

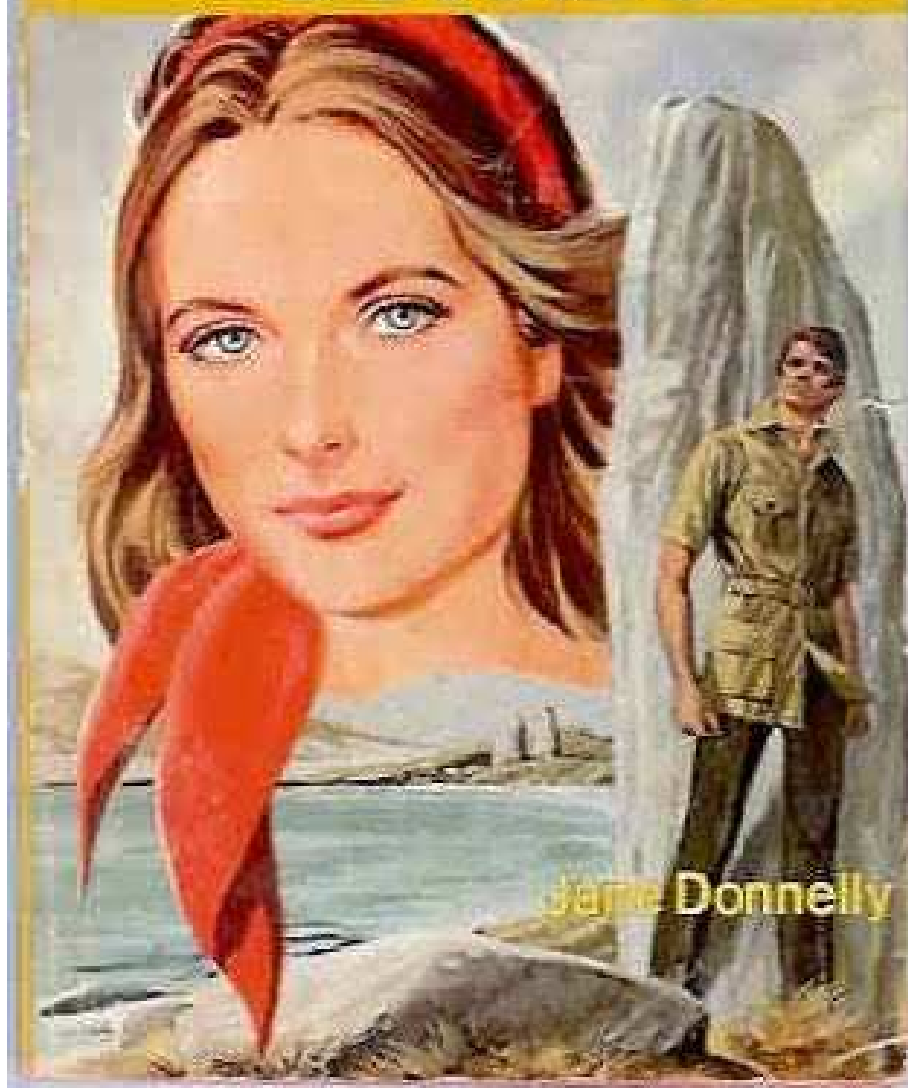


1859

A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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THE MAN OUTSIDE



Jane Donnelly

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Polly was delighted when the man she loved invited her to accompany him on an archaeological expedition in Scotland.

But when she joined the party she discovered a fly in the ointment in the shape of Piers Hargraves, one of the most disagreeable and exasperating men that she had ever met. Perhaps, if she tried, she could turn him into a reasonable human being?

CHAPTER ONE

Polly Blair settled down cross-legged on a long-haired rug in front of the television screen with the rapt attention of a teenager watching the latest pop star. She could have passed for a teenager. Her hair was shining and loose. Without make-up she had a wholesome well-scrubbed look, and right now, wearing jeans and a skinny sweater, she could have knocked six off her twenty-two years and got away with it.

But she wasn't watching a pop programme. The man being interviewed was an archaeologist. He was attractive enough for show business, he was better looking than the interviewer, and Polly's heart thumped pleasantly as he talked to the cameras with a pervasive warmth. No one could turn on the charm better than Clive Rounsley, but it was natural, there was nothing forced about it.

Polly smiled fondly at him. "You were marvellous," she would tell him later. She could have added, "And I'm crazy about you," because that was true too, and he probably knew it.

Her mother, sitting on the sofa just behind her, had watched the screen as intently as Polly.

Neither spoke until the interviewer ended, then Shirley Blair said, "He *was* good."

"He always is." Polly's wide grey eyes were shining as she turned down the sound. She wanted to remember and savour all that Clive had said.

"So clever," said her mother admiringly. Shirley Blair had brought in a tea tray from the kitchen and put it on the table. She placed the cups and saucers now. The china was gay with sprigs of mimosa, the tablecloth yellow and white check. An odd plate, spoiling the pattern,

would have spoiled the meal for Shirley. She liked things to match, to be right. This was the china she always used at teatime.

Funny how things work out, thought Shirley; life has a pattern too. Polly was her only child. Shirley loved children and she would have loved more, but there had only been Polly so that all her hopes were centred here.

Andrew Blair was a vet with a boarding kennels, and right from the beginning Polly had had an affinity with dumb creatures. Even before she could walk she would crawl up to dogs that were reputed to be savage, but none of them ever bit her, and as she grew older it seemed she rarely left the house without bringing back something that needed cherishing - a bird with a broken wing, an abandoned kitten.

Polly loved animals, but for her profession she chose archaeology. Shirley had been staggered. Ruins and museums had always fascinated Polly, but so did lots of other things. She had a collection of fossils and pieces of broken pottery, but she also had a collection of china dogs and early-blues discs.

Shirley had seen no special significance in the lumps of rock, until Polly settled her A level subjects and her degree course, and her teachers aided and abetted her.

Until then Shirley had taken it for granted that Polly would be helping her father run the kennels, but Andrew hadn't said a word to influence Polly, and he had been terribly proud of her progress.

So was her mother, of course, but passing exams and writing a couple of handbooks and getting taken on to the staff of the local museum didn't mean that Polly might not have a lonely old age. Shirley was more interested in the men around her daughter - the curator was a widower old enough to be her grandfather, and museums had always seemed such stuffy places to Shirley.

But Polly met Clive Rounsley at work. He was head of archaeology at one of the newer, brighter universities, a television personality and a popular author on his subject.

It was during the making of a television programme - a series on lesser known museums, and Polly's was very much lesser known.- that they met for the first time. Clive was doing the commentary, taking the viewer round, and Polly, who had only seen him on the screen until then, was immensely impressed by the real thing.

Clive Rounsley had husky good looks, a nose that might have been broken but had mended in the right way, a cleft chin, brown eyes that gleamed with humour. As well as all that he talked Polly's language, was absorbed in the things that absorbed her. It was almost too much. If she had written a detailed description of the man who should be right for her it would have been a prototype of Clive.

Now, almost a year later, those first impressions had been confirmed over and over again. Now she had leave of absence to join Clive's latest dig, that was what he had just been talking about on television, and she couldn't have been happier. If Clive should ask her to marry him, while they were working together in the months ahead, she would say yes like a shot. Everything seemed to be falling into place, making a lovely sense of her life.

Her father came into the living room, a big-framed man with grey hair and kind eyes, and Shirley said accusingly, "*Andrew*, you've just missed Clive."

"Sorry." His smile was apologetic for Polly. "I didn't realise how time was going. What did he have to say?"

Polly forgave him. "He was talking about what we're hoping to find."

"Exciting, was it?" He chuckled, "That young man always sounds as though he's launching a new wonder detergent!"

Clive's enthusiasm was one of the things that made him such a fantastic personality. Life couldn't be dull with him around.

"And why not?" Polly demanded. "It will be exciting, even if it falls short of our hopes."

She had high hopes, not only for the dig. She was so lucky. Good parents, a good life. Better born lucky than rich, and Polly had been born lucky.

In the kitchen the kettle whistled and her mother went to make the tea. Polly carried in the sponge sandwich, the homemade jam, the cheesecakes still warm from the oven. Feeding her family well was one of the ways Shirley Blair showed her love for them. Andrew, with his big bones, carried his weight easily, and Polly was a girl who was rarely still, who burned up energy and stayed thin. Shirley was the one who tended to plumpness. She always had, and it suited her.

As her family sat around the table she said to Polly, "I hope you'll get decent meals where you're going."

"Of course I will. But not as good as your cooking, you've spoiled me." Polly was eating slowly, allowing herself the luxury of daydreaming, letting most of the talk flow over her, until her father said:

"McAllister still isn't eating."

McAllister was a West Highland terrier. Boarded here for a week while his owners holidayed in Spain, he had taken their desertion hard. This was his third day of refusing meals, sunk in gloom and putting on a very good show of martyrdom.

"I'll go and see what I can do." Polly jumped to her feet as her mother protested:

"Finish your tea first."

She swallowed a few gulps from her teacup, still standing. "Don't clear away, I'll be right back."

The boarding kennels were just across the yard from the house, in a centrally heated building. The cages were large and clean and comfortable, the animals boarded here were well cared for. It was a good kennels, but of course they missed their owners and McAllister was making particularly heavy weather of it.

Doreen, the kennelmaid, had finished her chores for the day and was due to leave. She greeted Polly, "Hi!"

"Dad says McAllister still isn't eating."

"He's a hard case." Nancy's lips twitched, because he was such a small endearing dog, ears pricked up now hearing his name, one eye beady bright, the other obscured by tousled white hair.

He was being dosed with vitamins that would keep up his strength, and tempting titbits should persuade him to start eating fairly soon, but for the last three days while the other dogs were wolfing down their rations McAllister had been sitting around looking sorry for himself.

Polly took him out of his cage. It might be bedtime for the rest of them, but McAllister was homesick for his family. She cuddled him, scratching him behind the ear. Nancy said, "Good luck, and if I don't see you in the morning good luck there as well."

"Thanks." Polly was leaving early. "Poor old McAllister," she said. "They'll be back soon, they haven't abandoned you."

She took him with her into the house and her mother said, "I knew it."

"He needs a bit of fuss," Polly explained. "He thinks he's been kidnapped." She put him in the armchair and he watched her mournfully. He wasn't the first boarder who had moved into the house and he wouldn't be the last. They made extra work for Shirley, but she didn't really mind.

Polly was tempting the terrier now with scraps from her own plate; finally she brought in a dish of the food he had been offered half an hour ago, and kneeling beside him coaxed him to eat as though he was a small child. It sounded ridiculous, but it worked.

"Who's going to keep this up?" asked her mother. Tomorrow Polly was off to join the dig. She said cheerfully:

"He won't be much trouble. He needs reassuring, he's one of the lonely ones."

Shirley smiled, "I think he's a smart one. He's probably heard that if you're sent to Blair Kennels all you've got to do is look pathetic and there's a girl who'll make a complete fool of you."

"Could be," said Polly, and went on feeding him.

"The animals are going to miss you at any rate," said Shirley. But not so much as she and Andrew would miss their daughter. Polly had never left home before. The college she'd attended was near enough for daily travel, but this would be a rehearsal for the time when her life would centre around another home and another man.

Shirley and Andrew had guessed from the beginning how it was with Clive Rounsley. Polly had been thrilled about the television programme featuring "her" museum. The publicity should be good for trade, they didn't have too many visitors, and there were hectic days of preparation.

Polly would be on camera for a few minutes. Clive Rounsley would be asking her questions. The questions had come on ahead, the answers had been prepared, and it made a nice change from routine.

She was looking forward to meeting Clive Rounsley. "He sounds a dish," she'd told her parents over breakfast that day. She went out looking excited and came back ecstatic. There had been other young men, of course, Polly was a pretty girl, but this was the first time she had gone around with stars in her eyes, and her parents had been relieved when they met him themselves to find that they liked him.

The phone rang now and Polly said with elaborate nonchalance, "I'll get it."

It could be a business call for her father, or a social call for her mother or herself, but they knew she was hoping for Clive and they listened until they heard her clear young voice "Hello," followed by "But of course I watched you and I thought you were marvellous." Then they smiled at each other.

She was on the phone for quite a while, there was plenty to say, mostly about the dig. She and Clive had seen as much of each other during the past twelve months as their jobs allowed. They had visited each other's homes and met each other's friends, but this would be the first time they had worked together and it was a dream coming true for Polly.

The dig was on St. Bara's Isle, off the north-west coast of Scotland, centred around the foundations of a ruined castle that dated back to

the Norsemen. The only homes on the island now were cottages and small farmhouses, and the roads were tracks over the heathland, but once there had been a castle there, and farther back still a race that had left the great grey stones that dotted the island and that the locals called The Watchers.

When Clive had told Polly that this dig was proposed during the long vacation she had said eagerly, "I could get up for a week or two."

"I was hoping," he'd said, "that you'd join us."

It hadn't been difficult. Mr. Quinton, her boss, was helpful about getting her leave of absence and finding someone to help out while she was away. Polly was a bright girl, he expected her to go far, and fieldwork was good for a youngster's career. Good for anyone's career if discoveries were made, but Mr. Quinton's eyes weren't what they used to be, nor was his back. A sedentary life suited him these days.

She met her colleagues-to-be in Clive's apartment overlooking the quadrangle. Clive's sitting room was comfortable, well furnished in a strikingly modern fashion. It didn't look like a college professor's room, but, in everything but his subject, Clive Rounsley was very much a man of today. He dressed and spoke like a trend-setter, and he had the personality to carry it off. He was popular with his students, they had all clamoured to join this dig.

The selected six, three girls and three young men, were nearer Polly's age than the rest of the team were, and she could feel the envy of the girls' eyes on her. Clive was the most attractive man in the room, including the students. The two supervisors, Lewis Kent - black-bearded and deep-voiced - and Bill Canning, neater and quieter, were obviously intelligent and probably interesting, but while Clive was around they weren't going to make many female hearts beat faster.

Polly had met the only woman supervisor when she was a student on digs herself. Portland Wallis was in her late forties. Pleasant-faced, comfortably dressed, she looked like a country housewife, and in her spare time - of which there was little - that was what she was.

This meeting was the preliminary briefing. Clive's desk was covered with maps and documents, and the talk was technical. Towards the end of it, when they were sitting around with their coffees, sherries, or beers, Clive announced, "There will be one other man with us. He couldn't get here today. He'll go straight to the dig. His name's Piers Hargraves."

The name meant nothing to Polly. Portland said, "I worked with him once. He's a geologist and he knows his job." As an afterthought she added, "He knows everybody's job," and impulsively Polly pulled a face.

"Oh, dear, a know-all!" She bit her lip, that was a small disloyalty to a future colleague, especially in front of the students, but it had slipped out.

"A know-all but not a tell-all," said Portland. "Unless you asked him a direct question you didn't get two words out of him, and sometimes not then."

"He hasn't changed, then," said Clive glumly. "I was at Cambridge with him." This was an old acquaintance he had never mentioned to Polly. Portland admitted, "He is exceptional, I can understand why you wanted him on the team," but Clive's expression was wry.

"I had no say in selecting him, he was on the list before I was, and our grant depends on his reports." Then he grinned at the students, "So handle him with care, you lot. No aggro or taking the mickey, because he could shut up the shop for us."

Clive's word was law, they were Clive's fan club. Later, when she was alone with Clive, Polly asked, "Will you tell me some more about this Hargrave's character?" and Clive shrugged,

"I don't remember any more. He was a non-person. He was there, and academically, as Portland said, he was exceptional, but that's about all I can tell you."

Next day, at work, she asked Mr. Quinton if he'd heard of Piers Hargraves, and they checked and found he had so many letters after his name that Mr. Quinton's start of surprise slid his spectacles down his nose. He readjusted the spectacles, went over the list again, then said, "My goodness, girl, it should be an honour working with him."

"Wow!" said Polly faintly.

Now they all seemed like old friends to Polly. She liked them all, she knew she could work happily with them all. Piers Hargraves was the mystery man, the unknown quantity, but if he was as self-effacing as Clive and Portland said there should be no trouble from him.

"Write and tell us what Dr. Hargraves is like," Shirley said, helping Polly finish her packing that night. Her mother knew the others as well as Polly did. She hadn't met them, but Polly had good-naturedly answered all her questions and described every one faithfully.

"Are the girls pretty?" Shirley had wanted to know, and Polly's laugh reassured her, although Polly had said, "Yes, especially Elsa, she's the blonde."

Shirley Blair's family was her life. Neither Andrew nor Polly resented this. She was a devoted wife and mother, and they had no secrets from her. She was more curious about the men and women Polly would be joining tomorrow than she was about her own friends and

neighbours, and she needed a description of Piers Hargraves to complete the set.

"I'll send you an Identikit the moment I meet him," Polly teased her. "Although Clive couldn't even remember what he looked like."

"I do hope he's nice," mused Shirley, putting another sweater in the case and smoothing it down.

"Non-people usually are," Polly said comfortably. "No trouble, and nice."

She herself had hardly any interest in any man but Clive. Falling in love put blinkers on you, as though everything you could possibly want was right ahead. "I am so lucky," said Polly, half scared at her luck. "A working holiday like this. I can hardly wait. It's going to be fantastic."

"You will write?" Shirley Blair couldn't help sounding wistful.

"Of course I will."

"Because we'll both be waiting for your news."

She didn't mean news of the dig. She meant - tell me if Clive asks you to marry him, and Polly smiled, knowing this, and promised, "I'll keep you posted about everything."

"See you do," said Shirley, and Polly went on smiling.

She and Clive were close and in the months ahead when they were a working partnership it was more than possible they would decide they were stronger together and life was better. Polly was almost sure it would happen that way. Being as lucky as she was of course it would...

She stood at the ferry rail with Clive, watching the island come closer. The jetty was small, skirted by a few houses, and there was a stillness, a peace over everything.

The students, Portland and Lewis Kent, were here already. Bill Canning had sailed on this ferry, but as Polly stood with Clive's arm around her, and the taste of sea spray on her lips, they could have been alone. Clive asked softly, "Do you like our island?"

"It's beautiful." Rising blue-grey from the sea. "No wonder someone built a castle on it." They were near enough to make out the figures waiting to meet the ferry and Polly wondered, "Is Dr. Hargraves there?"

"No." Clive's voice was suddenly harsh, and as he met her eyes he said grimly, "But he'll be around."

"I didn't think you minded."

"I didn't think I did, but the nearer I get to him the more I remember him."

"What do you remember?" From nothing at all to a memory that could make Clive so truculent was an immense step. His left arm was still around Polly, but she saw how he gripped the ferry rail with his right hand. He said at last:

"He was the only man I've disliked without a reason."

That wasn't like Clive. "No reason at all?"

"No. He never said anything. He never did anything, except work and pass exams, but I couldn't get on with him. Nobody could." He sounded best left alone, and Polly asked anxiously:

"If he does his job and we do ours he won't worry us, will he?"

Clive's grin was strained at first, then it softened at the concern in her upturned face. "No, he won't worry us." The group on the quayside were waving and Clive hollered across the water, "Everything under control?" They went on waving, their voices raised in cheerful welcoming chorus, and Clive beamed, every vestige of discontent gone. "They're a grand bunch," he said. "It'll take more than Piers Hargraves to disrupt this team."

The ferry disgorged passengers and cargo. There were four students waiting to meet them, and Lewis Kent. With his black beard and his walnut brown face, wearing polo-necked sweater and ancient slacks tucked into gumboots, Kent looked entirely at home on this rugged quayside. He planted a hearty kiss on Polly's cheek, shook hands with Bill Canning and clapped Clive on the shoulder.

The students were waiting for Clive. They welcomed Polly and Canning, but Clive was the director of the dig, the man who was going to put the drama into this excavation. Now the star had arrived the show could start. It seemed they all had something to tell him. They milled around him chattering, as Lewis Kent ushered everyone towards the battered little bus.

They piled in, bag and baggage, and the bus filled up and moved off, rattling over the comparatively even ground of the quayside, up a rocky road that led into a track that had them all bouncing.

"How far?" gasped Polly, wedged at the back between Lewis Kent and Clive.

"A couple of miles," said Clive.

"It'll never make it."

Lewis grinned, "It will. Once round the island when the ferry comes. Unless there's snow."

There was no snow today, just late afternoon summer sunshine, brightening the gorse and the heather, casting shadows on the rising hills. Sheep and cows wandered free, and several times the bus stopped while the driver hooted them off the track. They passed lonely farms and cottages, with the sea never far away, and several of the Watchers, that Clive pointed out to Polly.

What shape and purpose these tall stones had had when they were first placed was anyone's guess. Three thousand years had worn them into strange shapes. Most were in twos and threes. On the whole island there were eighteen of them.

Passengers were dropped and packages put down. Bill Canning was the first to leave the dig party, getting out at a cottage where a woman stood waiting at an open door. He knew his landlady and her family. He had been up here before. Most of them had, but not Polly nor Piers Hargraves.

Polly was sharing with Portland, and she waited eagerly to see her cottage. Lewis and Clive were lodging at the pub and the students were camping near. Lewis nodded at a small grey stone house well back from the track as the bus passed it, and said to Clive, "Hargraves was round the dig this morning."

"Suited him, did it?" snapped Clive.

"I don't know," Lewis admitted. "He didn't say much."

Polly's cottage was pretty, with white shutters, a white picket fence, and a herd of cows between the fence and the road. "Are you scared of cows?" Elsa asked her, squinting at one animal standing on a hillock. "Isn't that one a bull?"

Clive and Lewis got Polly's cases out and were for carrying them to the house, but by now Portland had appeared and Polly said, "The bull's looking the other way - I can manage, thanks."

Clive had things to do and no time to waste carrying her cases and then walking to his own lodgings. He said, "Are you sure? All right, see you later," and kissed her tenderly. She waved as the bus started up again, catching a glimpse of Elsa looking almost as though she hoped the bull would charge Polly.

Portland opened the gate that led from the garden, and came towards the road calling, "Hello, had a good journey?"

"Lovely, thanks, but it's good to be here."

The cases were fairly heavy. Polly picked up the larger, and Portland collected the lighter and said, "The cows won't bother you if you walk round them."

Polly laughed, "My father's a vet, I'm quite fond of cows."

"Are you? I'd rather they were behind fences myself." As the bullock turned its head Portland's pace quickened. "It's going to be very distracting looking up from work and finding a bull breathing down the back of your neck."

Mrs. Munro, Polly's landlady, was waiting in the little hall, a tall grey-haired dignified woman whose welcome was grave. She assured Polly there would be a meal as soon as Polly was ready, and her husband, so like his wife that they were either first cousins or had grown uncannily similar through the years of their marriage, added his welcome with a courtly bow and insisted on carrying up the cases.

The little bedroom with the sloping ceiling that was to be Polly's home from home was austere simple. Ceiling and walls were

whitewashed. There were two black iron bedsteads with white linen bedspreads, Victorian wardrobe and chest of drawers, and a dressing table with a jug and basin on it. The jug and basin provided the only touch of colour, a riot of pink roses, and the sun was slanting in through the dormer window so that the general effect was pleasing.

"The beds are hard but the food's good," said Portland when Mr. Munro had deposited the cases and gone downstairs again.

Polly smiled, "I can sleep on a board," and Portland said:

"Just as well," opened the wardrobe which was not quite half- filled and said, "I've taken two of the drawers. All right ?"

"Fine," said Polly. She began to unpack and Portland sat on a bed and asked:

"Bill was on the ferry, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"We're all here now, then."

"How far's the dig?" Polly was rapidly filling her share of the wardrobe, her mother had packed a lot of clothes for her, including a flame-coloured silk chiffon with full skirt and floating sleeves, suitable for romantic evenings but hardly for the life she would be leading here.

Portland's eyebrows rose and Polly confessed, "I didn't know I was bringing this along. My mother must think we're going to do some celebrating."

"Nothing like being prepared," said Portland. "The dig's about twenty minutes' walk."

"Can we go over?"

"We'll go that way round when we go to the pub." They were all meeting at the pub this evening, including Hargraves, and a shadow took the brightness from Polly's face. She pushed her coathangers along on the rail, squeezed in another coat and said, head in the wardrobe and her voice muffled:

"I hope Clive and Piers Hargraves hit it off. Clive says they didn't when they were in college. And everyone else fits in so well it would be a pity if we had an odd man out."

"You wouldn't like that," said Portland gently. Polly seemed very young and vulnerable to her, wanting everyone to be happy. Portland saw friction ahead and felt that Polly should be warned. She said, "Well, I can see why they didn't get on together. They're complete opposites. Apart from the job I shouldn't think they've got a thing in common."

To be told that a man was Clive's antithesis was no recommendation to Polly. She grimaced, "In that case you can keep Dr. Hargraves."

"No, thank you," Portland declined promptly, and Polly laughed with the sunlight around her. Then she speeded her unpacking, so that she could get washed and changed and downstairs for a meal, because she was realising how hungry she was.

High tea was laid for two in the parlour, on a little round table and a cloth with bobble-edging. The parlour was small, and overfilled with furniture, but there was no speck of dust anywhere, and when the meal was over Polly looked at photographs and the titles of books in the glass-fronted shelves.

"Take a warm coat," Portland advised her before they set out. "It gets chilly when it gets dark." It was warm enough yet, a mellow evening although a breeze was blowing, as they walked along the coastline.

There was a single Watcher stone not far from the Munros'

smallholding, and a group of three nearer the dig. In grey basalt they did give an impression of cloaked hooded figures, watching and listening.

There was little to see at the dig as yet. On a high point, overlooking a bay, aerial photographs had revealed a pattern where a mighty building had once stood, and the outlines of a bank and ditch, all invisible at ground level. Following the photographs the area of the great hall had been staked with markers, and sections criss-crossed with pegged string into a checkerboard pattern of twelve grids.

"And there's the pub," said Portland. Handy for the dig, in a nearby sheltered cove. Two tents were pitched close by and Clive would be waiting for her down there. Polly began to hurry and when she hesitated Portland said, "Run on, I'm right behind you."

It was a small inn, catering for the islanders and the occasional tourists. This was the busiest it had ever been, with a couple of bed-and-boards, and meals to be provided for the camping students. A room behind the bar had been taken over by the excavation party, and the landlord pointed it out to Polly when she walked into the bar.

The students were very much at home. A record player was plugging one of the top ten, not loud enough to drown the talk but making a convivial background. Nearly everyone was here: four of the students were dancing; Bill Canning and Jack Powell, a bushy-haired serious young man, were playing darts; and Clive was sitting at a side table with Lewis Kent, a couple of tankards before them. It was like walking into a party.

Clive jumped up as Polly entered and came across to her. "Hello, darling, we were wondering whether to send out a search party."

She went into his arms and he hugged her close. "We went round by the dig," she told him.

"Come and sit down and have a drink." He steered her towards the table. "Where's Portland?"

"About two minutes behind me." Portland came in, smiled at them all, and joined Lewis and Clive and Polly, and everyone seemed as relaxed and comfortable as one big happy family. Hargraves wasn't here. Polly had scanned the faces and there was no one she didn't know, but for some reason she was reluctant to ask about him outright. Each time there was a movement at the door she looked, and in the end it was Jack Powell who said to Clive, "Aren't we getting to meet him this evening?"

"Doesn't look like it," said Clive.

Then Portland asked, "Isn't he coming?"

Clive took a swig of beer, and his time about setting the glass down. He said slowly, "I went along earlier and told him everyone was anxious to meet him, he'd better come along and introduce himself this evening." The pause was dramatic, they were all waiting for the punch line. "He said he didn't see the necessity," said Clive.

That was unsociable, a snub for all of them, and although Clive spoke calmly there was an angry flush beneath the tan of his skin. Polly tried to make light of it. "Well, it doesn't matter. We'll all know who he is. The new face tomorrow."

From the expressions around her when tomorrow came no one would be falling over themselves to greet Piers Hargraves. "The one on the

outside not even bothering to look in," said Clive, the resentment breaking surface. "He always was."

"Up to him, isn't it?" said Elsa chirpily. "It's his loss if he doesn't want to know us."

But Clive had asked him to come and been told to run away, and Polly burned with indignation and the desire to comfort Clive and make him smile. She put a hand on his arm. "Dance with me?" and her ploy was so obvious that for a moment he was laughing at her.

Then his smile became affectionate and grateful and he lifted her fingers to his lips and said, "A good idea, I thought you'd never ask. Yes, come on, my darling, let's dance."

The music and the movement were a therapy. Clive danced well and so did Polly, and in no time they had whirled away from the shadow of Piers Hargraves. "This is fun," she said, doing a twist and a twirl on her own. "I wonder if they danced in the Great Hall."

"Never like this," Clive laughed, and spun her around again. The flagstoned floor was not an ideal dancing surface, but Polly was light on her feet and she twirled with enough grace and infectious enjoyment to get a burst of applause. She and Clive acknowledged the applause, doing a parody of a professional dancing pair, and followed with an over-exaggerated display dance that had them all laughing and clapping.

Then the laughter stopped, and Clive's expression changed, and Polly turned and saw a man in the doorway who had to be Piers Hargraves. She said softly, "So Cinderella did come to the ball," and Clive burst out laughing, and it was so obvious this was a joke at the newcomer's expense that Polly blushed.

Clive went towards him. "Ah, good, you changed your mind." He paused to switch off the record player, and reached Hargraves. "Everybody," he said, "let me present Dr. Piers Hargraves."

He gave the name a slight flourish, the way he always did introducing anyone on television, and Hargraves stood still, saying nothing.

Polly found herself mentally filing away her first impressions as though she really was going to send an Identikit to her mother. Tall and thin, high forehead and dark flopping hair. A bony face, high-bridged nose and high cheekbones. Wears gold-rimmed spectacles, looks brainy and arrogant and as if he could use a square meal.

His face was quite expressionless. Clive had been smiling as he walked towards him, and now held out a hand. But even when they shook hands Hargraves didn't smile. Nor when Clive took him around the room introducing them all.

Portland and Bill and Lewis greeted him courteously, with a nod and a word, which was much as he was giving them. Portland reminded him that they had worked together before, and they exchanged a few remarks about that excavation. Lewis Kent said they'd met on the dig this morning and Hargraves agreed.

Even the more exuberant students were almost speechless. Piers Hargraves was making no friends. His withdrawn manner was alienating them all, and when Clive, said "This is Polly Blair, our ceramics expert from Averton museum," he said:

"How do you do," as though the last thing he wanted was an answer to his question.

She thought - cold hands, cold eyes, cold heart, and for once in her life was at a loss for anything to say except to echo, "How do you do-"

He stayed exactly ten minutes. The clock on the wall had been striking nine a few seconds before he walked in, and at ten past he said "Goodnight", that he would see them in the morning, and went.

The hush lasted until he was well out of the pub, while the team stared at each other, the babble held in check and then bursting like a flood, so that everybody seemed to be saying to everybody else, "How about that? Wonder why he bothered to come ? There's one who doesn't want to join the club."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Clive.

Elsa shuddered in distaste. "He's like something from the secret police," and Clive took up the description.

"You've really hit it there. That's just what he is in this excavation. You don't have to like him, but you'd better treat him with respect." He turned the record player on again and took Polly in his arms. "Now where were we before the interruption?"

They had been fooling and the others had been laughing, but for the moment some of the high spirits had gone, everyone seemed subdued. Polly and Clive danced quietly away without any flourishes. The dart players picked up their darts, some began to dance again, some began to talk.

After they had done a couple of turns of the room Polly asked Clive, "What lucky family is he billeted on ?"

"He's not with a family." Clive had been thinking about Hargraves too. "He's with an old man who's a bit of a hermit, and he's got his own sitting room, so it should be a suitable arrangement."

"I hope his landlord feeds him," she said. "Isn't he thin?"

Clive's voice had a tinge of tartness. "Now don't start getting maternal."

"Of *course* I'm not!" The idea of anyone mothering Piers Hargraves! Polly wondered what his mother was like, if he had a family, and decided he probably didn't. She must try to find time tomorrow to scribble a few lines home to her own parents and describe her lodgings and tell them she had met the missing man.

A non-person might still be the best way to describe him, although he had managed to irritate them all. It would have been better if he hadn't come this evening. With his qualifications he should be an asset at work, but socially he was a drag.

Or was that fair? Perhaps if they had been making a little less noise when he'd walked in he might have felt more inclined to stay. The scene must have seemed boisterous and juvenile, rather than a gathering of serious scientists, and he was no party-goer, Clive and Portland had said that. Perhaps tonight had been a misunderstanding all round, and tomorrow would put things on a happier footing.

"Tired?" Clive asked her. She must be. It had been a long tiring day.

"I suppose I should be getting back," she said.

"I'll walk with you."

She smiled mischievously, "And with Portland?"

Portland was yawning behind her hand and looked ready to go home any time. Clive laughed, "I'd forgotten you'd got yourself a chaperone."

Portland wouldn't be flattered at that and of course it wasn't true, but she would be going the same way home as Polly.

"Shall we call it a day?" Polly asked her as they reached her table, and Portland yawned again and said:

"Good idea. It's work in the morning."

Clive went a little way with them, and then he and Polly kissed goodnight under a bright moon to the sound of the crooning wind and the waves breaking on the seashore.

"It's a lovely night," said Polly dreamily, as she and Portland walked along the clifftop path. "It's a beautiful world."

"In spite of people it is," Portland agreed. Polly was glowing, she hardly needed the warm coat Portland had advised her to wear. She felt secure and cherished, and surely this must be one of the loveliest places on earth.

They walked without talking, each with her thoughts, until Polly saw a figure below, a man walking slowly along the sea's edge. The moonlight was clear enough to show him plainly and Polly's murmur of surprise made Portland turn and look, but when Polly said, "Isn't it Piers Hargraves? He's probably going our way, shall we join him?" Portland snorted:

"I'm not slithering down a cliff face to catch up with him 1"

Polly stood still. "I think I will," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't like people being alone. Not the way he is."

"But that," said Portland firmly, "is the way he likes it."

How did Portland know? Although she had worked with him and she was a discerning woman. "You're probably right," Polly had to admit. "But it can't hurt to say goodnight again, can it?"

"It will if you break your neck getting down there." Now Portland was sounding like Polly's mother when Polly brought McAllister into the house, not approving but tolerant and amused.

"Coming?" coaxed Polly. It wasn't that steep, and the coarser grasses offered plenty of footholds, but Portland shook her head, and Polly went alone down the hillside without mishap. On the beach the sound of wind and waves seemed louder and she walked silently across the sand to the sea's edge and towards him.

He neither heard nor saw her. He wasn't looking around, he was looking out across the water. The aquiline profile was bleak and the glow went out of Polly and she shivered, glimpsing a loneliness beyond anything she had ever known, even in nightmares.

CHAPTER TWO

Polly froze where she stood, pulling her coat around her, and that movement caught Hargraves' eye so that he turned. "Hello," she said breathlessly. He said nothing for what seemed a long time and then his "Good evening" was curt.

