you this before, I even pretended to the police that I wrote it--'

'When?' Auriel's eyes suddenly became enormous, and the hand which was running absently up and down her comb stopped abruptly.

'Last night. A detective came here and--'¹

'*Last night?*' Auriel's beautiful, vivid hair actually seemed to curl upwards from her scalp. 'A policeman—a detective came *here*—to ask questions—and you haven't even thought fit to mention it to me!'

'There was so much else, I—I somehow forgot until you'd gone to your room,' Joanna said, but a little confusedly because she realised how peculiar her behaviour must really seem this time.

'I think,' Auriel said, 'you'd better tell me about it now.'

'All right. I was going to. He was waiting here when Neil and I came in, and he had your letter with him.'

Auriel gave a small, frightened sound.

'It was not only addressed from here, Auriel. It was dated as well—except for the year.'

'I could have sworn--'

'Well, you were wrong. The only identification mark missing was the actual signature. He asked me if the letter were mine, and I knew if I had said "no", he would wait until you came in, and, for all I knew, you might come in with John. I said the letter was mine.'

'Joanna!' For a moment a flush of something like shame, as well as relief, appeared in Auriel's cheeks. 'You said that? —in front of Neil?'

'Yes, Neil was there.'

'Darling! I'm sorry I was such a beast when you wanted me to tell him the truth.' Auriel's capitulation was sudden and complete, so that Joanna felt her heart warm to her sister as it had not for a long time.

'It doesn't matter. He believes me now,' she said, and she pressed her hands against her heart without knowing that she did so.

'And did the detective accept your story?'

'Not completely at first. He thought the letter referred to a few weeks ago, which meant, of course, that it *could* have had some bearing on—Simon's death.'

'Oh, heavens, how terrifying!'

'Yes, I was a good deal frightened. But Neil came to the rescue perfectly. You remember he told the police in the beginning that I was his fiancée?'

'Did he? Oh, yes, I remember.' Auriel had a genius for forgetting anything which did not concern her personally. 'He pretended to know all about my having written that letter, and he claimed that I had confessed and been forgiven some months ago. As he pointed out, if the letter referred to this year, there had hardly been time for all that to happen.'

'That was clever of him. And very decent too. Though I don't know,' Auriel added with naive self-absorption, 'why he should go to so much trouble to help me, when he hadn't ever met me.'

'He believed,' Joanna pointed out gently, 'that he was helping me.'

At which Auriel said very thoughtfully, 'Oh, yes,' and stared reflectively at Joanna.

'So the detective was satisfied?' she said at last, returning to the essential point.

'I think so.'

'You're not certain?'

'One can never be certain in these cases, Auriel.'

'So that he might turn up and ask questions again?'

'I suppose he might, though it's unlikely.'

'And in that case, you would have to be Neil's fiancée again. You'd better keep in touch with him after all.' Auriel chose the lesser of two personal evils without hesitation.

Joanna laughed vexedly.

'It isn't a pretence we could keep up for any length of time, Auriel.'

'I wouldn't be so sure,' Auriel retorted, with the first gleam of humour she had shown that evening. 'I wouldn't be a bit sure about that.'

And though she laughed a good deal as she kissed Joanna goodnight, Joanna somehow had neither the courage nor resolution to ask her why.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DURING the short time between that evening with Neil and Auriel's wedding day, Joanna found life drifting on an extremely pleasant stream.

For a few days Sir Henry, who had caught a chill, was away from the office and she was busy, though not harrasingly so. Then towards the end of the week he returned, and j the first thing he did was to call Joanna into his office and address her rather ceremoniously.

'My dear Miss Deane'—he balanced his spectacles between his fine hands a little self-consciously, but he smiled at her kindly—'I don't want to enlarge on what must have been a rather—painful incident for you. But I do want you to know that Neil has had a long talk with me—with Lady Gilmore and me,' he amended, 'and we now fully understand that your visit to his flat was made from the very best of motives.

'We are, of course, very grateful to you for your efforts to bring us and Neil together again. And though, as it turned out, these were not strictly necessary, believe me, I Miss Deane, Lady Gilmore and I shall not forget how kindly you concerned yourself on our behalf.'

Joanna coloured and tried to look as though she understood what he was talking about. Then, having murmured a non-committal: 'Please don't exaggerate anything I did,' I she opened her notebook and made every sign that she was I ready for the day's work.

Sir Henry appeared to feel that he had done justice where justice was due, and he made no further reference to the! matter. Only he was more than usually nice and considerate to Joanna, so that she should understand that she was reinstated—and more than reinstated—in his good opinion.

'I must ring Neil up—at least, I suppose I may ring Neil up—and find out what really happened,' thought Joanna.

But this proved unnecessary, because at lunchtime, an extremely cheerful and friendly Roger came into the office and insisted on taking her out to lunch.

'I'm so sorry not to have seen anything of you for several days, Joanna, particularly after that nonsensical scene with Aunt Jessica. I was afraid you might think I had taken some notice of it, which of course I hadn't,' he insisted. 'But what really happened was that a friend of mine came on leave, and his old man can do quite a lot for me in my job, if he likes. [There was a sudden chance of visiting the family in Norfolk, and I thought I ought to snatch at it.'

'Of course.' She smiled at him. 'I wasn't—worried.'

'I'm so glad. And now I gather that Neil, after being so I confoundedly difficult and making half the trouble himself, has polished your halo afresh and made Uncle Henry and Aunt Helen see you in the best of lights again.'

'Yes, so I understand from Sir Henry. Though I'm not,' she added candidly, 'at all sure what Neil actually said.'

Roger laughed a good deal at that.

'Don't even know what a good girl you are, you mean?' he said. 'Well, according to Neil, you'd taken it on yourself :o come and see him and try to mend the rift between the uncle and aunt and him, all, I presume, for love of your employer and his wife.'

'Don't be so flippant about it. I do love them, as a matter of fact,' Joanna insisted.

'Well, of course. Anyone would. It seems that you had a hard time persuading him, and that you stayed much later than you realised. Then there was a to-do about that chap who was murdered (funny how they've never found who did r—I suppose it wasn't you?)" added Roger in facetious parenthesis. 'And then the police came on a routine inquiry visit which kept you still later, and Aunt Jessica barged in and found you there. According to Neil, he was so mad about your involving him in what he regarded as a ridiculous situation that he felt nasty enough to let you take the consequences at first. And that was why he wouldn't say the word that would clear you.'

'I—see. And did Sir Henry and Lady Gilmore accept that story completely?'

'Oh, yes, I'm sure they did. No doubt Neil embellished it with some convincing detail and made it sound better than I have.'

'By which you mean that you don't accept the story yourself?'

'Well, Joanna, I know a good deal more about you than my uncle and aunt do, and I can't help knowing there are several places where the story doesn't hang together.'

'And yet you can laugh about it, and be gay and friendly.'

'Oh, my dear girl, I don't have to have the whole thing explained in detail before I know you were in Neil's flat on some perfectly innocent matter. As he said to me himself this morning, "Only a fool would doubt Joanna's innocence".'

'Neil said that?' She was indescribably amused and charmed.

'He did. And it's so true, of course, that the moment he put it into words, I felt any stupid, unworthy suspicions I'd entertained fade away.'

'Roger, how nice of you!'

He laughed, but glanced at her curiously, and said, with engaging candour, 'That doesn't mean, however, that I shouldn't simply love to hear the real story.'

'Oh, Roger, you should if it were strictly my own story,' Joanna assured him with equal candour. 'But it does involve someone else, and is one of those stupid, not altogether creditable things which it would have been impossible to explain to your uncle and aunt. I think Neil was probably wise to give them the explanation he did. It isn't correct in detail, of course, but is near enough to the truth in spirit. To you I can only say—I really went into Neil's place by mistake and on someone else's behalf, and then got involved in an absolute tangle of suspicious-looking circumstances.'

'And what really made Neil turn nasty and refuse to help you out when Aunt Jessica blew the gaff?' Roger wanted to know.

'Oh, he'd accepted the very obvious view of me which in the circumstances suggested, and thought I deserved whatever was coming to me.'

'Doubted your innocence, in fact?' suggested Roger with huge enjoyment.

'I'm afraid so.'

'H'm—condemned out of his own mouth.' Roger gave a smile of friendly malice. 'Still, at least he had the grace to admit it. And I daresay his trust in women had had some rough treatment at the hands of that harpy who married Lord Norton.'

'Oh, was that who Vivien married?' Joanna was profoundly interested and showed it.

'Yes. How did you know her name?'

'Neil told me.'

'Did he?' Roger looked interested in his turn. 'He's been a bit clam-like about the whole business, so far as I've been concerned.'

'He didn't tell me much either,' Joanna said. 'Isn't Lord Norton what's called a Press Lord?'

'Oh, yes. And a theatre magnate and a business tycoon and all that sort of thing. She'll have her hand on all the power and money she wants now,' Roger agreed cheerfully.

'I can't help being glad Neil escaped,' Joanna exclaimed. And then: 'Did you ever see her, Roger?'

'Yes, I did. Not my sort at all, but I could see she's the type to—enslave is, I suppose, the word. Neil had it very badly, and I think I know why,' Roger added thoughtfully. 'In her way, if she *could* be fond of anyone, she was fond

of him. And I think if she could have afforded to let her feelings weigh in the matter, she would have taken him. Of course she wanted money and power much more than she wanted any person—Neil or anyone else. But, if her appetite for those could have been satisfied, I think she'd have allowed herself the luxury of being in love with him. I wouldn't put it any higher than that.'

Joanna was silent, most reluctantly digesting what had just been said. Not for the first time, she was surprised to realise what a degree of shrewdness Roger's cheerful good- humour covered. Far more than Neil's reluctant, half-mocking sentences, Roger's forthright comments conjured up a picture of the woman who had meant so much in Neil's life.

And Joanna saw her for the dangerous, powerful personality she was. It was curiously disquieting, although she reminded herself that marriage had most satisfactorily removed this disturbing influence from the scene.

Roger showed himself more than willing to take up their pleasant relationship where they had left it before the weekend, but Auriel's approaching wedding left Joanna very little spare time. She was not, perhaps, entirely sorry to have this excuse for curtailing their meetings. For, though Roger was a charming and delightful companion, he was not the only charming and delightful companion in Joanna's very recent experience, and she preferred not to have her time monopolised, however pleasantly. However, by general agreement, he was included in the long list of guests who were to assemble to see Auriel marry her John.

Of Neil himself Joanna heard nothing for a week, and she tried to tell herself that she was not in the least surprised or disappointed.

Then, a couple of evenings before the wedding, the telephone bell rang yet again at the end of a fantastically busy day, and Joanna went rather wearily to answer it, without even the premonitory thrill of expectation which had been hers almost every time she had answered the telephone during the past week.

'Hello,' she said without enthusiasm.

And Neil's half-laughing voice replied: 'Have I rung at the wrong moment?'

'Neil! No, of course not. What made you think so?'

'You sounded as though you were suffering fools not too gladly.'

Joanna laughed.

'I'm so sorry. It's been quite a day, and half London seems to have been on the phone to us this evening.'

'I know. I've been trying on and off since seven o'clock.'

'Oh!' With a pang of disappointment which surprised her by its sharpness, she wondered if he had meant to ask her out with him. Then she reminded herself that it would have been quite impossible for her to have gone, in any case. 'You are coming on Thursday, aren't you, Neil?'

'Yes, of course. I hear Roger is to be a guest too.'

'Oh, yes. By the way, he told me that you—explained things to Sir Henry and your aunt. Thank you.'

'Not at all. It was the least I owed you. I really rang up to ask if I might take you out somewhere after the wedding. I understand that extreme depression is the usual reaction after a wedding, except for the two people most concerned. Perhaps for them too, for all I know,' he added carelessly. 'Would you care to come?'

'I should have loved to, but there'll be some sort of theatre party for the bridesmaids and groomsmen and the immediate family. I couldn't cry off from that, you know.'

'No, of course not. Besides, you'll enjoy it. I just thought, if you were doing nothing--'

'I'd much rather have come with you,' she told him frankly.

He laughed and said: 'You have such a charming way of watering the olive branch,' which made her laugh too and feel that she was not so tired as she had supposed she was.

'Shall I have any chance of talking to you on Thursday, or will you be so much part of the show that one only looks at you?' he wanted to know.

'Don't be silly. Of course you'll have a chance of talking to me at the reception. Apart from seeing that Auriel changes in time to catch the train, I haven't any serious duties.'

'Don't you have to look after the best man or something?'

'I'll undertake to look after you too, if that's what you mean,' she retorted gaily.

He said that was exactly what he meant, and then wished her goodnight, and rang off, leaving her feeling ridiculously happy and excited.

The night before the wedding, Joanna brought herself to speak to Auriel once more of the letter which had threatened to bring so much unhappiness to them both.

She was sitting on the side of Auriel's bed, having come in to say goodnight to her, and see that everything was in order for the next day.

'I'm sure you're going to be terribly happy with John, darling, and I haven't the least anxiety about you so far as he is concerned. But I do think you ought to find the courage to safeguard your happiness in one respect.'

Auriel, who was leaning back against the pillows idly filing her nails, looked up sharply.

'It isn't any good bringing up that letter again, if that's what you mean,' she said, setting her soft red mouth in a singularly obstinate line. 'I just don't believe in stirring up trouble which probably will never stir itself up.'

'No, of course not.' Joanna tried to sound calm and reasonable. 'But there is such a thing as choosing the best time to deal with something which could look very ugly presented the wrong way. If you told John quite frankly about your past foolishness, how it never came to anything but you feel ashamed of the impulse, I know he might be angry at first, but he would get over it—particularly if you chose your time. Oh, Auriel, you can do these things so well, if you want to.'

'Not if I'm frightened,' countered Auriel, with some truth.

'But, darling, there's so little to be frightened *about*, if you tackle it that way. And then you're perfectly safe and in a strong position if the letter does turn up again.'

'Why should it?'

'I don't know. But we can't possibly be sure that we've seen the last of it.'

'But you claimed it as yours. Even if it did turn up again, as you put it, no one would pin it on me,' Auriel said naively.

'Oh, but if it acquired any real significance--'

'What significance would it acquire?'

'Auriel dear, I don't know. But we've got to face the fact that that letter was written to a man who was later murdered. Apparently they still haven't found out who killed him. At any time, any paper in the case might seem more important than it is, and there would be further inquiries.'

'But you said the letter was yours.' Auriel pressed back against the pillows, looking both frightened and angry. 'You can do the explaining just as well as I can. You haven't got a husband to—to satisfy and appease. If you continue to say the letter is yours, you can still do so without any crisis in your private life. Joanna, you *would* do that for me, wouldn't you? You wouldn't spoil it all now?'

'My dear'—Joanna gave a half-exasperated little laugh— 'what I'm willing or unwilling to do really has hardly anything to do with the case. Inspector Curtis accepted my statement that the letter was mine without further investigation simply because, at that point, the letter wasn't specially important. He was just on a routine inquiry. If the letter suddenly became—or seemed to become—important, they wouldn't be satisfied with a simple statement by me. They only have to ask me to write the date and my name for them to see that the letter isn't mine.'

'Oh!' Auriel's eyes went enormous. 'I didn't think of that.'

'I've thought of it rather a lot,' Joanna confessed. 'And that was what made me say it would be wiser to tell John at a--'

'I'm not going to tell John,' Auriel said firmly. 'No one can make me.'

'Of course not. It's entirely for you to choose but--'

'Well, I've chosen. I don't believe in crossing my bridges until I come to them. You say yourself that you can't really think of circumstances in which their might be further inquiries about the letter. We probably shan't ever hear of it again, and then what a fool I'd have been to stir up trouble with John and risk my happiness. I don't know why you bring up such a miserable, frightening subject just as I'm going to be married. Surely there are happier things to say to me on the evening before my wedding.'

'Darling, I didn't bring up the subject in order to make you miserable! You know I wouldn't do such a thing. I only felt it was my last chance to point out what I thought was the wisest thing to do.'

'All right. But I *don't* think it's wise. You talk about my needing courage, but I've more faith in the future than you have. I know everything's going to be all right.' Auriel was actually smiling again and the little colour which she had lost was returning. 'Don't worry so, Joanna darling, about things that will never happen! I shan't, I can assure you. I mean to be happy, and I *won't* frighten myself with any bogies out of the past.'

In the face of such determination—if entirely baseless—optimism, Joanna realised it was useless to press the matter further. So she agreed to change the subject and stayed long enough with Auriel to talk of pleasanter things and leave her with happy last thoughts. Then, kissing Auriel goodnight with all the warmth and affection she really felt for her, Joanna went away to her own room, to lie awake for a while and remember that she would see Neil on the morrow.

She was up early next morning, seeing to last-minute arrangements and making sure that nothing which could foreseeably be dealt with should mar the perfection of Auriel's wedding day.

Her stepmother—who, in spite of her gaiety and light-heartedness could be extraordinarily efficient when she liked—had left a good deal to Joanna at the end, on the assumption that, as mother of the bride, she was entitled to enjoy herself more than most.

'I'm quite worn out, darling,' she said, smiling very brightly at Joanna over the breakfast-tray which her stepdaughter had brought personally to her room. 'But if I take things quietly now, I shan't look too much of a wreck.'

'You'll look charming, as always,' Joanna assured her. 'Have a quiet, leisurely breakfast and don't worry about anything.'

The reception was being held at one of the big hotels, so that all the catering and entertainment problems were being taken care of. But during the morning there was a stream of callers, flowers, family guests and last-minute presents and telegrams.

With all of these Joanna dealt calmly and capably. And, if she felt a little tired by the time she went to her own room to dress, the sight of her pale gold silk dress, spread out on the bed, was enough to revive her.

She was glad Neil was going to see her in this, and as part of the very beautiful picture which would make up Auriel's wedding pageant. Auriel, of course, would be the central figure, and most people would look only at her. But Neil perhaps would look for the bridesmaid who followed after her, and

Joanna felt it was not vain of her to suppose that he would be a good deal charmed by what he saw.

It went without saying that Auriel looked the radiant perfection of what a bride should look. Even her rather difficult in-laws must surely feel their hearts warm to her, Joanna thought, as she stood admiring her sister in the last-minute glimpse she had of her before the bridesmaids left for the church.

'Darling, you look simply wonderful!' Joanna kissed her fervently but carefully, so as not to disarrange the perfect picture. 'Be happy and don't worry about anything.'

She had given the same affectionate admonition to her stepmother earlier in the day. But to Auriel the words had a more particular meaning. She smiled brilliantly in return and said, laughingly:

'I'm not the worrying one. If today holds no more worries for you than it does for me, we shall be all right.'

And then Joanna went down to the car, where the other bridesmaids were already waiting.

During the short drive she said very little to the others, although they chattered gaily and incessantly. She seemed to be enclosed in a bright little world of her own happiness. Auriel had looked glorious, everything had been perfectly arranged, she herself looked as nearly beautiful as she had ever hoped to be—and she was going to see Neil.

It was absurd to think that life could really narrow itself down to those few salient facts. But it is one of the glories of the human heart that it can sometimes find perfect happiness in so few things.

They had to wait some minutes in the porch. Auriel was too good a stage-manager of her own affairs not to heighten the excited anticipation by keeping everyone waiting a short while. One of the younger bridesmaids pushed the door ajar and peeped into the crowded church, and Joanna too, a little guiltily, took the opportunity of looking in.

Almost immediately she saw Roger, and, as she ran a quick glance over the crowded pews she recognised several people she knew. Only she could not see Neil. And someone pulled the door to and whispered a soft reproof before she could look further.

It didn't matter. She would see him on the way either to or from the altar. And anyway there would be the long and exciting reception, when she would be able to talk to him as much as she liked.

'Here she is!' The excited whisper rustled round the group of golden-clad girls as Auriel's car drew up at the kerb. Breathlessly, Joanna watched her father get out and then her young half-sister step down in her fairy princess gown. She looked so beautiful that she was the embodiment of every girl's dreams and every woman's memories, and one could not look at her without a tightening of the throat and a misting of the eyes.

Quietly but quickly the procession formed itself, the doors opened and the organ's thrilling notes streamed out to meet them, as they advanced slowly into the church. In the end, Joanna forgot to look for Neil, or anyone else.

Afterwards, when the register was being signed in the vestry, and everyone was kissing the bride and exclaiming at her beauty and self-possession, Joanna thought:

'Oh, I never noticed Neil! I must look for him on the way out.'

But when she passed through the church again—this time on the arm of the profoundly relieved best man, who had carried out all his duties to perfection—she could not see any sign of Neil.

Many people, of course, were already massing outside to see the bridal pair come out, but she hardly thought Neil would do that. He was more the kind to think one should show one's respect for the occasion and the actors by remaining in the church until they had gone.

'I could have missed him, of course. I didn't manage to see everyone,' Joanna reminded herself as, running the gauntlet of showers of confetti, she jumped into the waiting car.

But though she was laughing and as gay as everyone else, the first chill of doubt and apprehension had entered her heart.

Again at the reception there was such a crowd that it was difficult to pick out individuals. But surely he would come up to her himself. It was so much easier for him to find her than for her to go seeking in the crowd.

Joanna tried to tell herself that there was plenty of time yet—that he might even have been delayed and not have been able to get to the church in time. But she remained unassured by her own arguments, and when Roger came up to her, she caught him eagerly by the arm and exclaimed:

'Have you seen Neil?'

'No, Joanna.'

'I mean—not even in church?'

'No, he wasn't in the church.'

'You mean he didn't come?' It was impossible to keep the disappointment out of her voice. 'Will he be coming later?'

'No, Joanna, I don't think so.'

'But why, Roger, why?' Suddenly she realised that, in spite of his efforts to appear bright, Roger was worried by something. 'What is it? Has something happened?'

'Not to Neil himself.' Roger took her by the arm, and drew her aside from the crowd. 'You won't have seen the early afternoon papers, of course. There was a bad air crash somewhere in the South of France—the plane returning from Egypt. The Nortons were on it. He was killed, but she's listed among the survivors. I think—I don't know, but I'm practically certain—that Neil has flown out to join her.'

CHAPTER NINE

A FEW seconds before, Joanna had been very much part of the laughing, talking, milling crowd around her. Now she stood, isolated by the shock of what Roger had just said. People were still smiling and talking and moving around, but Joanna took no part in the scene any more. She was alone with the single momentous fact that Neil had gone to join Vivien somewhere.

'What makes you think—he went?'

'There was a message waiting for me at the flat, when I looked in to change before coming on here. It simply said that Neil wouldn't be at the wedding, that he'd been suddenly called away abroad. I couldn't imagine why, of course. Then I bought a lunch-time paper and saw about the crash. I'm afraid that probably explains it.'

'Yes, I expect it does.' She absently fingered a fold of the pale gold dress which Neil had not seen.

'Don't look like that, Joanna.'

She roused herself.

'Like what?'

'As though the end of the world had come.' He moved, so as to place himself between her and the other people. 'It's your sister's wedding day. And, whatever sort of idiot Neil is preparing to make of himself, it won't concern you greatly, dear. If you're thinking of my uncle and aunt--'

'Yes, I was—rather. Do you suppose they'll be terribly upset?'

Roger shrugged.

'That depends entirely on future developments.'

'Yes—of course. Roger, did she send for him, do you think?'

'How do I know, Joanna?—No, I don't see how she could have had time. She could only have got hold of him by phone, and if she was well enough to do that, there wasn't any reason for his going.'

'Oh—you think he went because she was injured and really needed him?' There was faint comfort in the thought that a sort of sympathetic sense of duty might have taken him to her side.

'I really don't know, my dear. I know no more than the newspaper said, and they spoke of her as a survivor, that's all.'

She could have screamed with impatience and frustration. Suddenly Auriel's wedding seemed of no importance —just an interruption to what she really wanted to do. If only she were not held here by the ruthless hand of social necessity, she could have been telephoning newspaper offices, inquiring at the airline—anything that would give her a glimmer of light on why Neil had done what he had.

'Joanna dear!' Her stepmother's voice suddenly recalled her to her inescapable duties. 'Where have you been hiding? I couldn't find you anywhere. Auriel wants you--'

'I'm just coming,' Joanna promised. Then she turned back for a last word with Roger. 'You'll let me know if you hear anything, won't you?'

'Of course. But I'm not likely to hear anything until we leave here. Unless, of course, any of the guests knew Norton. He must have known nearly everyone of importance.'

'But can't you go and phone up someone? I can't leave, but you could. You could slip away to the telephone for a few minutes.'

Roger looked surprised.

'It's not all that urgent, surely. We shall hear soon enough if Neil is mixed up in this. I haven't any interest in the accident apart from that, and at the moment we shouldn't be likely to glean anything personal from newspaper reports.'

Joanna wanted to shake him. Never before had she thought Roger insensitive and stupid, in his cheerful determination to take things as they came. She could hardly believe that he felt nothing of her own nervous agitation.

'Darling--' Her stepmother spoke again, rather plaintively, beside her.

'Yes, Mother. Tell Auriel I'm just coming.'

'It isn't really Auriel herself, dear. But do go and be cheerful to Uncle Dick, will you? He's being so dreadfully like the Ancient Mariner at the feast.'

'What's the matter with him?' Joanna wanted to know, as she strove to look interested. For Uncle Dick was what is known as 'something in the City', and whatever he was in the City yielded him such a handsome income that he was occasionally extraordinarily generous to his nieces, while never seeming to take much pleasure in his money himself.

'One of his old cronies has just been killed in an air accident. Lord Norton, the newspaper man. And though I know it's perfectly true that in the midst of life we are in death, I do think it's too horrid of Uncle Dick to choose Auriel's wedding reception for insisting on the fact.'

'Did he really say that?' asked Joanna, fascinated.

'Oh, no, but he's *looking* it, Joanna, and that's almost worse when you have a face like Uncle Dick.'

'I'll go and talk to him.'

Joanna found her gloomy relative sitting in a corner, sipping champagne as though it were quinine and refusing all the tempting eatables waved under his handsome, strongly- marked, aquiline nose.

'Oh, Uncle Dick'—Joanna slid into the seat beside him —'Mother tells me you've had a bad shock. I'm so sorry. It's about your friend Lord Norton, I suppose?'

'Hello, Joanna. Yes—shocking business, shocking business. Poor Norton. Hardly sixty. In the prime of life, as you might say.'

Joanna looked slightly surprised, but reflected that one's idea of the prime of life probably altered as one grew older.

'And he'd only recently married, hadn't he?' she said insinuatingly.

'Yes. Though that was a stupid business,' added Uncle Dick, who was a confirmed bachelor.

'You mean you didn't like her?'

'No, I don't mean that at all. It isn't necessary to like your friends' wives,' retorted Uncle Dick, so disagreeably that he gave the remark the curious polygamous impression of the apostrophe coming before the 's.' But she was thirty years younger than he, and a good business woman.'

'Don't you like any of us to be good business women, Uncle Dick?' said Joanna smiling, and motioning so persuasively towards a plate of chicken patties that he took one, in a moment of gloomy absent-mindedness, and bit into it with some faint sign of enjoyment.

'Not married women,' stated Uncle Dick unequivocally. 'They always want to interfere. She did, I know.'

'Lady Norton?'

'If you wish to call her that.'

Joanna hardly saw what else they could call her, and said so.

'I suppose you're right.' Uncle Dick took another patty, with a slight lightening of the gloom. 'Poor Norton. It's almost a pity this didn't happen a month ago, if it had to happen.'