"Portland and I were walking up there," she explained, "and we saw you down here." He could have made some remark on that, but he didn't, and she plunged desperately on. "Just now when you came to the pub we must have seemed - well, it was a bit rowdy."

"Yes, it was," he could have said, or "No, it wasn't," instead of looking as though he was still waiting for her to make sense. It was sense enough to Polly. She wanted him reassured that off-duty high spirits didn't mean they weren't all deadly serious about their work.

"You only know Portland, don't you?" she said. "And Clive. Well, the others are very friendly and very keen and it's going to be a first-class team."

When they had heard that Piers Hargraves would be joining them Portland had said, "You don't get two words out of him unless you ask him a direct question, and sometimes not then," so Polly asked, "Don't you think so?" "No doubt," he said. "We all feel we're lucky to be here." "You do?" he said drily.

"Oh!" If she sounded gauche it couldn't be helped. She *was* thrilled to be here. Clive had something to do with that, of course, but they all felt that the dig was going to be a voyage of discovery, and she couldn't understand how Piers Hargraves could be unmoved by the marvels here. He had to be dedicated to be so highly qualified, but he wasn't showing much enthusiasm.

If he couldn't talk about anything else he must be able to talk on his own subject, so she said, "The Watchers are fascinating, aren't they? Older than Stonehenge. Do you think they're the same period as the Rollrights ?"

"Miss - er - " he couldn't recall her name and he didn't give her the chance to prompt him. "You have read the relevant data on this excavation?"

"Of course."

"If you have questions I suggest you ask your tutor."

He thought she was one of the students. If she had been, eager and anxious to learn, she would have got no encouragement from him. She could understand why he hadn't recognised or remembered her, it had been a mass introduction and now she was muffled up in her coat, but she detested intellectual snobbery and she said stiffly, "Blair, Polly Blair. And I don't have a tutor."

"I beg your pardon." Perhaps that was meant to be an apology, and she agreed:

"There were a lot of us. I was the one dancing with Clive. You don't seem to have much time for students."

"We're all students, but I'm not a teacher, and anyone who has read anything about the St. Bara Stones must know they coincide with the Rollrights."

"True." Her question had only been a cue for talk, but with someone as intolerant as this talk wouldn't be easy and could be impossible. "Are you walking home ?" she asked. His lodgings lay in the same direction as hers, about half a mile further on, and he had been walking until he saw her. Since then he'd stood here, and now he

looked up at Portland on the path above them and she wasn't moving either.

"Mrs. Wallis appears to be waiting for you," he said.

"Mmm. Mrs. Wallis said you wouldn't want company." She said that with a flash of impishness, expecting him to deny it from common courtesy. But he didn't deny it, and for the second time that night her face burned hot.

"I apologise for intruding," she said with all the dignity she could muster. "I only wanted to say hello again and welcome to the team."

He wasn't wearing spectacles now, his eyes were very dark, so were the hollows of his cheeks. His mouth was straight and thin-lipped. He looked bleak, starved . . . Do you ever smile, she wondered, or did you decide a long time ago that there was nothing to smile about ? "Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight, Miss Blair. Thank you." Thank you for going, he meant, for not inflicting yourself on me for the next twenty minutes, and she said:

"I should start walking if I were you, the sea's coming in."

She marched quickly across the sand, and scrambled up the hillside, slithering a couple of times in her haste to get away. She was sure Dr. Hargraves wasn't watching her, but to Portland this must look like a panic retreat. That was ridiculous, and Polly made herself slow down and began to see the funny side of the situation.

When she reached the path at the top Portland greeted her sympathetically, "You don't have to tell me what happened, I couldn't hear a word, but I could see the pair of you. I saw you throw your head

back and square up, and like the youngsters say the bad vibes came loud and clear."

"Couldn't have been clearer," Polly agreed. "You were right, he didn't need company." She grinned and Portland, who had been trying not to smile, relaxed into a chuckle as Polly went on, "I asked him what period he thought the Stones were and he told me to go away and do my homework."

"He would," said Portland.

"He thought I was one of Clive's students."

"I wish someone would mistake me for a student," said Portland.

"But he did thank me when I said goodbye."

"He'd mean that." The wind was cold now, they went on their way with their heads bowed against it. "I told you," said Portland, "he likes being alone."

That seemed to sum up Piers Hargraves and dismiss him, but Polly couldn't forget that glimpse of him down on the seashore when he had thought he was alone. She woke briefly in the night, warm in her bed, and listened to the wind. It had a wilder sound here than the wind at home. She snuggled down, thinking of tomorrow and the joy of working with Clive and the others. And with Piers Hargraves. He couldn't stay aloof all the time, no man was an island, a dig had to be a team effort.

Why doesn't he smile? she wondered. Why is he such a solitary soul? She was still wondering when she fell asleep again.

Next morning as Polly got into her working clothes: sandals, jeans, scarlet sweater, she asked Portland, "Does Dr. Hargraves have a family?"

"I don't think so." Portland fixed her hair, which was cut short and crisply curling, with a few flicks of the comb. "He isn't married and his father died about five years ago. Charles Hargraves was a landowner, pretty well known. I don't think there were any other relations."

"Did you know him ?"

"Not personally, but he was a power in the land in Yorkshire. He was filthy rich. He was a philanthropist too. He ran an orphanage, that sort of thing."

"He doesn't sound like his son."

"Doesn't, does he?" The sun was shining again, and Portland opened the window and breathed deep. "We're blessed with the weather. You're never sure of it here. They get more than their share of rain and wind and mist creeping in from the sea."

Polly tied back her own brown hair with a red bow, that would keep it out of her eyes. Now she was ready for breakfast, ready for work. She asked as they came downstairs, "Is Dr. Hargraves filthy rich?"

"Possibly," said Portland. "If he is he doesn't seem to be getting much joy out of it."

They had large bowls of porridge for breakfast, and eggs from the white hens that strutted and scratched within the picket fence. Adventurous ones went over the fence from time to time, and were scolded and herded back by Mrs. Munro who kept a sharp eye on

them because they represented a fair share of her income. She supplied several of the cottages with eggs.

"This is the life," Polly gloated, as she and Portland set off for the dig. "At home now I should be just leaving for work, walking through the streets I've known all my life, past the same shops and the same people. It's a dear little museum, is ours, but it *is* a little museum. On a good day we get a school round, on a bad day we can get no visitors at all. There's just Mr. Quinton and me, and there's a limit to the ways you can rearrange the exhibits."

They came to the single Watcher and Portland said, "We'll be passing this daily from now on. And cows and sheep and dogs, of course. You might get just as tired of them."

"Never." Polly looked up at the Watcher, feeling the awe of it steal over her. Perhaps it had been carved once, covered with marvellous patterns, strange words and symbols, and gaudy with colour. But now it was grey, the elements had stripped and shrouded it in mystery. Portland told her:

"It's the only one standing alone," and Polly heard herself say:

"We should name it Piers."

That was a bitter little joke, suddenly to Polly it didn't sound funny, but Portland laughed, "Yes, we should. If this one ever had companions they've gone. It's all alone now."

Polly ran a light hand over the rough surface and said, "Never mind, I love you," and Portland said, still laughing:

"Oh, I do hope not!"

At the dig work was starting today in the string-pegged squares covering what had been the Great Hall of the ancient "dun" or castle. And also on a section of the bank and ditch surrounding it. For the next few days it would be rough and hard going as top vegetation was cleared and the "scratching and bucketing" began.

Three sectional huts had been set up, two together - Clive's office and the hut in which the team would deal with finds and where Polly hoped she would soon be pondering over pottery shards. And a third hut for Hargraves.

His was set nearer the section of the bank he would be working, but it seemed to Polly that it would have been better if the three huts had been placed together rather than emphasising the gulf between them.

When Polly and Portland arrived Hargraves, with the two students detailed to him, Jack Powell and Ewan Clay, was walking round the bank and ditch. The rest of the team were around Clive, bubbling with excitement. Clive was a good organiser, he had the operation in hand, all tasks allotted. He generated optimism and assurance and every face reflected his enthusiasm.

All faces but Hargraves'. Jack and Ewan called "Hi!" across to Polly and Portland, both grinning as widely as the rest of the team. But Hargraves didn't even look up, let alone shout a welcome, until Polly perversely added:

"And hello, Dr. Hargraves," to her acknowledgment of their greeting. Then he said:

"Good morning," face impassive and voice flat, and continued his pacing out of the ditch.

Later, when Clive came across to where she was working and she had a moment with him that wasn't overheard, Polly inquired, "Did he ask to have his shed isolated?" and Clive said:

"I got in first and had it put there. I'm darn sure he would have done, and frankly, the farther away he is the better I like it."

A transistor radio was playing pop music a comfortable distance away from where Polly was rolling back turf, undermining it with a small trowel. The sun was shining and the breeze from the sea gave a freshness to the air so that it seemed to sparkle. She felt free as one of the seagulls soaring overhead, and completely content with her lot. A few tendrils of her hair had slipped loose from the red ribbon and were falling around her glowing and grubby face. She had a smudge on the end of her nose and Clive grinned at her. "If we keep apart," he said, "we're less likely to rile each other. I hear you moved into the danger zone last night and got a touch of frostbite."

"Portland told you?" Polly sat back on her heels, and Clive sat down beside her.

"It wasn't a secret, was it?"

"No. I was only being neighbourly. I thought we were walking the same way home."

"All right," said Clive cheerfully, "you be his neighbour if you want to. No one else does, and if he sends in any adverse reports about us we could lose our grant."

She protested, "Surely he wouldn't do that unless it was obvious we were going to find nothing and the whole dig was a waste of time. And we'd know that ourselves and - "

"Yep," said Clive. He carefully removed a piece of grass from her hair. "You're a great girl for lost causes, aren't you? Never happier than when you're hauling lame dogs over stiles."

Polly said crossly, "Don't talk as though the name's Pollyanna."

"What?" Clive hadn't read the same books that Polly had read as a child.

"You make me sound insufferable," she objected, and immediately he was contrite.

"Sorry, my sweet, I'm only teasing. You're not insufferable - you're the girl I can stand having around any time at all." He leaned across and whispered, his lips tickling her ear, "And I wish we had this island to ourselves."

Polly dimpled, "Well, I don't. Think of all the digging we'd have to do."

"We'd forget the digging."

"Not with the Watchers around." She was joking about the Stones, but as she turned towards the group of three stones on a nearby hill she saw Elsa. Elsa, the radio blaring beside her, was standing with her hands on her hips, looking as though she disapproved of time-wasting by the director of the dig and one of the supervisors.

"Back to the trowel," said Polly. "Elsa's glaring at us." "Keep 'em happy," hissed Clive, "that's the answer to labour relations. I'll have a word with Elsa and you can toss Hargraves the odd smile in passing."

"Not the same thing at all," said Polly. "Elsa has a crush on you."

Clive didn't deny it. He laughed and said, "You're doing a beautiful job on that turf," and went across to where Elsa and Joan were working.

Polly was sorry for Elsa. All the girls fancied Clive. They were blatant about it, hanging on his words, hanging on him when they could. He was popular and handsome and everyone liked him, but Elsa's eyes had misery in them sometimes when she looked at Polly. Joan and Christine envied Polly because she was Clive's girl, but right now Elsa had been hating her.

The infatuation would pass, although it might have been kinder if she hadn't been allowed to come on this dig. She was going through a bad patch of longing for the unattainable.

She sparkled vivaciously while Clive was with them. The transistor drowned what they were saying for Polly, but Clive was obviously urging them to still greater efforts in clawing away the overgrowth, and Elsa tossed her long blonde hair and flashed her pretty teeth, then bent over her task again.

The way they were all putting their backs into it Polly was not the only one glad when lunchtime came and she could stretch and straighten and take a well-earned rest.

They were eating at the pub. Getting back to their digs would have used up time, and they might as well have all the sandwiches or snacks prepared together and eaten together. The landlord had offered to bring them up to the dig, but Clive had decided that a change of scene would be a better idea. So they trailed down together and took their lunch out on to the beach in front of the inn. The sea never came right in here. It sparkled invitingly now, a stone's throw away, and the sand and stones were warm for lounging on. They munched their meat pies and rolls, and drank their long cool drinks, and chattered companionably.

Hargraves hadn't come. He'd brought a snack with him and stayed behind, going through papers in the geology hut. Jack and Ewan were asked, "How did you get on with him?"

"Hard to say really," Jack scratched his head. "I suppose he knows what he's doing. He sure doesn't talk much."

"I think he knows," said Ewan slowly, and then with more emphasis, "Yes, I think he does."

"Amen to that," said Clive, and Elsa and Christine giggled.

"How's the swimming here?" Ewan asked.

"Not bad at all," Lewis Kent spoke with authority. "Not overwarm and there are currents. But it would be all right now."

"If you don't take longer than ten minutes." Clive who had finished his beer took a swig of Polly's coke while she squeaked in protest, "That's mine!"

Clive grinned, "Don't be greedy." He turned back to Ewan. "We start work again in ten minutes. You'd better wait till the afternoon shift finishes."

"How about moonlight bathing?" Elsa suggested. "How about a barbecue tonight and all of us going swimming?" "Not me." Portland spoke up hastily, then amended it, "Not that I'd object to cooking a few sausages out here, that might be pleasant, it should be a mild evening. But I'm sure that water would be very cool at night."

"Well, those who wanted to swim could." Elsa was reluctant to give up the idea. She wondered if Polly was a swimmer. She knew that Clive was and she had a fleeting dream of floating with Clive under a moon as bright as last night's moon had been. She said, "We should

do something to celebrate our first real day on the dig. A barbecue and a moonlight swim might not be wild, but who's got a better plan?"

No one had, and when Polly said, "I think it sounds super," they all agreed that it wasn't a bad idea. There was not much entertainment around here, they'd have to make their own, and this was the ideal place and the right time of year for barbecues. They could scout for driftwood and make a fire, and the pub could surely produce some food. Anything that anyone could bring along would be welcome.

As they gathered up the lunchtime debris to take back into the inn Polly asked Jack, "Will you tell Dr. Hargraves we're having a barbecue?"

He grimaced and swayed back as though dodging a body blow. "Why me?"

"Why not?" Polly demanded. "He might like to come."

"No, he wouldn't." Jack was quite sure and Ewan agreed:

"A moonlight fry-up and a chilly dip wouldn't be for him."

Polly went on arguing, "He might not want to come, but he should be asked," until Jack said:

"Then you ask him."

"All right," said Polly, "I will. Heavens above, we don't need to make an issue of it." Some time during the afternoon she would walk across to the bank and ditch section to see how they were progressing, then casually mention the barbecue. She didn't expect he'd come, but he shouldn't be excluded.

During the afternoon several sheep meandered up the hill towards the mound of the dig. It didn't matter yet, but fencing would have to be

put up soon. The sheep weren't curious, they simply munched on. And if cows came presumably they would act the same way, their only interest sustenance, the problem keeping them from wandering over or falling into the dig by accident.

But a couple of dogs who raced along the skyline and spotted the activity from afar were fascinated. They hurtled in for a closer look, eyes bright, noses twitching, moving from one digger to the next, frantically trying to discover what was going on here.

"I do hope," said Portland apprehensively as one of them skirted her section, "they haven't buried any bones around."

"Polly," Clive bellowed, "don't you dare encourage them!" Polly gurgled with laughter because she had been about to call out to the dogs and make friends with them.

"Aren't they a handsome pair?" she said. They were young border collies in splendid condition, their flanks gleaming like black satin.

"Too frisky by half," said Clive. "If you make a fuss of them they'll be all over the place."

"Not this breed," Polly defended them. "They're sensible dogs, used to discipline." They were calming down now and moving warily. "Just let them get used to us, they won't do any damage."

The dogs continued their investigation and then stretched out in the sunshine to watch. Polly couldn't resist petting them and they ended up beside her where she was working.

When she remembered that she had to tell Hargraves about the barbecue, and went down into the ditch to where they had started stripping a section of the bank, the dogs trailed along too. "How's it going?" Polly asked.

"Slowly," said Jack, wiping his sweating forehead with the back of his hand. He and Ewan were filling a wheelbarrow with clumps of rough grasses they had cleared, while Hargraves bent over a rock a short distance away, chipping or scraping. Suddenly the dogs spied him and rushed at him, and for a horrific moment Polly thought they were attacking.

But their barking was excited and their feathery tails swished and Polly stared as he patted them. "Friends of yours?" she asked.

"They belong to my landlord."

"Did they come looking for you?"

"No," he said. She hadn't thought they had, that was a pleasantry; hadn't he any sense of humour at all? And it wasn't as easy as she'd thought to mention the barbecue casually because he went on scraping his rock and she had to interrupt him.

"By the way," she said, "we're cooking a barbecue meal tonight down on the beach. Some of them are going to risk a swim. Will you come?"

"What?" He must have heard, but she repeated patiently:

"A barbecue. Tonight. All of us."

"I don't think so, thank you."

"You have other plans?" She was incredulous because there was nowhere to go and nothing to do but walk or read or listen to the radio. But he said "Yes," so that was that.

She had done her best, issuing the invitation on behalf of them all, and from now on she had better believe Clive and Portland that Dr. Piers Hargraves was a natural recluse.

"Pity," she said. With anyone else she would have chatted for a few minutes more, and asked why he was taking that particular specimen of rock, but he probably wouldn't tell her, so she said, "Coming?" to the dogs. They wagged their tails but stayed where they were, and she went back to Jack and Ewan and their wheelbarrow.

"Any luck?" they asked, and both grinned as she shook her head.

"Other plans," she mouthed softly, looking over her shoulder. "Turned down flat, *and* I've lost the dogs." She clambered up to her own grid on the mound and stayed there, working hard, until Clive called a halt at six o'clock.

Everyone enjoyed the barbecue. The fire burned brightly enough for them to cook bacon and eggs and fry bread, and heat up a saucepan of tomato soup. It was a lovely night, but the sea was too cold for bathing. Ewan and Jack ran into the wavesV splashed furiously and came out with chattering teeth and pale blue skins. Elsa paddled in to test the temperature and decided against stripping down to her swimsuit, especially as Clive wasn't swimming. She stayed close to him instead, while Polly was involved with the cooking.

After they'd eaten they kept the fire burning and sat around, ana Peter Gibbs strummed away on a guitar, playing folk songs, country songs, pop songs. It wasn't a professional performance, but it was tuneful and everyone joined in, humming where they didn't Know tiie woras.

Pony noticed that when Elsa sang the love songs she sang them to Clive, but CJive rarely acknowledged Elsa's homage. He avoided looking directly at her during the sentimental numbers. He had had plenty of experience in crushes and he had no intention of letting one get out of hand.

Alter Peter laid down his guitar they talked, discussing, arguing but always light-heartedly, telling anecdotes, capping each other's jokes. Polly joined in at first, then she sat quietly.

The moon was full. It was so beautiful here that she felt a lump rise in her throat. It was magical, a place of awe and mystery outside this warm little group in the cove.

Here was friendship and safety...

Safety . . . now why should she feel that she needed friends around her to be safe? There were no real perils here. Here you could surely walk alone without danger.

Thinking of walking alone made her remember Hargraves, so that she was looking serious, almost grave, while the rest were laughing. Lewis Kent had been telling a long-winded tale with a hilarious twist at the end, Polly had missed the point and Portland, sitting beside her, asked, "Is anything the matter?"

"No," Polly smiled hastily, "I was just thinking."

"What about?" Clive inquired.

She might have given a less controversial answer, but she said, "That it was a pity Dr. Hargraves couldn't join us."

No one else thought so, there was not one agreeing voice. "He was asked," Jack pointed out.

"If he had come," said Lewis Kent, "he could have proved the skeleton at the feast."

"Couldn't join us?" Clive echoed Polly's words. "Wouldn't join us, you mean."

She said, "He had some work and it was short notice."

It was short notice for all of them, and as the dig had hardly started he was unlikely to have had tests to do or masses of notes to write up. He wasn't here because he didn't want to be here, but as Polly looked around her, knowing that he couldn't count on one ally in the whole team, she had to plead his cause. She suggested, "Maybe barbecues aren't his scene."

"That's what I said," Ewan reminded her.

"The human race isn't his scene," Clive muttered. Few of them could have heard him, but Polly was shocked. She demanded:

"How can you say that? You don't like him, but you can't say he's inhuman."

"I know that you haven't got very far in making contact," Clive retorted. He was smiling, but the taunt carried a sting and Polly said doggedly:

"Give me time."

"Give it up, my sweet. You'll get no thanks and you'll get no results."

"I don't know about that." She was being stubborn, but she couldn't ignore the challenge. "We've only been here a day," she pointed out. "Maybe he'll mellow after a while."

"Mellow?" Clive roared with laughter, and the rest joined in because Polly couldn't have chosen an unlikelier word. "Not a chance," chortled Clive. "I'll bet you a bottle of perfume to a bottle of whisky he doesn't mellow this side the age of eighty."

"That's a long time to wait for a bottle of scent." The whole thing was a joke now and Polly went along with it.

"Very well," said Clive. "Any time you can get him to join the party after work - nothing to do with work, mind, strictly off duty - you can name your perfume."

"That sounds reasonable," Polly mused.

"Lady, I can afford to be reasonable," Clive shrugged, mimicking a con-man unloading a "bargain", "when I'm on to a sure thing."

The laughter lasted a while longer, and then the party broke up and everyone went home. Bill Canning walked with Polly and Portland as far as the Munros', and that was decent of him because he had a bike. His lodgings were the farthest from the dig, the nearest to the harbour, and although the track was rough he managed to pedal between the potholes and round the bumps, and Polly looked after him thoughtfully as he bounced away in the moonlight. "A bike could be useful," she said.

"I'd rather walk myself," said Portland, "than risk flying, over the handlebars."

No one mentioned Piers Hargraves until Polly was about to lay her head on the pillow, then Portland said suddenly, "I don't think you'll win your bet."

Portland had been in bed for the last five minutes. Polly had just turned out the oil lamp and the acrid smell of fumes lingered. Polly yawned, "I stand to lose a bottle of whisky that's all."

"Not very high stakes," Portland agreed. "Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight," said Polly. She stood to get herself classed as an interfering busybody by Dr. Hargraves, and she was certain he would be ruthless and hurtful with anyone who annoyed him.

When he'd turned down the barbecue invitation she had thought - that's it, I've done all I can to make friends. If he wants to walk alone that is his choice. But now she was committed to trying again to break down his reserve. At least to the stage where he would stop acting as though the rest of them were a sub-culture, speaking a language that wasn't worth learning.

Clive didn't like him. None of them liked him. He was not likeable, and tomorrow she would say to Clive, "You've won, I've decided not to bother."

But she knew she would not. The bet was a joke, but she had manoeuvred herself into this position. The challenge hadn't come from Clive, it had come from herself, and she couldn't understand it. She had a deep reserve of her own, she had never in her life before pushed in where she was not wanted, and yet now she found that she was planning her campaign to establish a relationship with Piers Hargraves as thoroughly as though the stakes of the bet were sky-high...

Next morning as they sat down to breakfast she asked Portland, "Do you know who Dr. Hargraves is billeted with?"

"An Alistair MacLean," said Portland.

"Know anything about him?"

Portland poured two cups of tea from the pot already on the table under a thick knitted cosy, and said she didn't. So when Mrs. Munro brought in the breakfast Polly asked her.

Mrs. Munro knew Alastair MacLean, Mrs. Munro knew everyone on St. Bara, although as the population of the whole island would not have overcrowded a thriving village that wasn't to be wondered at.

Poky explained, "Dr. Hargraves who's staying with Mr. MacLean is rather dour, and we're wondering how they'll get on."

Mrs. Munro gave a dignified chuckle. Well enough, she would attain, as old Alastair was a dour man himself. His neighbours had wondered how it had come about that Alastair was taking in a lodger. It was not for the company, they knew, but like them all she admitted he could be using the money. In the case of herself and her husband of course the company was welcome.

Under prompting she went on to tell them Alastair MacLean had been an engineer, building bridges, travelling all over the world, but when he retired he had come back to this island where he was born and where his spinster sister still lived. That was about five years ago and it was tragic that Elspeth had died last year. Alastair fended for himself now, and filled his time walking, tending his garden, reading.

He was a well read man, quite the scholar, an authority on the myths and legends of the isles. Folk tales that had been handed down through the centuries.

"He's a writer?" Polly asked, but Mrs. Munro shook her head.

"No - well, not a book writer, but he has notebooks full of them. It started when he was young and far away and he had the homesickness and he started jotting them down. Since he's retired he's built up his collection."

"He'd be interesting to talk to," said Polly, and Mrs. Munro agreed, but explained that Alastair was not a man to welcome callers to his home unless he had invited them.

"If you like," she offered, "I'll mention that you would like to hear the stories when I take the eggs."

"Thank you." Polly had read some of the legends of St. Bara when she knew she was coming here, and she would certainly like to hear more. "When do you deliver the eggs ?"

"Some time over the weekend."

"Don't let Dr. Hargraves hear you," Portland smiled. "If he suspects that his host is issuing general invitations he could discourage it. He doesn't like company at all."

Mrs. Munro was uncertain whether this was a joke. She said, "But surely he wouldn't object to Miss Blair- "

"Oh, particularly to Miss Blair." Portland's eyes twinkled while Mrs. Munro looked from one of her guests to the other and Polly said:

"I suppose he might. Unless - Mrs. Munro, would you let me take the eggs ?" Mrs. Munro could think of no reason why not.

"Do you know where Alastair lives ?" she asked.

"I was shown coming along on the bus. I can deliver the eggs on Sunday morning."

When Mrs. Munro had left them Portland said, "It would be worth coming with you to see Hargraves' face if he opens the door in his dressing gown on Sunday morning and finds you delivering the eggs."

"Do you think he'll answer the door ?"

"No. So the idea is you chat up Alastair and Alastair asks you in."

Polly, who had finished her porridge, buttered her toast and decapitated her egg and said gravely, "The more we learn of local

legends the better." That was true. One of the ways history filtered down was through memory entering the realms of legend.

"Oh, I do agree," said Portland. "But I still can't see you winning that bet."

The Munros' grey-muzzled old dog walked to the dig with them and ambled home again when they started work. They continued stripping the turf from the grids of the great hall area so that on Monday - today was Friday - they could start digging in four-foot-wide trenches running at various angles to pick up the best possible over-all linking.

They worked hard and happily together. Ewan and Jack, down in the ditch, were very much part of the general operation, although they had to shout their share of the conversation.

Hargraves never raised his voice. His talk was confined to the job in hand, and at lunchtime, as yesterday, he stayed where he was.

Polly went down and asked him, "Aren't you coming?"

"I've brought some lunch with me."

"Why don't you eat it on the beach?"

"Because I prefer not to. Do you mind?" This time there was definite asperity in his voice and she said:

"Please yourself," conscious that she was being watched, all of them following her lack of progress towards winning her bet.

When she joined Clive he put an arm around her and grinned, "Carry on like this, sweetheart, and you'll give him a persecution complex!"

"Civility costs nothing," she chanted. She had been snubbed again. It didn't hurt, except her pride. The only rejections that can strike at the heart are from those who matter to you. But although her smile was bright she felt cold in the sunshine, as though this rejection did matter, and she talked very gaily all the way down to the inn.

She didn't try to talk to Hargraves again. There was so much to do that every minute was filled anyway, and by six o'clock they were all weary.

No one suggested a barbecue tonight, and Portland and Polly promised themselves an evening with their feet up in the comfort of the Munros' small parlour. The students and Clive and Lewis would probably use the club room in the pub, but Polly didn't feel much like dancing. She was young and strong, but eight hours' hard physical labour in bracing air had taken its toll on all of them.

After the evening meal Mr. Munro put a match to the fire, which was not strictly necessary but warming and welcome, and Portland fell asleep in an armchair while Polly read a book with the old dog sprawled at her feet.

They didn't work on Sundays. That was one day a week set aside for relaxation. Sunday afternoon Polly and Clive would be looking for a cove where they could sunbathe and swim, and get away from the colleagues they liked immensely for a few blissful hours, although Polly would not be surprised if Elsa tracked them down. On an island this size she probably could if she searched hard enough.

Saturday saw the end of the turf stripping and the erection of the fencing to keep out straying animals. The area of the great hall looked stark and barren when they left it. Saturday evening they gathered together in the clubroom, everyone but Hargraves. No one looked for him, no one missed him. Tonight Polly didn't say it was a pity he wasn't here, but once or twice he came into her mind in a nagging

fashion that made her impatient with herself. Why should she wonder what he was doing? It was absolutely no concern of hers.

Clive walked back to the Munros' with her, Portland and Bill striding on ahead, and again it was a lovely night with a cool wind. Clive's arm around Polly kept her warm and when they passed the spot where she had looked down and seen Hargraves at the sea's edge she looked again. She hadn't meant to. She had been smiling up at Clive, listening to what he was saying, but she turned her head now and looked down at the lonely beach and the wide dark waters. There was no one there, no figure in the moonlight, only the shapes and shadows of rocks, and Clive tightened his arm around her shoulders and said, "Hey!"

She turned to him again. "What?"

He teased, "Look at me when I'm talking to you."

She wrinkled her nose, "Yes, *sir*," and they walked on together very close, so that it seemed impossible that anyone or anything could come between them.

On Sunday morning Mrs. Munro asked, "Do you still want to take the eggs round?"

"Yes, please," said Polly promptly.

"I go on the bike," Mrs. Munro explained, "but I don't know how you'd feel about that."

"I would love to borrow your bike some time," said Polly, "but I don't think I'd better use it for delivering eggs."

So she walked. It wasn't far, she enjoyed the walk, stopping to chat to a couple of boys who were rounding up sheep with the help of a dog,

and a sheep who thought she was a dog because she had been bottle-fed in the house and had become a family pet.

Alastair MacLean answered the door to Polly's knock, a big man with a craggy face and a thatch of grey hair. She said, "I've brought the eggs from Mrs. Munro," offering him the basket, and a rise of grizzled eyebrows was his only sign of surprise. Then he said:

"Wait there, lassie, I'll give you the bag back."

"Mr. MacLean," she caught him before he could turn away and she went on quickly, "Mrs. Munro told me you're an authority on local legends. I wonder, some time, please could I talk to you?"

Alastair MacLean had a collector's delight in his subject. He asked the girl in while he emptied the eggs out of Maggie Munro's basket, and Polly loved the language of legends. She was an enthralled audience with a quick receptive mind, and she could have listened to Alastair MacLean for hours, describing the selkie folk, who were seals in the sea and human beings on land, and the fin people who lived in a jewelled city far below the waves. The trows and the hogboons, the giants and the witches, the ghosts and the sea-monsters.

When Piers Hargraves came into the house she jumped almost guiltily and her "Hello" was jerky. He must have been out walking; the dogs came in with him and across to Polly. She got a welcome from them but not from Hargraves, who asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I brought Mr. MacLean's eggs."

That seemed enough explanation for him, although she had been about to add that she had come to ask Mr. MacLean about the legends.

Hargraves went through the living room towards the staircase, and Polly said to his retreating figure, "We're going swimming this afternoon. Why don't you come ?"

She and Clive were going swimming. What would she do if he said, "All right" ? But he said, "I don't swim."

"Now's your chance to learn," she said lightly, and he turned at the bottom of the stairs and looked at her as though she was out of her mind. "You miss a lot of fun," she said lamely.

"Do I?" He went on up the stairs and she thanked Alastair MacLean and he said she could consult his notebooks whenever she needed them.

Clive collected Polly after lunch, and they tried to follow Mrs. Munro's direction to a cove that was sheltered from the wind and was good for swimming and off the beaten track. But with no signposts, and no one around to help when they lost their way, they settled for the nicest spot they could find after an hour or so of walking.

It was as near perfect as made no matter. The sun shone and the water was warm. They swam out to a fiat-topped rock. Clive clambered on to it, then reached to haul up Polly and they lay, side by side, luxuriating in lazy well-being, watching the seagulls and a little red and white plane that looked no bigger than a bird.

Polly rolled over so that the sun caressed her shoulder blades, and rested her chin on the edge of the rock looking down into the green waters. "What can you see ?" Clive asked her.

"A selkie," she told him.

"A what?"

"A seal maiden. Haven't you ever seen a seal maiden?"

"Nope," said Clive. He looked admiringly at her, with her brown hair sleek and wet, and her skin smooth and shining. "Unless you're one."

"I wouldn't mind being a selkie on a day like this." She trailed a strand of seaweed in the water. "I wonder what the others are doing."

"Who cares?" Clive closed his eyes, arms folded behind his head, "Although I did promise we'd join them in the clubroom this evening."

"Oh!" Polly could guess who had made that request and a little chill of disappointment brushed her. She had thought they might spend the evening in the Munros' parlour. Portland had tact enough to accept the Munros' invitation to share their radio and company in the big comfortable kitchen. Polly had hoped for tea at the Munros' - Mrs. Munro had said that Clive would be welcome - and then a few more quiet hours for herself and Clive.

This was the first time Polly and Clive had ever been quite alone with no other human soul as far as the eye could see. Clive was usually surrounded by crowds, he liked crowds. This afternoon had been good, but even with Polly beside him solitude was beginning to pall. He was an extrovert who needed the stimulus of a bigger audience. He raised himself on an elbow now and said, "Race you to the shore."

"Of course you will," said Polly, and she slipped into the water and was away with a neat quick crawl.

Of course Clive raced her, he was a much stronger swimmer, and she soon lost the advantage of getting away first. But the distance to the beach was short and she ran out of the sea on to the shingle close behind him.

She towelled herself dry behind a handy rock, changed from her swimsuit into her clothes, and they sat a little while longer, talking, before they headed for their lodgings again. They found their way back to the Munros' without any trouble and Clive stayed for tea.

Polly didn't go to the clubroom with him. She decided to write some letters and wash her hair, and they said an affectionate goodnight, then she spent her evening in the parlour with Portland, drying her hair in front of the fire, writing in some detail to her parents, and dashing off notes to friends on a scribbling pad.

In none of her letters did she mention Hargraves. She wrote about old Alastair MacLean, about delivering the eggs, even some of the tales of the Isles. But she didn't realise until she was glancing through the letters, folding them and slipping them into envelopes, that almost everyone's name was here but Hargraves'. She hadn't even said that Mr. MacLean was his landlord.

When she had returned from delivering the eggs Portland had asked her if she'd seen Hargraves and she had said, "Just for a moment. He walked through the room." She hadn't told Portland, "I asked him to come swimming, I offered to teach him to swim." That had been a crazy suggestion. No man was less likely to make a willing spectacle of himself, and learning to swim was an undignified exercise. Dr. Hargraves wouldn't be swimming, but she hadn't mentioned that to Portland or Clive, or in her letter home that she was now sealing down. It was almost as though she was shying away from talking about him or thinking about him, but next time she wrote - the post arrived and was taken off the island twice a week by the ferry - she must make some reference to him, or her mother's curiosity would be piqued by the omission.