'Oh, but I think it's quite a good thing he had a happy honeymoon first,' protested Joanna, who had rather forgotten the exact identities of the people concerned in the interest of the argument.

Uncle Dick, who was among the few people left who really say 'Pah!' said it then, to his niece's admiration.

'She persuaded the poor fellow that she knew nearly as much as he did about some of his interests. And I know that in the marriage settlement he gave her a financial interest in several of his concerns. Pity, great pity. No woman ought to have all that money and power.'

Joanna didn't answer immediately. The expression 'all that money and power' struck most strangely and disagreeably on her consciousness, and she remembered with great distinctness that Roger had said Vivien Norton wanted money and power more than anything else. 'But, if her appetite for those could have been satisfied,' he had added, 'I think she'd have allowed herself the luxury of being in love with Neil.'

'Uncle Dick'—Joanna's tone was suddenly sharp and urgent—'have you heard any news about the crash? Anything that wasn't in the papers, I mean?'

'Of course.' Uncle Dick prided himself on having his own sources of information. 'There were only two survivors, and she was one of them.'

'Was she injured?'

'Only superficially. Broken arm or leg or something,' Uncle Dick replied, in the casual manner of one who had all his own limbs intact.

'Then she'll—soon be all right. A rich, attractive young widow--'

'Comparatively young,' put in Uncle Dick rather nastily.

'She can't be more than thirty, and I've heard she is—fascinating.'

'Well, I don't doubt Norton's will will double her fascination,' was the cynical retort. 'Now she'll probably marry some silly young fool who can't

make money himself. Poor Norton—poor fellow. Just served his turn long enough to provide her with the wherewithal to buy a husband she fancied better.'

'Uncle Dick! What an awful thing to say!' Joanna sprang t<y her feet, shaken to hear her own thoughts put into this rather brutal wording.

'It's the way of the world, my dear, the way of the world.' Uncle Dick was beginning to enjoy himself at last, and accepted a plate of lobster salad, to signalise the fact. 'But you don't need to worry. It won't concern you. And I suppose poor Norton is beyond bothering about these things now.'

Joanna said rather distractedly that she supposed so, and then made her escape. She had done her duty so far as Uncle Dick was concerned, and, in so doing, had found out most of what she wanted to know.

'Thank you, darling.' A radiant Auriel touched her lightly and affectionately on the arm. 'You seem to have raised Uncle Dick's spirits quite effectively. How did you do it?'

'Let him argue himself into a pleasant conclusion that the world is a cynical place, but that at least he's still in it while his friend Lord Norton isn't,' retorted Joanna.

Auriel laughed and passed on.

Everyone declared that it was a most delightful and enjoyable wedding, and Joanna supposed it must be, because even Uncle Dick appeared to be enjoying himself in the end.

Toasts were drunk with much good feeling, the speeches appeared to evoke pleasure and laughter on all sides, the bride looked superb as she cut the cake, and the timing was so perfect that Auriel and Joanna slipped away at just the right moment to the room which had been set aside for the bride's changing to go away.

'Everything went marvellously, didn't it?' Auriel chattered even while Joanna helped to lift the beautiful dress over her head.

'I think so. I didn't hear anything but favourable comments.'

'Was it a bit of a strain for you?' Auriel reached for the slim, elegant going-away suit.

'No. Why should you think that?'

'I don't know'—Auriel shot a critical glance at her half-sister. 'I suppose I thought you looked a little—harassed and distraite.'

'Oh, no,' Joanna insisted.

'Neil didn't turn up, did he? I don't remember seeing him.'

'No, he wasn't able to come in the end.'

'Wasn't he?' Auriel paused in her task of applying the faintest touch of red to her already red lips. 'How odd!' She evidently felt that no one could have a more pressing engagement than her wedding. 'What happened? Did he send any excuse?'

'Yes.' Joanna tried not to sound reluctant, or as though the information were being forced out of her. 'He was called away abroad.'

'Called away abroad? How could he be? Did he ring you up and tell you?'

'No, Roger told me.'

'Well, didn't he add anything to that? What part of "abroad", for heaven's sake?'

'The—South of France. At least, Roger thought so.'

'Didn't he know? What's the mystery?' Auriel inquired, half amused, half irritated.

'There isn't any mystery.' Joanna was desperately anxious to make that clear. 'Neil just left a last-minute message at Roger's flat. And Roger thinks he had

a—friend on the plane which crashed. The one in which Lord Norton was killed.'

'Oh, my!' Auriel spared the tragedy an absently sympathetic exclamation, out of the depths of her own happiness and satisfaction. 'Was his friend killed?'

'No.'

'Who was it?'

'I think—Auriel—it was Lady Norton.'

'I say!' Auriel really was interested for a moment. 'She'll be a terrifically desirable widow now, I suppose. You'll have to look out for yourself, my poppet.'

Already the new status of married woman was beginning to make Auriel take an affectionately managing air towards her half-sister, although that had been Joanna's role up to now.

'Don't be silly.' Joanna managed to smile convincingly.

'Why? Don't you want him yourself? I thought you did.' Occasionally Auriel spoke with devastating candour and, as on this occasion, it was almost always about something which one preferred not to have discussed.

'Auriel--'

'All right, you don't need to tell me, if you don't want to.' She was ready now, and catching up her short mink jacket over her arm, Auriel turned to face Joanna. 'But my advice to you is, if you want him, admit it to yourself—you don't need to admit it to anyone else—and *go all out to get him*. He's the kind that other women will fancy, particularly women with experience, so you'll have some competition. But you have a sincere charm which is all your own—and you're the dearest and best girl I've ever known.'

On which tribute, Auriel flung her arms round Joanna and hugged her with a fervour which—surprisingly—disregarded the finery of both of them.

'Auriel dear'—Joanna was deeply moved, and kissed her sister very warmly in return—'thank you. I'll—remember what you've said. Maybe I hadn't quite—looked facts in the face. I don't really know him very well, of course--'

'I know, I know!' Auriel retorted gaily. 'You fell for him when he saved you from that nasty policeman--'

'Nice policeman, only he was following out his duty,' Joanna amended smilingly.

'All right—nice policeman. It's always difficult to resist the charm of a rescuer, and when he's good-looking into the bargain, the difficulty is doubled. Bless you, dear. I'm going now. Don't let Mother cry, if you can help it, though she does it so charmingly that perhaps it doesn't matter. And—thank you for everything.'

Joanna had not expected anything like this from Auriel. As always on the rare occasions of Auriel's demonstrations of generosity, she was truly touched. And for a brief moment she knew why it was that she always forgave her young half-sister everything and continued to struggle for Auriel's happiness at least as much as for her own.

When the bridal couple had departed, in a flurry of good wishes, kisses, flowers and confetti, everyone felt as flat as everyone does feel on these occasions. But, since a theatre party had, as Joanna had explained to Neil, been arranged for the relations and more intimate friends of the family, most of these returned to the house, and Joanna still found herself so much in demand that she had no time to follow out her own thoughts and worries.

Only, just before they all left for the theatre that evening, Roger justified his reputation for being a good fellow by telephoning to her with the latest news of the accident. True, this was a little beyond what Uncle Dick had already supplied, but he added:

'I did call up one or two of the airline offices, and find that Neil booked direct to Marseilles, so I don't think there's any doubt about where and why he went.' 'No,' Joanna said.

'You just off to your theatre show?'

'Yes, Roger.'

'Have a good time.'

'Oh, I shall,' Joanna promised without conviction. At which he laughed, but very kindly, and said :

'You're bound to miss Auriel at first, but cheer up— you've got a pretty nice future of your own coming, you'll see.'

She managed to laugh too then and agree with some heartiness, relieved that he put down her lack of enthusiasm to nothing more than the depression of after-wedding feelings, and the loss of Auriel.

During the evening she contrived to appear in reasonably good spirits, although her thoughts kept on returning to the last time she had been at the theatre—with Neil.

It was all over at last. The final goodnights and good wishes and congratulations had been expressed. Even the short family discussion with her parents about the perfection of the day had been concluded, and Joanna was free to go to her own room—to relax and wonder what Neil was doing now.

As she went slowly up the stairs, the invaluable Trudi came out from the kitchen, and handed a letter to her.

'I'm so sorry, Joanna. It came by the last post, and somehow got mixed with some letters for us. I hope the delay doesn't matter. It's all this to-do and excitement.'

That's all right, Trudi.' Joanna leaned over the banister's to take the envelope. 'I shouldn't have been in to receive it until half an hour ago in any case, and I expect it's only late wedding wishes to Auriel.'

She said goodnight and went on up the stairs, hardly glancing at the envelope, except to decide it was no writing that she knew well enough to recognise.

As she undressed, she tried not to think with what hopes and happiness she had put on her golden dress at midday.

'I was nearly as happy as it's possible to be, I suppose,' she thought. 'How silly! Because I based it all on what might happen and not a bit on what had happened.'

She slipped on a housecoat and sat down in a comfortable chair because, tired though she was, she thought she would not go to sleep yet, even if she went to bed. Idly she reached for the letter which Trudi had given her, slit open the envelope and glanced at the single sheet which it contained.

Only one thing stood out. The note—because it was too short to call a letter—was signed by Neil.

'JOANNA DEAR,

I'm sorry I shall not be at the wedding, after all. Roger may guess why, but I'd rather tell you frankly. Vivien has been injured in an air accident, and her husband killed. I'm going out to join her in the South of France, where the accident happened. I'm not sure whether I'm going because I feel she should have a friend with her at such a time, or quite simply because I can't keep away now there's no longer a barrier between us. Anyway—I'm going.

YOURS,

NEIL.'

To her great surprise, Joanna found that she was crying when she reached the end of the note, and it was then she knew—or at any rate admitted—that she really loved Neil.

Until then she had been able to pretend that what she felt was friendship—interest—a sort of charming curiosity about one who had played such an extraordinary part in her life. Now she knew that she cried because he meant so much that, on the one hand, she was overwhelmingly touched and moved that he wanted to tell her the truth, and, on the other, she simply could not bear to think of him concerning himself lovingly and anxiously for another woman.

He wrote that he did not really know why he was going. But Joanna did.

In no circumstances could one pretend that the rich, important, injured Lady Norton would be at a loss for someone to look after her and her affairs. *She* would need no helpful and understanding friend, Joanna thought bitterly. Neil had gone to her simply because, in his own words, he could not keep away.

She went to bed at last, because there was no possible sense in staying up any longer. But, lying there in the dark, she could still see Neil. As he had looked that **very** first evening, when he had found her in his flat. As he had looked when he stood at the bottom of the stairs at the Manor, waiting for her to come down. As he had looked when he came to apologise to her for having misjudged her.

She told herself again and again that it was foolish to think about him any more. But she lay awake almost until daylight, doing just exactly what she was telling herself not to do.

It was no wonder that she felt exhausted and dispirited at the office the next day, but Sir Henry either noticed nothing, or kindly put her unusual slackness down to the aftermath of wedding responsibilities.

'I hope everything went off well, Miss Deane,' he said, smiling at her benevolently.

'Very well, thank you, Sir Henry.'

'Let me see—both Roger and Neil were there, weren't they?'

'Roger was,' Joanna said, trying not to look at all self-conscious. 'Not Neil.'

'Really?' Sir Henry was only making polite conversation, but assuming that the wedding was Joanna's favourite topic at the moment, he went on, 'I thought I remembered Neil telling me that he was going—that he had been invited.'

'He—was, Sir Henry. But he wasn't able to come in the end.'

Sir Henry, who took a very personal interest in all members of his family, looked up.

'Not this unpleasant 'flu which is going about, I hope?'

'Oh, no. No—nothing to do with his health.'

In the ordinary way, Sir Henry would have been quite satisfied to leave the subject at that. But some perverse, and most uncharacteristic, curiosity seemed to urge him on. Or else perhaps, in spite of all Joanna's efforts to the contrary, something of her concern and personal interest invested her short replies with an element of significance which arrested his attention.

'I'm sure he must have been disappointed,' Sir Henry said. 'What kept him away at the last minute like that?'

Joanna felt—and was afraid she looked—profoundly uncomfortable at this.

'He—had to leave London unexpectedly. On—on business, I think.'

'Just on that day—how unfortunate. But that reminds me--' Joanna's employer reached for the telephone. 'I wanted to speak to him about that contract with Maddons.'

'You—won't find him at his office, Sir Henry. I don't think he'll have returned yet.'

'Oh, but I must find out when he is returning.' Sir Henry firmly dialled a number, and Joanna sat there, nervously curling the pages of her shorthand notebook round her finger.

'What's that?' she heard her employer exclaim in surprise. 'About a week?—I didn't even know he was going away. I saw him only the day before yesterday. Abroad, you say?— But where?' Then there was a slight pause, during which Sir Henry evidently received information which surprised and faintly disturbed him. 'Most extraordinary! —No, no message. I'll telephone again some time next week.'

He replaced the receiver and looked at Joanna.

'He went to Marseilles, they tell me. Nothing to do with office business. In fact they sounded a little puzzled themselves. I hope he's not--'

Sir Henry broke off, and Joanna saw that some sort of uneasy suspicion had entered his mind. Distressed though she was by her own thoughts, it hurt her personally to see his handsome old face change and become bleak and harassed.

'I don't think there is any reason to worry, Sir Henry.' She forced herself to sound cheerful and matter-of-fact. 'He has all sorts of friends and connections all over the place. He hasn't been in the habit of mentioning his absences at home for over a year now. It probably didn't even strike him to let you know he was going away.'

'No, no—of course I don't expect him to keep me informed of his movements, any more than Roger.' Sir Henry seemed slightly shocked at the idea. 'It's just—their not even knowing at the office.'

'He'll be writing in a day or two, I expect,' Joanna insisted, with a cheerfulness which surprised herself.

'No doubt, no doubt,' Sir Henry agreed, but she knew that his anxiety remained. And, for the first time, Joanna felt a slow anger against Neil stirring within her.

How dared he upset them all, for some quixotic nonsense about a worthless woman who was very well able to look after herself? What sort of anxieties did he suppose he left behind him, when he rushed off like that, leaving no explanation? At least, only the barest explanation to herself, which, incidentally, she could not pass on to anyone else.

The break had been made with this woman once, and in circumstances which should have made him too proud to wish ever to see her again.

'Need him, indeed!' thought Joanna contemptuously, as she scribbled unusually inaccurate shorthand outlines. 'She doesn't need him as much as some other people do. Lady Gilmore needs him a great deal more. So does poor old Sir Henry when he gets agitated and upset like this. So might I, come to that, if the police suddenly turned nasty again about the Simon Gray business.'

By calling on all her self-discipline, Joanna managed to fix her attention on her immediate work, but, in the back of her mind, there remained that sense of undefined excitement—that feeling that she was on the verge of something tremendously important—which had come to her with the speculative: 'Suppose I really needed him--'

She told herself that one had no right to interfere with someone else's life to that extent, however much the end justified the means.

Then she remembered Auriel's candid: 'If you want him, admit it to yourself—and go all out to get him.'

Auriel, she thought with a slight smile, would not have hesitated over almost *any* means to bring him home from Vivien's side. But then she was not Auriel.

'He has a perfect right to make a fool of himself over Vivien, or any other woman, if he likes,' Joanna told herself ruthlessly. 'And don't pretend that

you're thinking primarily of the Gilmores, or any hypocrisy of that sort. If you do this thing at all, it will be because you want him home yourself, and you don't mind using Vivien's own sort of weapons to defeat her.' And then, after a long while: 'You see that's impossible, don't you? One doesn't *do* these things.'

She did see. But she went to her desk and, sitting down, she slowly drew a blank telegram form towards her and began to write.

CHAPTER TEN

It was one thing to make up one's mind to wire to Neil. It was quite another to find the exact words to persuade him that her need of him was greater than Vivien's. In addition, one had to avoid anything that would look too fantastic to the post office clerk who took the form. Melodramatic phrases about the police were definitely ruled out—if only because one simply would not have the face to stand there while the words were counted.

Joanna tried several drafts—still pretending to herself that she was only toying with the idea of sending anything. Then, having checked in her newspaper the exact place to which the two survivors of the accident had been taken, she telephoned to one of the big travel agencies to find out the name of the most important hotel there. For one could not imagine that Lady Norton would stay anywhere but at the best hotel. And if Neil were not actually staying there too, a telegram addressed to the hotel would almost certainly reach him.

Joanna was further confirmed in this belief when the clerk at the travel agency said:

'There's only one hotel that you could call a hotel, and that's the Grand.'

Well, that simplified things. If she really meant to send a telegram to Neil, she knew positively where to send it now.

Joanna looked back at the criss-cross of words and erasures on the paper in front of her. Then she deliberately took a new form, printed Neil's name and the address in careful capitals, and without even pausing for further consideration, wrote:

'Please return if possible. Curtis asking difficult questions. I need you.—JOANNA.'

Would he remember that Curtis was the name of the detective? If not, she must accept the fact that she was not of sufficient importance to him for it to be worth while making any further attempt to bring him home.

Having drafted the telegram, she folded it and put it in her handbag. It would have to stay there until she went out to lunch. Meanwhile she must attend to her work, and she could still go on telling herself that the wire had not been sent—need, perhaps, never be sent.

But later, when she stepped outside the building into the curiously dull and chilly day which had succeeded Auriel's glorious wedding day, instead of making for the small restaurant where she usually lunched, she turned deliberately in the other direction and went into the post office.

Curiously enough, she felt no qualms as she handed the form over the counter, experienced no self-conscious doubts as she watched the clerk counting and calculating the cost, had no panic-stricken, last-minute impulse to snatch back the telegram before it was absolutely and irrevocably too late.

She calmly paid for it and walked out of the place as though she had done nothing more sensational than buy a stamp. And then, as she looked round her—saw the familiar street, with normal people going about their normal business—sensed the indefinable but unmistakable atmosphere of hurried lunchtime, sandwiched between an ordinary morning and ordinary afternoon at the office—the thought suddenly came to her, with the impact of tremendous shock.

'What have I done? What have I set in motion?'

For a moment, she felt almost giddy with nervous terror. It was like one of those terrible dreams, in which one suddenly discovers that one has undertaken to fly a plane, or play Portia at Stratford, or stand for Parliament, without having the remotest capacity for the task. She saw the events which she had set in motion approaching her with the relentless inevitability of dream sequences. Only, in her case, there would be no blessed awakening with its reassuring discovery that she had imagined it all.

Someone shouted at her, and she stepped back on the pavement, just as a motor-cycle whizzed past her.

'I must look where I'm going,' she thought. 'I mustn't get lost in the maze of my own folly. Is there still time to stop the telegram?'

But already she seemed to see it winging on its way, being tapped out impersonally across the wires, transferred to a fresh form at the other end of its journey, folded, sealed, and delivered to Neil in some undefined surroundings which she could not quite visualise.

'And he will come,' she thought, with absolute conviction. 'At the first possible moment he'll come. I'm sure of that. I don't know why I'm sure—but I am.'

The thought, however, brought no comfort or reassurance with it, no sense of triumph or achievement. Only the horrifying, unanswerable question: 'And what shall I say to him when he does come?'

How was she to explain her action? What mad impulse had made her introduce the entirely unmanageable figure of Inspector Curtis into this? for in no conceivable circumstances could she control his actions or enlist his help.

And yet it was difficult to see what else would have impressed Neil sufficiently to make him come.

She must—she simply *must* find some plausible explanation for her telegram. If she had to confess to Neil that she had simply invented a police inquiry then he would be halfway to guessing that her own feelings for him had materially influenced her decision to bring him back at all costs.

By the time she returned to the office, after a lunch which tasted like sawdust, she was so shaken with fears and doubts of the situation which she herself had created that she was almost reduced to confessing the whole thing to Sir Henry and asking him to help her invent circumstances which might seem to justify the sending of that telegram.

But it was impossible to take anyone into her confidence. She had isolated herself by the fact that what she had done was inexcusable and, to a large extent, inexplicable.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Roger looked in, full of energy and good spirits as usual, so that, for a moment, she was almost tempted to tell him. But the impossibility of explaining all the implications of her action stopped her.

'Come out with me this evening,' he suggested. 'You'll probably only mope about Auriel if you go home.'

'Indeed I shan't,' Joanna retorted with energy, forgetting for a moment that this was supposed to be the cause of her apparent low spirits. 'But I think Mother and Father might if I leave them on their own this first evening,' she added hastily, for she thought she could not manage a whole evening with Roger, trying to conceal from him how restless and anxious she was.

He accepted her decision but, instead of going, leant against the side of the desk and watched her work. Then, after a few minutes, he said:

'They have no news of Neil at his office.'

'No, I know. Your uncle telephoned this morning.'

'Does he know about Neil?—and Vivien, I mean.' Roger looked a little disturbed for once.

'No. But he suspects something, I think. He seems worried.'

'Well, come to that, I suppose we only suspect something. We don't actually *know* anything.'

'Yes, we do. I mean—I do. I had a note from Neil last night, written before he left in the early morning. You guessed right—he went out to join her.'

'He wrote and told you so!'

'Yes.'

'Why you, I wonder?'

'Maybe he—thought he should give some real explanation for not coming to Auriel's wedding.'

'Well—perhaps.' Roger seemed doubtful. 'Though he'd already sent a verbal message about that. You mean that he categorically wrote that he was going to join Vivien?'

'He said he thought she would need a friend at such a time,' Joanna said carefully. At which Roger gave a scornful and unusually unsympathetic laugh.

Joanna then resumed her typing, and Roger presumably resumed his reflections. At any rate, after a while he said a little grudgingly:

'I suppose it's his own business, if he wants to marry her.'

'Oh, certainly.' Joanna did not even pause in her typing.

'She'll probably agree, of course, now she has all the money she wants from what might be called another source.'

'Probably.'

'It's useless to pretend that any of us will like having her for a relation. But even Uncle Henry and Aunt Helen will accept the situation if he marries her. They won't like it, but they'll accept it.'

'Then what was all the original fuss about?' cried Joanna with rare impatience, because she suddenly found her nerves stretched to breaking point by this discussion.

Roger looked slightly startled.

'What do you mean by "original fuss" exactly?' he countered.

'Why, his leaving home and being under a cloud and generally regarded as the prodigal nephew, of course!' 'Oh, Joanna,' Roger protested, 'it was never as clearly defined as that--'

She gave an impatient little groan and cried exasperatedly:

'Why can't people define things clearly? Half the trouble in the world is made from mistakes and misunderstandings.'

'Well, personal relationships are always difficult to define,' Roger pointed out reasonably.

'But one uses such ridiculous phrases that mean everything or nothing. Vivien is described as "undesirable", Neil as being "entangled". Why can't one say outright that he was having an affair with a woman of no morals?'

'But he wasn't,' Roger said mildly.

'He—wasn't?'

'No.'

'How do you know?'

'I asked him outright, on the way down to the Manor.'

'And he denied it?'

'Absolutely. He seemed a good deal surprised that I should even have thought it.'

'But, if there was nothing really discreditable involved, why did your uncle and aunt take up the attitude they did?'

'They didn't "take up an attitude" exactly, Joanna. I suppose, in the beginning, they probably thought the same as you did. That Neil was seeing too much of—possibly even having an affair with—a woman of great charm and little reputation. Is that clearly defined all right?' He grinned at her.

'Y-yes.'

'Of course they conceded in theory that Neil was entitled to run his own life the way he liked, but, in practice, Neil had chosen for his principal companion someone Aunt Helen wouldn't wish to have in her house. No one took up an attitude—not even Vivien, I guess. It was just that they were automatically divided by a profound difference of opinion on a fundamental matter. As I told you in the beginning, there was no real quarrel or showdown or anything of that sort. Neil simply went home less and less, and finally stayed in town all the time, seeing nothing of Uncle Henry, since they could no longer meet on a comfortable basis.'

'I wish,' Joanna said unhappily, 'that you'd explained it all as clearly as this when you first mentioned Neil to me.'

'But I couldn't, dear,' Roger pointed out good-humouredly. 'If you remember, I told you then that I just didn't know how deeply involved Neil had been, nor did I know just how undesirable—if you'll permit the term—Vivien might be. I found all that out later.'

'Then I wish you'd told me when you did find it out.'

'Well, I'm telling you now,' he said, and laughed.

She wanted to retort that it was too late now. That she had accepted a highly coloured version of the whole business for too long, and in so doing had felt vaguely justified in taking an irrevocable and, as it now seemed, unjustifiable step.

'You needn't look so serious about it,' Roger urged. 'If you've done old Neil a certain amount of injustice in your own thoughts, he probably doesn't know and doesn't care.' She winced. 'And in any case, all this doesn't alter the fact that I think he's a fool to get involved with Vivien again.'

'Oh, but there's no moral issue involved!'

'Well—no,' agreed Roger, displaying a certain amount of masculine astonishment at anyone trying to make a moral issue of someone else's personal problem. 'You weren't regarding yourself, or anyone else, as the keeper of Neil's conscience, were you?'

'No, no, of course not. But, shorn of all the heroics, and put into its present form, the whole situation just resolves itself into the fact that Neil wanted to marry someone of whom his family disapproved. She married someone else instead, but, now she's widowed, he may well consider trying once more to marry her—this time with probable success. The family won't like it any better, but there it is. That's all there is to it.'

'Yes, I'd say that about describes it,' Roger agreed judicially.

'But that isn't at all how it sounded before!' cried Joanna distressedly.

'No? How did it sound before?'

'Oh, Roger, you *~know*\ I—one felt that Neil was in danger of ruining his life by becoming involved with a— with a harpy of a woman. I—one felt he almost needed rescuing and--'

'Neil never needed rescuing in his life,' Roger declared unequivocally.

'But you were worried about him yourself, Roger. So was Sir Henry. And Lady Gilmore most of all,' Joanna j protested.

'Oh—worried, yes,' Roger conceded. 'It's natural to worry if you think that someone of whom you're fond is going to mess up his life. But *rescuing* is quite a different matter.'

'I didn't mean that literally,' Joanna explained hastily. And she thought of her telegram, and more than ever it seemed impertinent and inexcusable that she had sent it.

'I shouldn't worry too much about Neil, if I were you.' Roger smiled and straightened up. 'If he means to marry Vivien Norton, he will, whatever any of us says. And, come to think of it, who is to say he doesn't know his own affairs best?'

'Of course,' agreed Joanna a little stiffly. But in her heart she still cried out protestingly against the idea of such a marriage.

Roger left soon after that, and Joanna drove herself to the reluctant completion of her afternoon's work. She stayed, later than usual because the day had had so many interruptions that there was a good deal to finish up. Then, as she went out through the silent building, she was reminded poignantly of that evening when she had come out late with Neil.

How moving—how wonderful it had been, that scene when he told her that he believed her at last!

It didn't do to think about these things now—but how happy she had been.

When she reached home, she found her stepmother sitting in the drawing-room, sipping tea and looking very pensive.

'I know this is a ridiculous time to drink tea,' she said, as Joanna came in. 'But I felt I needed cheering up. How *quiet* the place is without Auriel.'

'No time is a ridiculous time for having tea,' Joanna declared, pouring out a cup for herself. 'And I'm afraid we're bound to miss Auriel sadly for a while. When she's back from her honeymoon and we have her running in and out again, and can go and see her, it will seem better. But it's impossible to lose anyone so lovely and lively without feeling it very much.'

'Not that you aren't excellent company yourself, darling,' her stepmother insisted generously. 'In fact, Uncle Dick told me yesterday that, if he liked women at all, he would like you better than Auriel.'