"You cjpnt say how you're getting along with Dr. Hargraves," her mother would write. "The others all sound very pleasant and friendly, but you don't say anything about him."

Because there was nothing to say, that was why. Polly knew nothing about him, except that he was self-sufficient and needed nobody, and that she had named the only Watcher that stood alone after him.

She and Portland passed the Watcher twice a day, going and coming from the dig. Portland usually saluted it and smiled, and it was a joke that Polly called it Piers, but each time Polly's smile was forced.

At work the trenches were marked out across the grids, Polly with the help of Christine was working in grid one, on a diagonal trench, sifting through the top soil to the depth of soil and pebbles where bones and pottery might be found. She was busy, they were all busy, she had no dealings with Hargraves and she kept away from him.

He and Ewan and Jack had cleared a section of the ditch and outer bank and were beginning to cut into the bank. At midday Jack and Ewan joined the rest for lunch; Hargraves ate alone if he ate at all. In the evening most of them met in the clubroom. He did not and no one asked him to.

It was Wednesday afternoon when Jack shouted, "Hey, Polly!" Polly was at the point in her trench farthest from the remains of the wall facing the sea.

"What is it?" she yelled back.

"Here a minute." When she got to her feet and went across to look she saw that he was holding a seagull and she hurried down to him. The bird was a sorry sight, it must have landed in an oil slick.

"I found it on the beach," said Jack. "I think it's a gonner. Can you do anything?"

It was alive, its heart beat wildly with terror and exhaustion. "I can try." She took it from him and carried it to the inn, talking softly and reassuringly, the way her father did with anything that was afraid.

The landlord's wife brought warm water and a mild detergent, and a few drops of brandy to be administered with an eye- dropper, and Polly worked gently, bathing away the thick viscous matter that clogged the delicate feathers.

The seagull weathered its ordeal. It was still alive when the last black globlet was drawn from its breast, and Polly took it back to the beach and left it in the sunshine. She had oil on her sweater which could well be a write-off, but she was beaming triumphantly as she reached Jack and Ewan. "I'm glad you spotted it," she said. "There aren't any more, are there ?"

"No," they told her. And no signs of oil on the beach either. This must have been an unlucky bird who had had a lucky escape.

"He's got a tale to tell," said Polly. "He's tasted brandy."

She passed Hargraves as she climbed up to the mound of the castle and he asked, "Do you make a habit of this kind of thing?"

Wasting nearly an hour cleaning up a seagull when the sky was full of them, was that what he meant? She said "Yes," and glared at him. "I suppose you'd have left the poor thing to die."

He spoke very quietly. "Why should you think that?" and blinding insight pierced her and she said, huskily and humbly:

"I don't. I know that you wouldn't."

Down on the beach the bird was spreading its wings to the sunshine, trying out a few tentative hops, then a brief flutter and fall, and finally rising higher, right over their heads, up into the blue sky.

Polly followed its course, and turned to meet Hargraves' eyes as he too watched the wheeling flight of the seagull. He smiled at her and her heart lifted, high as a soaring bird, and the sun was so bright that even with her hand shielding her eyes it dazzled her.

CHAPTER THREE

"And about time!" Clive greeted Polly with mock severity as she clambered up the hillside back to the dig on the mound.

"Don't nag." She grimaced at him. "Tell you what, I'll work overtime."

"Good idea," he said.

She rejoined Christine in grid one. "You made a mess of your sweater," said Christine, who was a tidy girl and did her digging in gloves. Polly had to agree, but the seagull had flown again, and she settled down to work feeling quite idiotically happy.

Dr. Hargraves was human. He had smiled. Not that Clive or Portland would have agreed that that proved anything. Smiles were easy to come by, if Polly looked across at any of them now, working up here with her, they would smile back. But Hargraves was different. That smile had been a break in his defences, the first fleeting moment of contact.

He was glad the bird flew again. He would not have left a bird to die. She knew that much about him now, and it was more than the others knew.

She went on sifting the earth, the warm sun on her head and her hands. No one could know yet what they were going to find beneath the surface, nor how deep they must go. This was her voyage she was on, this earth, that man...

Beside her Christine was chattering and Polly nodded, only catching a word or two, more concerned with what she was thinking than hearing. Maybe it wasn't a good comparison. Clive wouldn't care to hear she was beginning to find Piers Hargraves almost as challenging

as the dig, that she was wondering about the secret man as much as she wondered about the secrets beneath this mound.

She made herself stop dreaming, listen to Christine, join in the talking. But when they finished work for the day and Clive said, "See you later," Polly hedged:

"I'll see how I feel after Mrs. Munro's suet pudding. It could lay me out for the evening."

Clive laughed. "Shall I come and fetch you ?"

"No," she said. "If I don't turn up I'm resting my bones in the parlour."

The suet pudding Mrs. Munro had promised that morning was delicious at their evening meal, and Polly had slandered the cook by suggesting it might be so heavy that it would immobilise her. When dinner was over Portland settled down with a book and Polly said, "Coming, Bess?" to the old dog who usually walked to the clubroom with her in the evenings.

Portland was staying home as often as not these nights. Last night she had gone along, tonight she kicked off her shoes and put up her feet and opened her book. "Give 'em my love," she said, sinking back comfortably.

But this evening Polly took another path. She told herself she felt like a walk, she wouldn't make for the pub and the clubroom after all. With Bess at her heels she walked around the single Watcher, then looped back again, heading towards Bill Canning's digs, towards the harbour, towards the scab grey house where Mr. MacLean had told her she could consult his files on the myths and legends, and where Piers Hargraves was living.

She was going to the grey house. Playing a game of indecision it had taken her nearly half an hour instead of ten minutes, but as she walked up to the door she admitted to herself that she had been coming here all along - ever since Hargraves had smiled this afternoon. This evening she might get a few words out of him, and then she could say, "Why don't you join the rest of us after work sometimes?" There was nothing personal about it. She wasn't personally involved, but it was uncomfortable when one member of a team stayed aloof.

Old Alastair opened the door and Polly said, "Good evening, you did say I could look at your files, didn't you? Would it be all right now?"

If it wasn't convenient she would come back when he told her, but he said, "Come in, lassie. Hello, Bess."

Bess followed Polly in; the two household dogs were close behind Alastair, but they knew Bess and they knew Polly and they allowed all three to pass.

The room was more or less as it had been on Sunday morning, except for a chessboard laid out on the table. It was a homely room with the touch of Mr. MacLean's sister Elspeth, who had died a year ago, lingered in the neat floral pattern of the wallpaper, the patchwork cushions and the hand-made rugs, but there was no cloth on the table and the polish had faded from the furniture.

The notebooks and files were in a small bureau desk under the window, which MacLean opened now. The staircase ran down the opposite wall, and there was a door which probably led into a kitchen. This was the living room, and although Hargraves had a sitting room of his own it looked as though someone was coming in here to play chess.

Polly's excuse for arriving was almost genuine. She would have returned to read these notebooks without any ulterior motive because

the subject fascinated her. She sat down at the desk now and was soon immersed in her study.

Alastair MacLean went into the kitchen; she heard a clattering of pans and dishes, and helped herself to a sheet of paper and the loan of a pencil from the desk, and was jotting down a list of "cures" when he returned. She said, "I took a piece of paper, is that all right ? I'll bring a notebook next time."

"I reckon I can spare you a sheet of paper." He sank into a wooden armchair by the fireplace, and she thanked him, remarking:

"That's a lovely chess set."

She hadn't dared to touch the pieces in case she spoiled the game, but they were beautifully carved and they looked like ivory, and Alastair MacLean eyed them proudly.

"Aye," he said, "I've had that since I was a lad. Would you be a player yourself?"

"I'm afraid not."

"The doctor's a grand player."

"Does he often win ?"

"Always. I'm little match for him."

So that was one thing Piers Hargraves did with his evenings, played chess, although it would have been kind to let old Alastair win occasionally. "Doesn't it spoil the game," Polly asked, "if you always know who's going to win ?"

Alastair chuckled. Mrs. Munro had said he was dour, but Polly was finding him very likeable. "One of these days maybe I'll surprise

him." His eyes gleamed, anticipating his triumph, and Polly realised that he was too shrewd to be humoured by an easy victory, he'd see through it, but when he did win fairly he would really enjoy that.

"Good luck," she said.

"And to you, lassie."

She smiled; she was born lucky, and a girl who had Clive shouldn't ask for anything more. A door opened and closed above them and Hargraves came down the stairs. He saw Bess, then Polly, and said, "Good evening."

"Hello." She had a pencil in her hand, paper before her, and a file open at her elbow, so it was hardly necessary to explain, "I'm taking some notes."

His glance took in the chessboard and she suspected he was wondering if she would be prattling on all the time she was here. She added gravely, "I don't play, but I do know you need quiet for the game." Then she turned back to her list and wrote, "For arthritis stinging nettles boiled and eaten, also the water to be drunk."

It was a quiet scene. The men moved their chess pieces, old Alastair puffed on his pipe, the dogs slept for the most part, and Polly proceeded to read and to copy.

Several times she was tempted to ask Alastair MacLean to explain a passage or give her more information when his notes were too brief to convey much. But when she looked over her shoulder her courage failed.

Foiled by a chessboard - that would amuse Portland, and Clive and all of them. She hadn't expected a long and lively conversation, but she had hoped for a few words. Now she had to sit silent or she would

break the concentration, and she might never be allowed inside Alastair MacLean's house again because this could be the game he was all set to win.

When the light began to fade Maclean lit a couple of lamps, put one on the table and one in the window beside Polly. This had to be half-time, the natural break, she could surely relax now and venture a remark.

"How's the game going?" she asked. But his mouth turned down, he wasn't winning, and she hastily changed the subject, querying the spelling of a name where his writing wasn't clear.

After he had spelled it out for her she asked Hargraves, "Have you seen these?"

"Some of them."

"I love the hogboons," said Polly. "It must have been such a comfort to have a hogboon around." They were the goblins of the islands, helpful with the chores if you treated them well but crabbity when crossed.

"There's no saying they're not still about," Alastair MacLean joked. "It's no easy matter getting rid of a hogboon."

Polly found the page in the file. "I've just been reading about that." She read it again, aloud. "One housewife who preferred to do her own cleaning and who thought her husband should be dealing with the repair of his farming implements decided they should move and leave their hogboon behind. They bought a croft the other side of the island, and they carted their goods to their new home, but when the cart pulled up in the yard the hogboon jumped out and said, 'It's a fine day we're having for the flitting!'"

"And that's a true story," said old Alastair solemnly.

"Of course it is," said Polly.

Hargraves said, "Shouldn't you be getting back, Miss Blair?"

It was beginning to get dark. In half an hour it would be dark, but she could walk home in the moonlight. "It's the main road," she said. "That track the bus took, I won't get lost."

"Will you take a mug of cocoa before you go?" MacLean offered affably, but before Polly could accept Hargraves said:

"I'll see you back."

That didn't leave her any choice. "Another time for the cocoa, then," said old Alastair, and she thanked him again, and folded her notes and slipped them into her coat pocket.

Outside the house she said, "There's no need to walk with me," but all the dogs were outside by now, tails wagging and raring to go, so he had to walk somewhere with them.

"It's no distance," he said.

Was he seeing her home to make sure she arrived safely, or because he felt she had hung around long enough? Probably the latter, she decided, and she said, "You might have let me have my mug of cocoa."

"Did you want a mug of cocoa?"

"Not particularly, but it was kind of Mr. MacLean to offer me one. Do you have cocoa every night?" She hid a smile because for some reason the idea of Piers Hargraves with a great mug of cocoa seemed comic.

"He does," he said drily. "I can't stand the stuff."

"That follows," she said. No one that thin could be a cocoa addict.

He didn't ask why it followed and they reached the track, walking together but not close together. Dusk was on them and the track was uneven and it would have been the easiest thing to stumble accidentally. If she had lurched against anyone else Polly would have said cheerfully, "Whoops, sorry," but she was not risking falling into Dr. Hargraves' arms. If she did so she would be embarrassed, she knew that. She would prefer to fall flat on her face. So she stepped carefully and kept space between them.

The half light made the island a place of shadows, and Polly could understand how legends had grown around it. Right now this could be the loneliest place in the world or it could be teeming with invisible life. It was both frightening and beautiful. She said, "It's beautiful, isn't it, the island?"

"Very," he said.

"Have you seen it all?"

She hadn't explored it yet. She had spent her evenings with the others, there had only been last Sunday when she and Clive had found that little cove. "No," he said.

She gave him a few moments in case he had anything to add to that, but it seemed he hadn't. It might be possible to get used to this laconic style of speech. He wasn't snapping, he just never wasted a word, whereas Polly had started talking before her first birthday and chattered happily ever since.

She found the silence now so disconcerting that she had to say something. "I've been offered the loan of a bike," she told him. "By

my landlady. It's a sit-up-and-beg model, but she delivers the eggs and gets down to the harbour shop on it. Bill manages a bike too."

"Good lord," said Hargraves.

So he had never noticed Bill coming or going on his bike. She asked, "You don't ride a bike ?"

"No." Of course not. She said lightly:

"You don't ride a bike, you don't swim. What kind of boy were you?"

"No kind at all," he said. She hadn't expected an answer, but was that an answer? She gave a slight shrug, a small shake of the head. He was the same age as Clive, with none of Clive's youthful spirit, and she admitted:

"I can't imagine you as a child."

He had been walking fairly fast, but now he stopped and looked at her. "I can see you," he said. His unsmiling scrutiny was disturbing. She could feel him looking at her as though he touched her hair, her cheek, and put light fingertips on her mouth. It was the night wind blowing her hair across her face, but it made a pulse catch in her throat. She raised her hand to hold back her hair and her voice was breathless.

"You lived in Yorkshire when you were a boy, didn't you ? Do you still live there?" Where Portland had said his father was a power in the land, but his father was dead now.

"No," he said, and some impulse or instinct urged her to stretch out her hands and grip his hands. She didn't. "Hold my hand," was an impossible thing to say by word or action, she couldn't imagine what had possessed her. They began to walk again and for the next few

minutes neither spoke except to call to the dogs, then Hargraves said, "Goodnight," and Polly said, "See you tomorrow," when they reached the gate of the Munros' cottage.

He walked back over the rough land towards the track and Polly watched him. Bess had padded through the open gate; there was nothing to stop Polly following the dog, but she stood where she was and saw the man's tall figure reach the track.

Then he turned, and when he saw her he raised a hand. She waved back, and smiled although he wouldn't be able to see her smile in the fading light. Then she hurried after Bess, not stopping to analyse why it had seemed important that if he looked back she should be there.

"You're back early," said Portland.

"I didn't go to the pub,"

Portland put down her book to ask: "Then where did you go?"

"To Mr. MacLean's, I've been taking notes from his notes." Polly produced the sheets of paper from her pocket. "These will interest you. The Norse influence is very marked."

"I'll read them," Portland promised. "Was Hargraves there?"

"Mmm."

"Any progress?"

"About a dozen words all told."

"You're a tryer," said Portland. "But you're going to lose your bet."

Polly said brightly, "That is more than likely." She sat down and yawned. "I'm tired, I think I'll have an early night. Is that a good

book?" She didn't want to talk about Piers Hargraves. She would talk about anyone or anything else, but not about him...

The first find of the dig was made next morning. Lewis Kent who was working on a trench in a central grid bellowed: "Hello- ello, what have we here?" and everyone rushed to see. It was an Anglo-Saxon coin, that could have been Viking loot, and everyone was delighted.

Jack and Ewan came scrambling up from the ditch and joined in the general glee, but Hargraves didn't come running. He was in the geology hut and when his assistants told him what it was all about he said quietly, "Excellent."

"What did he have to say?" Polly asked as they passed her returning to their work, and got her answer when Ewan grimaced and said:

"I'd like to see what it would take to get him cheering."

But for the rest there was plenty of excitement. Before the excavations had started Clive had arranged television coverage. As soon as he gave the word an outside broadcast unit would be along. Now Clive felt that a day could be fixed, and he fixed the following Monday.

When he came back from making the phone call he told them, "That gives us three clear days. If we slog at it we're bound to make a few finds so that we've got something for the cameras, something to talk about."

The students were thrilled, none of them had been on television before. Portland and Bill and Lewis, more experienced, were less impressed, but everyone was prepared to put on as good a show as possible and work at full stretch, coming early, eating their midday meal on the site, staying until dusk fell.

Even so, with the best will in the world, there were not enough diggers up here to cover all the grids in the great hall. "We could do with Ewan and Jack," Clive mused. He grinned at Polly, "Come on, my sweet, use your influence on him."

He meant on Piers Hargraves and she protested, "I don't have any influence."

"You don't?" Clive pretended to be surprised. "Hasn't he mellowed yet ? I expected him to be putty by now."

He was teasing and something in her shrank from the banter, but she answered flippantly, "Not so that you'd notice or I should have won my bet, shouldn't I? And why do you need anyone to use their influence, you're the director?"

"Not with that one," said Clive. "Coming?"

"All right," she agreed reluctantly, and they went down to where Ewan and Jack and Hargraves were working. They all knew that Clive had fixed the visit of the TV team and he said as he reached them, "I've decided to concentrate on the area of the great hall on Monday. How about leaving things down here and all working on the dun until then ?"

Ewan and Jack were willing, until Hargraves said, "I prefer to carry on here."

Clive gave him a look of open dislike. "Yes," he said, "I thought you would." He turned to Ewan and Jack. "How about it, fellers? It's up to you. How about a change of scenery?" He was giving them the choice and they shifted uncomfortably because Clive was their friend as well as their tutor and the director of the dig, but they had been assigned to the bank and ditch all along and it was getting progressively more interesting.

Besides, neither of them wanted to desert Dr. Hargraves, he might not have them back, and although they would have strongly denied that they stood in awe of him they had both developed a respect for him. He was nobody's mate, he was a loner, but he knew the lot. In a way they were enjoying working under his supervision.

Jack said at last, "Sorry, Clive, but I would rather stick with what we're doing. Anyhow, won't they want to see the bank and ditch ? Isn't it all part of the same operation ?"

"Sure," said Clive expansively, looking at Hargraves, then giving Jack and Ewan an understanding grin, "I get the picture."

Polly hesitated as he retraced his steps. Hargraves had every right to refuse to shelve his own project, but she wished he hadn't. It would have been pleasanter all round if he had cooperated with Clive over the TV programme, but now she had to accept that Hargraves and Clive would never work in harmony. The best she could hope was that their antagonism would not flare into open conflict. In a battle of wills it would hurt her to see either man the loser.

She said wistfully, "Well, I hope you unearth something smashing before the cameras arrive."

"We'll do our best," said Hargraves. Jack and Ewan grinned and she thought - if those two weren't here I'd ask you to reconsider. It seems such a little thing, why must you make Clive dislike you more than he does now ?

But she had no chance to ask that question, no chance to talk to him at all. There was no leisure for anyone in the three days that followed. They worked early and late and got home grimy and bone-weary.

There were more finds. From the ditch an iron pot that had once been a cooking utensil, and bones of small animals that had served a food,

kitchen debris thrown from the castle. From the trenches in the great hall some pieces of pottery, that hadn't been cleaned yet but which gave every appearance of dating from the Middle Ages and the remains of a leathern bucket. The leather had disintegrated, but the shape of it was there in the soil, and the bronze studs had survived in their original positions. It was not a spectacular haul but it was a beginning, a promise, Clive was satisfied with their progress so far.

He walked back to her lodgings with Polly, from the dig site *

on Sunday evening. "After tomorrow," she said, "when we're working reasonable hours again I won't know what to do with all my spare time."

"You've been a marvel," he told her. He looked back at Bill and Portland, who were following wearily behind. "Everybody's been marvellous."

"Haven't we just?" Polly agreed. "I hope the TV team appreciates what a lovely lot we are."

"You'll like them," Clive assured her. He had worked with them, although they were not the team that came to Polly's museum twelve months ago when she met Clive for the first time.

She remembered that day again now. "Last time," she said nostalgically, "I had a script of sorts. It won't be so easy answering questions off the cuff."

"You'll be all right." She wasn't worried, she expected it to be fun. "I'll see you are," Clive promised. "I've told you they're all mates of mine." He laughed softly, "And I've warned Alex what he's up against with Hargraves."

That was reasonable,-interviewing Piers Hargraves would be a tough task. "Will he agree to be interviewed?" Polly wondered. "He's never given a television interview before, has he ?"

Everyone seemed to know that, but Clive laughed again.

"No, he hasn't. He's pretty pathological about it, but he'll go on film this time. Scowling at the cameras, I hope. I want that on record."

"Whatever for?"

"So that if he should cause trouble over the grant some time there's proof that he had no enthusiasm for the project from the beginning."

Not Clive's kind of enthusiasm, certainly, but Polly protested, "I don't agree. If he didn't hope for results he wouldn't be here, and he's working as hard as anyone."

"Then he'd better get off that damned high horse and meet Alex more than half way," Clive snapped. "Alex knows what I think of him."

Piers Hargraves was hardly a natural for television with his withdrawn personality, but Clive had obviously given his friend the kind of briefing that must bias any reporter. "What did you ask them to do?" Polly demanded hotly. "Feature him as the Monster of the Isles ?"

Clive chortled, "Well, isn't he ?" Her indignation amused him. Polly was pretty when she was angry, and he was too conceited to see any danger in her championship of Hargraves. Polly always championed the underdog. He said cheerfully, "For my money they can flay him alive and give it national coverage."

They reached the gate of the Munros' cottage by now and as Polly gasped he kissed her goodnight. But it was not the familiar pressure

of his arms around her and his lips on hers that stopped her protests but the fact that Portland had caught up with them.

"Both of you get your beauty sleep for tomorrow," said Clive, smiling as he released Polly, and she looked balefully at him for a moment before she said anything. Then it was a sharp "Goodnight" as she walked through the gate with Portland, who was too tired to comment on Polly's brusqueness or even to notice it.

Polly was shocked. This was not fair tactics, this was mean and underhand. She was deeply disturbed and her disquiet prevented quiet slumbers. She tossed and turned and was faced with the problem again the moment she woke. But she said nothing about it to Portland.

This morning they rushed through breakfast and hurried to the dig, arriving even earlier than yesterday to find the TV unit there already. A launch had landed personnel and equipment, and four men and a girl were in the area of the great hall meeting the dig team.

Clive was doing the introducing, and he gathered in Polly and Portland. It was very friendly and familiar, all first names: the reporter was Alex, the two photographers were Fergus and Dave, the sound engineer was Malcolm, and the beautiful girl with long red hair and large sunglasses who was carrying a clipboard was Louise.

Clive was an expert in television technique and as he strolled around with the TV team, discussing the format of the interviews, the positioning of the camera, the subjects for filming, Polly made up her mind to act. She had been wondering what she should do ever since last night. Now she went down the bank to Hargraves, and Jack and Ewan, and said without preamble,

"Dr. Hargraves, please, I want to talk to you."

Jack and Ewan moved away, obviously intrigued, and Polly went on quickly, "This may sound dotty, but the reporter is a friend of Clive's and Clive was rather annoyed that you wouldn't fall in with his suggestion about all of us concentrating on the great hall and the reporter is expecting you to be unco-operative." She drew breath. "To say the least," she said.

"Thank you," said Hargraves. She gave him a half smile, and a wider grin for Jack and Ewan, openly curious as she passed them. "Mind your own business," she told them sweetly, hurrying back up the bank to her trench in grid one, reasonably sure that Hargraves could take care of himself now that he was prepared for prejudice.

Alexander Fergusson, a cheerful lanky young man, chatted up everyone and everywhere met bubbling enthusiasm, especially from the students. Getting the film and the recording seemed very casual and informal, and took most of the day, although it would be edited into a ten-minute regional transmission, going out nationwide later if real finds were made.

The interview with Clive was the pivot of the programme. Fergusson introduced Clive - most of the viewers would know him already, as he was an international TV personality - and asked, "What are you hoping to find here, Professor?"

Clive talked to the camera, he knew his best angles for photography, and he delivered his message with no hesitation, lapping up the limelight. "This" - the area around him, with its checkerboard grids and criss-cross of trenches - "was once the hall of a great castle. We believe that the men who lived here were Norsemen, Vikings, who sailed their long boats around the coasts of Scotland plundering and murdering."

The coastline was behind him and Polly almost expected to see a long boat sail into view. "But here," said Clive, slowly and impressively,

"they stayed. They built their castle." He gestured high walls, a mighty building rising. "Here I hope to find proof of that Norse occupation, and perhaps something more. I am particularly interested in one man, their chieftain, the man who was king here. I'd like to know his name, and we could find that in a Runic inscription. I'd like to handle articles that were once his personal belongings and equipment."

"Such as?" the reporter prompted, but he need not have prompted, Clive was going to tell him.

"Such as the remains of the great shield he carried, the shield boss perhaps, a sword pommel, maybe an axe head or a helmet. And the long boat that carried him to this island would have been brought ashore when they settled here. Something could still remain where that lies. Then there could be treasure." Clive had saved the best till last. "Stolen from the monasteries, because these men were pirates, marauders, conquerors wherever they came."

He was not unlike an idealised version of a Viking himself, standing tall and broad-shouldered and strong, with the sea as his background, his eyes blue, his hair glinting fair. When he threw his head back it was obvious that he was feeling an affinity with the Viking chieftain, and Polly noticed that Louise was looking at him with as much appreciation as Elsa and Christine and Joan.

The camera stopped turning and Alex said, "That's good. Looking for the head man. The personal touch, I like that."

"You were fantastic," cooed Louise effusively, and Clive beamed on her. "What's the Runic for Clive?" she gurgled. "He might have been an ancestor of yours."

"Then you should be taking to the hills." Clive picked her up and held her high. "The Vikings were always on the lookout for gorgeous girls."

Louise pealed with laughter and Portland said quietly to Polly, "Our Clive's a born showman."

A born show-off, thought Polly, surprising herself. It had never bothered her before that girls flirted with Clive. Louise was very attractive, but so was Elsa, and anyhow it wasn't jealousy that was making Polly critical. Suddenly Clive seemed a shade too boisterous, too pleased with himself, amusing but immature. She saw Hargraves come out of the geology hut and walk down towards the ditch, and wondered if he had seen the performance and what he had thought of it.

There was little excavation done on the mound that day, except for the benefit of the camera. It was more of a holiday, and when the TV team went down into the bank and ditch area most-ef the dig team went too.

Again Clive made the introductions. It was, "You met Ewan and Jack at lunch time, didn't you?" then the affability left his voice. "Now," he said, "you can meet Dr. Piers Hargraves."

Fergusson eyed Hargraves warily as they shook hands, and said he was delighted to meet him. Then he asked the question that had opened his interview with Clive, "What are you hoping to find here?"

Hargraves looked at Jack, giving him the chance to answer. "Throw-out stuff," said Jack promptly. "Drift down from the castle. The kind of junk people have always thrown into ditches. You can learn a lot from ditches."

Jack and Ewan contributed most to the interview, but there was no lack of courtesy on Hargraves' part. When he was asked he pointed out the different strata in the cutting in the bank, his voice dry, incisive. It was too technical to be entertaining, there was no showmanship here, but Fergusson had no doubt that there was a man who knew his subject.

They had taken photographs of the Stones, of course, and Dr. Hargraves was a geologist and Fergusson asked, "Can you throw any light on these mysterious Watchers, doctor?"

"None," said Hargraves blandly, "except that they are monolithic structures of igneous rock, not native to what appears to be the main stratification of the island."

"Er - yes, indeed," said Fergusson heartily. "Well, thank you very much, doctor. That is most interesting."

The bank and ditch were the last shots by daylight. The cameramen were hoping for a spectacular sunset, and for some moonlight pictures of the mound and the three Watchers that stood near. But the TV team packed up after Fergusson had interviewed Hargraves, and the arrangement was that everyone should eat at the inn, all spending the evening together, the cameramen emerging later to complete their schedule.

No one expected Hargraves to join them. Louise had firmly attached herself to Clive and as they went off towards the inn, arm in arm, talking nineteen to the dozen, Elsa hissed spitefully to Polly, "What about that?"

"What about it?" Polly smiled, refusing to rise to the jibe. It was no effort, she wasn't jealous, everyone was chatting, the new faces were a welcome change and good company.

They went in little groups of twos and threes. But not Hargraves. He said, "That's all for today, gentlemen, thank you," and Jack and Ewan strolled away with Fergusson, questioning him about his work.

Polly stayed where she was, sitting on a rock. No one called to her. If they had she would have called back, "I'll be along." But for the moment no one had noticed that she was staying behind, and then there was only Polly here, and Hargraves.

He asked, "Was that co-operation enough?"

She said gravely, "Very informative, although you did blind him a bit with science." Deliberately, she was sure. No one could complain that Dr. Hargraves had been unhelpful, but he hadn't spoken the language of popular television, and they were unlikely to come back for more.

Polly sat with her hands looped over her knees. "I don't think they'll bother you too much in future," she continued mischievously, "unless you photograph like a dream. You could at that. You could look very distinguished on the telly."

"I shall photograph like a sick horse," he said. "I always do." He was laughing at himself, and he looked younger than she had ever seen him.

"You must meet my father," she said gaily. "He's marvellous with sick horses." She had been joking, but this was true. "He's a very good vet. I'm very proud of him." Piers Hargraves' father might have been rich and powerful, but to Polly's mind she had the best father in the world.

"He must be very proud of you," said Hargraves quietly. The compliment caught her off guard, although she was used to compliments. She blushed as she smiled,

"You know how parents are." Polly was gifted, it would have been hypocritical to pretend she wasn't, and her parents were proud of her. They made much of her small successes because they loved her as she loved them. She said, "Well, wasn't your father proud of you?" Portland had said he had no family now, but his father at least must have shared his triumphs, a double first was an awesome accolade.

"Hardly," he said wryly. "I was the biggest disappointment my father ever had."

But he was a near-genius, everyone said so. He must have been outstanding in any circumstances and at any age. That was sad and strange, it seemed terrible to Polly and she floundered for a reason. "Wouldn't you go into the family business ?" That might have alienated a man with a business empire.

"There wasn't a business. Just property."

"Then why? You don't have a police record or anything, do you?" Of course he didn't or everyone would have known. He sounded amused.

"No, I don't have a police record."

"What *did* he expect from you? How could you have been a disappointment to him ?"

"I managed it. Tell me about your family."

She would if he wanted to hear. She glanced in the direction of the inn and he said, "I'm keeping you from your friends."

"Will you come?" she asked.

"I'd rather not." She didn't want the laughter and the chatter herself tonight, she wanted to go where they could talk alone. She stood up, then stood still until he asked, "Do you have to join them?" She shook

her head. "I - wish you wouldn't." His voice was strained, as though he was asking an immense favour, and she said quickly:

"All right, let's leave them to it." She went as fast as the rough ground would let her, along the ditch, away from the cove of the inn, rounding the mound of the dun. When she turned to see if he was close he was beside her. When he asked:

"Why are you running?" she laughed:

"Because someone might come looking for me."

"Yes, of course he will," he said.

They came up behind the castle mound on to the heathland, out of sight of the inn, and she asked, "Which direction?" She was hungry, she had skimped breakfast, had sandwiches for lunch, and was missing a good buffet at the inn. Mrs. Munro wasn't expecting them, but she would feed them if Polly could persuade Piers to step inside.

"Will you have dinner with me?" he said.

"At your digs?"

"I don't think there is anywhere else I can take you, except the pub."

"Won't Mr. MacLean mind? The invitation was for a mug of cocoa, nothing was said about food."

"He won't mind." He spoke as though her query had been serious, and perhaps it should have been. She said:

"In that case thank you, I'd like that. This is the first time I've been invited out to dinner on St. Bara." Because there was nowhere to go. She had what amounted to a standing date with Clive every evening, but tonight she had run so that Clive shouldn't catch her and take her

to where they were all friends together. She had tried to bring Piers Hargraves into the group too, another member of the team. But a few minutes ago she had run from them all, only glancing back to see if he was with her.

He asked abruptly, "Are you doing this because Rounsley walked away with the script girl?"

"I don't play tricks like that." She had had no thought of making Clive jealous, it had not even been unconscious design, and she looked at him steadily. "You can't have a very high opinion of yourself."

"I know I'm no Viking." Although his face was still and expressionless she glimpsed again the bleakness she had seen that first night on a lonely shore. But now he was no stranger, she could speak, she could touch. She put a hand on his arm and said:

"I'm here because I wanted to talk to you, and for no other reason." An awareness of him was in every nerve of her body, every cell of her brain, crying out - we must know each other, you and I, closer than friendly faces in a crowd.

"I'm glad of that," he said. So was Polly, so glad that it bewildered her. He said, "Tell me something about yourself. Anything."

That was easy. Polly's life was an open book. She talked as they walked, about her parents, her friends, the little town where she lived. "How long have you known Rounsley?" he asked.

"Just over a year," she said, and there were no secrets there either, although they didn't talk any more about Clive.

As they passed three tall Watchers, sheep grazing around them, Polly said, "I wonder what they did look like in the beginning. Do you think they were carved and painted?"

"More than likely, but I'm more interested in the structure of them. They're basalt, volcanic. If there was an upheaval in the formation of this island it could have a volcanic core."

"Are you guessing?"

"There does seem to be a fault."

She turned from looking at the stones to look at him, her dark hair swishing. "That could be exciting. Couldn't it?"

"It could be interesting." To him it was simply a geological problem to be worked out. Clive would make it interesting. Clive would handle it with a fanfare of trumpets because everything was flamboyant that Clive had a hand in.

"Do Jack and Ewan know?" she asked. They hadn't talked about it, and Piers said:

"I don't know for sure myself yet. It's still a theory. I'd rather you didn't discuss it with anyone." He meant with Clive.

"Of course I won't. But if you should find a volcanic layer that will be a few million years farther back than the Vikings."

"A few." Interesting but not exciting. She laughed softly and at his questioning look explained:

"Ewan said he'd like to know what would get you cheering."

"Did he?"

"And don't say I told you that, because both Jack and Ewan are scared of you."

"But that's ridiculous."

"Isn't it?" she said.

Alastair MacLean was in the living room, reading a newspaper a week old, when Piers opened the door and walked in with Polly. He didn't seem displeased to see her, nor particularly surprised. He got up a little stiffly and asked, "Is it business tonight, Miss Blair, or is it a social call?"

"I think it's social," said Polly.

"I've asked Miss Blair to dinner," Piers explained.

"It's pot luck, then," said MacLean, and as Polly tried to apologise for short-rationing somebody he announced solemnly, "No woman about the house doesn't mean no stores in the cupboard."

She wondered if this was reassurance or an old island saying, but he didn't seem put out by his unexpected guest. "I'll show you the sink," he said.