'That's handsome,' Joanna said, and laughed.

'Quite a lot of men would feel that way, you know,' her stepmother said consideringly. 'I mean—would prefer you to Auriel. Serious-minded men, who have enough sense to want something more than prettiness and high spirits. Though, goodness knows, there aren't so many of them,' she added good-humouredly, for though she was invariably popular with men—and would be when she was eighty—she had no very high opinion of them.

Joanna smiled, and said without rancour:

'Oh, Auriel was always the very popular one. It's quite natural.'

'There's at least one man who comes here who prefers you,' retorted her stepmother, stirring her tea with a shamelessly matchmaking air.

Joanna thought of Neil, and her heart missed a beat.

'Oh—I think his affections are engaged somewhere outside this house,' she said lightly.

'Nonsense! I'm sure they're not.' Her stepmother looked extremely surprised. 'Roger never mentions any other girl.'

'Oh—Roger. Were we speaking of Roger?'

'Well, of course. Who else?'

'Never mind.' Joanna coloured slightly under her stepmother's shrewd, if beautiful, blue eyes. 'You don't think he's in love with me, do you?'

'Of course he is!'

'Oh, dear,' sighed Joanna, who had once thought so too, and revelled in the thought.

'That doesn't sound very hopeful for poor Roger,' her stepmother remarked with a rueful laugh.

'I think he's awfully nice, but--'

'All right, darling, that finishes Roger. Who is it, then?'

Joanna flushed.

'What do you mean? There isn't—anyone. Why should you think so?'

'Because your mind was so much on someone other than Roger that you actually thought I might be referring to him when I spoke of someone preferring you to Auriel,' retorted her stepmother shrewdly.

Joanna gave a half-vexed little laugh.

'You're making altogether too much of it,' she declared, with determined casualness. 'I thought you meant Neil Gilmore at first. I suppose because Auriel didn't make any sort of hit with him.'

'Neil Gilmore?' Mrs Deane drew her charmingly marked eyebrows together and considered him. 'He came here only once,' she said.

'Did he?' Joanna was surprised and could not hide it. 'Yes, I suppose he did.'

'And yet it seemed to you that he had been here often.'

There was a slight pause, though Joanna would have given much not to leave that thoughtful sentence of her stepmother's isolated in silence.

'Are you very fond of him, dear?' The query came with a kindly candour there was no resenting.

Joanna drew a long breath.

'Very,' she said, and sensed the delicious relief and indulgence of confiding that to someone at last.

'I see.' Her stepmother nibbled the top of her thumb reflectively, a childish habit which always indicated that she was thinking as deeply as she could. 'Well—of course—in some ways he would suit you admirably. Better than Roger. But not anything like such an easy man to manage, darling.'

'Oh, Mother--' Joanna laughed protestingly and more regretfully than she knew—'I'm afraid there's really nothing much in it. He's infatuated—fond of someone else.'

"Infatuated" or "fond of"? inquired Mrs Deane briskly. 'They're two entirely different things.'

'Very well, infatuated, I think.'

'Is he engaged to her?'

'No.'

'Or tied to her in any other way?'

'N-no.'

'Then I shouldn't worry too much about her,' declared her stepmother, with the easy assurance which goes with an inner confidence that one can attract as and whom one pleases.

Joanna shook her head and smiled slightly.

'It's not quite as easy as that, I'm afraid.' But even to her stepmother she could not bring herself to confess the real situation, or what she herself had done.

'Anyway, I shouldn't allow myself to get anxious, if I were you. Anxiety always reduces one's powers and does dreadful things to one's looks.'

'I shouldn't dream of allowing myself to get anxious,' said Joanna, who shook with anxiety every time she thought of that telegram.

'That's right.' Her stepmother smiled affectionately at her, and Joanna went away to change for dinner.

It was just as they were all going to bed that the telephone bell rang and Joanna, without any special sense of expectation, went to answer it.

'Is Miss Joanna Deane there, please?' the impersonal voice asked. 'I have a personal call for her.'

'Yes, I'm Joanna Deane.'

'Hold on, please. I have a call for you from France.'

Joanna wanted to say: 'Oh, no—no, I can't take it! I'm not Joanna Deane, after all!'

But it was much too late to do anything of that sort—even if it would have been any good. There was the buzz and rattle of connections being made. Then Neil's voice—incredibly near and clear—said:

'Joanna, is that you?'

'Y-yes,' she almost whispered. So that he had to say: 'I can't hear you!' And then she said: 'It's Joanna,' with desperate distinctness.

'That's better! I've just got your wire.'

'Oh—yes.'

'And you think it's essential I come home?'

'Well--'

'I can't hear you,' he said again, not realising that there was nothing to hear. 'This line is infernally bad.'

'I was going to say—don't come if you very much want to stay where you are.'

'That's not the point. I can get away if I have to. Do you need me, as you say in the wire?'

She hesitated. It was difficult to deny a need which she had earnestly pressed by telegram only a few hours previously. At the same time—here was her line of retreat, if she wished to take it.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Is it possible to explain over the phone?'

'Oh, quite impossible!' she cried, so that her answer must have reached him with startling clarity that time.

'I see.' He evidently thought a moment. 'In fact, it's rather difficult for you to be making any answers at all your end?'

This was so true in one sense that she had said: 'Yes!' most fervently, before she realised that this would probably make him think there were police actually in the house.

'All right, don't worry.' His voice came, warm and reassuring, to her. 'I'll come home to-morrow, child.'

'Oh, Neil—thank you!' she exclaimed, feeling nothing in that moment but the delicious conviction that at least he cared enough about her not to leave her in trouble if he thought she really needed him. Then common sense returned to her, and she felt bound to add: 'Though it isn't absolutely--'

'All right,' Neil's voice said again. 'I'll see you to-morrow.'

And then he rang off, and he was hundreds of miles away again, and she was standing in the familiar hall, looking round dazedly and thinking: 'He'll be here to-morrow.'

The sheer joy of having spoken to him, the sense of contact and nearness, were so heart-warming that it was only slowly that her original doubts and fears returned to her.

She was no nearer finding an explanation for her having given a false police inquiry as her reason for bringing him home. Indeed, she had made matters considerably worse by more or less confirming the story by word of mouth.

'I must have been mad,' Joanna thought. And then— 'But I'm not quite sane when I talk to him. I can't think of anything but that he's coming home to me, because he thinks I need him—more than she does.'

Strangely enough, she slept calmly and peacefully that night. There were no dreams—not even of Neil. And the next day she alternated between the

delirious joy of knowing that she would see him that evening, and the impossibility of deciding what she could conceivably say to him when he came.

As evening drew on, her sense of fear began to conquer any delight she still felt in his coming. She sat there alone in the drawing-room—because, to her considerable relief, her parents had gone out for the evening—and tried to imagine how the conversation would go.

'I shall tell him, of course, that there is less reason to be alarmed than I thought at first—that perhaps I panicked— misread the intentions of the police. But he'll want exact reports of conversations. He may even insist that he should see Inspector Curtis himself--'

She shuddered at the prospect, and saw herself in imagination having to deal not only with Neil, but a suspicious and puzzled Inspector Curtis.

'Would it be better to confess at once that the police story was invention? That I presumed to interfere in his personal affairs because I thought he would ruin his life if he got entangled with Vivien again?—Oh, no! That sounds so insufferably impertinent and smug!'

She could imagine that Neil would be furiously, blazingly angry with her, if she dared to offer such an explanation. And he would be justified, she thought now.

'I've behaved like a child over this,' Joanna thought wretchedly. 'Like a stupid child. I rushed in and did whatever seemed a good idea at the moment, without the slightest appreciation of the inevitable results.'

She had even had a second chance, and refused to take it. Last night, when he had phoned, she could have found some way of putting him off. Declared that the situation had improved suddenly—that there was not the slightest need for him to come home.

But then, of course, he would have stayed with Vivien, and been irretrievably lost to herself.

'He is irretrievably lost to me, as it is,' she told herself.

And at that moment she heard the front door bell ring.

Unconsciously, Joanna rose to her feet. She listened while Trudi's footsteps crossed the hall and there was the sound of the door being opened. At this moment she could not remember even the feeblest explanation which she had prepared. Her mind was a complete blank, and the sense of nightmare helplessness was stronger than anything she had ever known before.

It was a matter of seconds now. She could here him exchanging a few words with Trudi in the hall. Then the footsteps came on again.

If there had been anywhere to hide, she would have hidden then. But there was nowhere. She could only watch, fascinated, while the door opened.

Then Trudi's voice announced respectfully:

'Inspector Curtis.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

.To Joanna, keyed up as she had been for the ordeal of Neil's entrance, the appearance of Inspector Curtis came first as a shattering anti-climax, and then as an entirely new reason for fear.

The double shock deprived her of speech for a moment, and she could only hold out her hand silently, in a vague, instinctive gesture of hospitality, as she would have to anyone who came into her parents' home.

He took her hand, though he regarded her, she thought, with a rather more reserved air than he had before, and, when she murmured, 'Do sit down,' he did so rather deliberately, and waited until she too dropped into a chair, a little because she felt unable to stand any longer.

Then he said, quite conversationally:

'Why did you lie to me the other night, Miss Deane?'

'Lie to you?' she repeated helplessly, trying, not very successfully, to sound surprised.

'About the letter which I asked you to identify,' he amplified, with grim helpfulness.

'I didn't--' she began. But he shook his head at her and frowned with some severity.

'Miss Deane,' he said. 'Let me tell you that it's never a good idea to lie to the police, but particularly is it a poor idea when the he can so easily be exposed. The final folly—which I'm sorry to see you were about to perpetrate—is to persist in the lie, even when it's been found out. Now let's start again, and please be a sensible girl this time and tell the truth. That letter was not written by you, was it?'

'No,' Joanna said. And at that point the door-bell rang again.

'Do you know who wrote it?'

Joanna nodded, while she listened to the repetitions of sounds which announced Trudi's opening of the front door once more.

'And in the mistaken belief that you ought to shield that person you made a deliberate misstatement to me?—to the police?'

'It wasn't a question of "ought", exactly,' Joanna said. And then Neil came into the room.

By no timing or arranging of her own could she have hoped to create any scene which so perfectly supported her telegram. Here she was in the very act of being interrogated. In spite of her fears about the reason for his visit, Joanna could have kissed Inspector Curtis at that moment.

Instead, Neil came across and calmly kissed her.

She was so startled that she clung to him for a moment and hid her face against his shoulder. Then she remembered that he was here, of course, in the character of her fiance. The kiss had been for the benefit of the Inspector.

So also, presumably, was the fact that Neil then sat down on the arm of her chair and put his arm round her.

'Good evening,' he said curtly, allowing Inspector Curtis to impinge on his consciousness for the first time.

'Good evening,' returned the Inspector pleasantly. 'I was just asking Miss Deane some questions about that letter which she claimed—I'm afraid untruthfully—as hers.'

'I'm sure I don't need to tell you,' Neil retorted, 'that she is entitled to have either her solicitor or someone like myself present when she's questioned. I think that should have been made clear to her.'

'Well, she has you now,' the Inspector pointed out good-humouredly, 'and only two or three questions had been asked in what I can assure you is a very informal interrogation. We have no further interest in Miss Deane, or

anyone else, come to that, in connection with the Gray murder. That particular mystery was solved in the early hours of this morning.'

'What?' cried Joanna and Neil in chorus. And Joanna added, timidly, 'Who—was it, then?'

'As we suspected all along, one of the dead man's associates in some of his less savoury financial ventures.'

'And have you—arrested him?'

'No. He shot himself, just as he was about to be cornered on another charge.'

'Oh!' Joanna considered that soberly. 'But you're quite —sure?'

Inspector Curtis smiled grimly.

'Quite sure.'

'Then I see no reason why you should come badgering my fiancée with further questions,' Neil said, so emphatically that, for a delicious moment or two—and with his arm round her—Joanna felt almost as though she really were his fiancée.

'I don't think Miss Deane would describe my mild inquiries as badgering,' Inspector Curtis replied, smiling. 'All I want to make clear is that, if she should ever again be concerned in a police case--'

'Oh, I never shall!' cried Joanna fervently.

'—She will remember that the wisest and simplest thing is to tell the truth, in all matters.'

'But I *couldn't*, just that evening when you asked me,' Joanna explained eagerly. 'If I'd said whose the letter really was, you would have waited until Auriel--'

She stopped and looked conscience-stricken.

'All right, Miss Deane. We never remember information which is not relevant to a case,' the Inspector assured her kindly, if improbably.

'Well, it doesn't matter now, anyway,' Joanna said, with a sigh. 'But you would have waited then until she came in, and I was almost sure that she would be accompanied by the man she was going to marry. I *couldn't* have her questioned in front of him.'

'I seem to remember that you elected to be questioned in front of your own fiance,' the Inspector reminded her.

'Oh—that was different.' Joanna smiled up suddenly at Neil, overwhelmingly and rapturously happy to have him there beside her.

'Was it?' said the Inspector, and looked amused. 'I suppose it was since Mr Gilmore—most reprehensibly—added a few misstatements on his own account.'

'Oh!' Joanna looked guilty and laughed apologetically. She was beginning to like Inspector Curtis—especially when she thought of the wonderful, incredible service he had done her by arriving just at the moment when he had.

Neil, however, still maintained an extremely aloof attitude. And Joanna was quite glad that her parents chose to return home at this point, to add a little warmth to the occasion.

'Do you mind if I introduce you in a—in a private capacity?' she inquired in a hurried whisper of the Inspector. 'It will simplify things a lot.'

'Very well,' he agreed gravely.

So she introduced him as, 'Inspector Curtis—off duty, fortunately—a friend of Neil's.'

Neil didn't look too pleased at having this unexpected friendship wished on to him. But there was nothing to do but accept the situation for the moment, of course.

'How *very* interesting,' exclaimed Mrs Deane, giving a friendly hand to Neil, but continuing to look with respectful attention at Inspector Curtis. 'Do you really solve murder mysteries and that sort of thing?'

Inspector Curtis unbent considerably at this, and explained that he did a great deal of uninteresting routine work most of his time and that the solution of murder mysteries represented only the highlights of the profession.

Mrs Deane then tried very hard to make him talk like her favourite detective of fiction in the last chapter, while her husband sympathetically helped Inspector Curtis to keep things on a more sensible basis. This left Joanna and Neil free to talk to each other and, although he had withdrawn his arm and was no longer sitting on the arm of her chair, his attitude towards her (possibly still for the Inspector's benefit) remained attentive and almost affectionate.

'Have you had a harrowing day or two?' he asked, in a kindly undertone.

'Oh, it—doesn't matter now.' Joanna felt an unutterable fraud, but a shamelessly happy one.

'I'm glad I arrived just when I did.'

'So am I.' She smiled at him, and her eyes sparkled more than she knew. 'Was it—very difficult to get away?'

'No,' he said briefly, and she sensed that perhaps she had better not ask anything more about the circumstances he had left behind him in France.

'It seems a shame to have brought you home, now that everything has turned out all right.' She felt she owed him so much, at least.

But he smiled and said: 'You couldn't know that it would.'

Joanna bent her head at that, and murmured something unintelligible. Then she rallied and asked, as casually as she could:

'When do you have to go back?'

'Back? I'm not going back to France.'

'You're not?' She concealed her joy with difficulty.

'No, it isn't necessary. Vivien returned to England with me.'

'I see,' Joanna said, and her despair was even more difficult to conceal.

'It seemed the best thing to do, since she was well enough to travel.'

'Of course.'

They were talking like casual acquaintances, and she felt he was as far away from her as though he were still in France.

She ought to be filled with gratitude, she knew, for the mere fact that he was home and because, by a miraculous arrangement of circumstances, she had not had to explain that unlucky telegram. But none of her relief and joy in those two things seemed to ring quite true after he had said: 'Vivien returned to England with me.'

It was difficult to say why she had hoped in the last half-hour that the whole situation might have changed. Perhaps the release from all anxieties about the Simon Gray inquiry, and the sudden reprieve from having to explain the inexplicable to Neil, had made her somehow feel that everything must be happy and right by now.

At any rate, it was sadly disillusioning to find that life still had its prime anxiety and problem. Neil still spoke of Vivien as though his actions were largely dictated by hers. And all Joanna could do was to smile and say, 'Of course.'

'I was sorry you were not able to come to Auriel's wedding, Mr Gilmore--' Mrs Deane turned at last from the fascinating task of cross-questioning Inspector Curtis.

'I was sorry too, Mrs Deane. But I'm sure she looked beautiful and that everything went off splendidly.'

'Oh, it did. Largely thanks to Joanna.' Mrs Deane smiled approvingly at her stepdaughter. 'She manages everything so well. Even one's difficult relations, and that's the test of any manager.'

Neil laughed, and glanced almost affectionately at Joanna.

While Inspector Curtis—to show that he was there in an entirely unofficial capacity—smiled and said:

'Well, I suppose Miss Deane will soon be "managing" her own wedding. When is it to be?'

There was a short silence, for unquestionably Inspector Curtis was looking at Neil, as though he would naturally be the authority on this topic.

'Oh'—Joanna gave a breathless little laugh, realising suddenly that, in all the explanations, neither she nor Neil had thought to explain to the Inspector that their engagement was purely fictitious—'oh, that's a point which the future will have to take care of.'

The Inspector looked momentarily surprised. But, being used to interpreting the vaguest of hints, he obviously sensed that this was not a topic to be pursued, and changed the subject immediately.

Soon after this, he said that he must go and, somewhat to Joanna's disappointment, Neil declared that he must too.

It was getting late, and there was no real reason for her to expect Neil to stay longer. Only—she longed to know when she would see him again, what his plans were for the future, if this were, virtually, the last she was to see of him.

As she stood there, smiling and saying goodnight, it was impossible to ask him any of these questions. Instead, she had to bid him a cheerful goodbye, and turn to receive Inspector Curtis's final teasing admonition:

'Now remember, next time—the truth and nothing but the truth.'

'I'll remember,' Joanna promised, and somehow managed to infuse an air of light-hearted gaiety into her manner.

As soon as the two men had gone, she announced that she was going to bed. But her stepmother, rather unexpectedly, came upstairs with her and into her bedroom, with the obvious intention of asking something important.

'Is d\at nice Inspector a close friend of Neil's, Joanna?' she inquired, as Joanna bent to switch on the fire, because of the unseasonable chill of the evening.

'Not—very close.' Joanna did not straighten up at once, and when she did, she was slightly flushed—possibly from her exertions. 'Why?'

'Well, didn't you notice that he was obviously in Neil's confidence?'

'In Neil's confidence?' Joanna looked justifiably surprised. 'Really, I—don't think that's likely.'

Her stepmother laughed indulgently.

'Really, darling, you ought to be more observant where your own interests are concerned,' she protested. 'When Inspector Curtis made that not very tactful inquiry about your wedding date, he looked at Neil. He evidently knew what *Neil's* wishes were in that respect, but didn't realise that he hadn't got as far as trying his luck with you. I thought it was all rather transparent and clumsy, really. But I expect they both believed they covered it up quite well.'

'I expect so,' Joanna said helplessly.

'But I don't think you need worry about any rivals where Neil is concerned.'

'Don't you?' Joanna knew she ought to make that sound more interested and excited, but just now she simply could not manage any more cheerful camouflage.

Her stepmother looked at her speculatively.

'You mean that I haven't got the situation quite right yet?' she suggested.

'Not quite.' Joanna smiled at her, but a little wanly. 'I haven't either, come to that. But I shouldn't go too much by what Inspector Curtis said, if I were you.'

'Wouldn't you? Such a nice man. But married, I feel sure.' Mrs Deane looked regretful.

'Mother dear, really! He's middle-aged and not at all my type.' Joanna laughed with some genuine amusement that time.

'To be sure. But it would be such fun having one's thrillers right in the family circle, so to speak.'

Joanna, who had had more than enough of 'thrillers' in the family circle, made a slight face and said: 'No, thank you!'

And then Mrs Deane bade her goodnight and went away _v to her own room.

The next day was Sunday, which Joanna spent quietly at home—pleading, with some reason, that she was tired after the wedding and the general upset. But, more pressing than any fatigue, was the feeling that she wanted to be within easy sound of the telephone, just in case Neil rang up.

There was no telephone call from Neil. And, while she told herself that there was no special reason why there should be, the absence of any word from him depressed her sadly.

By Monday morning, however she had pulled herself together and told herself that no girl with any pride went moping through life because of a man who loved some other woman.

'You aren't the first this has happened to, by a long way,' she insisted, addressing herself in a mood of self-condemnation which we all adopt when everything else has failed. 'You'll get over this. It isn't as though you'd

known him for years, or even as though he ever made love to you. You're being rather silly and illogical, really. Be thankful you came out of that ridiculous telegram business so well. At least you have your pride and your self-respect intact.'

Such sensible words—such excellent advice. Addressed to anyone else they should have carried conviction. But addressed to oneself—how little they altered the picture.

During the morning, Lady Gilmore telephoned, to say that her husband showed signs of having caught another chill.

'I've persuaded him to stay at home, Miss Deane,' she said, 'because he's prone to bronchitis, and it worries me when he takes liberties with his health at his age.'

'Of course,' Joanna agreed sympathetically. 'Tell him I'll see after everything, Lady Gilmore.'

'But it isn't only that, I'm afraid. He is worrying about some recent contract. Something to do with Burwood & Crane.'

'I know. The plans and specifications came in this morning.'

'Oh, they did come in? Miss Deane, if it isn't too much to ask, I wonder if you would be so kind as to bring them down here--?'

Joanna glanced at the unusually large pile of work on her desk, some of it, she knew, urgently in need of attention.

'Would this evening do, Lady Gilmore?'

'Oh, yes, certainly, my dear.' Lady Gilmore unbent very charmingly. 'Only it seems rather an imposition to take up your own time.'

'Not at all. I haven't any engagement this evening, and I should like to come.'

'Then please do stay the night. It's a long journey back, except by car.'

Again Joanna hesitated a moment. She had the ridiculous feeling that, if she were out of town, she was out of touch with Neil. But there was something in Lady Gilmore's tone which told her that this was also an *amende honorable* for any unfortunate impression which might remain with her after her earlier visit. To refuse, without good reason, would be to reject a kindly-meant gesture.

'Thank you, Lady Gilmore. That's very nice of you,' she said. 'If I can catch a reasonably early train in the morning...'

'Oh, yes, of course! Or, if Sir Henry is better, you can both travel to town by car.'

So it was settled and, when Joanna had rung off, she reflected that, if she would in strict fact be putting a few extra miles between herself and Neil, she would also be strengthening her connection with his family.

Her final instructions had been to arrive in time for dinner, so, leaving the office a little early, she hurried home to collect a few necessities for the night and to let her stepmother know where she was going.

'Poor child,' was Mrs Deane's comment. 'Such a tiresome journey. Why couldn't one of the nephews have run you down by car?'

'Oh, I—they don't even know I'm going, and it isn't much of a journey in actual distance.'

'You could ring up Roger. He'd be delighted to take you if he's free.'

'N-no, I don't think I'll bother Roger.'

'He wouldn't consider it a bother, dear.'

'No, I know. But after what you said about him, I don't want to—to make use of him, or put any ideas into his head.'

Her stepmother laughed, but indulgently, and said how extraordinarily different Joanna was from Auriel. Which was so palpably true that Joanna made no comment.

She hastily packed an overnight case, glad that her stepmother had not gone on to suggest that she should telephone Neil and ask him to drive her down to the Manor, for she felt just now that she could not bear any further discussion about him.

Lady Gilmore had given her the time of a convenient train and, glancing at her watch, Joanna saw that she would be just in time to catch it, if she hurried. But, as she came through the hall, the telephone bell rang and, unable to resist this very, very last-minute hope, Joanna caught up the receiver, her other hand still clutching her case, as she stood there.

'Hello,' Neil's voice said. 'Is that you, Joanna?' And the clouds parted and the sun shone.

'Yes!' She tried to keep the hit of happiness and relief out of her voice.

'I'm so glad I caught you. Aunt Helen phoned me to say that you're going down to the Manor this evening. If you wait twenty minutes, I'll be round with the car and drive you down. It will save you that rotten journey on the local line.'

Joanna would have waited hours, but she felt bound to say:

'Don't make the journey specially for me, Neil.'

'I'm not. I've been meaning to go down and see them. And if Uncle Henry isn't too well, this is the time. Besides, it will give me a chance of a talk with you.'

She hardly dared to believe her ears. But he *had* really said that. And somehow she managed to answer with impersonal friendliness.

'Well, that will be delightful. I'll wait here until you come.'

When she had rung off, she stood there in the hall, smiling into space, savouring the sweetness of actually having him say: 'It will give me a chance of a talk with you.'

Then she went to find her stepmother, and tell her that Neil was going to drive her down to Sir Henry's place.

'Very nice, dear. And such a pleasant evening for it, too,' Mrs Deane observed, with supreme tact. Though she could not help adding: 'Did he make the suggestion, or did you ring him up?'

'Oh, he did! Lady Gilmore let him know that I was going down there, and he—he said it would give him a chance of a talk with me, if we drove down together.'

'Well, so it will. Have a lovely time, darling.'

'Oh, I shall!' cried Joanna, and hugged her stepmother ecstatically.

In less than the promised twenty minutes Neil arrived.

He came in, to say a pleasant word or two to Mrs Deane—even nobly responded to a query about 'his nice friend Inspector Curds'—and then said to Joanna:

'Well, shall we go? We have quite a long drive in front of us.'

She knew that all too well. Had they not done it together once before? But in such different circumstances. How sore and angry she had felt with him then. How badly he had been thinking of her.

Now it was all quite different. They were on friendly—even intimate—terms. It was to her he had written so frankly when he had gone abroad, because, as he had said, he preferred to tell *her* the truth. Now he was looking forward to a long talk with her. It was not unreasonable to believe that he was going to confide some of his inmost thoughts and ideas about Vivien and his future to her.

Had he been disillusioned?—rebuffed?—disgusted?

At any rate, she was to be admitted to a level of discussion, presumably. Otherwise, why should he wish to talk to her?

She felt happy and confident, as she had very seldom before had a chance of feeling in Neil's company. She looked at him, as he slid into the driving-seat beside her, and she thought: 'He's the dearest and best-looking man I've ever seen. How *lucky* that it was his flat I chose to burgle!'

The thought made her laugh, and at that he glanced interrogatively at her.

'Oh'—she coloured a little—'I don't know why, but I was just thinking that I'm rather glad I chose your flat to burgle.' •

He smiled slightly.

'Well, it certainly started something, didn't it?'

'Y-yes.' She was not sure that his amused reaction was quite all that she might have expected. He smiled, it was true, but not with the complete sharing of a joke which she was used to with him.

'I'm imagining things,' she thought. 'As soon as we're free of the traffic, he'll begin to talk, and tell me what he has on his mind.'

But, even when they had threaded their way through the maze of the outer suburbs and were beginning to have long stretches of open road, he spoke very little, except for an occasional conventional remark.

Uneasiness, which had touched the fringe of her consciousness from the first few minutes of their drive, began to take possession of her. Again she glanced at him, and his sombre, almost stern expression disquieted her indescribably.

For a few minutes more she bore the weight of her anxiety. Then, hesitatingly, almost timidly, she asked: 'Is there something worrying you, Neil?'

'Worrying me? No—puzzling me, rather.'

'About—Vivien?'

'Oh, no, about you.'