Polly was probably less grubby today than she had ever been coming back from the dig, and she washed at the little hand- pump over the kitchen sink while Piers went into the washroom off the kitchen. Meanwhile MacLean took the lid off a brown earthenware casserole in the oven and emptied in a tin of mushrooms.

The table wasn't laid and Polly asked, "Can I help ?"

"You can bide a mite," said MacLean reprovingly, "and I'll show you the doctor's room." He closed the oven door, and collected knife, fork and spoon from a drawer in the dresser, and a plate from the shelves.

"Doesn't he eat down here ?" Polly asked.

"He has his meal in his room." MacLean sounded as though this routine suited them both. "Then he works. Then, if he's a mind to it, he comes down later. This way, lassie."

It was up the stairs and the second door along. There was a small table laid for one, which MacLean proceeded to lay for two; a much larger table against the wall, carrying papers and a typewriter. There was one easy chair, two straight-backs, a cabin trunk, and a divan bed covered by a green tartan travelling rug.

It had possibly been the room that Alastair MacLean would escape to when sister Elspeth was bustling around in the kitchen downstairs, or polishing the furniture in the living room. There was a bookcase full of books, all engineering manuals except for a few faded novels. The pictures, framed in narrow black frames, were photographs of bridges and dams and construction sites all over the world. In his time old Alastair had travelled far.

Polly was studying the pictures when Piers walked in carrying the tray. As well as the casserole there was bread and cheese, and a bottle of red wine. He put down the tray and picked up the bottle. "With the compliments of the chef," he said.

Polly had thought the offer of a mug of cocoa generous. "I can't understand," she said, "why my landlady thinks he's a dour man."

"Possibly," said Piers, "because he thinks Maggie Munro is a nosey wee body."

They laughed together. Once she had thought he never smiled, and now he laughed. They ate the casserole and drank some of the wine. Polly did most of the talking, but he was talking too. Questions mostly, but he talked. None of them would have believed it, and yet it seemed to her natural and nothing to wonder at.

"None of these books on the shelves are yours, are they?" she asked.

"No," he looked towards the cabin trunk. "My books are in there." When she said:

"May I see?" he opened the lid and she gasped, because it was full of books, no light reading, all books dealing with scientific subjects. And they were in several languages. She opened one, and did a double-take, blinking. "It's true what they're putting around, isn't it ? You have got to be a genius."

"I'm a freak," he said.

She closed the book and put it back, kneeling in front of the trunk. She said lightly, "Your record is a bit formidable, I looked you up before I came here."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'd met the rest, so I knew them, and I wondered about you." He still looked puzzled and she said, "Weren't you curious about any of us ?"

"No. The excavation had official backing, so I knew you'd all be qualified."

"You were going to be stuck with us on this island for at least two months and you didn't even wonder what we'd be like?" He hadn't. She went on, "Well, no one is going to accuse you of being a nosey wee body. Anyhow, Mr. Quinton and I checked you out." She had already told him who Mr. Quinton was. Now she described how her elderly boss's spectacles slid down his nose as he read the list of Dr. Hargraves' qualifications. "And then he said, 'My goodness, girl, it should be an honour working with him'."

It was the truth and it was as though someone else had said "Freak", and she had to make Piers smile and take the sting from it. He did smile. "That was flattering of him."

"That wasn't flattery. He was very impressed and so was I."

She went on talking about the museum, about some of their exhibits. Then she said, "I've been rattling on all evening, let's talk about you."

"There's nothing to talk about. You read the record and that's it."

"That was just degrees you've got, papers you've written. What's your favourite colour ?"

"What's yours?"

"Yellow."

"I don't have a favourite colour."

"And you'd know what your birth sign is, but you'd know it's nonsense?"

"Yes."

She went back to her chair and sat with her elbows on the table, her chin on her clasped hands, play-acting an interrogator. "Where did you go to school ?"

"I had tutors."

"Where do you live?"

"Mostly in hotels, sometimes in an apartment in London. More wine?"

So personal questioning was out. She could answer questions, she had nothing to hide, but she must wait to learn about him. She put fingertips over her wineglass and said, "No more for me, thanks. I need a clear head for walking home or I might trip over a sheep. Would you believe there's a sheep on this island who thinks she's a dog?"

"If you told me," he said, "I might believe it."

They took the rest of the wine down to Alastair MacLean, to insist that he had the last glass, which he did with no urging needed, then Polly went back to her digs. Piers went with her, and the two dogs went with him. The cameramen had their moon if they were still filming the Watchers by night, although it was more likely they had finished and the TV launch had carried them all away.

It was only a short walk and when they reached the white gate Polly said, "Goodnight, and thank you."

On the-surface it had been an unremarkable evening. If the man had been anyone but Piers Hargraves it would have been pleasantly mundane, nothing said or done that would be remembered beyond tomorrow. He took her hand for a moment and said, "Thank you." Then he went, and she stood where she was, until he reached the track again and looked back. She waved a final friendly farewell, and turned to go through the gate, and realised that her hands were trembling and her heart was pounding as though she had just parted from a lover.

CHAPTER FOUR

Portland was not home yet. Polly looked into the kitchen where Mr. Munro was reading a book and his wife was knitting, and Mrs. Munro fixed the lamp for her.

Mrs. Munro had cycled over to the dig during the morning to watch the cameras at work for a while. Several of the islanders had come to see, and now Mrs. Munro was curious to hear who and what everyone was. It seemed a long time ago to Polly, but she talked about the TV unit until the lamp was burning brightly and Mrs. Munro, assured that she needed no supper, had left her.

Then she sat in the lamplight, not dreaming exactly but with her mind too disturbed for rational thinking. That was how Portland found her, Bess's head on her knee while Polly stroked the old dog. "Hello," said Portland, "where did you get to?"

"Have they all gone?" Polly countered.

"Yes. Clive wasn't very pleased with you."

There had surely been enough company around for even Clive, but Portland went on, "You did make him look rather a fool."

"Did I? How?" She hadn't meant to, she was sorry if she had. Portland sat down and reached out to pat Bess.

"Admitted he was paying a fair amount of attention to Louise, but they do know each other and that is Clive's way, isn't it? He didn't expect you to take it badly."

"Why should I?" asked Polly. "As you say, that's Give's way."

"Then why did you go? When we realised you weren't with us Elsa began to laugh. She said Clive was in trouble, that you'd been

watching him; and then that television reporter started on about Clive's free-wheeling days being over. There was some leg-pulling."

Clive would not like that. That would not fit in with the roving Viking image. Polly said, "You didn't really think I'd flounced off in a temper because Clive walked down to the pub with Louise?"

"Not in a temper exactly." Portland was making a fine distinction. "But I did wonder if you'd decided the evening might not be much fun." Watching Clive flirt with Louise, who was fierce competition for any man's attention. "Anyhow, she's gone now," said Portland.

"So now I've only got Elsa to worry about." Polly sounded solemn. "Although I do sometimes ask myself what Christine or Joan would do if Clive told them they were the love of his life. That only leaves you. Can I trust you?"

"You are joking?"

"Of course I'm joking. Clive likes being liked, and he's good- looking and he gets fancied. But I'm not possessive, and if I was I couldn't have ducked out tonight, I'd have been in there fluttering my eyelashes."

Portland smiled. "Then why weren't you in there?"

Because she had not wanted a crowd around her. "I had a headache," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you should have said something. Is it better now?"

"Yes, thank you."

Portland was still not sure what had caused the headache. It could have been Louise. She thought that Polly looked pale. "What you need," she said, "is a good night's sleep."

Next morning the weather was a little cooler, the sun hidden by streaks of cloud, and the sea looked less inviting than it did when sunlight tipped the waves.

Clive was in a cool mood too. He wished Polly and Portland "Good morning" together, and Polly went down to the inn to get two plastic bucketsful of warm water, then into the hut where the pottery pieces awaited her. With a soft scrubbing brush she removed most of the earth from the larger pieces and she was drying them carefully when Clive came in.

"See/" she said, showing him. They were glazed, medieval. Norse pottery would be Crude and coarse and black.

"We knew that, didn't we?" he said. Even before cleaning they had been reasonably sure of the period and she admitted:

"Yes."

"What happened to you last night ?" Clive demanded.

That was, lot easy to answer. Nothing had happened to her, except that when she had gone down to the inn she had found herself unable to turn her head and look towards the bank and ditch where Piers should be. She didn't even know if he was there.

Clive was aggrieved. "You knew they were all friends of mine, I told you, but I didn't expect you to clear off like that just because I was talking to Louise."

She took a fine paintbrush to one spot of grime and worked with delicate pressure. "Did you come looking for me?" she asked... "Of course he will," Piers had said...

"As a matter of fact I did." Clive's expression suggested that she should count that no triumph. "And you'd gone. And a right Charley you made me look." But he was puzzled. "It isn't like you. What got into you ? You knew there was nothing serious going on."

"Elsa hoped there was." Polly admired her handiwork as the grime dissolved. "She drew my attention to you chatting up Louise, and wasn't it Elsa who told everybody I was jealous ?"

"But it isn't like you." Clive was querulous as a spoiled child. Polly wouldn't have been surprised if he had added, "It isn't fair," and she smiled:

"No, of course it isn't like me, and of course I wasn't jealous. But I did have a bit of a headache and I didn't feel like a noisy evening. I'm sorry everyone got the wrong impression. Except Elsa, who made darn sure they got the wrong impression."

Clive, like Portland, did not entirely believe her. During the Hargraves' interview she had looked bright and alert enough. Clive had been standing with his arm around Louise, but he had kept an eye on Polly. The interview had not gone as Clive planned, but it had been dull stuff and that was the next best thing.

Polly told him, "I walked back with Piers Hargraves. I had a meal at his lodgings."

"Strewth!" Clive thought he saw it all. Whatever she pretended Polly had been jealous of Louise. And Hargraves had been heading for his lodgings and Polly had simply walked off with him. She had very likely invited herself to that meal, she was an impulsive girl. "I should think that cured your headache," Clive sneered. "That must have been quiet enough for you."

"Yes," said Polly.

If she imagined she was paying him out she would have to find someone else. Hargraves was a cold-blooded fish, and Clive was about to say he'd as soon be jealous of one of the Watchers, but he stopped himself. He was not going to argue about this and he was having second thoughts.

Yesterday had been the first time Polly had put on a display of possessiveness. One of her charms was her lack of jealousy. Of course she had other charms as well and when Clive got round to marriage Polly was likely to be the girl. But he would not want a wife who watched too closely and considered herself affronted if he looked at another woman. Go on as you mean to go on, was Clive's motto.

Still, there had been no reproaches from Polly this morning, she didn't seem to be sulking either, so it was possible that she might have had a nervous headache - there had been more excitement than usual earlier - and Elsa might have been stirring things. He hoped it was that simple because he was in love with Polly. He would have hated to find any flaws in her, especially as he honestly believed he was pretty near perfect himself.

"Let's forget it," he said.

"Do let's," said Polly. She smiled at him and went on with her work.

There was really nothing to remember, but something had changed the day for Polly. She expected to see Piers. She thought he would come to see where she was working, in the trench or in the hut, if it was only to examine the pottery shards or tell her how they were progressing down in the ditch.

She did catch a glimpse of him crossing from the geology hut, but he didn't approach her, she didn't think he even looked in her direction. At midday they went down to the inn for lunch. The weather was fine,

but there was no sunshine to tempt them to stay on the beach, so the landlord's wife served the snack meal in the clubroom, and they all relaxed and chatted and took a deserved break.

Clive made much of Polly, a little to punish Elsa and discourage her from further mischief-making. Clive was content with the way things were and so long as Polly asked no more he adored her and was prepared to tell her so.

He did tell her, and she laughed and said something light and predictable.

Of course Piers wasn't here. Ewan and Jack were. He was alone and there had been nothing to stop Polly talking to him before she came in here, except shyness. She couldn't remember shyness. From childhood she had expected friendship. She had known there were people vastly cleverer than she was, but she had never been paralysed by any of them. Of course there were those who subdued her into a respectful listener, but this was the first time she had found herself unable to make any kind of move at all towards someone.

She literally could not go looking again for Piers Hargraves. She could think of a score of casual ways of crossing his path, but she couldn't put one foot in front of another and move. If he wanted her he knew where she was, if there was anything more to say.

He knew where she was and she knew where he was, all week long, but he never came near her. All Tuesday she felt that he must. He was in the geology hut when she left the site at night. She went with Portland, they had all stopped work. "See you tonight," Clive had said, and Polly had answered, "I expect so." They had a pleasant evening on Tuesday, like most of the evenings Polly had spent on St. Bara.

By the time the working hours of Wednesday were over she had accepted that Piers Hargraves had nothing to say to her, and had heard all he wanted to hear. It wasn't surprising that she had bored him. Hers had been small talk. Although he had said, "Tell me about yourself, anything," any fool should have realised that he would hardly be enthralled by a description of her home town.

It was a busy week. They dug deeper and found more animal bones, more pottery pieces. Routine was well established now and working smoothly. So was Polly. She had learned a lesson. She was happy how she was, enjoying her work, comfortable with her colleagues, comfortably in love with Clive.

Everything was comfortable, even the aching back and broken fingernails. An emery file fixed the broken nail, sleep took care of tired muscles. She spent the evenings with Clive, and they planned a lightning visit to Polly's home at the end of the month. It was her mother's birthday, it would be a lovely surprise.

She didn't think about Piers Hargraves. When she saw him she stayed quite still so that he couldn't hear her calling, "Come and speak to me." No one could hear. She didn't even hear herself.

The weather stayed grey until Saturday morning, but on Saturday the sky was black and there was a spatter of rain. Portland was first at the window when they woke, and she announced, "We're not going to get much done today."

They had all brought work with them: the students books for their studies; Lewis Kent and Bill Canning material for books they were writing; Portland and Clive had curricula and lectures needing their attention, and Polly had promised a few articles to her local newspaper.

It hardly seemed worth walking to the dig, they wouldn't be able to take the sheets off the trenches, but Clive might want them for something, so they put on mackintoshes and Wellingtons and tied scarves round their heads. "I wouldn't come if I were you, Bess," said Polly as Bess, who also had her routine these days, tried to edge out under Portland's flapping raincoat.

Mrs. Munro hauled the dog back again, scolding, because Bess had rheumatism and should not be getting wet.

"Is it likely to last, do you think?" Polly asked.

"The weekend out for sure," said Mrs. Munro. She added for comfort, "It's awful good for the complexion," and thus reassured they set off.

It was a gentle rain, tasting clean and cool. "Wretched weather," Portland grumbled, gumboots squelching as she ploughed on. Hopeless for digging, of course, but Polly felt it gave the island another face of beauty, soft and sensuous, less haunted than moonlight.

This place is bewitching me, she thought. Maybe I'll build my castle here. "Still, it gives us a chance to catch up on the paper work," said Portland.

The rain was light as yet, but the clouds were threatening and it was obvious there could be no work done on an open site. When Portland and Polly arrived most of them were standing around, having reached that conclusion. The door of the geology hut was open, Ewan lolled against the jamb, hands in his jacket pocket. Clive and Bill and Lewis stood looking at the plastic sheeting, each with its small shining pool of rain.

"Hardly worth turning out for," said Clive, as Polly and Portland walked towards them. "Can't do anything out here today."

There was plenty of work they could do under cover, but Polly said wistfully, "I suppose nobody would care to come exploring?"

"Exploring for what?" asked Portland.

"Just looking around the island. We haven't had much chance up to now. Only the one Sunday."

"In this?" Portland shuddered, and Polly laughed:

"A drop of rain won't hurt."

"See them?" Clive tilted Polly's chin so that she was looking overhead. "They're clouds, my sweet idiot. There's going to be a downpour before long and I don't want any of you with streaming colds. Show a bit of sense."

Some of them might have agreed that this was a chance for discovery, or at any rate for exercise, but Clive's decision swayed them all. The students stayed in the huts and the club- room. Bill Canning cycled off again for his lodgings, and Portland and Polly went back to the Munros', where Portland opened a portfolio of papers and spread them out on the little round table under the parlour window. Polly sat with a writing pad on her knee, dutifully jotting down notes for her first article for the *Averton Mercury*. Mrs. Munro brought in coffee for them, and outside the rain still fell gently and the clouds still lowered black. »

Suddenly Portland leaned forward and gingerly lifted the edge of the lace curtain. "We've got a caller," she sounded surprised.

"Who?" Portland had dropped the curtain, but Polly could see someone coming. "It isn't Clive, is it?"

"It's Hargraves," said Portland.

Polly felt a surge of exhilaration so that she almost threw her arms round Portland and waltzed her around the room. Instead she nearly fell over Bess, making for the door into the tiny entrance hall to get through the front door.

He was not yet at the white gate, but he was coming to it, and Polly ran and opened the gate. Both of Mr. MacLean's dogs were with him, and they bounded forward and danced around Polly. She could feel herself blushing, and smiled, and bit her lip to steady it. "Hello," she said. "How are you?" She knew how he was, she had seen him daily.

"How are you?" he said. As though they had been apart. "The storm hasn't broken yet. Do you still want to go exploring?"

"I'll get a coat." Portland was in the hall by now asking quietly:

"What's the visit in aid of?"

"We're going walking," said Polly.

She changed back into her gumboots, and took her mackintosh off a peg on the wall. "No, Bess," she said. "Sorry."

"Suppose Clive does turn up, what do I tell him?" Portland wanted to know.

"He won't." Polly wrinkled her nose. "It isn't sensible, walking in this weather."

Portland's voice was still hushed, but it was very emphatic. "I hope you're not doing this simply to annoy Clive."

"No\" Polly was even more emphatic.

"Because Clive can't stand him now," said Portland. "Put a match to that fuse and you will cause trouble."

Piers was still standing at the gate. Polly came, buttoning her mackintosh, fastening the buckle of her belt. She had her scarf stuffed into her pocket; some time she might tie up her hair, but right now she felt like a child out of school. She wanted her hair to blow free. She said, "I am so glad you came."

"There's a place I'd like to show you," he said.

They met no one. The sheep were still around and the cows, and the dogs rushed off from time to time to greet other dogs. The rain had made the ground soft underfoot, the grasses swished wetly and the bracken and heather shook off glittering showers as they brushed against it.

Piers knew far more of the island than Polly did. He had walked alone many times. He told her names, of crags and mounds and coves, of plants. She teased, "What don't you know?"

"A great many things, but if I've read it I remember it."

"Everything?"

He said drily, "It saves carrying files around."

"What is your I.Q.?"

"Two hundred."

"Don't ask me mine," said Polly. Hers was a hundred and forty, which had always been considered very satisfactory.

They talked of work. Piers hadn't found his volcanic level, and having cut into the outer bank of the ditch he proposed tunnelling under the castle mound during the next weeks. Polly described her pieces of pottery, her eyes shining, her lashes wet and spiky, her skin glowing pearl-like with a healthy transparency.

"Rain suits you," said Piers.

"Does it?" She was blushing again. "I like it. I like water, swimming. That's something I must do more of while I'm here. I've only been swimming once."

"You're a good swimmer?"

"A moderate one," she said, although she had been swimming well since she was very young. They were coming down to the shore now, into a cove where the sea was breaking on the shingle.

"We had a swimming pool," said Piers, "the size of a lake."

"You did?" She almost added "lucky you". Instead she said, puzzled, "But you don't swim."

"My father did. He was championship standard. Most of his friends weren't far behind."

"But no one taught you?"

"He threw me in the deep end one day and I sank like a stone."

"That was a stupid thing to do."

"Some youngsters learn that way."

"One in a hundred, maybe," said Polly indignantly. "The ones who are fat enough to float like a balloon."

Piers laughed, "Which ruled me out. Anyhow, I was too scared to try to get to the side. I thought he'd brought me there to drown me."

Polly's mother and father had taught her to swim, holding her in their arms, encouraging her, praising her, swimming beside her. She asked, "How old were you?"

"Five."

Polly had been about five too. How could anyone have put that much hopelessness into a child? Horror darkened her eyes and made her voice husky. "What kind of man was your father?"

"You'd have liked him," said Piers.

"I would not!"

"Most people did."

"Did you?"

"No." He might have been talking about an acquaintance. "But I appreciated his quandary. I was not what he'd expected and God knows I was not what he wanted."

"What *did* he want?"

"A son who could ride to hounds with him. Can you see me riding to hounds?"

She shook her head, asking, "What was your mother like?"

"She died in a car crash when I was a few months old. From all accounts she was like my father, most people liked her too."

Most people were uncomfortable with Piers. Clive had been from their student days. "The only man I've ever disliked without reason," he had told Polly, but of course there was a reason. Piers Hargraves' kind of intelligence must bring an inborn arrogance, and a

self-sufficiency, if life demanded it, that would form a shield around him hard as tempered steel.

When had he first heard himself described as a "freak"? she wondered. He was probably reading at two, was it then? She could imagine his father: landed gentry, big and bluff and handsome, hail-fellow-well-met with everyone. And the child like a changeling, thin and unsmiling, seeing the bully beneath the benevolent mask of the man.

At five he had believed his father hated him enough to kill him, and he was afraid when the water closed over his head, but back on dry land there was a world in his mind where no one could reach him or harm him. No kind of boy at all, Piers Har- graves had been cheated of youth and of love.

But it was not too late. He had probably taken Polly closer into his confidence than he had ever taken anyone, and he had come looking for her today. Almost a week without a word, but he must have thought about her because in the end he had come.

"Look at this," he said. Across the shingle, over the rocks, there was a cave in the cliff face. Polly held out her hand for him to take, she could use a little support where they were clambering. The rocks were slippery with rain, and from the cave came a rivulet running into the rock pools.

There was a waterfall in the shadows, cascading down in silvery spray over the boulders. Everything was darkness around, and the sound of rushing water, and Polly's breath quickened with surprise and pleasure. "How beautiful! How big is the cave?"

He turned on a torch and she saw the rock, ahead and overhead. The waterfall came from an underground stream through the cavern roof. It was only a tiny gem of a waterfall, but in its black velvet setting it

was perfect. There was just enough room to stand back from the spray and watch it. There were even stones large enough to sit on.

Polly sat on a large fiat stone and the dogs lolloped in, and out again on to the beach. She asked, "When did you find this?"

"A few days ago. I'm glad you like it. I hoped you might." So he had thought of her when he came across it. He sat on one of the rocks himself, looking at her, and she said directly:

"I thought I must have bored you last time. I thought you were avoiding me."

"No." He said that explosively, then in his usual level tones, "You were with Rounsley."

Not all the time. "If I was," she said, "that doesn't mean that no one else has to speak to me."

"What does it mean?" She hesitated because it wasn't easy to give a straight answer. There were no ties and no claims, not yet. Some, day, maybe, but at the moment she was no longer certain what she was hoping for.

Piers sat, arms folded, looking impassive as an Inca chief, and she said with a touch of impatience, because surely she should have been able to speak for herself even if she couldn't answer for Clive, "I'm not *sure*." To avoid enlarging on that she added, "You don't like Clive, do you?"

"He says that?"

"He believes that."

"He's wrong." She was pleased for a moment, until he said, "I neither like nor dislike him."

Indifference could be more insulting than dislike, and Piers Hargraves seemed indifferent to most people. Polly said sharply, "Folk are flesh, you know, not cardboard cut-outs."

Then he smiled and she was filled with a missionary zeal to make him see what he was missing. Every day he missed chances of getting to know people who were kind and generous and intelligent. Except for Elsa there was not one member of the team whom Polly did not consider a friend. They were all very human, not a cardboard cut-out in the set.

"Take - " she had been going to say "Clive," but that might have been a little too personal, so she took Lewis Kent instead. Kent was a colourful character, always sailing off in small boats and getting blown off course in the Gulf Stream or grounded up the Amazon. She ran through a few anecdotes about Lewis Kent, and then she talked about the others with genuine affection, trying to make him see them through her eyes as though he was a visitor from another planet.

At last he said, "Is there anyone you don't like?"

"Not here, no."

"Anywhere?"

"Well, of course." But she would have been hard-pressed to name anyone and he went on looking at her, steadily, searchingly. Then he said:

"You might have a different viewpoint if you were ugly."

Obviously if she had been physically repulsive, or if she had not grown up in a home where loving and caring were taken for granted she would be looking at life with different eyes. He thought she wore

rose-coloured spectacles, to a small extent it could be true, and she said wryly, "It's Pollyanna again."

"Who's Pollyanna?"

"You certainly wouldn't have read the book." One of the dogs came in shaking itself vigorously. The rain was heavier now outside, the threatened downpour had started. "We should be getting back," said Polly. She walked the few steps to look out at the sky which was unbroken leaden grey. "This isn't going to ease up again, is it?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I told you I don't mind rain. I wanted to come."

"What about your hair?"

"It's wet already. And I've got a scarf." She brought it from her pocket and he took it from her, put it cornerwise over her head and tied it under her chin.

"Wait," she said. He wore a trench coat and she fastened it up, turning up the collar. "There, now we're ready for anything. Well, almost anything." She held his arm. "If either of us slips and breaks a leg climbing over these rocks we shall never hear the last of it, so it isn't going to be me."

The rain didn't ease. It came slow and soaking, all the way back to Mr. MacLean's cottage, which was nearer than Mr. Munro's or they might have made for there. When they were nearly home one of the dogs went through a grey quagmire of mud and came out looking as though he was made of the stuff, and Polly was apprehensive about the reception they might get from Alastair MacLean. \

At least, thank heaven, he wasn't houseproud. The door was unlocked and she stepped in warily. "Down," Piers ordered the dogs, and they settled motionless just inside the room. Polly took off her gumboots and got out of her mac. Under boots and mac she was dry, and she watched Piers' muddy footprints appear as he crossed the flagstones into the kitchen. He came out of the kitchen at once saying, "It doesn't look as if he's back yet. He went down to the harbour to visit a friend."

"Good." Here was her chance to clean up the footprints, even perhaps clean up the dog. "Would you have any slippers?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, you must have some more shoes. Don't you think you should change those?"

He looked down, viewing his tracks for the first time. "Yes, all right."

"Don't go upstairs in them," she protested as he began to. "And hadn't you better take off your coat too? It's dripping water all over the place."

"All right," he said again. He took off coat and shoes, and carried them into the kitchen. She followed with her mac, draped both coats over chairs, his shoes beneath. It was warm in here from the solid fuel range, her mac would dry. In the meantime she rubbed down one of the dogs with a piece of sacking towelling, looked at the muddier dog and said, "We really should bath Bolter, he's an awful mess."

"Won't he dry off?"

"If he does you'll have to chip him out. That's your line, you're the geologist."

"Bathing dogs isn't my line."

"I've had practice. Where is the bath?" A large tin bath was in the washroom leading off the kitchen. They heated water on the stove and Polly lured a reluctant Bolter towards the bath. She had done quite a lot of this in her time. She knew how to coax and to handle, and as she soaped and rinsed Bolter she talked about some of the animals who had lodged at her father's kennels. There had been champions and mongrels, nice docile animals and raving eccentrics.

"MacAllister was the latest, a West Highland, I left him there when I came away. His owners collected him last week and he was so homesick for them we had to bring him into the house and kid him he was one of the family." She poured more water over Bolter, getting the last of the soap from his glossy coat.

"My mother says they tell friends when they go home, 'Look mournful at Blair Kennels and you'll get an armchair by the fire'." Bolter looked at her, mournful and reproachful, and she said, "And you can't understand why you're in hot water and Gipsy isn't, can you? Never mind, it's over now. Out you come, my handsome."

Bolter needed no second telling. He was out and shaking himself all over them. Polly rubbed him vigorously for a minute or two, while Piers got rid of the bathwater and the bath, then she said to Bolter, "Stay by the stove now and I'll clean up in there." The mud on the flagstones.

"That will brush off," said Piers.

"I know, but it seems unfair to leave it for old Alastair." She padded around in her stockinged feet, briskly wielding a mop that didn't look as though it got much use.

Piers put a match to a fire that was laid in the living room grate and asked, "Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please," said Polly.

They ate apple tart, somebody was not a bad hand with the pastry, and Polly had made scrambled eggs. "Can you cook?" she asked Piers. They sat at the table in the living room, the dogs were almost dry now, stretched out in front of the fire. "No," he said.

"So there is something you're not an expert on," she smiled.

"Any number of things," he said.

"Although you could always read a cookery book. You'd never forget a recipe."

"I could read a book on the bicycle, but I'd still fall off a bike, and I doubt if a book on Casanova would turn me into a great lover."

She laughed; he was laughing at himself, there was nothing pompous about him. Beneath the icy self-control there was a man so different from everyone else's idea of Piers Hargraves that it was hard to believe they were one person.

I do like you, thought Polly, I like you very much. She looked at him with smiling shining eyes, and he looked at her for a moment, then away. The chessboard was at the far end of the table, as she went on eating her apple tart Polly asked, "Has Mr. MacLean beaten you at chess yet?"

"No. Why?"

"He wants to. He told me. Fair and square, though. He says he's no match for you, but his day will come."

"I'm sure it will," said Piers. "Do you play?"

"No, and I don't want you to teach me, thank you," she said gaily. "If Mr. MacLean can't win, and he's had that set since he was a laddie, what chance would I stand?"

"A good one," he said, "I concentrate on the game when I'm playing him."

She laughed again, delighted, enjoying herself immensely. This was cosy and warm, and the rain still pouring down should keep Mr. MacLean away for a few hours yet. Not that Polly could stay here indefinitely. Portland would have no idea where she was, and might presume they were out in all this rain. Portland had also been concerned that Clive might turn up.

If Clive turned up he might turn awkward. Not that he had the right to dictate Polly's movements, but perhaps it was time to get back to the Munros'. She said, "I think I ought to go. Portland will be wondering where I am."

He stood up from the table as she did and asked, "Shall I see you tomorrow?"

Tomorrow Clive would expect her to be around and she didn't want to cause any trouble for anyone. She said, "Oh, there'll be a get-together. There was talk of taking a launch out. Would you come?"

She half thought he might agree, but he said, "No," and before she could try to persuade him, "What about Monday?"

"I'll see you at the dig. If it's raining I'll be in the hut or - "

"I'll find you," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

She went into the kitchen and put on her mac, which was dry now but wouldn't stay dry for more than a couple of minutes out there. Piers who had gone upstairs came down with an umbrella. It was slim and long, with a white curved handle, in lilac. It looked ladylike, and had probably belonged to Miss Elspeth. "Will it be all right if I borrow that?" Polly asked.

"Why not?" He put it down and picked up his coat. The dogs, scenting action, were on their feet, looking from Polly to Piers.

"Forget it, you two," said Polly. She pulled on her gumboots at the door. "I'll run all the way," she said to Piers. "There's no need for you to come with me and get wet through all over again."

"Of course I'm coming," he said.

"Oh! WeH, there is the umbrella." She giggled. "Although I can't see you coming back carrying a lilac umbrella. I'll return it Monday evening, shall I?"

"Do that," he said. When they opened the door the rain met them, and he asked, "Must you go yet?"

"I think I should. I'm sure Portland will be worrying, I think I'd better go."

She put up the umbrella and they stepped out. She took his arm to draw him under the comparative shelter, and there was no question of running. It was not dark yet, but the driving rain drastically reduced visibility and made progress a bit of a battle.

It also cut out conversation, and when Piers stopped and said "Listen," she heard the rain and the wind, and then a faint cry.

"What is it?" She put down the umbrella and they looked around. They were not at the track yet, they were still crossing the heathland with its scrub and dips and hillocks; and what with the rain and the overcast misty greyness on everything they could have passed within a few feet of Alastair MacLean without seeing him.

He moaned again and they saw him then. "Oh no, no!" Polly almost sobbed. "Oh, what's happened?" Piers was already kneeling beside old Alastair, who lay half buried in the bracken, as sodden wet and as pale as a drowned man.

Piers took his hand, feeling for his pulse, as MacLean's eyes flickered. "And about time. Get me in my house, will you?" At least that was what Polly thought he said - his voice was a croak. Piers put an arm underneath him and he moaned louder this time, "My leg!"

Polly knelt in the bracken too, cradling the old man's head while Piers ran a hand over his legs. When he reached the left ankle MacLean almost got out a roar. "We'll get you indoors," said Piers. MacLean was a big man with big bones, it wasn't going to be easy lifting and carrying him.

Piers said, "Let's get his overcoat off." It was a thick coat, weighing more than double its weight now it was saturated with rain. Polly undid the buttons and as they eased off the coat she whispered, "Shall you go for help? We could put the umbrella over him, I could stay while you get someone."

"Get me to m'bed, I'm dying," moaned Alastair. Polly's heart lurched, she looked at Piers with questioning eyes, and he said:

"No, you're not, but you've been out here long enough. I'll take your" head and shoulders and Polly will take your legs. It isn't far."

It seemed a long way. Although Piers took most of the weight Polly's arms ached as though they were being drawn from their sockets, and perspiration dabbled her forehead as fast as the rain washed it away. They laid him on the floor as soon as they got him inside. His head fell back and his breathing was raucous.

"I'll get some bedclothes," Polly gasped. "And a mattress." She ran up into the first bedroom, snatching blankets and coverlet, throwing them down the stairs, dragging the mattress with her as she hurried down again. Piers had old Alastair near the fire now, and a glass at the old man's lips. Alastair swallowed and coughed, shivering so that the glass rattled against his teeth.

"Help me get these clothes off him," said Piers. "He's soaked to the skin. God knows how long he's lain out there." They had come to the house from another direction. He could have been lying there then. If his cries had been faint they would not have heard him.

They got him undressed and covered him with blankets, and he lay semi-conscious. The ruddiness had gone from beneath the weather-beaten tan of his face, leaving a livid pallor. Exhaustion and exposure were both taking toll. He probably needed drugs, certainly he needed attention if that ankle was broken.

There was no doctor on the island and the nearest phone was by the harbour, but most of the islanders were used to dealing with illness and injuries, and the obvious thing was to call in a neighbour. Bill Canning's lodgings were about a quarter of a mile away. Bill could cycle down to the phone and get through to the mainland for a doctor while Bill's landlady came back to lend an immediate hand.

Piers went to get help, and Polly made hot sweet tea and begged old Alastair to drink some. He was still in shock, but he was lucid enough to know that he would have preferred another brandy to sweet tea, and it was only when he saw tears in Polly's eyes that he made the

effort and got down half a cup of tea. She was a soft-hearted lass and a pretty one, in some ways she reminded him of Elspeth.

Mrs. MacNeil, Bill's landlady, came hurrying. Dr. Hargraves had explained they had just found Alastair MacLean outside his house, his leg was hurt and he could be at risk of pneumonia. She had never spoken to Hargraves before, but he was a man whose word you'd accept without question. Mr. Canning hadn't asked any questions at all. He had been on his bike, pedalling towards the telephone and a real doctor, almost before Mrs. MacNeil could get her coat on.

As they came along she did ask "Seems to be bad, does he?" but Dr. Hargraves, striding ahead of her, only said "Bad enough" and Mrs. MacNeil was worried. She was more than worried when she saw Alastair, with his bed made up in front of the fire, his two dogs and the girl who was staying at Maggie Munro's sitting beside him. Alastair was propped up with cushions, his grey thatch of hair, still damp, seemed thinner, and his skin had a yellowish tinge.

He watched her advance on him, asking, "What's all this, Alastair?" and groaned faintly:

"Can you no' see, woman, I'm a sick man?"

"They found you lying outside, they tell me. Drunk, were you?" He swelled with righteous indignation and she was glad to see a faint flush in the pallor as he protested:

"I was not. No more than a couple of drams. Willie Mc- Tavish set me down and drove off in that boneshaker of his and I turned m'foot in a rabbit hole. I couldn'a get up." He shivered again at the memory. It had been a bad fall, sucking the breath from his body into a black pit of pain, so that he lay stunned. When sense came back cold driving rain beat down on him and his cries for help were weak. He was an old man and he knew it then, without the strength to crawl or even

move. Now, sheltered and safe from the deadening rain, warmth had begun to creep back into his limbs although his bones were still chill and aching.

The doctor, and the girl the doctor used to call Miss Blair but now called Polly had saved his life. He had seen them coming and known they could pass by and prayed as he hadn't prayed in years, and they had stopped and they had heard him. He turned to glare at Polly, "Where's Elspeth's umbrella?"

She jumped up guiltily. "I dropped it. It's still out there - I'll find it."

"I'll get it," said Piers. "And I'll look for your overcoat." Mrs. MacNeil took off her coat and pushed up her sleeves and said:

"Let me-see this leg."

The swelling was immense. It must have ballooned as soon as they got his boot off, and Mrs. MacNeil put on cold compresses, then bandaged the ankle with practised dexterity. "Leave that for the doctor now," she said, looking pleased with herself.

But there was going to be a delay before medical help reached them. Bill Canning came back to report that the doctor was in Edinburgh and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. His wife promised that he would then get over to St. Bara as soon as he could.

"I'm sure that's genuine," said Bill, watching Piers as though he might need appeasing. "It's a foul night, you couldn't blame anyone for not wanting to put to sea, but the man isn't there. He will come tomorrow."

"Rest and quiet and another dram is the treatment I'd advise," said Mrs. MacNeil soothingly.

There was really nothing else they could do. There were no fireplaces upstairs, but this room could be kept warm, so Bill and Piers brought down the divan from Piers' sitting room, and Polly and Mrs. MacNeil made it up with bedclothes from Alastair's bed - it was Piers' bed that Polly had stripped earlier. The men put the old man's flannel nightshirt on him while the women went into the kitchen - he was having a belated attack of modesty - and then they lifted him off the mattress on the floor into the bed.

He was no longer shivering, but no one was sure what tomorrow would bring. Mrs. MacNeil had hot water bottles at home, she would fetch them and a bottle of painkillers. Alastair downed his dram "for medicinal purposes" and slipped into slumber.

"Somebody ought to be sitting with him," said Mrs. MacNeil. "He'll be running a temperature, I shouldn't wonder, a touch of the fever - he's got malaria in him from those foreign parts. He'd better be watched, we don't want him throwing the blankets off or wandering outside."

"I'll stay with him," said Piers, but Mrs. MacNeil sounded doubtful.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but have you done any sickroom nursing?"

"No."

"No, well, a man can always be useful about, but I do think that's a woman's job. I do find that men are more likely to drop off." Her look for Polly said it was between them, and Polly offered:

"I'll sit up with him." "That's settled, then," said Mrs. MacNeil. "If he's restless and you want me I'll come right back. I'll leave my door on the latch, then either of you can come in and shout."

"Bill," Polly had another errand for him, "would you go and tell Portland where I am, please?" She thought for a moment. "And ask her to come round here in the morning."

The bike was earning its keep. Bill Canning pedalled through the rain to the Munros'. Portland opened the door and gasped, "Bill! Come in! I thought you were Polly."

Bill agreed that he was not Polly, explained what had happened and gave her Polly's message. Although Portland had never met Alastair MacLean she was shocked at the news of his accident, and she was saying how sorry she was when Bill asked, "What was Polly doing there?"

"They went out walking. Then I suppose they went back to the house."

"Polly and Hargraves?" Bill vaguely remembered the bet, but he had had no idea that Polly was on walking and visiting terms with Piers Hargraves.

"There's nothing in it," Portland insisted. "He - well, he just came and collected her."

"Did he now?" Bill ruminated. "I wonder what Clive will have to say when he hears where she spent the night."

CHAPTER FIVE

Exhaustion sedated Alastair MacLean as thoroughly as drugs could have done. He lay without movement, deeply asleep, and when Piers and Polly were left alone with him everything was quiet. Polly sat in a wing-backed chair, reaction to the strain of the last hours making her feel a little sick and a little shaken.

"All right?" Piers asked, and the moment of weakness passed. She said honestly:

"I'm fine." The dogs lay between them on the hearthrug, looking across at the unaccustomed bed and the unconscious form of their master.

Piers said, "It would have been all the same if we'd been robbing him." They had carried in the body and stripped it down, and the dogs had circled anxiously but with no signs of attacking.

"No, it wouldn't." Polly stroked the nearer dog. "They trusted us. Animals can sense what you're feeling just as they know if you're scared of them. They know he's ill, but they know we care."

The dog she was petting seemed unaware of the caress. He whimpered faintly, still looking at MacLean, and Polly asked: "You do care, don't you?"

"Yes," said Piers.

She need not have asked. He cared probably more than Clive would have done in the circumstances. After that fleeting disloyalty to Clive, Polly got up to find something to occupy herself because there was a long night ahead. She brought out the files and the notebooks with the myths and legends and sat on the hearthrug with the dogs. Piers brought down a couple of books from upstairs. She picked them

up and looked at their titles and grimaced, then handed them back with an ostentatious haste that made him smile.

Sleep was what the patient needed, quiet deep sleep. They sat in the lamplight: Piers reading, Polly reading, dreaming, thinking, sometimes just sitting, resting against the leather arm of his chair. Sometimes she handed up accounts or stories that struck her and he read them, but she suspected it was courtesy, that ghosts and goblins didn't really interest him.

When she had read them all she took the papers back to the little bureau and stood beside the bed, looking at MacLean. There was colour in his face now, there could be fever in his blood, but it was less frightening than that awful pallor; he had looked more than half dead when they found him.

She said softly, as she sat down again in front of the fire, "He was born in this house. Mrs. Munro told me. Although he travelled the world he had to come back."

But not to die yet. Surely fate was on MacLean's side. He could have lain there into the night and beyond if Piers had not been living here, if Piers had not fetched Polly and Polly had not had to return to her own lodgings. She had insisted oil going right then, although she might easily have stayed longer, and another hour in that rain could have finished old Alastair.

I wonder, thought Polly idly, if that was a premonition. She turned to ask Piers what he thought. She doubted if he believed in premonitions, but it was curious because she had insisted on going. There had been a touch of panic in her determination. Of course there could be another reason for panic if she had felt there might be risk in staying.

Piers was looking inquiringly at her, as well he might as she had only said, "Do you - " before her thoughts raced ahead and left her gasping.

Danger from him? From herself? That was unlikely, but perhaps she wouldn't go into premonitions or alternatives. She said, for something to say, "I was born in the house my parents still live in."

"My family were born in the same house for generations," he said.

"The house with the swimming pool like a lake?" That slipped out and he nodded. Then he added:

"It's an orphanage now."

Portland had said his father was well known for his charities. He must have willed the family home away from his son, so the disappointment and the dislike had lasted all his life. "Do you mind?" Polly asked quietly.

"They need it. I don't." There was no bitterness in the way he said that. It was a fact but not an interesting one. He hadn't wanted the house that had been in his family for generations, there had been no security there for one child.

She didn't ask, "Do you ever go back?" because she knew he did not go back and the memories were bleak. Instead she asked, "Shall I get us a hot drink?" It was time, it was something to do, and it was a small comfort she could offer. "Coffee?" she said.

"Thank you." He smiled at her. "A mug of cocoa for you?"

"Black, black coffee," she chanted, "to keep me awake."

"You go to sleep. I'll call you if he wakes."

"I daren't risk it. Mrs. MacNeil says men drop off."

"The MacNeil men must have easy consciences."

She asked as she went towards the kitchen, "Does your conscience keep you awake?"

"I don't have a conscience," he said.

"Then it's black coffee for both of us. Do you know if the dogs have been fed?"

They hadn't. Piers came into the kitchen and fed them while Polly made coffee and found bread and cheese. The sleeping man's breathing was reassuringly even, but as time wore on the coffee wore off and Polly found it harder and harder to keep her eyes open. She tried to keep her head up, but that drooped too, and she jerked herself from surface slumber to feel Piers' hands on her shoulders. "Into a chair anyway," he said.

"Yes, all right, but I mustn't go to sleep." Her foot had gone to sleep already. When he lifted her she nearly crumpled. He held her and smiled at her.

"For an hour," he said. She was tired, but she was a light sleeper, any sound would alert her. He put her into the chair and she rubbed her numb foot, wincing at the pins and needles.

"Then you'll call me," she insisted.

"Trust me."

"Yes."

"Can I trust you?" he said. She was still flexing her ankle as - she looked up and met his eyes. He hadn't worn spectacles out in the rain, nor at night when he saw her home. He wore them on the dig, he wore them reading. Now he was wearing them. What did he mean - could

he trust her? Trust her to wake when he called her? To act fast if action was needed?

"I certainly hope so," she said.

He looked at her without smiling, and his eyes seemed to probe until they hurt. She could almost understand why people who didn't know him were afraid of him. "One hour," she said. Then she closed her eyes and turned her head away, and tried to relax.

She slept a little. Piers was standing by the bed when she woke and she went over quietly. "How is he?" she whispered.

The sick man was muttering, his face was ruddy again, unhealthily so, little beads of perspiration showing on his brow. Polly stared in dismay. "He is feverish. Could it be malaria?"

"He could be sweating it out. He's more or less bound to run a temperature after what he's been through. He hasn't had malaria for over five years. At his age it's unlikely again. Will you fill the waterbottles?"

He took them out of the bed and she heated water on the stove and refilled them. The old man was rambling about people and places from his past, rarely intelligibly but less in delirium than in restless dreams. The pain from his foot had probably disturbed him and Piers got a couple of Mrs. MacNeil's painkillers down him.

Then he sat beside him, talking quietly. Although he gave no sign of understanding what was being said MacLean rambled less when Piers spoke. The reassuring voice was reaching and restraining, and there was no time at which Polly felt they must get help. Between them she knew they could cope. She gently wiped the old man's forehead, smoothed back the bedclothes when he threw them off, and at last the

disjointed monologue ended and the tossing ceased and he sank once more into peaceful sleep.

She was "almost sure that Piers didn't sleep that night. He sat in the armchair by the fire and he closed his eyes, but she didn't think he slept. She wasn't tired herself now. The action of the past hour had started the adrenalin flowing, and she took a pad and pencil from the bureau and wrote a long letter home.

There was plenty to write about. Tonight's drama filled pages, and the fact that she was sitting in the lamplight at nearly four o'clock in the morning, watching over the man whose life she might have helped to save, gave impact to the letter. She didn't say that Dr. Hargraves was sitting in the chair opposite as she wrote. She hadn't actually mentioned that Piers lived here. Her mother was pro-Clive, so was Polly, of course, there was nobody more pro-Clive than Polly, but she didn't want her mother writing and asking, "This Dr. Hargraves, he's a friend of Clive's too, of course?"

So in the letter Polly talked a lot about Mrs. MacNeil, right up to "sickroom is woman's work, I do find that men drop off," but she omitted to add that shortly after that Mrs. MacNeil had gone home.

When dawn came the rain had stopped, and Polly went into the kitchen and began to cook breakfast. She wasn't hungry, and she wasn't asking Piers in case he wasn't because he had to eat something. With Mr. MacLean out of action meals might be a problem in this household. So Polly cooked bacon and eggs and made tea and carried the food and cutlery into the living room.

MacLean still seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and she moved carefully to avoid disturbing him. Piers got up and took the tray from her, and she whispered, "When do you think the doctor will come?"

"I don't know when the man Canning phoned will make it," he said, "but I'll have someone out here this morning."

She glanced towards the bed. "He won't have to go into hospital, will he? I'm sure he'd hate that."

"I'm sure any nursing he needs can be done here, we'll see that it is." She was pleased to hear that. It meant he was making Mr. MacLean his responsibility. He would get a doctor out, he would get a nurse if a nurse was needed. It justified her liking for him and it proved that anyone who said he was inhuman knew nothing.

She nodded approvingly. "Now come and eat your breakfast, I don't know when you'll get your dinner." She laughed at him softly. "There should be a hogboon somewhere for the chores, shouldn't there?" She looked around her as she sat down. "Where's our hogboon now that we need him?"

Piers sat opposite her and she suddenly clapped a hand to her forehead. "Good heavens!"

"What's the matter?"

"I saw myself as a selkie. Do you know what a selkie is?"

He looked blankly at her. "A seal maiden. What are you talking about?"

"That's right," said Polly. Her dancing eyes belied her serious expression. "And it's very disappointing because I'm not a selkie after all. I'm the hogboon in charge of the chores."

There might have to be someone here during the day, but Polly could come after work, and borrow Mrs. Munro's cycle and nip over in the lunch-break. She was fond of old Alastair, but even if she hadn't been

she would probably have made the offer because, as everyone who knew her knew, Polly was a pushover for those in trouble.

From the bed Alastair MacLean said in the voice of a man who has been following the conversation for some time, "A hogboon is a wee grey man. Did you not read the notebooks?"

The old fraud! Not that he was feigning illness, but he had feigned sleep to hear what they were saying about him. Polly went to his bedside. The shadows were still round his eyes, but his eyes were clear.

"All right," she said, "you're the expert. But can you say for sure there aren't any little brown lady hogboons? Maybe they've kept out of sight not being as pushing as their menfolk."

"Knowing their place?" MacLean was enjoying the joke.

"Yes," said Polly. "Now isn't that just like me?" She appealed to him, and then to Piers. "Aren't I a born hogboon?"

MacLean was feeling weak, but he had been greatly reassured by what the doctor had just said. He was no longer alone. Help was here that would in no way rob him of dignity. He chuckled, but the compliment was heartfelt, "I'll tell you what you are, lassie. You're a sight for an old man's eyes."

"Thank you, master," said Polly gaily. "Now your hogboon will see to your breakfast." She turned and almost collided with Piers.

"And for a young man's eyes," he said quietly, and she hid her confusion with another smile and a swirl of her shoulder-length hair, because she was profoundly moved with that strange and unfamiliar feeling that was shyness.

Alastair drank his tea, and managed a couple of boiled eggs. He was not altogether clear about last night. He knew how his accident had happened, but his recollections of what followed his rescue were hazy. And he knew that his ankle was giving him agony. He complained on that score, but Mrs. MacNeil's bandages looked so professional that they hesitated about removing them until she arrived.

When she did she was cautiously pleased with the patient. In the light of day Alastair MacLean looked much older than he had done yesterday morning, but he was sitting up and missing nothing. "We'll leave the bandages," she decided. "Take another of my headache pills if it's bad."

He growled at her, but took the pills, and as soon as breakfast was over Piers set out to walk down to the harbour and the telephone. Polly was washing up in the kitchen, and Mrs. MacNeil was washing Alastair's hands and face with very little cooperation from him, when Portland arrived. Polly answered the door and as Portland's voice reached him Alastair bellowed through the face-cloth, "No more women in here!"

Polly began to laugh, stepping outside and closing the door behind her. "Sorry," she said to Portland.

"He doesn't sound mortally injured," said Portland.

"He'll be all right. He was lucky."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Portland. She looked through the window. "What are they doing to him now?"

"Bill's landlady is washing his face, and Piers has gone to find out exactly what's happening about the doctor. He's walking to the harbour unless he can find someone with a vehicle on the way."

"You look all in," said Portland. "You'd better come home and get some rest." Until then Polly had not been unduly tired, but now she remembered how little sleep she had had and immediately felt light-headed. "Before Clive comes," added Portland.

Polly did not want Clive coming here, adding to the strain. Somehow she had no doubt that was what Clive would do. She went back inside and asked Mrs. MacNeil how long she could stay.

Between them the MacNeils could cover Sunday. Doctor Hargraves was due for some rest, said Mrs. MacNeil, and so was Polly. Alastair MacLean agreed emphatically with that. "Run along, lassie," he' urged her. Polly was wan and woolly- witted with fatigue by now. It had hit her like a blow, but she still hesitated and lingered, saying, "I'll be back, I wish I could stop. Mrs. MacNeil, are you sure it's all right?" until Mrs. MacNeil fetched her gumboots and mackintosh.

With the door open Polly glanced back again. "I'll tell your doctor where you are," said Mrs. MacNeil kindly. She was distinguishing Piers from the medical doctor and Polly said:

"Thank you."

As they walked across the heathland Portland said, " *Your* doctor?"

Polly plodded on like a sleepwalker. "Piers."

"That's the first time I've heard anyone use his christian name," said Portland.

Reaching the track, Polly looked in the direction of the harbour, although he couldn't be coming back yet. "Not many do," she said, and wondered if she was the only one.

Mrs. Munro wanted to hear how the injured man was progressing. "He was feverish in the night," said Polly. "But he seems better this morning." She got to her room and took off her sweater and skirt and fell into bed.

Portland picked up the clothes she had left in a heap, shook them straight, and put them in the cupboard. "Shall I call you if he comes?" she asked.

"Wh[^]t?" Polly was almost deaf to the world.

"Clive," said Portland, as though she had asked, "Who?"

"Not if he comes before midday," mumbled Polly, and Portland smiled and shook her head ...

"What was Polly doing there?" Elsa asked. Mrs. Munro had brought the news to the inn with the eggs, and that was Elsa's first reaction when the landlord relayed it to the clubroom. Until then the topic of conversation this Sunday morning had been the launch they were hiring this afternoon, but now there was another subject. Polly and Dr. Hargraves had found old Alastair MacLean injured, and had sat up all night by his sickbed.

The landlord thought that was commendable, but it raised a few eyebrows among the dig team. "She must have walked over there," said Lewis Kent, with sarcasm. "Why not? And if you were injured no doubt Polly would sit up with you."

Elsa felt he was purposely blurring the question and she inquired pointedly, "What on earth can she see in Dr. Hargraves? He gives me the creeps."

No one spoke until Clive said, "Behave yourself." When he smiled so did everyone else but Elsa. They all knew about Elsa's crush, just as they knew it bothered Polly that Hargraves was odd man out. Clive got up now. "I'd better get over there. If Polly isn't stopped she'll nurse the invalid until she drops."

How marvellous it must be, thought Elsa, to have Clive coming to make sure you were all right. How lucky Polly was, and how extra marvellous it would be if Clive and Polly had a quarrel. Not a tiff, but something savage enough to finish the relationship. If Elsa had a four-leaf clover or saw a shooting star that would be her wish, a row to finish it, because with Polly out of the way she was sure she would stand a chance.

But they didn't quarrel, they didn't even argue much. The only thing they disagreed on seemed to be Dr. Hargraves, and Clive really disliked him. If Polly stayed stubbornly determined to make friends with the man that might start some beautiful fireworks.

Goody, thought Elsa, hugging her hopes. But they faded fast enough, because she knew that as soon as Clive made an issue of it Polly would drop Hargraves. No girl would risk losing Clive for a man who looked colder than charity.

Clive had intended to stroll over to the Munros' this morning anyway. He wanted to tell Polly and Portland about the afternoon's arrangements, he knew Polly would want to come and Portland might. But this was a little earlier than he had planned and he walked slow and thoughtful.

He would have preferred Polly to stay away from Hargraves. He was not jealous. Generally popular, Clive had what it takes to attract the opposite sex, and he simply could not imagine any woman preferring Hargraves to himself. Certainly not Polly, who was full of life and bright as a button. There was no jealousy, but he wished this rubbish

had never started about bringing Hargraves into the group. She was sorry for him and capable of becoming even more defensive.

It might be better if Clive thought of the whole thing as a joke. It was a joke. It was flaming ridiculous. Polly was a little idiot as well as a girl with a first-class brain, and Clive liked that, it proved his own superiority. If she was still at Hargraves' lodgings he'd take her back to her own digs. "Look, sweetheart," he'd say, "you're here as an archaeologist, not as a home help. What use do you think you're going to be on the dig tomorrow?" Hargraves of course wouldn't notice if she collapsed at his feet. It was a wonder he hadn't walked over the old fellow last night, although it was probably Polly who'd found him.

The Munros' cottage was first and he called there. Mr. Munro opened the door to him and Portland came out of the parlour. "Polly's asleep," said Portland.

"Did you fetch her back?" Clive asked.

"I suppose I did."

He grinned boyishly, "She can be a handful, can't she? This looks like her Florence Nightingale week."

They shared a glass of sherry in the parlour. Clive didn't ask how Polly had come to be walking with Piers Hargraves. If he started prying others would start wondering, and there was nothing that couldn't be seen on the surface. It was obstinate kindness on Polly's part and on Hargraves' nothing, beyond tolerance of a pretty girl.

Clive's attitude affirmed that, and Portland went along with it. They chatted about the launch that Lewis was collecting in the harbour, and bringing round to the cove of the inn about half- one.

The weather was dull but there was no rain and the wind was not much more than a breeze, so the plan was they should circle the other two even smaller islets that made up a cluster with St.

Bara, and get back around dusk. It would provide a change of scenery with little effort.

"That sounds rather pleasant," said Portland. "Polly went to bed about nine o'clock this morning. She said not to call her before midday. She'll probably still be tired, but I suppose she could go on sleeping on deck."

"Do you mind if I hang about till twelve?" said Clive. He settled himself deeper into his chair and raised the sherry bottle inquiringly.

"Please do," said Portland, and he poured himself another glass.

"You're quite comfortable in here, aren't you?" he said. "It's not at all bad."

When his watch reached twelve Clive put down the pages of Portland's lectures that he was reading and said, "Will you go up and see if she's stirring?"

They both went up. Portland went in, and Polly lay with her dark hair fanned out on the white pillow. It seemed a pity to wake her, Portland would have let her sleep on, but Clive knocked on the door and Polly blinked. She looked groggily at Portland. "Hello, what day is it?"

She knew what day it was, when Polly woke she woke, and another tap on the door sharpened her voice. "Who is it?"

Clive put his head round. "Good afternoon," he said. "How's the patient?"

"Golly, yes!" Polly sat up. "The doctor should have come by now." She was still in bra, pants and slip. She looked for the rest of her clothes where she had dropped them, and Portland opened the wardrobe door.

Clive explained, "I'm not talking about that patient, I'm talking about you. I was about to say I prescribe sea air and the launch is setting off for a trip round the islands at half past one."

"Nice," said Polly vaguely. She took her jumper off the hanger, frowning slightly, and Portland said:

"You're not going crazy, I put it there."

"Bless you," said Polly.

"While you dress," Clive offered, "I'll get the bulletin on MacLean." "And bless you," said Polly. She kissed him briefly. "Ask if there's anything they want," she said. "Say I'll be along."

The only reason he was going was because he suspected that if Polly went she would stay, and he was damned if he was telling Hargraves that she would be along. Polly washed and dressed and sat downstairs yawning. Mrs. Munro was bringing lunch forward a little so that they could set off for the launch at one o'clock, and Polly was trying to brainwash herself that she had had enough sleep until tonight.

She saw Clive coming and went to meet him, not hurrying as she had yesterday meeting Piers. But she hadn't been sleepy then, a lot had happened since.

Clive vaulted the gate with a wide grin and an athletic ease, so that Polly giggled, then sobered to ask, "Has the doctor been?"

"Yep," said Clive. "The old lad was sleeping, he's been given some sedatives. A few days in bed, then take it easy for a while. The ankle doesn't seem to be broken, but it's badly sprained."

"That doesn't sound too bad, does it? Who was there?"

"Ian MacNeil, Bill's landlord."

"No one else?"

"Hargraves was upstairs in bed." Clive was scornful and Polly let it go, although she hoped Piers was in bed considering he hadn't slept at all last night. "I didn't go up and ask him if he'd care to join us on the launch this afternoon," said Clive jovially.

"I did," said Polly. "He said no."

It was pleasant on the launch. They went out into the Atlantic and Lewis Kent at the wheel, pipe clamped between his jaws, looked in his element. Polly sat in the bows, with the spray on her face, enjoying herself as much as any of them. This blew the cobwebs away and every vestige of weariness. She said to Clive, "I'm so glad you brought me to St. Bara."

"I'm glad I brought you." He brushed the silky hair back and kissed her thoughtfully. "You always taste delicious."

"It's the salt," she said. "I taste better with salt."

He kissed her lips. "Salt it is. Talking of food, does your mother know we're coming for her birthday?"

It was a joke, that Polly's mother cooked Clive's favourite dishes when he was expected. It gave her as much pleasure as it gave Clive, and it had become almost a tradition in the past year.

"I haven't told them," said Polly. "I thought we were surprising them."

It was all one to Clive, but perhaps she was taking away their fun of anticipation. She would add a postscript to that letter she wrote last night.

When they stepped out of the dinghy on to the cove of the inn the idea was they should all spend the evening together in the clubroom, but Polly had decided some time ago that she would not rest easy unless she checked Mr. MacLean's progress for herself. She said so and Clive laughed. "You're a real little do-gooder. Don't forget I expect you here bright and early in the morning."

Elsa said sweetly, "Will you and Dr. Hargraves be sitting up with him again tonight?"

"I doubt it," said Polly crisply. They would not, and Clive knew that. Portland had had enough for one day, so she and Polly left the party together. Christine, Elsa's fellow student, hung back a moment as the others went into the inn to put a hand on her friend's arm and offer some advice.

"Give it a rest. Nobody thinks Polly's having an affair with Dr. Hargraves."

"I know," Elsa agreed wistfully. "She'd drop him like a hot brick if Clive said she had to."

"I hope he doesn't." Christine hero-worshipped Clive with the rest of them, but she was more thoughtful and more observant than Elsa.

Elsa asked, "Why?"

"Because if anybody is going to make an enemy of Dr. Hargraves," said Christine with feeling, "I'd rather be off this island."

"Shall I walk along with you?" Portland offered as she and Polly reached the point on the track opposite the Munros' cottage. It was another ten-minute walk to MacLean's and Polly said, "I'm going to ask Mrs. Munro if I can borrow her bike."

That suited Portland, although she did ask, "Has it got a good lamp ? This is a rocky road."

"I shan't be meeting much traffic," said Polly, "give or take a sheep or two."

The lamp was good. It wasn't dark yet, but the gloaming exaggerated the uneven surface of the track and Polly cycled carefully. Even so she did the trip in three minutes, laid the bike on the heathland at the side of the track and kept an eye open for rabbit holes as she made for the house. One of them had brought Alastair MacLean down.

The windows gleamed mellowly, but the curtains were drawn. She knocked and the dogs barked and Piers opened the door. He was glad to see her. There was a softening in his face and her heart quickened because she was glad to see him too.

"Who's that?" Alastair MacLean's voice was encouragingly loud and she called, "The hogboon!"

The room was warm, and tidy enough. There was no sign of MacNeils now, but Mrs. MacNeil was coming in each day while Alastair MacLean was confined to his bed. Polly gathered there had been opposition to that from Alastair; as Piers was explaining the arrangements to her Alastair kept up a low muttering growl until Piers said, "Mrs. MacNeil or a nurse living here, it's up to you." Alastair growled again and muttered:

"Better the devil you know."

"That's not very flattering to Mrs. MacNeil," said Polly. "The doctor came?"

"Flew in," said MacLean, as though that at any rate had given him satisfaction.

"There's service," said Polly, and MacLean went on to tell her that Piers had contacted the pilot-owner of a Piper Club that landed fishermen on the islands or flew sightseers over them from time to time, and they'd had a doctor here like that.

"You're in good hands," said Polly. "Are you still needing a hogboon?"

"Aye," said MacLean. Piers said nothing. Polly felt that he would find it almost impossible to admit he needed anyone, but she had no inhibitions about offering help.

"Then may I come and cook your evening meal?" she said. "I'm a good plain cook."

"Thank you," said Piers.

So it was settled. She left half an hour later, and Piers and the dogs walked with her to where she had left the bicycle. She said, "You get things moving, don't you, flying a doctor out?"

"It was only a matter of a couple of phone calls."

"Who's paying? Who'd have paid for the nurse?" She knew he was, but she wanted it stated, and when he said "I am," she said, "That's good of you."

"It's nothing," he said. "Literally."

She asked in gentle raillery, "Are you that rich?"

"No," he said. "I've got money, I've always had money, and I've always been poor." Polly had always been rich, often with her bank balance near the red. She said:

"You're richer tonight in Mr. MacLean's book, and in mine." That sounded fulsome and a little silly. It embarrassed her as she said it and it seemed to amuse Piers, because he laughed. Polly smiled, "Well, I think it showed style, flying the doctor here, and I shall look forward to having dinner with you both tomorrow, although I have got to cook it." She got on her bike and said goodnight as she pedalled off.

"Mind how you're going." Piers sounded anxious, and she called back:

"And you get some sleep!"

She needed her own sleep, having mortgaged her leisure for the next fortnight at least. When she got back and told Portland she had promised to cook for the two men each night Portland said, "That doesn't surprise me. It would have been too much to expect Hargraves to make himself useful."

"He can't cook," said Polly.

"I'm sure he can't," said Portland.

Mrs. Munro told them at breakfast that Mrs. MacNeil was going in each morning to keep down the dust and make sure that Alastair MacLean was all right. As a good neighbour she would have done that anyway, but the doctor who was staying there had insisted on paying her for her trouble.

"So he's got a cook and a daily laid on," Portland quipped when Mrs. Munro had left them. "He soon got organised. I suppose he isn't paying you?" As Polly frowned she said quickly, "A joke, but don't take on too much, because he'll let you, and I don't suppose he's ever nut himself nut for anvmp in hie iif» "

Portland was a mile off the mark. A daily and a cook sounded as though Piers' main object was his own comfort, but it wasn't, it was Alastair MacLean's welfare. Polly wished they could have seen Piers when the old man was in fever, and heard his reassuring voice. Old Alastair had been comforted; and so would I be, thought Polly, if I was hurt and afraid and Piers came to me.

It would short-circuit a long argument on why Portland had the wrong idea if Polly simply said, "If I was in trouble there's no one I'd rather have beside me than Piers Hargraves."

She came within a breath of saying it. It would have shaken Portland. It might have proved Polly's point, but when it reached Clive it would have ensured that every possible obstacle was put in the way of Polly getting round to the MacLean household each night. If she even admitted, "I like Piers Hargraves very much," that would be enough to crystallise Clive's resentment.

If she was going to be any use while old Alastair was ill she must restrain herself from singing Piers' praises. This was as far as she could go.

"You're wrong," she said to Portland. "Piers is fond of Mr. MacLean and very concerned about him. And I offered to do the cooking, nobody asked me. Piers would have fed old Alastair if he'd been left to it, he would look after him."

"Why didn't you let him?" Portland inquired.

"Because I like Mr. MacLean too," said Polly. "And I quite enjoy cooking and it will give me something to do with my spare time."

Like Portland the others were not surprised that Polly had put herself on the MacLean staff. Clive teased her about it, "What's on the menu tonight?" and they all took their cue from Clive as they always seemed to. Sometimes at lunch-time, always when work on the dig ended for the day, Polly pedalled off on her bicycle. - which she had on full-time emergency loan, and which Lewis Kent had nicknamed meals-on-wheels.

When she walked in old Alastair was usually reading or listening to the radio. He'd acknowledge her with a grunt and a glance, but within a few minutes he would be asking how her day had gone. Polly's news was all about the dig and she entertained him with that while she got to work.

Every day now it seemed that the dig was producing something exciting. They had plenty of specimens left from the occupation of the castle: animal bones galore - the folk who lived here had been great meat-eaters. Then there were bits of iron that had been spears and arrowheads, a shield boss, a hilt of a dagger and fragments that probably came from a drinking horn.

Old Alastair enjoyed hearing her descriptions of the day's haul, and Polly enjoyed listening to him. He had travelled to places she would love to visit, doing an interesting job. He was a man of character, who in some ways reminded her a little of her father. MacLean was much older and much more cantankerous, but Polly's father had had a doting wife and a loving daughter to smooth the edge off his ruggedness.

She rode old Alastair's grumbles equably. She cooked what he wanted, preparing the dishes according to his instructions. It was all simple fare and Polly managed well enough.

MacLean was fuming at his own inaction, but Piers insisted he stayed where he was until the doctor's next visit. He wanted an end of Mrs. MacNeil dusting and polishing around him, and harboured a suspicion that she was not making beds or cleaning when she was upstairs but going through his drawers rooting out his secrets.

"What have you got to hide, then?" Mrs. MacNeil would retort cheerfully. "Is it a spy you are?"

After work Polly was usually here half an hour or so before Piers. The dogs told them when Piers was coming. He could have opened the door himself, but Polly always hurried to open it as though it was one of the moves of the game. Not that looking after old Alastair was a game, but it had its element of secrecy.

Polly's colleagues had no idea how Piers Hargraves changed when he came through this door. On the dig he was the man they thought they knew, silent and self-contained. Even Jack and Ewan were still calling him "Dr. Hargraves" to his face, "Hargraves" behind his back; no one but Polly used the name "Piers."

He and Polly talked when they met. but neither went obviously into the path of the other. At lunch-time now Polly usually cycled over to see old Alastair, sometimes to slip a casserole into the oven, but if she did stay on the dig site she ate with the team and Piers still spent his lunchbreak alone.

This was deliberate policy on Polly's part. She was anxious to avoid a situation where Clive might lay down the law. She knew that Elsa watched beady-eyed, and constantly came up with small catty comments; so Polly played it cool, and got a great deal of satisfaction from her "secret life".

That was too grand a description for the hour or so an evening that she spent in Alastair MacLean's home, rather like thinking of Piers as a

secret lover instead of a secret friend. He was a secret friend. She was discovering the man he would have been if he had been reared with the love and understanding that her parents gave her, the secret man whose existence no one else even suspected.

She knew that he had humour, consideration. She watched him caring for old Alastair, without fuss, with unruffled composure, but *caring*. After the doctor's next visit Alastair was allowed out of bed and his progress continued, but Polly went on with her routine of turning up each evening to cook the meal. She never stayed late, she rarely ate with them, usually cycling back to her own digs to join Portland, then meeting Clive. That way Clive had no complaints, even Elsa couldn't make much of it, because the only time Polly was alone with Piers was when he and the dogs walked back to the track with her.