'About me?' She was startled, and could not quite hide it. 'What's puzzling you about me?'

'I'm wondering,' Neil said, almost conversationally, 'why you sent me that telegram calling me home.'

Joanna felt as though something had caught her on the chin. Something which she should have expected and against which she should have guarded.

'I—but I told you.' She tried desperately to keep her voice steady and natural, but it shook a little in spite of her efforts. 'There were—questions—from the police. I needed you. It—was only a coincidence that everything was cleared up the very day you arrived home. If you remember, the police only found out the explanation themselves a few hours before you arrived.'

'Yes, I understand about the coincidence.' He spoke in the tone of a man who had all the time in the world in which to arrive at the truth. 'What I don't have clear is the bit about the questioning beforehand.'

'Well—you see---' She passed the tip of her tongue over dry lips. 'I got—scared. Unnecessarily, perhaps. But it seemed to me that they even—suspected me in some way. I —wanted you home.'

'You mentioned Curtis in your telegram, Joanna.'

'Yes. It seemed so sensational to mention the police.'

'I see. But when you wrote that he was asking awkward questions, you meant literally that Curtis himself was doing the questioning?'

She sought desperately for a way of avoiding committing herself to a name. But if she said it had not been Curtis, then she would have to invent a purely fictitious member of the police force, and that was too dangerous.

'Yes. Yes, he did the questioning.'

'That's the bit I don't understand, my dear.'

'But why not?'

'Because,' Neil said rather deliberately, 'when I left your house with Curtis on Saturday night, I took the opportunity of saying that, even though everything appeared to have ended well, I still resented your being frightened and distressed by previous questioning--'

'Oh!' Joanna seemed to see the ground opening in front of her.

'He replied that he had neither questioned nor seen you since he first came to inquire about the letter. So you see, Joanna, unless Curtis told a lie--'

He paused so long that she was forced to whisper:

'N-no, he didn't tell a lie.'

'Then your telegram becomes quite inexplicable. Why did you send it?'

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOANNA wondered how long they had been driving in silence. An hour would not have been too long for this accumulated weight of unhappiness and despair to settle on her. And yet perhaps it was only a matter of minutes since Neil had asked that question, made that statement.

And now he was waiting for her answer.

She sought for an explanation—any explanation. She groped for words, just to hide the silence, even if they meant very little. But nothing came to her. While she seemed to totter on the edge of the abyss which had opened before her, her mind remained an obstinate blank.

At last he said, quite pleasantly:

'Aren't you going to tell me, Joanna?'

And, unalarming though the tone was, she was forcibly reminded of that other time, when he had found her rifling his desk, and had, not unreasonably, demanded an explanation.

'I wanted you—home,' she said huskily, 'at all costs.'

'But why, my dear? Were you frightened about something?'

'Not—for myself.' She hardly knew why she had said that, and would have recalled it, if she could have, the moment it was said.

'For Auriel?' he suggested, but he sounded puzzled again.

'No.' She locked her hands together. 'For you.'

There was another of those short, incalculable pauses. Then he said:

'I don't quite understand.'

'No,' she said desperately, 'I don't entirely understand myself. Sometimes one acts on—on a crazy but irresistible impulse. At the time it seems the best—the only thing to do. One hardly even justifies it to oneself—there seems no need to do so. But it's—nearly impossible to explain afterwards.'

'Well'—he negotiated an awkward corner with meticulous care—'I think I know what you mean. But you still haven't told me why you were afraid on my behalf. Of what you were afraid?'

'Of your—your being unhappy again—spoiling your life, by going back to—her.'

'Do you mean'—to her dismay, she saw an incredulous little frown appear—'that you deliberately interfered in my private affairs? Cooked up that story about Curtis, simply to make me leave Vivien?'

'That's—what I'm trying to tell you.'

She thought at first that- there would be a quick, violent outburst of anger. There was nothing of the sort, however. Only, after a moment, he said coldly and flatly:

'Don't you think that was damned impertinence on your part?'

'Yes,' Joanna said.

He gave a short, angry laugh at that, and exclaimed impatiently:

'Why don't you even attempt to defend yourself?'

'Because there's nothing to defend,' she retorted, suddenly almost as angry as he. 'You told me yourself, in one of your saner moments, that you'd made a fool of yourself over Vivien--'

'I did?' He challenged that hotly.

'Certainly you did! When you chose to regard me as undesirable, you courteously informed me that you didn't want Roger making a fool of himself over me, in the way you had over someone else.'

'Oh--' He was suddenly cool again.

'Exactly. And then, when you wrote to me, telling me you'd decided to join Vivien in France, you said yourself, quite frankly, that you hardly knew if you were going because you felt she needed a friend at such a time or because you just couldn't keep away. In other words, you didn't know if you were acting on ordinary friendly impulse, or just preparing to make a fool of yourself again. Well, I did know.'

'But, Joanna--' He was half amused, as well as annoyed by the violence of her attack—'one just doesn't interfere in other people's affairs like that.'

'Well, I did.' She sounded sulky suddenly, and almost childish, because she knew that her position was quite untenable, and was frightened to see what feeble arguments remained to her, once the force of her anger was spent.

He didn't reply to that. Perhaps he thought it hardly merited a reply. And, glancing round her, Joanna recognised, to her intense relief, that they were nearing the end of their journey.

The ordeal was not quite over, however. As they turned into the lane which led to the gates of the Manor, he said:

'Joanna, what made you think that you had any *right* to do this extraordinary thing?'

'I didn't argue to myself about rights.' She pushed back a strand of hair with a distracted little gesture. 'Strictly speaking, of course, I know as well as you do that one has no right to interfere in the affairs of someone else, like that--'

'Well then?'

'Neil, a lifetime of regret is a high price to pay for avoiding the unpleasantness of appearing to be interfering and impertinent.'

'By which I suppose you mean,' he said, as they passed through the gateway to the Manor, 'that the interference might be yours, but the lifetime of regret—mine?'

'Well--' for a moment a fleeting smile crossed her face, though she was still pale with the strain of this conversation—'I should have done some regretting myself, if I'd have to see you unhappy and know that I'd done nothing to prevent it.'

'You extraordinary and impossible girl!' he exclaimed, on a note of impatient incredulity. But, before she could ask him just what he meant by that, they drew up outside the house.

Lady Gilmore welcomed them both kindly and, undemonstrative though she usually was, she kissed not only her nephew but Joanna too.

'I'm very glad to have you here again, my dear,' she said.

To which Neil added, readier teasingly:

'My kind Aunt Helen means that she is ashamed to think how completely her black-sheep nephew spoilt last time.'

'You didn't spoil it,' retorted Joanna with spirit. 'I enjoyed most of that visit very much.'

'Thanks to Roger, I feel.'

'Well--'

'I did telephone Roger, to see if he could bring you down this evening,' Lady Gilmore explained, taking no notice of Neil's teasing, 'but he evidently was not in. I couldn't get an answer.'

'I made quite a satisfactory second-best, Aunt Helen,' Neil assured her.

And Joanna had to smile and murmur something polite. But because there was no possibility of explaining that Neil was not—and never would be—second-best in this respect or any other.

At dinner Sir Henry joined them, looking very handsome and rather sorry for himself in a velvet smoking jacket, with a white silk scarf wound round his throat. For the first time, Joanna saw an elusive and almost amusing likeness between him and Neil, and she was specially kind and sympathetic to her employer in consequence.

Like all handsome old men, Sir Henry liked being made a fuss of when he was ill, and responded to Joanna's attentions with a realistic impression of a very sick man who had left his bed only at the call of duty.

This led quite naturally to the matter which had brought Joanna down to the Manor, and she was rather afraid that her whole dinner-hour was to be given up to business discussion.

However, Lady Gilmore intervened presently with:

'Let Joanna have her dinner in peace, dear. I hope I may call you Joanna,' she added to her young guest.

'Please do.' Joanna was secretly a good deal flattered. Only once before—and then almost by accident—had Lady Gilmore used her first name. This formal acceptance of her on Christian name terms marked a distinct step in their relationship.

Sir Henry, who was no doubt feeling a little peevish because of his chill, looked rather annoyed at having Joanna's attention diverted from himself. He glanced round for further interests, and his eye lighted on Neil.

'By the way, what were you doing, gallivanting off abroad last week?' he demanded, with considerably less than his usual agreeable charm.

Neil's eyebrows went up.

'I went to France.'

'They didn't seem to know anything about it at your office.'

'No, I went on private business.'

Until that moment, Joanna had never imagined actual friction between her employer and Neil. Now she saw that, in the wrong mood, Sir Henry could take a very highhanded manner to his nephew, and that Neil resented it.

'It's a mistake to put private business before your official affairs. At any rate, to the extent of not even letting your office staff know where you are.'

Sir Henry's tone was that of a guardian to an erring schoolboy, rather than one for expressing a difference of opinion between equals.

'I'm quite aware of that. There were special circumstances in this case.'

'Special circumstances!' Sir Henry retorted scornfully. Then he coughed unfairly, to show that he was a sick man, and therefore at a disadvantage in this discussion. 'I suppose you were running after that woman again.'

'Henry!' Lady Gilmore's tone of shocked protest showed how unusual it was for her husband to talk like this.

He waved her protest aside, however, apparently enjoying this departure from his usual discretion in the way a child enjoys a sudden breakaway from authority.

'All right, Helen, Neil knows we have enough intelligence to put two and two together. There's no need to pretend we're more foolish than we are.'

'Aunt Helen is not at all foolish, and never pretends to be,' said Neil coolly, with a little too much emphasis on 'Aunt Helen'. 'And if you want the truth, I certainly went- to France to see Vivien Norton. As you know, her husband had just been killed and she injured in an air accident. It was not an extravagant gesture of friendship, surely, to go to see if one could be of any help.'

'Quite unnecessary--' began Sir Henry.

But Lady Gilmore said peaceably and firmly:

'It was your own business entirely, Neil. But I'm glad you didn't stay long.'

'Hm! She sent him off again, I don't doubt,' Sir Henry interjected crossly. 'She wouldn't need him now.'

'On the contrary.' Neil spoke with a sort of provocative defiance. 'She was very glad to see me.'

'Then why did you come home again?' his uncle wanted to know.

'You'll hardly believe it'—Neil was completely and coolly himself again now—'but I came home because Joanna sent for me.'

'Joanna!'

'Miss Deane!'

Both the Gilmores turned and regarded Joanna in astonishment—Sir Henry as though he had only just remembered that she was there.

Joanna, already distressed by the dispute which had so suddenly arisen, was horrified to have the limelight turned on herself. She felt herself flush and then pale unexpectedly, but any words of casual explanation once more refused to come.

'But how did—I mean, what did you say, dear, to make him come?' Lady Gilmore looked at Joanna, with a mixture of doubt and something like admiration.

'She invoked the police, Aunt Helen,' Neil explained, with a touch of amused malice.

'The police!' Lady Gilmore was shocked.

'He's teasing you, Lady Gilmore. I—I--'

She looked helplessly at Neil, but he said unkindly:

'Go on. This is your cue, not mine.'

'Very well, then,' Joanna said slowly. 'When I first met Neil, I was involved, as a quite innocent party, in a—in a police case, which has recently been—settled. I wired to him, saying that I—was having difficulty with the police and—needed him. To his credit—her tone suddenly became firmer—'he came. And I refuse to think that it was to my discredit that I sent for him.'

'Bravo!' said Neil, softly and a little mockingly.

'Very sensible and ingenious,' commented Sir Henry who would, at any other time and in any other circumstances, have thought Joanna's action most questionable.

As it was, Lady Gilmore could not hide her disapproval of the means, however much she might applaud the end.

'I'm sure you—meant it for the best,' was all she could achieve, as she rose, to indicate that dinner was at an end.

'Oh, no, Aunt Helen.' Neil pushed back his chair with unwonted violence. 'Joanna meant it for the future. She doesn't want Roger to have any trouble with his relations in future. Joanna is going to look after us all.'

'What has Roger to do with this?' inquired Sir Henry, looking tiresomely bewildered.

'Nothing at all,' his wife replied calmly. 'Neil is just showing off. Will you and Joanna have coffee in the drawing-room with us? Or would you rather have yours in the study, so that you can chat about office affairs and get them over?'

'In the study,' said Sir Henry, as though he suddenly thought enough time had been wasted already on unimportant matters.

And so Joanna—however much she might want to stay, and get to the bottom of Neil's almost savage remark—had to go to the study with Sir Henry, and show an intelligent interest in plans and specifications.

Almost immediately, her employer's usual good humour was restored.

At last the papers were gathered together again, her notes had been read back to her employer and checked as correct, and, remembering once more that he was a sick man, he rose and said that he would go early to bed.

Joanna went into the drawing-room as soon as Sir Henry had gone upstairs, though she hesitated a moment on the threshold, afraid of she knew not what.

She need not have bothered. Only Lady Gilmore was in the room, sitting under the soft light of a tall standard lamp, calmly and peacefully doing her tapestry work. Joanna stood in the doorway and watched her, wondering how long it had taken her to achieve that calm, or if there had ever been a time when Sir Henry distressed or enraptured her. ..

Lady Gilmore looked up.

'Come in, dear. Have you finished your talk?'

'Yes.'

Joanna came across the room, and sat down on a low stool by her hostess, the fold of her green dress settling softly round her as she sank down, the lamplight intensifying the sheen of the highlights and the depths of the shadows.

'Sir Henry has gone up to bed now.'

'Oh, yes? The best place for him. He was tired and a little out of sorts at dinner.'

Thus, without mentioning names, did she explain, excuse and dismiss his unusual irritability with Neil, 'Where is Neil, Lady Gilmore?' Suddenly it was quite easy to ask frankly about him.

'He went out for a walk ten minutes ago.'

'Oh.' Joanna looked out into the darkened garden. 'I'm afraid he's very cross with me.'