They reached the flagstones of the floor of the great hall a couple of days before Polly should have gone home for her mother's birthday, and she understood why it changed Clive's plans. These stones were a treasure trove in themselves. They could show the way to vaults, some of them might have marks or carvings that would help to write a page of history, and at the least they were the stones that the Vikings had trodden, the bedrock of the castle.

The first stone was found at the bottom of Bill Canning's trench in section eight, a central grid. Everyone was delighted that the dig was proving worthwhile, but Clive's special personal gratification was the fact that if Hargraves turned in an adverse report now this should answer it.

He was exultant as he walked down to the inn at lunchtime with an arm around Polly. "We're earning our grant, sweetheart, Hargraves can't shut up the shop for us after this."

Polly was as elated as anyone about the stones, but she said, "There was never any question of him 'shutting up the shop'."

"How do you know?" Clive was fooling. "You might have done a better job than you thought, you could have him in the palm of your hand. Anyhow, you can lay off the lure now."

Elsa, a little way behind, was pleased to see Polly turn indignantly and say something quiet and fierce - which was "Don't talk such a load of old rubbish." But Clive went on laughing, and kept up with Polly, and there was no rift apparent when they reached the inn.

Clive rang the television studios with the news that they had reached the floor of the great hall, and when Polly walked into the clubroom that evening he met her with an apology. They wanted him to do a live broadcast from the Glasgow studios during the weekend, which meant he couldn't go home with Polly.

He gave the impression that it was up to her whether he agreed, he waited as though she could have him rushing down to the harbour to phone and say, "Sorry, it can't be done." But of course the matter was settled, and of course Polly couldn't object. She smiled ruefully, holding back her disappointment, saying, "Next weekend, maybe?"

"Maybe," said Clive. "Will you go on your own?"

It would be a long journey alone, although they had been going part of the way by plane. "I'll have to think," she said.

She decided against. Clive left on Friday morning, and on Friday evening Polly would cycle down to phone home. When she told them how things were up here, that it was because Clive was appearing on television that they couldn't come, her parents would understand. They would be disappointed, but they would understand, and she

would go home either next weekend or the one after, either with Clive or on her own.

Piers and Mr. MacLean weren't expecting her this evening. She had told them both she was going home, but now she wasn't, and at lunchtime she went across to the geology hut where Piers was working. "May I come round this evening?" she said. "I'm not going home after all."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Clive's doing a TV interview, so he can't make it. We'll be going another time." She sighed, without meaning to, regretting now that it was too late to take the launch, to pick up the hired car, to catch the plane.

"Didn't you want to go?"

"It's too late."

"It isn't," he said. "I'll get you there."

She hadn't expected that, but when he spoke it seemed that she had. She said, "I do want to go, yes, if it's only to look in and say 'Happy birthday'. Will you come with me?" Without waiting for an answer she asked, "How?"

"The Piper Club," he said. "Jackson will fly us down."

They left during the afternoon, climbing aboard the little white plane with its red piping, and soaring into the sky, higher than the seabirds. They flew down the coast of Scotland, glimpsing Northern Ireland as they crossed the Irish Sea. Then it was Wales, heading inland near Liverpool, down towards Chester, over Radnorshire, east of

Worcester . . . the marshes . . . the Wiltshire plains . . . the strange stones below, reminding Polly of the Watchers.

She was still in the clouds with excitement when their taxi drew up in front of her home, and when the door opened she threw herself into her mother's arms, laughing and too breathless for words.

Her mother hugged her, bubbling with delight at having Polly home again, babbling, "This is wonderful, this is my best birthday present - oh, it's so lovely to see you. And to see Clive - "

Shirley Blair looked from Polly in her arms to the man behind Polly, and her jaw dropped.

"Clive couldn't make it," Polly explained. "He had a TV interview. This is Piers."

"Oh!" said Shirley Blair.

"Piers Hargraves," Polly elaborated.

"How do you do, said Shirley, her voice and manner so strikingly changed from the warm welcome of a moment ago that Polly wanted to say . . . He got me here. He did it all. You should be thanking him, not standing there blaming him for not being Clive.

CHAPTER SIX

Shirley Blair believed she was being the welcoming hostess. As this man was a stranger she was obviously less exuberant than she would have been greeting Clive, who was the man she wanted for Polly. But Clive couldn't come and there was no reason why Polly shouldn't have brought another friend, Polly's friends were always welcome.

Shirley held out a hand for Piers to shake, trying to remember what Polly had said about Dr. Hargraves in her letters. Nothing much, so far as Shirley could recall, nothing to suggest he might be travelling all this way to pay them a visit. "All Polly's friends are very welcome," she assured him. "Her father and I love meeting them."

"Thank you," he said, and his handshake was firm and brief. Clive would have hugged Shirley and asked, "How's my second- best girl?" and there would have been smiles all round.

Polly smiled to herself. "All Polly's friends" sounded like a troupe, but Piers Hargraves wasn't going to fit into the pattern. "You'll go a long way before you meet another like this," thought Polly wryly, as her mother turned back to her and started asking questions about her health, which Polly's appearance should have answered without her having to say a word.

Andrew Blair came into the hall and Shirley said quickly, "It isn't Clive," as though her husband was very short-sighted.

He chuckled, "I can see it isn't, how do you do. Hello, Poll."

Polly took Piers with her, holding his arm. "This is my father," she said. "And this is Piers Hargraves." At least her father wasn't disappointed, so long as Polly came home he didn't care who came with her, but he gave Piers an assessing look as they shook hands, and then led the way into the living room.

Polly intended them knowing right away the part Piers had played in getting her home. She started her account before they were sitting down: the discovery of the flagstones, Clive's television programme, the fact that she had given up hopes of coming and would have been phoning to say so until Piers had offered to hire a plane, which had flown them to the last twenty miles, and in which they would be returning on Sunday.

When Polly stopped speaking Shirley asked, "Will we see Clive's television programme?"

"No," said Polly shortly. "It's a local transmission. Scotland."

Shirley sighed, "What a shame! Clive's always so interesting on television, isn't he?" Polly didn't think she was doing it deliberately, but she was being abysmally tactless. Andrew Blair said:

"Thank you," to Piers. "We're indebted to you."

"Yes, we are," Polly agreed, "so let's have a drink, if it's only a cup of tea, and toast tomorrow's birthday girl."

With Clive around the evening's entertainment would have been assured. He would have told them all that had been happening on the excavation, Polly joining in, the two of them doing a double act, but Clive always in the starring role. He would have complimented Shirley on her hairstyle, her dress, her cooking, and it would have been familiar and comfortable.

With Piers there was some restraint. Not only was he an unknown quantity but he looked it. He sat on the settee, long and thin, still and mostly silent, and his withdrawn expression could have meant he was watchful or arrogant or simply bored rigid. It was impossible to tell which.

Polly was anxious that these three should like each other. It was very important to her that they should, and she was sure that once this initial period was through her parents were going to realise the depth of character in Piers that made up a hundred times for his lack of social chit-chat. He would like them because Polly loved them so dearly, and because they were super people.

In the meantime, tonight, she tried to keep the conversation general so that everyone could contribute and the process of getting to know each other could start. But her mother preferred personal matters, like giving Polly news of friends and neighbours, and getting a thorough report of Polly's weeks away from home and what was happening to the team on St. Bara.

All talk of the dig seemed to come round to Clive eventually. The number of times he got into the act, either by name or implication, was almost funny. Telling herself this Polly smiled across at Piers. He smiled back, but she was not sure that the smile touched his eyes. For the moment she couldn't reach him, it was as though he moved away from her, and she realised how frail the link was between them. But it mattered, and she had to make her parents understand that.

She began to talk about the little waterfall in the cave, making it clear that she and Piers had been walking alone, about them finding Alastair MacLean. In her letter she had said, "We found him ..." naming no names, but now it was "Piers and I." She talked about cooking the meals and her mother listened, realising for the first time that Dr. Hargraves was the lodger in that household. The way Polly was talking now she had been seeing more of Dr. Hargraves recently than she had of Clive.

This man is a friend I value, Polly was telling them both, and after that her mother talked less about Clive, although she looked at Piers with veiled apprehension from time to time.

Supper was cold meat and salad, and a fudge cake with a chocolate topping. Shirley looked at it sadly as she brought it out of the kitchen and placed it in the middle of the table. She said, "Clive's favourite," sounding wistful. "Last time he ate four slices."

"There's one Viking who'll be running to fat one of these days," Polly hissed from the corner of her mouth at Piers. "Will you try a piece?"

"Thank you," he said, and she laughed.

"Now that's noble of you, because you'd much prefer cheese, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted it, and Polly's father applauded his taste.

"Sensible man, so would I. Tell you what, my dear, you put that in a bag and they'll take it back for Clive, if there's room in the plane."

Shirley was not amused, and Polly said, "We'll take half of it back and I'll have some now. I think it's a delicious cake." That appeased her mother, and she wondered if the gift might appease Clive when he heard she had brought Piers home, or Piers had taken her home. There was going to be a reaction from Clive, but she realised that she was not worrying about it.

She did the rounds of the kennels with her father last thing at night. Piers had been shown his room, and Polly had gone out with her father partly because she wanted to and partly to dodge her mother's questions. Her mother was partisan for Clive, but her father was impartial and calm and always ready to listen.

The dogs were all right, both boarders and patients, and as they moved along the compartments Polly asked, "Do you like him?" Her father's voice smiled:

"He might take some getting used to."

"It's worth the trouble. He's exceptional."

Andrew Blair nodded, "I can see that. Where does Clive stand in this?" They came out of the building into the yard and Polly shivered, she wasn't wearing a coat.

"Clive doesn't like Piers. It's nothing to do with me, it was that way when they were in college together. But the more I know Piers the more I do like him. And he likes me. And that's where everybody stands at the moment."

"So which one do I put my money on?" Her father smiled at her again, but there was concern for her in every breath he drew. She said slowly:

"I think Clive will ask me to marry him some time, and it will go on as it is now, sharing work and interests, loving each other in a way that never asks too much. But with Piers - " she hesitated, then spoke softly in the darkness, "I think the limits with Clive might be the beginning with Piers. I think - I don't know all that much about him - but there seems to be so much more to him."

They were nearing the kitchen door. She put a hand on her father's arm and said urgently, "Don't let Mother get the idea there's a great emotional triangle going on, will you? Because there's nothing going on. I'm just waiting."

"Making up your mind?" he asked gently.

"Or waiting to have it made up for me." She laughed and squeezed his arm. "You know me, all for the easy way."

He wished it could be the easy way for her, then he did not because he knew that in the end the easy way would never satisfy his shining girl.

Polly had put on her alarm clock for early rising. It was her mother's birthday and she intended to get down to the kitchen first, to make tea and start the breakfast. She woke before the alarm sounded and pressed the switch-off button and lay for a few minutes thinking of the day ahead.

Clive should have been here, sleeping in the next room. It would have been a cheerful day with Clive, he had made friends among Polly's friends on other visits. They might have spent the morning looking up some of them, meeting for coffee, maybe having a ploughman's lunch at a pub. At tonight's birthday outing - a table for four booked at a local restaurant - Clive would have kept the party going.

But today she was with Piers. If Clive had been here she would have jumped out of bed, pleased with the world, rapped on his door in passing and gone on her way singing. Probably not singing aloud, she didn't want to wake the household, but carefree enough to sing.

So what was different? She didn't knock on the door and she wasn't entirely carefree. She had a quick shower and dressed, but as she laid the breakfast table and filled the kettle she knew that she was glad it was Piers Hargraves and not Clive Rounsley who would be coming downstairs and sitting at this table.

That was disturbing, a simple fact that could cause complications and confusion. But right now Polly laid the breakfast table and resolved to keep cool, because no one had asked her to make either a choice or a decision.

The kettle boiled and switched itself off and she went back into the kitchen. She was making the tea as Piers came from the yard through the kitchen door and Polly nearly jumped out of her skin, parrowly avoiding scalding herself. "Whatever time did you get up?" she demanded. "I thought you were still in bed."

He was fully dressed and wearing an overcoat. "I've been walking round your town," he said.

"You should have called me."

"I would have done, but I didn't know which door to knock."

"You could just have called 'Polly', it's only a little house. It's only a little town too."

"After St. Bara it seemed a fair size."

She asked, "Did you see my museum, in the old city wall?"

"Yes, it was closed, of course." But it would be open later. She said:

"I'd like to show it to you, and Mr. Quinton would like to meet you." Piers seemed to doubt that and she said emphatically: "Yes, he would, very much. Give me your coat." She hung it behind the kitchen door. "Breakfast won't be long," she said, "and by the way, thank you for being prepared to eat a slice of fudge and chocolate cake last night. Fudge and chocolate are not your dish, are they?" She was smiling and he smiled.

"No," he said, "but if you offered me hemlock I'd probably take it."

That would be a joke from anyone else at all, a flip compliment, but when he said it her heart stopped with terror, as though she held hemlock and could do deadly harm. "I wouldn't hurt you," she wanted to say. "You could trust me with your life."

She said, "Don't say that when I'm offering you a cup of tea." She poured a cup for him and left him sitting on the high kitchen stool, to go into the living room and pour out two more cups for her father and mother.

Shirley came in as Polly set down the teapot and Polly said, "Happy birthday, darling," and kissed her.

"Thank you, dear, I thought I was first up."

"Well, you're not, and the post hasn't come yet, and there's nothing from me in it when it does, I'll be hand-delivering mine later."

"That will be fun," said Shirley. "It's lovely having you here if it is only for the day." She grimaced in real regret. "Oh, but I *was* so disappointed you didn't bring Clive with you, I'm sorry, but I just can't - " Polly gripped her hand and she froze, eyes questioning wildly. Polly nodded, with a slight head movement towards the open kitchen door.

Still silent, Shirley clapped a hand to her mouth and sagged into a chair. She gestured embarrassment, apology, and showed signs of hysterical giggles which would have been the last straw.

"Will you take Dad's cup up?" Polly suggested, and her mother grabbed at it,

"Oh yes, yes, of course I will. He was supposed to be getting up as it's my birthday and bringing me breakfast in bed, but he's still asleep and - " she got out of the room and closed the door behind her and Polly went to the kitchen door.

Piers still sat on his high stool, long legs stretched and ankles crossed, holding his cup of tea. "My mother wanted Clive," said Polly.

"They all do," said Piers. "But I'm here and he isn't."

"That suits me," said Polly. They smiled at each other and she knew she had taken the sting out of comparisons anyone might make today. I want you here, she had said. You came because Clive let me down, but you are not second-best, you are the one I would have chosen.

One day she would say these things in words, but for now they were said with a look, a smile, a remark that meant little at surface level.

By the time Shirley came downstairs again the post had arrived, a lot of cards and a few small parcels. They were waiting on her plate and she seized on them gratefully. They carried her through the discomfiture of facing Piers Hargraves after what he had heard her say. Not that it was so bad. If Polly hadn't stopped her she would have gone on to say a great deal more.

Clive fitted into this family so well and seemed so right for Polly. He was a little selfish, a little spoiled, but he had so much charm and Shirley had become very fond of him. She already considered him a son. Dr. Hargraves was a stranger. Compared with Clive he seemed cold and aloof and calculating, and she was afraid for Polly.

She opened her cards, by now Andrew was downstairs too, and handed them round to be admired. Then she opened her parcels. While they all had breakfast Polly kept up a flow of chatter, Andrew produced his occasional comment, and Dr. Hargraves said very little. But he watched Polly and listened to her, and Shirley kept thinking about Clive and wishing he were here. -*

There was no surgery for Andrew Blair this morning, but there were calls to be made and animals to be cared for. Doreen the kennelmaid had arrived, and Polly took Piers to meet her. Doreen knew Clive and liked him, but if Polly felt like a change why not? She wasn't

engaged, much less married, and it was a free country, and Doreen gave Piers a friendly welcome.

Clive had always been good for a joke, but Piers didn't look the boisterous type. He looked clever, though, interesting, and Polly was proud of him. When she said, "This is Piers" there was something in her voice and in her eyes that quickened Doreen's instincts. She and Polly had been close friends ever since she came to work here, and Polly was saying very plainly, "This one is special."

So Doreen marked his good points and decided he looked distinguished, and was not at all surprised later when Andrew Blair told her he was one of the world's top geologists. Not that that sounded much fun, but it was in Polly's line and he did have a very attractive voice.

Clive would have been flabbergasted to know that Doreen was impressed, but then Piers Hargraves had never tried to impress anyone before. That day people were impressed. They were Polly's friends he met, and because of that they were not cardboard cut-outs he wanted their approval. He made himself pay attention to them, and he found the exercise rewarding.

Mr. Quinton, Polly's boss, was typical of many ageing scholars, who had never been brilliant but could do their job and knew their subjects. Hargraves had met dozens of them, hardly noticing them. In most cases he could have done their jobs in a quarter of the time. But this man worked with Polly, he had been helpful and fatherly to her and Polly was fond of him.

This was Polly's small museum, so Piers took his conducted tour seriously, discussing the exhibits with Mr. Quinton, discussing St. Bara. He had found traces of the volcanic stone of the Watchers under the bank of the castle, and they talked about it, and Polly hid smiles because Mr. Quinton had no idea he was hearing the longest lecture in

the career of Dr. Piers Hargraves, who was answering questions and considering Mr. Quinton's opinions in a way that would have astounded the team on St. Bara.

When they left Mr. Quinton said heartily, "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed talking to you," and Piers said:

"It has been a real pleasure for me."

"Did you mean that?" Polly asked when they were out in the street again, and he nodded.

"Y[^]s, I did. But you'd better stay by me, I need your eyes to see Mr. Quinton as he probably is."

She turned smiling eyes with their fringe of dark lashes on him. "My eyes?" she said.

"You," he said. "I need you."

"That's a better arrangement." She took his arm and they went about their next task, buying Polly's birthday present for her mother.

Polly bought a pendant and Piers bought the matching bracelet and they took them back with a big bouquet of flowers. Shirley liked her gifts. She hugged Polly, she would have hugged Clive if he had been the giver, but with Piers her appreciation was restricted to a little speech on how guilty she felt that his visit should have coincided with her birthday, and how naughty it was of Polly to let him waste his money like this.

Shirley wished he hadn't. She felt she was accepting under false pretences because she was not on his side. She wished that Polly hadn't brought him. Polly should be marrying Clive, everything had been working out so nicely.

"Leave them alone," Andrew had advised Shirley while Polly and Piers were out this morning. "Let Polly make up her own mind."

"It's such an upset," Shirley had wailed. "I had no idea. Well, you know she's hardly mentioned him in her letters, and it was Clive she meant to bring home. Then without any warning she turns up with this man, someone we've never seen before." She added helplessly, "I just don't know what to say to him half the time."

"He's^not as easy as Clive," Andrew admitted. "He's a great deal deeper, but I'm not saying he's not the man for Polly. Leave them alone, my dear, let Polly make up her own mind."

Reluctantly Shirley followed advice, so far as biting back the questions she was dying to ask, but it wasn't the happiest birthday she had had. It was an anxious day, until evening when the celebration was a success.

Andrew Blair had booked at a restaurant where he and Shirley were known. It was noted for its good food, and the owner had prepared a special meal and had the table specially decorated for Shirley's birthday party. She wore a simple blue silk dress, silvered with tiny beads, and with her husband and daughter beside her she glowed becomingly in the candlelight.

Polly wore a long coffee-coloured skirt in fine velvet cord, a scarlet blouse, and an assorted collection of gilt chains. Clive would have provided the trendy male accompaniment, counterbalancing Andrew Blair's solid countryman look. There was nothing trendy about Piers Hargraves, but he had an air of unmistakable distinction. As they were shown to their table even Shirley admitted to herself that he looked important, somebody, a man to be reckoned with. At that moment she was not displeased that he would be sharing her birthday celebration in this public spot, where they would be recognised and friends would come over to speak.

Piers acquitted himself well. His compliments for Shirley were not like Clive's would have been. He didn't say she looked young enough to be Polly's sister, but he paid attention to Shirley, he talked to her, and she discovered that he was neither patronising nor boring.

The friends who came across to say happy birthday and be introduced might have been surprised that Clive was not here with Polly, but Polly was a girl who always had had a lot of friends, and Dr. Hargraves as an escort was doing her reputation no harm. The younger ones decided that Polly could pick them, the older ones wondered about him and were convinced that he was somebody whose word carried weight somewhere.

Flushed with happiness and her share from a couple of bottles of champagne, Shirley reflected, as she brushed her hair before bed, that she didn't really mind Polly being friendly with Dr. Hargraves. He could be quite charming and he was obviously very clever and it was nice that Polly was friendly with him, so long as Clive was the man she loved and married.

Downstairs Polly had shaken her hair out of the wide tortoise- shell slide that held it back. She sat on the sofa, sipping a glass of milk, and Piers stood by the fireplace looking at her. The fire had been almost out, but they had put on a few lumps of coal and poked it into a flame, giving light enough.

Polly was talking lazily about the evening, about their fellow diners. She said, "They'll be wondering who you are. They like a new face, we don't get too many in town."

Piers smiled, "They must be desperate if they want mine to add to the collection." She pretended to be viewing him in the flickering firelight as if he was up for sale.

"I don't know," she pronounced, "it's not too bad. I think it should wear well."

"It hasn't changed much," he said. "I was an ugly child."

"Were you?" She was not smiling now nor joking.

"Very." On top of the bookcase was a photograph of Polly as a child. He picked it up. "You were beautiful."

"No, not beautiful." Pretty because she was happy and loved, because every gift, from her quick mind to the natural wave of her hair, had been cherished. She went to him, took away the photograph and set it in its place. Then she drew him down beside her on the settee. "What made you believe you were ugly?" she asked.

"I was, skinny as a rake with a face like a skull. When my father said I was a freak I knew it. Except that I thought he meant deformed, that I had two heads or a hump. I waited for them to grow." He smiled, and Polly burned with anger.

The man might smile, but he must still feel the child's pain. If he had total recall for the written word he must remember despair. She said, "Did you have no friends as a child?"

"I didn't need any. I read, I occupied myself." There was no self-pity in that, he had protected himself by repressing all feeling. "I had one friend," he said. "But I wasn't a child and she was more than a friend."

He spoke in the past tense, so it must be over, and Polly was glad of course that there had been somebody, but she was glad it was over. She had never been jealous for Clive, but somehow this was different. She swallowed and asked, "What happened?"

"My father died, she'd been counting on the estate - I should have realised that was the attraction. When I told her he wouldn't be leaving me a penny she left."

Polly said tartly, "Stupid woman!" That was no rival, that was a stupid woman.

"She was," said Piers drily. "He died without making a will. He'd thought he was good for another thirty years. I was the only heir - although he never really believed I was his son - so it came to me."

"The house?" The house that was an orphanage.

"That too. I made it over to them so long as they kept my name out of it. It's named after my father." He went on cynically, "That would please him, he was a man who wanted all the credit due. He never got a title, but he might have done, he had his sights set on it and none of his charities went unnoticed. He didn't hold with doing good by stealth - no red carpet, no cash. He might well have got his title if he'd lived longer, he got what he wanted in everything but me."

Polly said softly, "But he didn't cut you out of his will. Perhaps he didn't mean to."

In the firelight Piers' profile was as bleak as on that first night and his voice was toneless. "He had a stroke. He lived a few hours. He was barely conscious, but he knew me. He looked at me as though the sight made him sick, then he closed his eyes."

Pity racked her for both, father and son, who were alien to each other in everything. Perhaps the father's had been the greater loss, he should have had such joyful pride in his son. But Piers had come near to being emotionally crippled, first through his father's rejection and then through the girl who had only wanted the estate.

Polly reached both hands to turn his face towards her. She knelt so that she could look at him closely and said, "I cannot imagine any way in which you could be a disappointment to anyone." She kissed him tenderly, as though she was comforting a child.

Then she was in his arms, and when he kissed her she felt the first real shock of desire she had ever known. She clung to him, as though she was the one in need of protection. He was the strong one and she was scared because it seemed this moment was momentous, changing her life. He looked at her in wonder. "You are beautiful," he said, and she said huskily, "So are you."

They sat for a long time in the firelight, his arm around her, talking quietly, close and safe, and although they made no plans and gave no promises it seemed to Polly that her life was involved with this man as she had never felt committed to Clive, and she was utterly content that it should be.

Clive Rounsley returned to St. Bara on Sunday afternoon, arriving by launch at the harbour where Lewis Kent was waiting for him with a battered old car and with Elsa. Kent had not wished to bring Elsa, but he had known she would walk down or cadge a lift somehow if he refused her.

Elsa wanted to meet Clive. Elsa wanted to get in the news that Polly and Dr. Hargraves had flown away together to spend the weekend at Polly's home, before Lewis Kent could tell Clive, playing it down, making it sound like nothing much.

In Kent's eyes Elsa was a trouble-maker and the team would have been better without her, and the last thing any of them needed was rivalry between Clive and Hargraves. Elsa hurried to meet Clive and

Kent stayed where he was, puffing on his pipe, watching Elsa with disfavour.

"How did the interview go?" Elsa asked.

"They seemed happy enough about it," said Clive. He had known Kent would be meeting him and he had expected Polly. As he looked for her Elsa said smugly:

"Polly went home."

"How?" Clive asked.

"With Dr. Hargraves," said Elsa. "They hired the Piper Club."

She hoped for anger, but she only got impatience. "I don't think they're back yet," she added for good measure.

Clive gave a snort of exasperation. Polly was carrying this thing too far. Her home had always been open-house to her friends, but landing Hargraves on her folk was too much. What a birthday present for poor old Shirley! Clive walked across to the car and said to Kent, "Can you hang on another few minutes? I want to phone and see if Polly's left yet."

"Sure?" said Kent. "Elsa, get in if you want a lift back."

Elsa could hardly go along and listen to the phone call, although she would have liked to. She could feel Lewis Kent's disapproval as she opened the door and got into the back seat. She sat there in sulky silence, and he ignored her, still puffing his foul-smelling pipe.

Shirley Blair was delighted when she heard Clive's voice. It seemed like an answer to prayer because she badly wanted to talk to him. This morning she had changed her mind about the friendship between Polly and Dr. Hargraves, if it meant that Polly was forgetting Clive

and turning to Hargraves. And today Polly had forgotten Clive, she hadn't seemed to be missing him at all.

"Happy birthday," said Clive. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it."

So was Shirley. It had been *such* a pity he hadn't been able to come. "Clive," she said slowly, "this man Polly brought with her."

Clive chortled, "Yes, I'm sorry about that too. Are they still there?"

"They left about an hour ago."

"Well, he's one of Polly's good causes. She can find them anywhere, can't she? He's an anti-social devil, he just won't mix here, and Polly's set out to befriend him. I'm sorry she persuaded him to go home with her, and I'm surprised she managed it."

"I'm not surprised," said Shirley. "I think Polly could lead him over a cliff."

"*What?*" Clive almost shouted, then he began to laugh. "No, you've got it all wrong. Polly's got a way with her, I know quite a few who'd follow her over a cliff, me included, but you've got the wrong idea about Hargraves. All he wants out of life is - "

"He wants Polly," said Shirley.

"Well, he can't damn well have her," snapped Clive.

Those were Shirley's sentiments and it was reassuring to hear Clive agree. She said, "Don't say you talked to me, will you? Her father says I shouldn't be interfering, but my advice to you, Clive, is to break it up quickly."

"I'll break it up," Clive vowed. "I'll put a stop to that piece of nonsense right now."

He joined the others in the car. "They're on their way," he told Lewis Kent. "Anything happen while I've been away?"

They had concentrated on the clearing of the flagstones, slow work as they were trench-deep. Kent explained exactly how much progress had been made, and Clive said the TV team would be coming to take some more shots towards the end of the week. He described the way his interview had gone, and Elsa sat quietly in the back wondering if all this talk was a cover-up.

When they reached the inn Clive said, "I'll walk up to the dig, I want to check something in the office," and Elsa asked quickly and winsomely:

"May I come?"

He turned on her then as though she irritated him beyond endurance and snarled, "Get lost, will you? Just - get lost." It was the first time Clive had snubbed her with venom, and as he strode away she turned to Lewis Kent, bewildered and cut to the quick.

"Serve you right. What did you expect?" growled Kent, feeling no sympathy for her whatever.

Clive did not want anybody dogging his footsteps, he needed to be alone to think. Polly's mother was no fool, nor was she one of those women who imagine that all men have designs on their daughters. If she thought that Hargraves had fallen for Polly he had, incredible though it seemed. Not that it should be incredible to Clive, he was in love with Polly himself, but he had thought that Hargraves had ice-water for blood.

Of course it must be stopped. Taking Hargraves home with her would mean nothing to Polly, beyond the hospitality she would have offered to any member of the team. But Hargraves might have seen it for

something else. He could have started believing that Polly was falling for him.

The simplest solution might be to tell Polly that she had overplayed it as usual, and had better start disentangling herself. She would do that, blaming herself if Hargraves was hurt. Clive had no doubt she would do it, but it would be a slow process, Polly being cruel to be kind would take weeks softening the cruelty.

Clive wanted it finished now. He wanted cards on the table so that Hargraves could see the score and know that he was the loser. This was for Polly's sake, saving her from her misguided kindness.

That was what Clive told himself. He had never tried to reason out his near-hate for Hargraves, he was not given to self- analysis, but the reason was resentment of an intellect vastly more profound than his own.

He wanted to see Hargraves humbled. He had a weapon here that should cut at the root of the other man's pride, and the bully in Clive gloated so that he was smiling, licking his lips as though the taste was sweet.

He didn't see Polly that evening. They returned, the plane came down, then rose again and winged away over the sea towards the mainland. But Polly didn't come to the inn and when it was dark and latish Clive set off to walk to Hargraves' lodgings.

Polly would hardly be there at this time. If Hargraves was out Clive would have to ask to speak to him alone tomorrow, although he wanted this meeting to get as little publicity as possible.

The old man answered the door and Clive asked for Dr. Hargraves. He gave his name and was left standing outside until the old man

came back with Hargraves. Then Clive said, "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Come in." Hargraves led the way upstairs- to the room where he obviously worked.

Clive said, "This is a bit embarrassing, but I'd better get it over with. You've been seeing a lot of Polly lately." As he said the name he watched the other man's face, but it was expressionless, and Clive went on, "And as it seems you've been getting some ideas about her I think you should know the set-up."

Still Hargraves said nothing. Clive drew a deep satisfying breath and said it all. "Polly and I had a bet that she couldn't - 'humanise' you, I think that was the word used. She's a natural, is Polly, for the strays and the sick and the sad. Anyone on the outside she wants in. She's sorry for you. God knows why, but she is. She has a first-class mind that turns to putty when she finds a lost dog in the road. Or a beggar. Now you may be less cold-blooded than we thought, but remember this is pity. You're the beggar in the road to Polly.

"Some of it is my fault, I suppose. I did encourage her to get into your confidence because of the grant. If you were sending in any reports that might jeopardize that I wanted to know, but I tell you I - "

Clive's voice trailed and stopped. From a tightening of Hargraves' mouth and a narrowing of the eyes Clive had received an impression of anger, controlled but tremendous, that silenced him like hands around his throat.

"You tell me nothing," said Hargraves. "You never did, you never will. Now get out."

Clive came downstairs. Once out of the house he almost stumbled in his haste to get away. His triumph had drained from him and he was afraid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"All my friends liked him," Polly told Portland at breakfast next morning, and when Portland looked surprised she laughed and added, "Why not? I do."

"You do, don't you?" Portland was finding this interesting.

"Why don't you?" Polly asked, and Portland considered while she stirred her tea, finally admitting:

"Because he doesn't want to be liked, I suppose. He gives the impression that he's his own man and to blazes with the rest of us."

"Not always," said Polly. "You should have seen him with Alastair MacLean. While Alastair was delirious that night Piers quietened him and comforted him, and afterwards it was Piers who was really looking after him."

She followed with some information that had been top secret, although he hadn't sworn her to silence, "And that orphanage you told me his father was interested in, they have the family home now, because Piers gave it to them on condition his name was kept out of the transaction."

Portland digested that. "More surprises," she mused.

"It isn't all on the surface with that one." Polly smiled, but Portland noted the pride in her voice. None of them had known the first thing about Piers Hargraves, but it seemed that Polly had found the key, and Portland suspected she had made her choice between him and Clive.

The choice was becoming less surprising to Portland. She liked Clive Rounsley, but she knew a shallow man when she saw one. He was not

measuring up to Piers Hargraves in Polly's eyes and he was not going to like that. We are heading for trouble here, thought Portland. Looking and sounding worried, she said, "Go easy on Clive."

"Oh dear," said Polly. She hadn't been thinking much about Clive in the last few hours. "Is it that obvious?"

"That you prefer Piers? Yes, it is."

Polly's cheeks were warm rose, she looked like a girl with lovely secrets and she made no attempt to deny anything.

"I'm not saying Clive will be broken-hearted," said Portland, "but he will be resentful. It hasn't occurred to him that any woman could turn him down." It was time they were on their way to the dig and as she got up from the breakfast table Portland added, "So go easy on him, for the sake of the rest of us."

Polly nodded, then smiled mischievously, "There's always Elsa."

"And Louise," said Portland. "The TV unit are due again." She watched Polly, remembering the last time, and Polly laughed:

"Maybe I can get Clive to jilt me, then his masculine conceit won't be hurt."

"That's a good idea," said Portland, and thought that Clive would be unlikely to jilt Polly. With this new singing radiance about her she had never looked more attractive.

They passed the single Watcher on their way to the dig and Portland asked, "Do we still call him Piers?"

The one that was alone. Polly's eyes danced. "I love him. I always said I loved him."

"So you did," said Portland hastily, "but don't tell Clive that in front of the whole team," and Polly sobered from her gaiety.

"Of course I wouldn't."

"Your flight into the blue with Piers created quite a stir," Portland warned her. "They'll be waiting to see what happens next."

All those who were working on the mound seemed to be on the mound. Clive was visible from here, he had been looking for them and spotted them. He knew how he planned to play his hand. He was not going to scold Polly, nor rile her. She looked very pretty as she came over the hill, with her hair blowing and the bright colour in her cheeks.

"Hello, sweetheart," said Clive, and kissed her, and she remembered the wild music in her blood when Piers' mouth had crushed hers, how the world had slipped away. Clive's kiss was faintly pleasurable, and if they had been alone and in darkness it would still have been no more. "How are your folk?" asked Clive.

"Fine," she said. "Mother sent you some cake."

"She's a doll." He beamed at her as though she was a doll too, and took her arm, and there was nothing she could do about that. "You won your bet then?"

"What?"

"You got Hargraves to join in something outside the working schedule, so choose your perfume."

"I don't think so," said Polly, "because I wasn't working on the bet, I'd completely forgotten the bet. How did the TV interview go?"