'You mustn't take too much notice of that little outburst.' Lady Gilmore smiled indulgently. 'He thought you went a bit too far, I daresay, in your concern for Roger--'

'It had nothing to do with Roger, Lady Gilmore!'

Lady Gilmore drew a thread through her tapestry before she replied. Then she said:

'I don't want to force any confidences, Joanna, but are we wrong in thinking that you and Roger are very fond of each other?'

'Entirely so!—if by that you mean, are we in love with each other,' Joanna insisted earnestly.

'I think Roger is very fond of you.'

'I—know. I'm even afraid that he's a bit in love with me. But I haven't given him any real encouragement—particularly lately. I'm hoping he'll get over me fairly easily.'

There was a silence then. But a companionable silence, which seemed to spread around them in warmth and understanding. And finally, Joanna said, almost appealingly:

'Do you think I was very wrong to send that telegram to Neil?'

'Strategically or morally?' inquired Lady Gilmore, with an unexpected niceness of distinction.

'I suppose I meant—both.' Joanna smiled faintly.

'Well, I'm old-fashioned enough to think that an untruth is never really justified,' Lady Gilmore said. 'Also, on principle, I don't believe in interfering in the lives of other people. But when I've said that, I must confess that I'm extremely glad Neil came home for *any* reason. Which only shows, of course, that there is a touch of the hypocrite in all of us.' She smiled very charmingly at Joanna.

'And—strategically?' Joanna pressed, rather anxiously.

Lady Gilmore pushed aside her work, and regarded the wide-eyed girl before her with kindly consideration.

'I suppose, my dear, since you ask me the question in just that tone, you mean that you are in love with Neil, and do I think you've spoiled your chances with him by doing something which has angered him and made him feel that you presumed on the limits of his private life?'

'Yes,' Joanna said with a sigh, 'I mean exactly that. Except that, in my more truthful moments, I admit to myself that it probably hardly matters what I did, because I'm not of any real importance to him, compared with—her?'

'But he did leave this—Vivien Norton and come home to you when he thought you needed him.'

'No. She came with him,' Joanna said flatly.

'Came with him!' Lady Gilmore repeated in angry dismay. 'In what sense do you mean that, Joanna?'

'Oh, I don't know! I just don't *know* anything real about the situation at all,' Joanna cried wretchedly. 'Maybe he just booked her seat on the plane for her, and looked after her travelling arrangements in the way he would for any friend-in distress. Or perhaps they came home together, happy in each other's company, planning hardly to be separated in future. I just don't know, Lady Gilmore.'

'Then you'd better ask him,' retorted Lady Gilmore, with unusual briskness.

'Ask him? I couldn't possibly ask him. He'd resent it terribly.'

'Well, I must say that your courage fluctuates very strangely,' Lady Gilmore declared, with signs of genuine amusement. 'After having threatened him with the police--'

'No, no!' Joanna corrected. 'Telling him that I was threatened by the police.'

'Very well. But it seems strange to me that, having invoked the police, let us say, you now hesitate before asking him for a straightforward answer to a straightforward question.'

'But he doesn't think that I, of all people, should ask him questions, straightforward or otherwise,' Joanna protested.

'Well, well'—Lady Gilmore's smile became indulgent once more—'it shouldn't be beyond your capacity to frame the question acceptably.'

Joanna looked doubtful.

'You mean—on the way back to town—tomorrow?'

'Dear child, I leave the timing to you.' Joanna's hostess covered her tapestry frame, put her wools and threads away with meticulous care, and stood up. 'Tonight might be even better. A good night's sleep might depend on the answer.' And she actually patted Joanna's cheek.

'But he's out.' Like a child, Joanna raised objection after objection, because she was frightened.

'He will come in presently,' Lady Gilmore said equably.

'I might—be in bed—by then.'

'Well, that of course depends entirely on you. If you will excuse me, I'll go and see how my husband is.'

Then she went away, leaving Joanna to take a book at random, and sit there, trying to look relaxed and at ease, while her breath fluttered ridiculously in her throat, and the elegant French clock on the mantelpiece ticked off the minutes with a sort of gentle inexorableness.

'There's no heed to be afraid,' Joanna told herself. 'There isn't anything else to confess. I don't need to ask him why Vivien came home with him, unless I really want to. Unless I really want to.'

Did she want to? Did she long or dread to know the truth? It was hard to say which feeling was uppermost. At one moment, she felt she could no longer bear to go on in ignorance. But the next soft tick of the clock brought her back to the realisation that, so long as she knew nothing, she could still permit herself foolish but infinitely comforting hopes.

'I shan't decide yet,' Joanna thought. 'I'll wait and see who comes in first. If Lady Gilmore comes back, I shall stay and talk a little while with her, and then I shall go to bed. If Neil comes in first--'

Suddenly her breath caught in a small gasp, and, if the clock did not actually cease to tick, at least she no longer heard it. For there was another sound which gripped and held her whole attention—the sound of a footstep on the gravel path outside the french window.

Even when she heard the door open behind her, she refused to turn her head. She felt the light stir of cool air from the garden, and then the door closed again.

Although the thick carpet deadened the sound of his steps, she knew, through every sense she possessed, that he was standing immediately behind her. Then he leant his arms on the back of her chair, and his voice said softly and a little mockingly:

'Hello. Aren't you and I on speaking terms any more?'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

To her shame, Joanna found that she had not quite enough courage to turn her head and see his expression. Instead, she answered his question as lightly as she could, but without looking at him.

'Of course we're on speaking terms. Unless you are feeling too mad with me to want to talk, that's to say.'

'No, I've got over that stage.' He came round then and stood in front of her, so that she had to look at him. 'Now I've reached the point of admiring your single-minded devotion to my young cousin's future interests.'

'Roger had nothing whatever to do with what I did,' Joanna said distinctly.

'Then, for heaven's sake, who has? For whom did you do this risky and questionable thing, if not for Roger?'

'Do I have to have done it for someone?' she countered.

'Of course.' He stood looking down at her rather moodily. 'You have a perfect passion for making yourself do unpleasant things for other people.'

'I have?'

'Certainly. Look at the ridiculous position you got yourself into, all for your pretty good-for-nothing young sister, if you want an example.'

'Oh—that.' For some reason, she laughed, perhaps at his unnecessarily angry and accusing tone. 'I'm quite glad I did that. As I told you, I shouldn't have known you otherwise.'

'Yes, you would—through my uncle and aunt.'

'Oh, well, it's much more original to make one's own introduction, by way of a burglary.'

Suddenly she was the one who was mocking and gay. He seemed uncertain and curiously anxious, as he insisted obstinately,

'But that doesn't answer my question.'

'Which was?'

'Whose interests were you considering when you sent that—that bogus telegram?'

'Yours, to a certain extent, as I told you. And for the rest'—a reckless and mischievous gleam came into her eyes —'I hate to undeceive you, after the touching degree of self-sacrifice which you tried to foist on me, but—simply, solely and selfishly, my own interests.'

'I don't understand.'

'It isn't really necessary that you should,' Joanna told him. 'There's quite a lot about you which I don't understand, come to that.'

The idea seemed to surprise him, and he asked: 'What, for instance?'

She caught her breath, for there, suddenly, was the opportunity to ask what she really wanted to know, but, for a moment, she was so much afraid of the reply that she hesitated. Then she said, very calmly:

'Why, for instance, did you and Vivien travel back to England together?'

'But I told you'—there was no mistaking his surprise that time—'because I went to look after her and see if there was anything--'

'Oh, I know, I know that bit!' Suddenly she sprang to her feet, and nervously paced the room in an agitation she found impossible to control. 'I know all the unimportant details. But that isn't what I meant. Were you with her as the useful friend who made the travel reservations, or the devoted lover who accompanied her wherever she went, or the man she meant to marry as soon as--'

'I made, the travel reservations,' he said coolly and categorically. And she stopped in her stride, dead still, with her back to him.

'Just—that, Neil?'

'Just that.'

'You mean that, when you got there, you found she— no longer cared for you?'

'No. Something much more fundamental and dismaying. I found I no longer cared for her. Why are you asking all this?'

'I just—wondered.'

'Liar,' he said, evenly and pleasantly, and came up behind her, so that she could feel him there although he did not actually touch her. 'Joanna, why did you send that telegram?'

'I—don't know.'

'Of course you do!' He caught her by the shoulders and spun her round to face him.

The touch—peremptory and possessive—did something to her which nothing else could have done. It released a passion of feeling that was half anger, half remorse, and only to be expressed in the crude, simple truth.

'I was jealous!' she flung at him. 'I wanted you here at home, not there with her. I'm not ashamed of it! She was no good to you. She didn't really love you, or she would never have turned you down for someone richer and more powerful. If she'd been good and decent and loving, I would never have interfered—I don't think I'd even have been jealous—at least I'd have tried not to be. But she was unworthy—*unworthy*. She didn't love you, and I—I--'

'Yes, Joanna?'

'I do,' she said flatly. 'Now you can do what you like about it.'

'Exactly what I like?' he asked softly.

'Oh—yes.' She made a little gesture of puzzlement and weariness. And he took her in his arms and kissed her over and over again—on her hair and her cheeks and then her lips.

'My darling, silly, quixotic little Joanna, didn't you even think, when "you sent that telegram, that you were courting the utmost humiliation if I guessed your real motive, and didn't return your feelings?"

'Yes. But I didn't think of that until after the telegram had gone,' she confessed almost naively.

He laughed immoderately at that, but his tone was tender as he said:

'Don't you ever count the cost when you do something for someone you love?'

'Not—really. I suppose that's what loving is,' Joanna said, at which he kissed her again.

'Neil'—she returned that kiss, with a sort of incredulous rapture which he seemed to find bewitching—'I don't really understand what's happened, you know. Only three minutes ago you were being perfectly horrid--'

'I was?'

'Of course. Pushing me around almost literally, and trying to make me say I loved you, without so much as giving a hint that you cared for me.'

'Darling, I'm sorry! But I just had to know.'

'I should have liked to know about you too,' she countered, smiling a little.

'But you don't know? Didn't you realise that I loved you when I was jealous about Roger?'

'No, of course not.' And then, with irresistible curiosity — 'Were you jealous?'

'Fiendishly so. That time in the garden, too, when the nightingale did its stuff. That's why I was so disagreeable.'

'Oh, no, it wasn't,' Joanna reminded him firmly. 'You were disagreeable then—and how disagreeable—because you thought I was making up to Roger.'

'We-ell, I suppose I wished you would make up to me.' 'While you were still mad about Vivien?'

'Oh—Joanna'—He sat down on the arm of a chair, and drew her down against him—'it's been such a miserable, hellish mix-up. I'd been crazy—I think your expression was "making a fool of myself"—about Vivien for so long. I didn't recognise at first what you were doing to me. Though I ought to have known that very first evening,' he added reflectively, 'when I found myself telling the police a pack of lies, just because I couldn't bear to see you cornered.'

'Neil! You're not going to tell me it started then?'

'Must have, I'm afraid, darling. The fact was that, when you came burgling, you were determined to have something. There was no letter to steal in my flat, so you stole my heart instead. Isn't that right?'

She laughed, and rubbed her head against him affectionately, so that her bright hair was ruffled and looked childish.

'I didn't do it consciously.'

'Well, you made an awfully good job of it unconsciously. I shouldn't have been so abominable to you in the early stages, you know, if it hadn't hurt so strangely, to have to think you a worthless little fly-by-night.'

'You're not very good at judging people, are you?' she said.

'Not very.' He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. 'At least, not when I'm angry and in love. But, though I'm in love, I'm not angry now. And so I know you're the dearest and sweetest girl in the world, and if you won't marry me, I'll be a disillusioned bachelor for the rest of my days.'

'Like Uncle Dick,' she said, and laughed.

'Uncle Dick?'

'Oh, you don't know about him. It's all right.'

'Is he going to be one of my relations by marriage?' Neil inquired.

'Yes.'

And then, as she realised that she had accepted a proposal in the name of Uncle Dick, that firm opponent of matrimony, she laughed so much that Neil demanded an explanation.

But as we can none of us ever explain our odd relations to anyone else, she made a poor job of it, and presently they changed the subject to the much more satisfactory one of their own future.

By the time Lady Gilmore—that admirably tactful woman—returned to the drawing-room, they were comfortably ensconced in one armchair, completely absorbed in themselves and each other.

'All right—don't move,' Lady Gilmore said with a smile, as Neil lifted Joanna from his knee and stood up. 'The only time a man should never stand up for a lady is when he has another one on his knee.'

This was such an unexpected flash of humour in Lady Gilmore, that they both laughed and kissed her simultaneously, explaining the position, so far as they understood it themselves, and demanding her good wishes and congratulations, which she gave with the utmost warmth.

They made her stay for a while and share in their plans, but she said presently that Sir Henry would be needing her. Which was palpably absurd, but very tactful and nice of her.

As she rose to go, however, the first doubtful frown creased her forehead, and she said, with a slight sigh:

'The question of best man is going to be quite a problem. You can't very well have Roger.'

They could not very well have Roger, and, in any case, they were being considerate enough to arrange their wedding after he would have returned from leave.

'We'll think of someone,' Joanna began. But Neil interrupted with a laugh.

'There's only one possible choice, my pet. What your mother calls "my nice friend in the police force".' 'In the police force?' Lady Gilmore looked excusably surprised.

'Inspector Curtis!' Joanna cried. 'Of course. I'm sure he'd love it. And anyway, it was because of him that we first became engaged.'

'I don't understand,' Lady Gilmore said.

'It's rather difficult to explain,' Joanna agreed.

Neil smiled.

'Just accept it as it is, dear Aunt Helen. Surprise is the keynote of every real romance.'

And because Lady Gilmore saw that they were happy and amused and entirely immersed in their own mood of joyous absurdity, she said. 'No doubt you are right, dear. Goodnight.' And went to bed a very happy and satisfied woman.