"Very well," said Clive. He couldn't resist sneering, "Was Hargraves a hit on Shirley's birthday outing?"

"A very satisfactory companion, thank you," said Polly demurely. Then she remembered afterwards and looked across for Piers, and Clive felt her hurrying from his restraining hand. Her profile was sweet with parted lips, but not for him.

Piers was hot on the mound of the dig, neither were Ewan and Jack. They must all be somewhere around the bank and ditch, and up here work went on, clearing the flagstones. Polly got down to that, smiling off the teasing because Portland was right, it had created a stir when she had flown off with Piers after Clive had left the island. Elsa was so persistent in her loaded questions that Polly was tempted to tell her the facts to get her from underfoot.

None of the bank and ditch crew came up to the mound that morning and at lunch time, before Clive could stop her, Polly had downed tools and was hurrying to find Piers. There was no sign of him, no sign that anyone had been working down here this morning. She walked along the ditch, staring at the black polythene sheet that was pegged over the spot they were tunnelling, until Clive joined her and taunted, "You're not still chasing him, are you?"

She bit her lip. "Where are they?"

"Not here, from the looks of it."

When they had said goodbye last night Polly had said, "I'll see you tomorrow," and Piers had said, "You will." So he would be back before work ended for the day, and in the meantime Polly went along to the inn with Clive, to have lunch with the rest of them.

Half way through the meal Jack turned up to collect some sandwiches and Polly asked, "Where are you working?"

"We're doing test bores for volcanic rock all over the place," said Jack.

She inquired, "Was it a sudden decision?" because Piers hadn't mentioned it, and Jack said:

"Yes. He gave us our marching orders when he arrived."

She couldn't understand it. She had been so certain Piers would be here. She would have expected him to wait until she came however urgent this expedition had suddenly become. She was on time, they could only have left the site minutes before, and they must have gone along the shore instead of climbing the mount as though Piers had meant to miss her.

Polly sat quietly through lunch, looking thoughtful, while Clive smiled. The barriers were up again, Hargraves was keeping out of Polly's way, and although Polly would be puzzled for a while she must accept it in the end. There had been no call for Clive's apprehension of last night, he should have known that Hargraves would put up no fight.

Polly was bewildered by the turn of events. Last night they had left each other at the gate of the Munros' cottage, and Piers had held her in strong arms, so close that she could feel the hard muscles of his body. It hurt her to leave him, and it hurt him too because he almost groaned her name.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she had whispered, although she wanted to cling to him for ever, and he had said:

"You will," as though it was a promise he would keep even if he died in the night. He had watched her go into the cottage and Portland had asked Polly no questions that night, except how did you find the family and was it a good flight?

But Piers was not here now and he had let Jack come with no message for her. If there had been a message Piers would not have concerned himself with what anyone else might think. He would have said, "Ask Polly to wait on the site," or "Tell her I'll see her at Alastair's."

But of course Piers knew she would go round to Alastair MacLean's cottage after work. Except for the last weekend she had prepared the evening meal ever since Alastair's accident, cycling there on Mrs. Munro's bike. Today she hadn't brought the bike, she had expected to walk with Piers and to stay and share the meal. She had told Mrs. Munro she wouldn't need feeding this evening, so that was all right and that was what she would do.

Clearing the central grids to flagstone level was sweatingly hard work, and there was excuse for not chattering. So long as Polly looked cheerful no one knew what she was thinking, but anxiety gnawed in her as she toiled, throbbing in her temples, parching her throat, and making her limbs heavy.

Clive was relieved by Piers' non-appearance. The longer Piers and Polly stayed apart the less likely Polly was to hear how Clive had engineered the rift. From now on Clive meant to make sure that Polly's spare time passed where he could keep an eye on her. But he was looking the other way when six o'clock came round and when he looked back Polly had gone.

"Where's Polly?" he asked Lewis Kent, who had been working beside her a few minutes before.

At six o'clock precisely Polly - never a time-watcher normally - had looked at her watch, said, "That's it, then," and left the site at a brisk pace. "I reckon," said Lewis Kent, "she had a heavy date."

Clive scowled. He could have caught up with Polly. Now that he scanned the landscape he could see her, but he wasn't running after

her with everyone watching him. "It's about time she stopped cooking this evening meal for old MacLean," he said.

And for Hargraves, Kent ruminated.

Polly walked as fast as she could, past the Munros', heading for the grey house where Piers was living. She had felt cheated today because he was not within call and sight. She realised now how much it meant to her to have him near, how overwhelmingly important he had become to her.

Alastair answered the door and the dogs came out to welcome her. "I'm back," she said.

"Aye, lassie." He let her in. He was looking his old hale self again, and she could smell a casserole cooking. It was obviously the end of her domestic chores here and she had expected to be ousted from the kitchen as soon as Alastair was up to taking over again, but she felt a pang of regret, she had enjoyed serving up the meals.

She asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"You've been a rare help." His shrewd eyes under the grey beetling brows were kind, but his voice was gruff. "But the doctor thinks we've wasted enough of your time."

"Wasted my time?" she echoed. Did that mean that Piers didn't want her coming here like this, hurrying from the dig so that she was waiting when he arrived? But the time she had spent with Piers had been the most meaningful of her life and she pleaded, "Even if you're not needing a hogboon any more I can still come, can't I?"

"You're a popular lassie, I hear," said old Alastair. "The doctor feels we're keeping you from your other friends. Imposing on your good nature."

She couldn't believe Piers had said that. It sent shivers through her while she pretended to laugh. "Heavens," she said unsteadily, "what nonsense!"

"Are you not a popular young lady?"

"We're all good friends in the team."

"Vairy nice," said old Alastair. No, it was not nice. Friendship was not enough when you thought you were near to a fusion of mind and body beyond anything you had ever dreamed. Piers was sending her back to Clive and to the others. Something had happened to change the way he felt about her between last night and the time he reached the dig this morning. Perhaps something as simple as regretting all he had told her, and deciding he did not want that kind of intimacy.

Perhaps things had moved too fast. In a few weeks Polly had learned more about Piers than anyone else knew, but he couldn't really have regretted that. He couldn't deliberately have decided to live without the piercing sweetness they had already found in each other. She must see him and talk to him and touch him and ask how she could be wasting her time with him when he was so clever.

Then he would laugh, and then she would say, "And when I melt when you touch me and when I love you." She would tell him that she loved him, although he must know it. She hadn't told him yet, but she would tell him this evening.

Alastair MacLean didn't seem to mind her wasting her time, he let her stay and pet the dogs and talk about the three flagstones they had uncovered today.

When the dogs pricked up their ears and made for the door she knew that Piers was coming, and she went to open the door, the way she always did. He was later than usual, and she hadn't cooked tonight's

meal, and he had left a message that she was wasting her time. These things were different, but she stood her ground and smiled and waited.

He didn't smile and he looked surprised to see her. "Didn't you expect me to be here?" she asked.

"Frankly, no."

"But why not?" She floundered, "You said you'd see me at the dig. Why weren't you at the dig?"

"I was working somewhere else." He exchanged a few words with old Alastair and began to walk up the stairs to his room. Polly went too, asking:

"Why didn't you wait till I arrived?"

They were in his sitting room now. He tossed his zippered jerkin on to a chair, then he turned to Polly. "It's over," he said, and she looked at him, bewildered, stammering.

"I - don't understand."

"That makes a change," he said drily. "Up to now I've been the one in the dark."

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, she could only stare. Piers Hargraves was tall, but he seemed taller now, the cold withdrawn mask had gone, his face was hawklike and dangerous, the eyes were glittering. He stood, arms folded, looking down at her.

"Thank you," he said.

"What for?" she croaked.

"For humanising me." She got her first inkling then, and she blushed hot and guilty. "You did a great job," he said. "You made me so human I damn near killed a man last night."

"What?"

"Sit down." He took her by the shoulders and set her on the divan with its tartan rug. "Hospitality," he said. "Another thing I've learned from you. Do you want a drink?"

"Listen to me," she begged. She could explain if he would let her, but he was not going to let her. He sat down beside her and said:

"Of course you know who told me about the wager?"

She suspected Clive, but they had all been at the barbecue when that stupid bet was made. "Who?" she asked, and Piers said softly:

"You really are an accomplished hypocrite."

Her eyes were burning dry or she could have wept as she protested, "That isn't fair, and whoever told you had no right."

"He seemed to have every right," Piers drawled. "He also mentioned that your heart rules your head and that you never have been able to pass a beggar or a stray dog."

Polly gasped in horror. That was surely Clive, and she would never forgive him - what a foul thing to say. "How did I qualify?" Piers asked sardonically. "Which did you decide I was?"

"Do stop it!" Polly begged, and he said quietly:

"I do agree that it's time to stop."

"You know I don't mean that. I mean please stop talking like this. The bet happened when they were teasing me for trying to make friends with you, and it was only a joke."

"And were they all in on the joke?"

"They all knew," she had to admit. "But it isn't a joke to me and it never was. I love you."

"Why?" he demanded bluntly, and all her reasons choked her so that she didn't know where to start. "Because you think that no one else does," he said. "But if you'll think a little further it might occur to you that there's no woman in love with me because I haven't wanted one. When I do I have the most potent aphrodisiac in the world - money. I could buy a woman almost anything she wanted, and don't tell me that wouldn't make me irresistible."

It was true that no rich man need be lonely. There was a gleam of laughter in his eyes. She had seen him mock himself, but he had never mocked her till now. "Are you sure you won't have that drink before you go?" he asked.

She shook her head, although a drink might have steadied her. "Please," she made an appealing gesture, reaching for him but letting her hands fall when he made no move, "I'm sorry Clive talked all this rubbish. You know it wasn't like that."

He was still watching her with disturbing steadiness. "I know you won your bet," he said. "You made me human. You brought me emotions I could well have done without. Anger for one when Rounsley came here last night. You can tell him that, and that I could have killed him."

He stood up and pulled Polly to her feet. His hands on her were steady, she was the one who trembled as they faced each other. "I'm stronger than Rounsley," he said. "Does that surprise you?"

She turned her face so that the swathe of her hair fell over his hand on her shoulder. Her hands crept around the back of his neck, fingers lacing behind his head. She pressed herself close, hearing his heartbeats, praying that he would pull her closer still so that Clive's vindictiveness would have no power.

"It doesn't surprise me," her voice was muffled, "and it doesn't surprise me that you're angry, but please let me stay."

"No, thank you," he said. He unclasped her hands and stood back from her. "I've had all the charity I can take. And there was one other thing. Rounsley mentioned that he'd asked you to check my reports and my attitude to this excavation."

"No!" Polly exploded.

"He didn't?"

"Well - it was the grant he was concerned about, of course, but -"

"So you'll appreciate that I'd rather you kept out of rooms where I keep papers," said Piers blandly. She could have laughed as easily as she could have cried at the absurdity of this.

She sounded as though she was laughing, "You don't - you *can't* seriously believe I was *spying* on you?"

"How would I know?" he said, and there was no laughter in him. "It wouldn't have mattered, the results are more than justifying the grant."

"It wouldn't have *mattered*?" Except that it would have meant she was cheating all along. Had he accepted that on Clive's word? "Who do you believe, Clive or me?" she asked wildly, and Piers said,

"I believe that Rounsley knows you well. He's right about your heart ruling your head, but I don't care to be classed with stray dogs and street beggars."

"But that is nonsense!" she cried, for the second time that night.

"Isn't it?" he said. "And now, I've work to do."

"You really want me to go?" He didn't repeat himself again, he looked at her until she said, "Goodnight, then."

He said, "Goodbye." The word was deliberately chosen. He let her go downstairs alone and let herself out. Alastair MacLean watched her from the kitchen, but she didn't notice him, nor the dogs who had come forward and were left wagging their tails at the door she closed behind her.

When he took Piers' meal to his room some time later Alastair said severely, "I hope you know what you're doing, doctor. That is a guid-hearted lassie and you're no' treating her well."

"I know exactly what I am doing." Piers didn't look up from the notes he was making, and his cold voice brooked no argument.

Polly couldn't go straight back to the Munros'. She walked blindly, needing the breeze on her face, blaming herself for not mentioning the bet to Piers. Then it would have been something to smile at together. Hearing about it first from Clive, Piers must have felt that the whole team was following Polly's pursuit of him. Including the students, Jack and Ewan, his own assistants.

He had confided so much in her, did he wonder now if she had babbled those confidences around? He had asked if he could trust her, on the night of old Alastair's accident, and she had said yes because he could. But how could she expect him to believe her now that Clive had told him she had been going through his reports?

She would have some bitter things to say to Clive when they met tomorrow. But they met sooner than she expected, because Clive was waiting for her in the little parlour with Portland, who had finished her evening meal and was relaxing with a pot of coffee.

The radio was on and Clive was talking so that neither Clive nor Portland heard Polly open the outer door, and when she walked from the hall into the parlour everybody jumped. "Goodness, you startled me!" gasped Portland. Clive got up. He and Polly eyed each other, and he knew at first glance that the big scene was imminent. He had expected it. He was as ready with his excuses as he ever would be.

"How *could* you? That was a *despicable* thing to do!" cried Polly with ringing scorn, and Portland sighed deeply because whatever it was that Clive had done there was obviously going to be an almighty row.

"Because your mother asked me to," Clive announced. Shirley had also asked him not to tell Polly this, but he was conveniently forgetting that. "I rang to wish her happy birthday and she said she didn't like Hargraves and if I had any influence at all she hoped I'd keep you away from him."

Polly believed that much. Her mother probably had warned Clive of the awareness between Piers and Polly. She could easily have added, "I'd keep her away from him if I were you, Clive." And Clive had fixed it so that Piers had almost thrown Polly out of the house tonight.

Polly turned to Portland, her eyes too bright and her voice shaking. "And do you know how he went about it? He told Piers that he and I

had a bet on whether I could turn Piers into a human being. That I'm always a sucker for strays and street beggars. Piers wanted to know which category he came in."

"Oh dear!" Portland pursed her lips. "Was that necessary?"

Clive tried to look patient and to speak slowly and calmly. "Yes, it was necessary. Polly *is* a sucker for the underprivileged. She's been trailing Hargraves because she's sorry for him, but he's a man, and how is any man going to react when an attractive girl continually throws herself at him? He needed to be told he was on the list of Polly's good causes before he got the wrong idea."

"And believed she was in love with him?" Portland inquired.

"Yes." A blotchy colour came up in Clive's face, but Polly was paler than usual.

"How do you make Piers out to be underprivileged?" asked Polly silkily, and Clive's veneer of calm blew so that he was almost shouting.

"For crying out loud, because he's got no friends, because nobody likes him, because he's only just human."

"All the people he met at the weekend liked him," said Polly. "My father did, so would my mother have done given time, she isn't quite so perceptive as my father. Piers is clever, he's rich, that doesn't sound underprivileged to me. Oh, and he *is* human. He told me I did a good job on humanising him." Clive looked at her with sharp suspicion, but there was no triumph in her face. She said, "He also told me he nearly killed you last night."

Portland couldn't imagine Piers Hargraves saying that, but if he did she felt that Clive had had a narrow escape. She poured herself

another cup of coffee and took several strong black steady gulps while Clive tried to laugh.

His sangfroid was not convincing, the memory of last night was too close. He blustered at last, "Who does the damn fool think he's kidding?"

"He was not kidding," said Polly quietly. "I advise you to take care from now on what you do and what you say to him."

"What is going on between you two?" Clive began, suspicion stirring again, and Polly said bitterly:

"Nothing. Oh, and he's locking up his papers from now on, because it seems you told him I was going through his reports for you."

"I may have mentioned the grant," said Clive, "but I certainly said nothing about you going through his papers."

"Just a misunderstanding?" said Polly wearily.

"It seems like it," Clive tried to bluff. Last night he had been high on the power to humiliate, but now he wished he had said nothing to Hargraves. He had achieved the break between Polly and Hargraves, but he was realising he should have been more subtle, and that perhaps he should try appealing to Polly.

He put on his little-boy-lost face and admitted, "I could have pitched it too strongly, I said some things that were going it - I'm sorry, sweetheart."

What could you do with Clive? Polly wondered. Not long ago she might have found this appeal disarming, but now she had wiser eyes that saw the selfishness under the surface. She said, "Being sorry won't take back what you said."

"Ah, he'll forget the half of it," Clive waved a dismissing hand. "Not the message, I hope, but the way I put it."

"Unfortunately he has total recall," Polly said in a taut little voice. "He'll be able to remember every word any time he turns that particular page."

But only a short page, surely, and there were other pages that recalled other things: the hours they had spent together, the words, the looks, her yielding softness in his arms. He had put her out of the house tonight, but perhaps she could steal back into his memories when he was alone and tired and less on guard.

She sat down, suddenly very tired herself, and Clive said brightly, "What about that cake your mother sent me?" ... The fudge cake. Piers would have eaten fudge cake although he disliked it because "I'd take hemlock if you gave it to me..."

"You want it now?" said Polly. Clive wanted the subject changed, he felt they had spent long enough on Hargraves.

"Why not? Or have you two eaten it?" He grinned at Portland, who shook her head, marvelling at the thickness of Clive's skin. He didn't seem to realise he had done an appalling thing, hurting Polly and insulting Hargraves beyond belief.

"I'll bring it tomorrow if I remember," said Polly. "And now, Clive, I think you had better go. I've had enough for one day."

"You don't feel like a walk? There's going to be a moon." Clive was looking whimsical and Polly was verging on hysterics. She had absolutely nothing to say to Clive that would need moonlight.

"No, thank you," she said emphatically.

He stooped and kissed her mutinous lips. "Tomorrow then, bright and early."

Portland stood up, telling Polly, "I'll get you a cup, there's still some coffee left." She saw Clive out, went into the kitchen for the cup and saucer and came back to find Polly still sitting in the chair by the table, dark-eyed, pale-faced, looking beaten.

Portland poured coffee. "That was very stupid of Clive," she said.

"If he hadn't talked about the bet it might not have been so bad," said Polly tremulously. "Now Piers thinks everyone was watching to see how I made out. And he thinks I was running to tell Clive everything he said about the dig."

She bit her lip hard. "Clive knows me, Piers says, he knows that my heart rules my head. Well, I can't deny that, can I? Half the time I'm an idiot do-gooder, and how can I convince Piers that I'm not?"

You can't, thought Portland, looking at the girl's troubled face. It was refreshing in this day and age to meet someone who was genuinely loving and giving. But Piers Hargraves was not the man to be told that a girl's interest in him was part pity, and partly another man's interests. He had the pride of Lucifer, he would never forgive that.

"You stay the way you are," said Portland gently. "I like my friends to be kind." She wished she had a daughter like Polly. "Have you had anything to eat?" she asked.

"You sound just like my mother," Polly sighed.

"Do I?" Portland had to smile at that. "If I were I suppose I might have thought you and Clive made a pair. But now I've seen rather more of him than your mother had and I don't think you need Clive. *Have* you had anything to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I'll fetch you something," said Portland briskly. "You can't go on digging if you're starving yourself."

Polly lay awake that night. She had never been lonely before, and the wind seemed full of sighs and the sound of weeping. She lay in darkness and wondered what she could say when she saw Piers again ... "It doesn't matter how it started, but it must go on because I can't manage without you. Perhaps you don't need charity, but show me a little..."

Of course she couldn't say that, she didn't know what she could say. She was adrift, helpless, and she turned her face into the pillow because Portland was a light sleeper, and it would be dreadful if a sob woke her.

Polly got through the next day without giving herself away. Only Portland - apart from Clive, of course - knew what had happened,, and Portland was glad to see Polly working hard and talking and joking as though nothing much was amiss. That took courage, and Portland approved of courage.

Polly was frosty with Clive, who had walked some way across the heathland that morning to meet them. Portland saw him coming, Polly's glance was downcast until Portland said, "Shall we set Bess on him?"

Dear old Bess, trotting beside them, was not an attacking dog, and Polly blinked and looked up and saw Clive. "Good morning, sweetheart," said Clive cheerfully.

"Is it?" Polly glowered.

"You're not still moody?" He was disappointed in her and she said fiercely:

"This is no mood, and you at the moment are my least favourite person."

Clive fell back a couple of paces. Polly was usually sweet-tempered, and he was glad there was only Portland listening. This was not good for his image, a girl glaring at him and announcing that he was her least favourite. He said shortly, "Let me know when you're feeling reasonable," and marched back to the dig keeping well ahead of them.

That day he spoke to Polly only when he had to, and she answered briefly, and everyone presumed that Clive had objected to Polly clearing off with Hargraves on Friday. He had told her she must stop seeing so much of Hargraves and Polly was showing her independence before she gave in. She would capitulate, of course, nobody doubted that, not even Elsa.

For the second day running Hargraves was not around. He, and Jack and Ewan returned to the site late when the others were almost due to leave, and came up on to the mound carrying the equipment they had been using during the day.

The three men came together. That was the obvious way to come, but up to now Piers Hargraves had usually walked alone. Although Jack and Ewan had been working under his direction for weeks there had always seemed to be a space between them - physical as well as mental.

Now they came together and talking, and when they reached the mound Bill Canning, the first man they came to, automatically asked, "Good day?" He expected Jack or Ewan to answer, but it was Hargraves who said:

"Quite rewarding, thanks, how about you?"

Bill could hardly have been more surprised, especially as Hargraves waited for an answer, and when Bill said, "Another couple of Saxon coins and five foot of flagstone," Hargraves smiled and said:

"No treasure yet?"

Then he went over to the trenches in the central grids, looked down into them and across at Clive. "Can we show you anything?" asked Clive.

"Thank you," said Piers quietly.

Clive registered astonishment. "You're actually concerned with what's happening up here?"

"Of course." The voice was still quiet but with a cutting edge. Polly had told Piers every detail of their progress on the dun. He was as knowledgeable as though he had worked alongside the diggers, and now he examined finds and asked questions, showing an interest and an insight that surprised them all. He was as self-contained as ever, but this was a man who might be approachable, and when he had joined Jack and Ewan in the geology hut Elsa giggled, "And I thought Polly was the only one he could communicate with!"

Piers hadn't spoken to Polly, but he had discussed weapon finds with Lewis Kent who was the weapons expert, and Kent said, "Any time he'll talk on my subject I'll listen."

Clive was uneasily aware of having been overruled and overshadowed, and now it seemed that the whole team had stopped to discuss the astounding fact that Piers Hargraves had spoken to them of his own free will. "Big break-through," jeered Clive. "Anyone

doing any more work today, or have these few words from the master been too much for all of you ?"

Portland said coldly, "Don't be childish, dear," and it had been the wrong line to take with Lewis and Bill too. They were mature, highly qualified men, and Clive's sarcasm was an impertinence. His dislike of Hargraves had been blatant from the start, but Hargraves was a member of the team, and if he came halfway they would meet him. They felt that the dig was the thing, and neither the place nor the time for personal prejudice.

Bill Canning asked bluntly, "What's wrong with the master's words? Like Lewis says, they're worth listening to."

"Sure," said Clive. "Shall we knock on the door of the hut and ask for an encore?" No one laughed and the showman in Clive sensed that he had lost his audience. He grinned, "Sorry, sorry, you're absolutely right."

Elsa wanted to say, "Dr. Hargraves gives me the creeps." She knew that she was missing a chance of allying herself with Clive, but she couldn't say it when she remembered how unexpectedly attractive Hargraves' smile had been. Elsa had never seen him smile before, and honestly it had made him look a different man.

"Anyhow," said Clive, "it's time we knocked off, we've all worked like beavers."

They put away tools and locked up huts and fastened down the plastic sheets, and when Polly saw Ewan and Jack leave the geology hut she was near enough to walk into the hut almost before she'd realised what she was doing. Five steps and she was inside, closing the door behind her. She had no idea what she was going to do and Piers turned from the trestle table under the window, where he was

distilling what looked like muddy water in a retort heated from a calor gas bottle. "Yes?" he asked, sounding annoyed at the interruption.

He looked grimy. There was white dust on his hands, and a black smear on his cheekbone, down the side of his face. Polly followed it with her eyes and felt as though she was running a fingertip slowly down his face, curving the hard line of his jaw. She gulped and said quickly, "You said it was a rewarding day. Did you find what you were looking for?"

He regarded her steadily for a moment, then he said, "I thought I had, but it seems I was mistaken."

Perhaps he was talking about geology, not about her. She had found what she was looking for in him, but if she told him that he wouldn't believe her. "Haven't you any work to do?" he asked, and she tried to joke.

"You've brought work to a standstill. Everyone's knocked out because you're showing an interest in their half of the dig."

He raised an ironic eyebrow. "Surely you told them how interesting you'd made everything sound."

She said, "I told them nothing." She came to the trestle table so that she was standing beside him. "Do you know you've got a great smudge on your face?" She plucked a tissue from a box. "Let me," she said.

She turned, facing him, and he gripped her wrist, taking the crumpled tissue from her fingers and dropping it. Then he loosed her and his smile was utterly cynical. "You've already put your mark on me," he said. "We'll leave this one alone."

The door opened and Clive came in. "Sweetheart," he said, and it wasn't an endearment, "what do you think you're playing at now?"

"Go away, we're talking," said Polly, her voice rising, but Piers said:

"Go away, both of you, I'm busy," and when Clive reached for Polly's arm and she drew back Piers said curtly, "And both of you keep away from me. You're well matched and you're welcome to each other."

Polly walked out of the hut ahead of Clive. Behind her Clive demanded, "Are you satisfied?"

She lifted her head a little higher.

"I could spank you," said Clive.

"You're thirty years behind the times," Polly gritted. "The heavy hand technique is very out of date. I doubt if even Elsa would be turned on by it."

"Don't make a scene," hissed Clive. "Don't make a scene " They had almost a full audience. Jack and Ewan had gone, but everyone else was still around, having watched Polly walk into the geology hut and Clive follow her. Now Polly had come out, scarlet-cheeked, and Clive looked like a man who could well explode from the strain.

"I don't mind a scene," said Polly.

But Clive minded a scene very much. He thrived on popularity, he had to be admired, and no girl was going to bawl at him in public. He turned to take the path down to the inn while Polly headed for Portland.

The two women walked in silence from the site, past the single Watcher, and were almost at the Munros' cottage, wending their way

through a herd of cows, before Portland asked, "What was said this time?"

"Not much," said Polly. "Piers said he wants us both to keep away from him."

"That's not surprising," said Portland, and Polly nodded. But it would make no difference whether she kept away or not. In the little hut just now Piers had held her wrist and looked into her eyes, but there had been a gulf between them as wide and as deep as the space between the stars.

Elsa followed Clive at a safe distance. He and Polly had obviously not settled their differences, and Elsa would have given a great deal to have been a fly on the wall of the geology hut just now. What *had* happened? she wondered.

Anyhow, Polly had gone off with Portland and Clive had left without speaking to anybody and Elsa trotted behind Clive down the rocky track to the cove of the inn. As he was about to go into the inn she called "Clive!" and hurried to catch him up. "You will be in the clubroom tonight?" don't know," he said pettishly.

"There isn't anywhere else to go, is there?" said Elsa, looking hopefully sympathetic. The others were coming down the track now, and Clive said:

"No, there isn't," and went into the pub. Lewis Kent followed Clive, but the students lived under canvas in the two tents beside the inn, and Christine and Joan and Peter walked on with Elsa.

"Trying for Clive on the rebound?" they teased her, and Elsa said pertly:

"If I am, why not?"

"Because he won't be on the rebound long enough," said Peter. "Polly will come round, she'll drop Hargraves." Joan laughed.

"When she does I wouldn't mind him on the rebound, he was quite nice this afternoon, wasn't he?" They were still surprised about that, they were still talking about it when they reached the small camping site, and Jack and Ewan who were both lying full length on the grass. Joan leaned over Ewan. "We've decided your boss is quite nice when he talks."

"He will be pleased," said Ewan.

For some time Jack and Ewan had been satisfied with their part in the excavation, and lately they had been almost smug. Flagstones had been found on the castle mound, but Jack and Ewan showed no envy at being stuck with a bank and ditch. Nor were they complaining at being stuck with Hargraves. They hadn't complained for some time.

The students sat on the cool damp grass. They had worked hard and they were tired. Later they would clean up and be ravenously hungry for their dinner, but they always lolled around for a while when they left the site.

Christine chewed a blade of grass and asked suddenly, "What should you think Clive's got against him? They hadn't met for years, but Clive made him a monster from the start."

Jack, staring up at the sky, arms folded beneath his head, said, "He won nearly every award that was going when they were at Cambridge, maybe Clive was a runner-up. Clive likes to be number one."

"Why not?" demanded Elsa. "Clive *is* number one. Clive's got everything." They were Clive's "fan club", he was the most popular

tutor in the university, but now Jack rolled over, raised himself on one elbow and looked at his fellow students.

"Everything Hargraves doesn't want," he said. "If they were both after the same thing I don't think Clive would get it."

"Of course he would," shrilled Elsa.

"Does Hargraves want Polly?" asked Joan, who liked a bit of romance and a bit of excitement. Apart from the dig St. Bara hadn't provided much entertainment.

"Does he look the sort who'd wear his heart on his sleeve?" said Jack.

"Does he have a heart?" asked Joan.

"I don't know that either," said Jack, "but he's got one hell of a brain."

Clive's only satisfaction in the past humiliating hour had been the knowledge that Hargraves no longer wanted Polly. He had wanted her, her mother had been right on that, and although Clive couldn't believe that Polly was falling for Hargraves Shirley had been right again that somebody had to stop it. Clive had told Hargraves the facts, and if his words hadn't suited Polly they had successfully turned Hargraves against her.

He had ordered her out of the geology hut just now. "Both of you get out," Hargraves had said. He had said they were well matched, Polly and Clive, but Clive was less sure of that than he had once been. Polly was showing too much spirit, and although she would regret it soon Clive was undecided how to deal with her when she did.

The only thing he was crystal clear on was that it was never going to be Polly and Piers Hargraves. Clive had made them enemies, and the

way Clive was feeling about them now he would hardly have cared if they had cut each other's throats.

He looked at himself in the mirror in his room and that cheered him up. Elsa would be waiting in the clubroom this evening and he could always use admiration, although Elsa didn't particularly appeal to him and there was no point trying to make Polly jealous of Elsa.

Polly scored over Elsa in every way and must know it. But when the TV team came and Louise Brogan arrived that might be another story. Louise was striking and sophisticated, she enjoyed flirting with Clive, but they had given Polly no grounds for what Clive believed was Polly's small show of jealousy last time. Next time could be different. Clive beamed at his reflection, sure that Louise would be delighted to receive his full and undivided attention. Serve Polly right, thought Clive, if he started something serious with Louise.

Polly was quiet, eating her evening meal, and Portland talked more than usual to fill the silences. Portland had an easy flow of words, she lectured for her living, but she found it hard going tonight, because the most interesting thing that had happened today was Piers Hargraves.

Portland had worked with him before, but this was the first time she had really talked with him, only for a couple of minutes, true, but he had seemed genuinely anxious to hear all that Port-i land could tell him about the dig, and she had been pleasantly surprised by Piers Hargraves this afternoon.

All the same, he was the subject Polly hardly wanted to discuss, so Portland chattered obligingly about anything else that came to mind and was not sorry when the meal ended and Polly said, "I'm going for a walk."

"On your own?" There were still a couple of hours of daylight left and it was a safe island, but walking alone wouldn't cheer Polly out of her depression.

"Bess will come, won't you, Bess?" Polly scratched the top of Bess's head and Bess thumped her tail.

Polly's reason for getting out the house was in case Clive should come along, because she simply could not stand any more of Clive tonight. Anyhow, walking was relaxing if you took it quietly. The day had been spent with her back bent, digging and carting, and she could walk with her head up and her shoulders swinging and Bess at her heels.

She would not let herself hope for one moment that Piers might be out walking the dogs too, that if they met the dogs at any rate would rush up to each other. "Hello," Polly would say. "I really am trying to keep away from you, but the island isn't very big, and you were so wrong about Clive and me being well matched." Or perhaps she would just say, "Hello."

She met two boys who were rounding up sheep, and several dogs, and there were always cows, but she didn't meet Piers. Not even when she went as near as she dared to Alastair MacLean's.

There was smoke coming out of the chimney, and inside the evening meal would be over and maybe they would be playing chess, or Piers would be working in his room alone. The room he had told her to keep out of because of the papers. The room where he had taken her the first time the TV team came and Alastair MacLean had served up a bottle of wine with their dinner. She had told Piers about the sheep who thought she was a dog. "Would you believe?" she had said, and he had answered, "I might believe it, if you told me." So why wouldn't he believe her now?

She stood watching old Alastair's house for a few minutes, while Bess trotted ahead a couple of times, looked around for her and came back, the second time with an expression asking, "How long are we staying here?"

Then they made for the coastline, and the cove of the little waterfall. Polly had only been there once, but she remembered the way and it was a pretty walk, somewhere to go. The tide was well out, even when it came in there was still a wide strip of shingle edging the cliffs. She walked across, over the sand and the rocks, and found the little cave in the cliff face that held the waterfall.

She mustn't stay, there wasn't time. She had sat on this stone and Piers had sat there and they had talked. If you could wish on a well why not on a waterfall! "I wish he would believe me," said Polly aloud.

Bess pricked up her ears and Polly could feel the spray of the waterfall on her face. "We must go home now," she said to Bess. "We'll come again." And again and again, because if Piers ever came here it meant that it wasn't over. If he came to the waterfall in a way he would come looking for Polly.

Her cheeks were wet from the spray and before she got home she had to dry her eyes and pull herself together because it might have looked to Portland as though she had been crying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There was a touch of tension around the dig next morning. Everything looked the same, everyone worked as hard as ever. Up on the dim there was the usual talk and laughter, but work yesterday had ended on a cliff-hanger and nobody knew what was going to happen today.

Clive seemed affable, except that he didn't speak to Polly. Polly was fine, but ignoring Clive, and when Piers Hargraves came up on to the mound, carrying a small plastic bag containing a gritty substance, the talking stopped and even Lewis and Bill waited.

Piers wished them all good morning when he came to them, took a quick and appreciative survey of the clearance of the last two hours, then put what he was carrying into the geology hut and went back down into the ditch.

That was what Jack or Ewan would have done, what most folk would have done, it was only remarkable because it was Hargraves stopping to talk to his colleagues and involve himself in their progress. No one remarked on it today. Clive made no snide comments, and they all went on with what they were doing, but everybody noticed.

Hargraves didn't join them at midday. He ate his lunch where he always had, in the hut or where they were working, but during the afternoon when Peter reached something that might be a sword hilt Lewis Kent said, "Let's get Hargraves up."

"Why?" Clive demanded. "This isn't his department."

"Weapons are mine," Lewis insisted, "and I'd like him to see this."

He didn't wait for what Clive would have said next, he went down to Piers and Jack and Ewan, and came back with Piers, and that was

Piers Hargraves in a new role. Clive Rounsley was the director of this dig, but Piers Hargraves knew more. If he was willing to share his knowledge then his colleagues would take up his offer, of course they would, and glad to get it.

Clive went into the director's hut while Hargraves and Lewis were talking, sat down at his desk and changed a line in an article he was writing. He could see them through a window, Lewis Kent broad and bearded and husky as a pirate, and Hargraves - taller. Clive hadn't realised how tall Hargraves was. Kent was speaking and Hargraves nodded, then spoke, and fury rose in Clive because Hargraves looked like the man in charge, and that he was not.

Clive walked out again, carrying some papers as though they were the reason he had taken himself off in the first place. He rejoined the group, joined in the discussion about this latest find, and said rather patronisingly, "Thanks for giving us the benefit of your advice," to Piers.

"Not at all," said Piers, and smiled, "you gave me the benefit of yours."

Some of them might have suspected a double meaning. Clive knew what he meant. And Polly knew, and kept her head bent over the earth she was working, as she had done ever since Lewis went to fetch Piers.

"A slight shift in the balance of power today," said Portland as they walked home.

"What do you mean?" asked Polly.

Portland looked at her. "Clive didn't like it when Lewis called in Piers, and he liked it even less when Piers came."

Polly looked ahead, not meeting Portland's eyes. "The dig's supposed to be a team effort, isn't it a good thing that Piers has - " when she hesitated Portland suggested:

"Come in from the cold? Yes, I think it is, he's going to be a big asset. But up to now it has been Clive's dig, hasn't it? No one has challenged him. He's had it all his own way."

"He is the director," said Polly.

"Agreed," said Portland. "But I'll be surprised if he has it all his own way much longer, so don't start feeling sorry for Clive, will you?" Polly winced a little at that. "I've finished feeling sorry for anyone but myself," she said wryly. That sounded weak and whining and Polly was neither, but she was sorry about the heartache that wouldn't leave her, and that was hurting enough right now to make her wonder seriously how long she could stay here.

She could have occupied herself if she had stayed home tonight. She should be writing a letter to her parents - it was no use blaming her mother for what had happened, that was how Clive would have reacted anyway as soon as he'd realised Polly was in love with Piers. It would only worry her mother and father if she told them that Piers had finished with her and that she couldn't care if she never saw Clive again. When she wrote home it would only be about work, she couldn't handle her personal problems on paper, she couldn't handle them at all. She would plead that they had never been busier to explain why the letter was a short one.

There was also another article due for her local paper that she must get down to before long, but when the evening meal was over she said, "Ready, Bess?" and Portland said:

"Don't go too far, there's a mist coming up."

Portland guessed that Polly was hoping to meet Piers, but if they did come across each other accidentally Portland feared there would only be more hurt for Polly. She offered, "Shall I come?" and Polly smiled:

"You know you don't want to, you'd much rather put your feet up."

Polly wanted to go alone. She went the same way as last night, but she walked faster because there was mist around this evening, lying like smoke in the hollows and in fantastic trails between the heather and the scrubs. When she reached the cave of the waterfall she sat down for a few minutes looking out at the sea, willing Piers to come.

If you were on the same wavelength you should be able to transmit thoughts to each other, and they were on the same wavelength whatever he said now. She concentrated fiercely - come this way, come to me...

A dog bounded along the water's edge and she stopped breathing, but it wasn't Alastair MacLean's dog and it was alone and Polly knew that she could sit here till morning, wishing her heart out, without making a scrap of difference to the way things were. Wishing was no use. It only left you lonelier, if that was possible.

She got up from her rock and said, "Come on, Bess."

Bess had been snuffling happily around the little cave and Polly went to her, noticing for the first time a narrow fissure in the corner at the back, not wide enough to creep through but intriguingly dark and spooky. If you had a torch you could peep in and what would you see, a seal-maiden or a hogboon?

Piers hadn't shown her this, he probably hadn't noticed it either. Perhaps she could tell him about it and then he would know she had been to the waterfall, and at least he would know she was remembering and walking alone and that she wasn't with Clive.

The mist was pearl-grey when she got home, the light was fading and every wisp of mist looked like a ghost. Portland had been watching for her from the window and opened the door before Polly reached it. Polly looked back over her shoulder. "Weird, isn't it?"

"You can see where the old legends come from," said Portland. "Meet anybody?"

"No." Polly shivered. "Nobody at all."

There was still fog over the sea next day, but it didn't halt work on the dig. Several pottery pieces were turned up, some of them matched, and Polly spent the morning cleaning and piecing them together. She was still on her task at lunch-time. "I'll come in a minute," she said when the rest went to the inn. "This is a tricky bit."

She wanted to go down and look for Piers. He might be in the geology hut, he might be down in the bank and ditch. He was around the dig because while she was working she had seen Ewan on the dim, and if Ewan and Jack were here Piers was here. But the lunch hour went by and Polly was still fumbling with the "tricky bit" of her reconstruction. Her usually deft fingers were all thumbs today, and she was scared.

She wanted to find Piers and she didn't. There wasn't much hope that his attitude had changed since Monday when he had said, "Keep away from me." She was asking to hear that again,

louder and clearer, and she felt sick just thinking about it.

But she had to make one more effort. If that failed she would give up, but just once more she would try to reach him. It would have been better during the lunch hour when there was no one else around, but she hadn't been able to screw up her courage, and she couldn't stay in

this hut all day, jittering over her pottery pieces. The state she was in she could drop the lot.

She took a deep breath, as though she was about to jump into deep water, picked up a piece of pot that hadn't been treated yet, and came out of the hut. She walked across to the geology hut and looked in and there was no one in there. Then she went down into the ditch towards Jack, who had just come out of the tunnel and was emptying a bucket of earth into a wheelbarrow.

"Hi!" she said. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," he said. "Do you want the guv'nor?"

"Yes."

"In there," said Jack, and walked away with his wheelbarrow along the ditch. The tunnel was about four foot high, well supported with wooden struts, and reaching about six foot under the great mound of the castle. They had moved some earth down here.

Piers was working at the face, down on his knees, an electric battery lamp burning beside him. He must have heard what was said because he had turned his head, and there was enough light to show Polly a very discouraging expression. "Yes?" he said.

Polly went down on her knees too, it was easier than standing bent double. She said, "We've found a pot that's very nearly complete up there, here's a piece of it." She held it out on the palm of her hand and Piers said:

"So I've heard."

She said lightly, "I think I've found where the hogboons live," and he said wearily:

"I wouldn't be surprised at that either."

"There's a little passage from the cave of the waterfall."

He had turned to his work again.

"What waterfall?" he said.

She talked to his back, so tense that her tight-clenched hands ached. "I thought you had total recall." "Only for what I want to remember."

"And you don't want to remember that?"

"What do you think?"

"I think - " she began, and he said:

"No, you don't, not often enough. You feel, but you don't think."

That was near to being a cutting truth. "Maybe, sometimes," she admitted, "but sometimes you'd do better to think less and feel more."

"Oh *no!*" He struck a rock ahead so that chips flew out, but none could have hit him because he didn't flinch, and she asked:

"Do you hate me?"

"I don't know."

"Think about that, will you?"

Outside someone called, "Polly, there's a dog here with a thorn in its foot," and Piers turned.

"Another stray needing you."

"I'm going," she said. She unclenched her hand and felt pain and stared at her palm where the sharp-edged pottery shard had cut her.

"Get that cleaned up," he said.

Obviously, there was mud in it. "That's your mark on me," she said.

He didn't touch her. He said, "That's a scratch. That will leave no mark."

"I think it will," she said.

They were calling her from the dun, Jack had relayed the call, and she climbed back to where Joan and Christine were squatting beside a brown and white dog, who was growling and wagging his tail at the same time. "He's been hobbling around for ages," Joan explained. "And we think he's got something stuck in his paw."

He had, a particularly vicious gorse bramble, and it took Polly some time to get his confidence so that he let her ease it out. From the first aid box she dabbed on disinfectant and then got round to dealing with her own cut palm.

"He never bit you, did he?" gasped Joan.

"No," said Polly. "That's only a scratch I did myself." She put a plaster on it and went back to work, and although she was probably being stupid she did have a flicker of hope. Piers was angry still, he wasn't letting her reach him. But if there had been no chance he would have let her see his face.

That evening Polly walked to the waterfall again. Although she knew it was too soon for Piers to come she was afraid to miss a night, and by now Bess had decided this was routine and almost sat up and begged as soon as the meal was over.

Polly took a torch and peered in through the crack in the rocks, and it only went for a couple of feet before it closed so there was no magic cavern there, the only magic here was the waterfall and memories. And the stubborn dream that Polly was building, that some time Piers would come here for her.

"You don't think enough," he had told her today. She did think. You don't pass exams and write booklets for your museum and articles for your local newspaper without thinking, and she had never realised you could feel too much until now. Until now both affection and love had been comforting emotions. She had felt affection for almost everyone she knew, animals included; and love for a few. But never this kind of love before, this hunger for one man as though she was starving to death without him. He must come here one night, perhaps walking with the dogs the way Polly was doing, and then they wouldn't need to say anything at all. Just being here would put back the clock.

They saw each other each day at work. When Piers came up to the geology hut he spoke and he looked at what was happening up here and, except for Clive, his colleagues were beginning to like him. But when he spoke to Polly it was never more than a word or two, as everyone noticed. He seemed to have no particular interest in her and Polly seemed to have lost both her admirers.

It was unlikely they decided that Hargraves had ever been really involved with Polly, but Clive certainly had, and Clive was very cool with Polly these days, because on top of her other shortcomings he held her partly to blame for how Hargraves was acting now. Clive reasoned that, left to himself, Hargraves would not have bothered anybody, but Polly had to go chasing after him, and now he only had to walk across the dun to challenge Clive's authority. He was the flaming expert on everything, in any argument the odds were that

Hargraves would know the answer, and it was Polly who couldn't bear to see him outside, who had to get him into the team.

Clive had had no choice about Hargraves joining the dig, but he had wished more than once this week that he had never brought Polly to St. Bara. He had thought he was in love with her, and she was bright and helpful and would work hard, but how was Clive to guess she was going to cause this kind of disruption? When she did come round to apologising for the way she'd carried on Clive would be sorely tempted to tell her to get lost.

He looked across at Hargraves, talking to Bill Canning on the edge of the dun, and growled at Elsa who was asking some question or other. "That's a lot of help," said Elsa. She was becoming disillusioned with Clive these days. It wasn't that Clive was not still dishy, but he was downright morose at times.

Of course Elsa wasn't the only one to notice that. They all noticed and they all disapproved. It was not jealousy over Polly. It was plain professional jealousy on Clive's part, that Lewis and Bill and Portland tried to ignore and that was turning the students rebellious.

Clive had always been popular because he was one of the boys, but when he came up against Hargraves he seemed immature while Hargraves stayed cool and in control. The brushes were never about anything important, Hargraves never interfered unless he was asked for advice, but Clive resented everything about him and so sure as Hargraves had been around Clive would start throwing his weight about.

That made the digging seem tougher. The students had volunteered to come here in their holidays, prepared to work hard but expecting to enjoy themselves; and supervisors like Portland and Lewis and Bill and Polly don't usually dig on excavations. Everyone was slaving away because the flagstones were down there, waiting to be

uncovered, and no one had objected up to now that Clive as director wasn't digging. But when the director turned into a dictator he could find himself with a walk-out.

Portland was the first to protest. Piers had just come across and asked when the TV unit was expected. This was Friday afternoon. "Monday," said Clive brusquely, and he surveyed his workers. "We can't clear the whole area down to flagstone level, but if we work through the weekend we shall have grids six and nine for the cameras as well."

Portland, who was hauling up a bucket of soil, put it down by her feet and said, "Not this old lady, dear, I'm feeling my age, so stop cracking that whip at me."

Most of them laughed, and Clive, who really should have denied that Portland - in her late forties - was an old fogey, said, "The rest of us, then."

But Lewis Kent had hired the launch again, they were going over to the mainland, Clive was ordering, not asking, and they had had enough. Suddenly he saw that in every face, even Elsa's. He looked for Piers and Jack and Ewan and said, "Of course it's no use suggesting you stop mucking about down there and come and help us clear some flagstones?"

He was sounding jovial now, trying for a lighter note, and when Ewan said, "You'd do better to join us," Clive said:

"You've got to be joking. What have you come up with?"

Since they had been tunnelling into the hill the only things that had come out had been earth and stones and lumps of rock, while up here there was quite a collection to show for their efforts.

Piers said, "We've reached a passage."

These days Polly didn't look directly at Piers unless she had to, she found it easier that way. She saw him, whether he was near her or not, but she could seem casual enough as long as she didn't meet his eyes. If she did there was a risk that hers would show naked commitment, which was something she might do well to hide. She had been carting away the buckets of "spoil" that Portland was hauling up, but when Piers said that about a passage she whirled around and he was looking at her.

It was a physical shock that tingled through her like touching live wires, right to her fingertips and the tips of her toes. Everybody started asking questions, but Polly stood gasping, the thought singing in her - He looked for *me*... he told *me*...

Piers wasn't looking at Polly now, he was telling all of them.

"There are man-made workings under this mound, probably as old as the Stones."

"How long have you known this?" Clive demanded, and Piers said:

"It's been a theory until now."

"Why isn't it a theory now?"

Piers said, "Because we've reached a carved stone, probably the entrance to a tomb."

After that there was no holding them. They all hurried down into the bank and ditch. They had to go into the tunnel one by one and the tunnel ended in a great slab of dark brown almost black stone covered with swirling designs. They came out pale with excitement and awe, because this was spectacular and terrifying. There wasn't much talk

for a while, except in hushed tones as though whatever was behind the stone might hear them.

Before Clive went in he said, "It could lead into the vaults of the castle," but Piers shook his head.

"No. Much earlier. Bronze Age." Portland chuckled:

"The telly people *will* have a good story! This is going to take the limelight off the flagstones."

Clive frowned, then he remembered that he was the television star, that Hargraves had no personality at all in front of the cameras, and there was no doubt who Fergus would want to interview on Monday.

When everyone had looked and they all stood outside the small tunnel Clive began, "Talk about luck - "

"See here, Clive," Jack interrupted truculently, "this wasn't luck. Dr. Hargraves didn't just chuck a pebble over his shoulder and start digging where it hit."

Clive resented one of "his" students taking Hargraves' part, but he grinned at Jack, "Point taken. Anyhow, we've certainly got something here. They'll want to film it on Monday, of course, so we'd better concentrate down here now, cut back the overhang."

"The three of us can manage that," said Piers.

They could, three able-bodied men, but Clive wanted to take over. There was going to be glory in this discovery and Clive coveted glory. He lost his temper and snapped:

"I say how this excavation operates and I'm telling you - ""You tell me nothing." Piers' voice was quiet, but Clive remembered the last time Hargraves had spoken those words, and although it was broad

daylight and they stood in a small crowd he backed down and shrugged and said:

"Well, it's your stone up to now, you clear it. Just keep me posted on anything else you find or I'll have to put my spies in."

He made that sound like a joke, but Polly could have hit him. He was reminding Piers that she was supposed to have been spying on him before, and she was sure it was deliberate. It was. Clive had seen how Piers looked for Polly when he told them about the carved stone. In spite of everything Piers still wanted Polly to be the first to know.

"O.K.," said Clive. "We'll leave you three to it." He led the way back to the site on the mound, but the students didn't follow him at once. They hovered around here until Hargraves appealed to their common sense.

"You would be more use on the dim. We'll only be clearing away this side of the stone for the next few days."

They left unwillingly. What seemed unfair was that Jack and Ewan, who had had everyone's sympathy when they were assigned to Hargraves instead of to Clive, should now be the ones with the exciting find and the considerate boss. Clive was being so foul-tempered these days.

But Clive was realising that bad temper was not getting him far. When Portland had rebelled he had seen that they were all against him, and if the students went back to college with the news that Clive Rounsley had been a tyrant on St. Bara that would take some living down. Popularity was meat and drink to Clive, he really needed it.

Besides, this excavation was going to be a great success, with a Bronze Age burial chamber beneath the Norse castle, so even

Hargraves would have to be placated, no more cracks like the one just now about putting a spy in.

By the time he was back on the site of the dun Clive had made his good resolutions and proceeded to act on them. He apologised to Portland first. "About Sunday, sweetheart, I am a bit of a slavedriver and there isn't much point killing ourselves up here when the main TV coverage will be down there."

"None at[^]ll," said Portland.

When the students did arrive Clive greeted them cheerily. He didn't apologise to anyone else, but he went around spreading the charm, and everyone was thrilled about the big discovery, and the atmosphere improved and it was almost "good old Clive" again, with the students at any rate.

Polly was resistant to the charm, and Clive left her alone for now, although possessiveness had stirred in him when he saw that look between her and Hargraves. He got himself some way back into the good books of Portland and Lewis and Bill by praising Hargraves for the discovery of the underground workings. Clive was a good actor and he gave a good performance of admiration for a colleague.

"He took the first chance he got to speak to Piers alone. When Piers came up to the geology hut Clive followed him in and said heartily, "Congratulations, this is fantastic."

"Thank you," said Piers.

"I very much hope we can work together on this." Clive looked solemn and Piers said:

"Of course."

"The TV unit are bound to make a lot of it on Monday, but I'll keep Fergus off your back."

Hargraves disliked interviews, he had always avoided them, but now he said, "I'm sure you will," with disconcerting irony.

"Fantastic," said Clive again, projecting sincerity as though he was in front of the cameras himself. "They always said you were a genius and this proves they were right. How did you come to choose that spot?"

"There are always signs," said Piers, but he didn't elaborate, and after waiting for a few moments Clive went on talking, flattering, convinced he was winning Piers over and finally offering his hand with what seemed a genuine offer. "Shall we let bygones be bygones? We've had our differences, but this has to be a team effort."

It was a genuine offer, Clive could not have been more sincere. He very much wanted a team effort, with himself as head of the team, getting the credit. When Piers looked across with a cynical curve to his mouth and eyes as hard as flint Clive's immediate reaction was - how can he know? Then - he can't, unless he's a mind-reader.

But Piers did not need to be a mind-reader. Clive's blandishments were familiar to him. His father had been very like Clive Rounsley, the same charm, but underneath only self-interest, no real concern for others at all. Piers knew exactly what Clive had in mind, and his smile was sardonic as Clive took his hand.

Clive came out of the geology hut feeling uneasy, although he contrived to appear happy enough as he strolled over to where Polly was brushing a flagstone clear.

He bent down and said softly, "A word with you." She hesitated, then she got up off her knees and followed him, and when they were far

enough not to be overheard Clive said, "This is a peace move. We've just declared a truce." He glanced back at the geology hut. "So now how about you and me?"

Polly had not forgiven Clive, but she was feeling happier now than she had done all week, and they had to go on working together and bearing malice did not come naturally to her. All the same - "What did you mean just now by telling Piers you might put one of your spies on him?" she demanded.

Clive clapped a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, I'd forgotten he'd got this idea you were spying on him. I swear I wasn't stirring it. I just said it. It didn't mean a thing."

She deliberated for a moment, suspicious but finally allowing him the benefit of the doubt, because it would be easier for everyone on the dig if the feuding finished. She was ready to call a truce, but no more. Of course she didn't feel as she used to about Clive, and she couldn't understand now how she had ever wanted there to be more.

She said at last, "All right," and then, because this was the important thing, "Isn't it marvellous about the passage, or whatever there is behind the stone?"

"Fantastic," said Clive. "How do you imagine he nosed that out? Seems he *is* a genius."

Polly had to smile. "It must hurt to admit it."

"He showed better taste than I gave him credit for as well," Clive was smiling too. Looking at Polly now he could understand why Hargraves was having second thoughts about wanting her to keep away from him. There was something unconsciously beguiling about Polly. Perhaps she did have too much spirit, most of the week Clive had felt like shaking her, but right now he would rather have enjoyed

stroking her soft dark hair. "What are you doing this evening?" he asked, and Polly gasped.

"You are incorrigible!"

"Come to the pub for a drink?"

"No."

"A walk?" he coaxed.

"No!"

Piers came from the geology hut and glanced across and saw them standing together, apart from the rest. Polly had her back to the hut. Clive grinned, looking at Polly, marking Piers without appearing to, asking, "And what happened to that cake your mother sent me?"

"I fed it to the seagulls," said Polly, and Piers saw Clive throw back his head and roar with laughter, and wondered what he and Polly were talking about...

Polly ate her meal rather faster than usual that evening, and when she got up from the table Bess trotted to heel. It had been noticed on the dig that Clive and Polly were on speaking terms again, and Portland wondered where Polly's walk was taking her tonight, if she still hoped to meet Piers or if she had arranged to meet Clive. But Polly said nothing, and Portland had too much tact to pry at this stage.

Polly, of course, had no thought of Clive in her head. She was buoyed by the memory of Piers looking for her this afternoon, telling her of their discovery in the hill. He was too proud to make an obvious move, but that look had been the next best thing, so surely she could call in this evening and say how exciting it all was. She had an excuse in her article for her local paper, there were lots of questions she

needed to ask, and Piers had wanted her to know about the find, so surely he would be prepared to discuss it with her.

Old Alastair answered her knock and she said, "I've come to visit you, is that all right?" It was all right by the two dogs who were all over her, and it seemed all right by Alastair, who smiled broadly and said:

"Well, lassie, I'm the only one here as yet, so it'll have to be me." They must be working as long as the light lasted, but the light would fade before long and then Piers would come home. "Come in and sit you down," said Alastair. Polly loved this room, with the tiny rose-pattern wallpaper and Miss Elspeth's neatly stitched patchwork cushions, and the chess set and an open book on the table, and the dogs moving back to the fire. She felt such a belonging here where she had cooked in the kitchen, and nursed a sick man, and welcomed home the man she loved.

She sat down in the wing-backed chair, and old Alastair took the chair he had left to come to the door, with the book on the table by his elbow. He didn't pick up the book again, he sat back as though waiting for Polly to speak and she reached to touch one of the chessmen and ask, "Have you beaten him yet?"

"Now there's a strange thing, the last time we played I did." He stroked his chin reflectively. "But to be fair I do not think his mind was entirely on his game." She smiled in response to the twinkle in the old man's eyes, and hoped that she had been the distraction, although it was just as likely that Piers had been thinking about work and the clues that were leading to that strange stone he had uncovered today.

She leaned forward, her own eyes shining, her voice breathless as a child sharing a secret. "Do you know what Piers found today in the mound under the castle? A tomb. Whoever's buried in there must have lived on this island when the Watchers were new. Imagine that!"

The old man and the girl shared the gift of wonder. Old Alastair shook his grizzled head slowly and said in awestruck tones, "Now there's someone who'd have known the hogboons."

"It could be your original one-eyed giant in there," smiled Polly. They sat talking until it was almost time to light the lamps and then the dogs began to bark and Alastair got to his feet.

"I'll fetch you the book," he said. A book on Malaya, he had been telling her about Malaya. He went upstairs and she shrank back a little into the wing chair, hands clasped tightly together.

Three dogs charged to welcome Piers as he opened the door and he looked up from the doorway across the room at Polly. She clenched her fingers even tighter because she ached to hold out her arms to him, and that would have been more than reckless, it would have been mad. It was going to be a slow process getting back to a time when she might have done that. She said, "You worked late, you must be tired."

If he was surprised to see her it didn't shake his composure. He didn't stand looking at her. He came towards her and said, "I'm not tired, but I'm ready for a meal if you'll excuse me," and went past her, not slowly, not hurrying, into the kitchen and into the little washroom that led off the kitchen.

She could have lit the lamps, but that might look like making herself too much at home, so she stayed in the wing chair, examined a couple of chess pieces as though she might have changed in some way since she saw them last, and wished that Alastair would come down again. She was jittery, she heard herself babbling to the dogs and she sounded nervous, so she bit her lip and shut up.

She was still sitting there alone when Piers reappeared and asked, "Where's Alastair?"

"He went to get a book for me."

"How long ago was that?"

"Just before you came in." As Piers raised an eyebrow she said, "He may not be able to find it." Old Alastair was giving them the chance to settle their differences, and Polly was grateful, although she was finding it hard to know what to say. "He could be being tactful," she said. Old Alastair the matchmaker, giving them time to fall into each other's arms, to kiss and make up. If Piers had smiled she would have said, "That's kind of him, isn't it?" But he didn't smile, and she went on desperately, trying to laugh, "Or it could be because you threw me out last time I came here, and he didn't fancy being around if you did that again. He's got a chivalrous nature, he might feel he had to defend me."

A smile could be as guarded as no smile at all. Piers stood by the fireplace, smiling down at her, and she wished she had lit the lamps so that she could have seen if the smile reached his eyes.

"Not out of the house, though," she said. "Only out of your room where your papers are." He must have realised by now how crazy that was and she grimaced, wrinkling her nose. "Like Alastair, he accused Mrs. McNeil of rooting among his secrets. There must be something in this place that gives men persecution mania." "Perhaps there is." That was admitting it was nonsense and that was enough for now. She stroked Bess, lying near her feet, and explained:

"I was walking Bess and I called to congratulate you on today's find."

"Thank you," he said.

"It is very exciting, and you know I'm writing these articles for my local paper, so would you tell me how you came to choose that

particular spot to dig, what you think might be behind the stone, that kind of thing ?"

She felt that she sounded just right, friendly but professional. "Perhaps you could tell me about it while you eat your meal?" she suggested. Once he had agreed she could stay the misunderstandings must vanish. Of course they would talk about work, but not for ever. Not when he walked back with her, under the stars, through the quiet magic of the night. "Please," she added softly.

He didn't answer at once, as though this needed considering. He walked to the bureau under the window and lit the lamp that stood there. As he adjusted the flare of the wick he said, "This is for a newspaper article, not for a television script?"

Polly was puzzled. "It's for one of my articles for the *Chronicle* back home, I'm not writing a television script."

"You know that Rounsley has guaranteed to keep Fergus off my back when the TV unit arrive on Monday?" The lamp was burning steadily now and he turned from it to look directly at her.

"Has he?" she said.

"And he will need rather more information than he's got if he intends to do all the talking as usual."

"I suppose so." She caught the drift of things and said emphatically, "But I don't know anything about Clive's plans."

"Your only concern is for your newspaper article?"

"Well, yes,"

"Then you won't mind waiting for your interview?"

"I suppose not."

"Good," he said curtly, "because you've no choice." He went to the bottom of the stairs and shouted, "Alastair, if you can't find that beast forget it, our visitor is going home."

For Polly the disappointment was sickening. Everything had been so nearly right, and now there was another misunderstanding. It was as though whatever she said or did was misunderstood. She was back as Clive's spy again, and it was no use protesting because that was how fate was casting her and Piers was very ready to believe it. And Piers had no right to believe it. She said indignantly, "Why should you think Clive sent me here? I've hardly spoken to him all week."

Old Alastair came down with a book, and the one lamp cast enough light to show him the angry colour in Polly's cheeks, although she did her best to smile as she thanked him for the book. "I'll see you home," Piers said. "It's getting dark."

"I shall be perfectly all right, thank you," said Polly stiffly. "And your dinner will be spoiling."

But he left the house with her. She was determined not to say another word. She was hurt and she was angry, her eyes were swimming with furious tears that she had to keep blinking away to see where she was going. They were within sight of the Munros' cottage, leaving the track to walk across the heathland, when the man asked suddenly, "If you've hardly spoken to Rounsley why did he go straight to you this afternoon after he'd been talking to me?"

She gulped, "Because - because he said you two had declared a truce and wouldn't it be better all round if he and I did as well. And of course it would, it isn't comfortable working for someone you've had a screaming row with."

Neither looked at the other. "I can understand that," said Piers quietly. He might have asked, "Why were you laughing?" This afternoon, using all his practised charm, Rounsley had probably believed he was manipulating Piers into the background for when the television cameras arrived on St. Bara. By his own lights Rounsley had been astute, the whole act must have struck him as amusing, and what he had been telling Polly had been amusing. Or perhaps what he was asking her to do, so that Rounsley would know the answers when Fergus Alexander asked the questions.

Polly half turned to say, "*Do* you understand?" She was unsure what happened next. Perhaps she threw herself off balance in turning, or stepped on a slithery hummock, or it could have been Bess who was close at her heels but ambling slightly. But she lurched fairly hard against Piers, and he caught her and steadied her and then she was held in his arms, his hands pressing through the thin material of her jacket, in a fierce and passionate embrace.

She reacted instinctively, clinging to him and raising her face blindly. His cheek was cold against her seeking lips and she was shivering, but when he kissed her she turned to flame.

She didn't hear what he said at first. She heard the murmur of words, but it took a while for them to make sense, and then she knew that although she was still in his arms he was saying quietly and calmly, "Are you going to suggest I keep in the background again during the television coverage, and let Rounsley take over?"

When she started shivering this time she couldn't stop. Piers was still wondering if she was on Clive's side. Did he expect her to laugh now and say, "Well, you never did care for publicity and you did say yourself that you photograph like a sick horse?" And was he wondering if she had slipped into his arms on purpose, using her physical appeal to win him round?

But there had been nothing planned about that kiss, and it would have been a very two-edged persuader that left him calm and her feeling like a lump of putty. She seemed to be a darn sight more susceptible than he was, and she found that so humiliating that her only coherent thought was to snatch at her tattered self-control and get away.

"You do just as you choose," she said, "I don't kid myself I can influence you, and I'm not trying to by flinging myself into your arms. That was an accident, Bess tripped me."

Head bowed, she began to run towards the house. Piers didn't follow, and when she raised her eyes she saw that the lamps were lit in the parlour and Clive's silhouette was outlined against the window. Piers must see Clive too, and almost certainly would presume that Clive was waiting to hear what Polly had to tell him.

CHAPTER NINE

Polly would have gone straight up to her room, but they must have seen her when the light from the house reached her, or heard the click of the front door latch, because Clive came into the little hall.

"Pretty late to be out walking the dog," he said.

She said breathlessly, "I was seen home. Excuse me."

"Oh." He had guessed she was with Hargraves, and when she would have pushed past him to reach the staircase he said, "Well, at least say goodnight, I've been hanging around for hours."

"I'm sorry." What had happened wasn't Clive's fault, so far as Polly knew, and she hadn't the strength to argue with him. Besides, Portland had opened the parlour door now and automatically Polly tried to smile. She couldn't bear it if either of them guessed how terrible she was feeling.

"Where's Bess?" asked Portland.

"Oh lord, I shut the door after me." Polly hurried to open it again and the dog padded in.

"You were preoccupied," Portland murmured.

"Yes," Polly admitted. She wanted to say - stop staring, both of you. She said, "I'm going up to my room, goodnight," and they watched her climb the little staircase and heard her door close at the top.

Clive stood with his hands deep in his jacket pockets and a scowl on his face. "Damn the man," he muttered. "I wish I'd never brought her here." Then he marched out of the house, his shoulders hunched and angry. He had never seen Polly like that before, her hair dishevelled, flushed and breathing quickly, not wanting to speak to anyone,

hurrying away as though her thoughts were all the company she needed. He was furious to think that another man could have had that effect on her. Clive never had, for all his expertise. Polly had always kept that cool core when she was in Clive's arms, but he still couldn't let himself believe that she might really prefer Hargraves.

Once in her room Polly sank on her bed with her face in her hands. She wanted to go home, to ram all those clothes that were hanging up in the wardrobe back into her suitcase, and walk if she had to down to the harbour, and sit there until morning came with the Saturday ferry. But of course she couldn't and now the dig had taken such an exciting turn she should be thrilled to be here. So she was professionally, thrilled to bits, of course, but that didn't stop her feeling utterly desolate.

Well, she couldn't go home, and she did have a job to do, and right now she must get a hold on herself before Portland came to bed and started asking questions. When Portland did come up about half an hour later Polly was sitting up in bed, with a scribbling pad on her knee making herself write a chatty cheerful letter home.

"Clive gone?" Polly asked brightly.

"As soon as you did," said Portland. "Was he likely to meet Piers?"

"I shouldn't think so." Polly went on with her writing.

"Just as well in his frame of mind," said Portland.

The weather was patchy next day, cool enough for them to need jerkins over sweaters, damp enough to make the ground heavy. They didn't do much more digging up on the dun, they concentrated on the items they had already unearthed, and in any case the focus of interest was down in the ditch. Clive's team was constantly wandering down to see how things were shaping. They would have helped if they had

been asked, but they weren't, although as soon as the stone was fully revealed then its removal would be a full-team job, and so would the follow-up of clearing and retrieving whatever lay behind it.

Polly was the only one who didn't go down to see. She stayed in the hut most of the day, catching up on paper work, and when Portland asked, "Are you coming to see how they're getting on?" Polly looked and sounded very busy.

"Not just yet, I'll wait until it's clear."

Clive was making notes on a wall chart. When Portland had gone he asked, "Was it Hargraves' suggestion you wait until the stone's cleared?"

"No," said Polly crisply. "My idea."

Clive regarded her speculatively. "I'd have thought he'd have found *you* something to do down there. Doesn't he want you helping him?"

"When they find some pottery," said Polly lightly, "I'm their girl."

"Aren't you his girl now?" growled Clive. Yes, she was, but Piers wouldn't believe it, and she certainly couldn't discuss it with anyone else, least of all with Clive. She said, "You're standing in my light."

Most of the morning Clive had been standing near, keeping an eye on her, and he was beginning to hope that he had got the wrong impression last night. Polly's confusion might have covered distress. She could have quarrelled with Hargraves. The more Clive considered that the more he liked it, and when lunchtime came and Polly went straight to the inn, and even then didn't go looking where the real work was being done, that was almost proof, and Clive was pleased.

He was pleased about little else that day. It galled him constantly that Hargraves held the limelight. As the three men removed more and more of the surrounding earth all the students stopped down there watching, and by late afternoon Lewis and Portland had joined them.

When Peter came up to say that the stone was clear there was only Bill Canning, besides Clive and Polly, left on the dun, and Bill put down his sieve of earth and went hurrying to see. Polly had to go too, but it took an effort to leave the safety of the mound and go down to where Piers was. She wasn't sure she could face him again after last night, without blushing furiously or going pale or doing something equally self-betraying. But Clive said, "Come on, sweetheart," and she had to go.

The stone was about five foot by three, embedded in natural rock and surrounded by clay mortar. The earth around was raw and stripped, and thick mud still clung to the stone, but the designs could just be made out and were cut deep.

"We're covering it now," said Piers. "We'll clean it tomorrow."

"Do that," said Clive, who would have preferred to be giving the orders.

"It is a beauty," said Portland. They all gloated over it, it promised an archaeological jackpot. They patted it and stroked it, and Polly's agitation went unnoticed in the general excitement.

She didn't speak to Piers and he didn't say anything to her. Nor did she go to the waterfall that evening. When Bess begged for her walk Polly couldn't resist her, but there was no reason to go to the waterfall again, because Piers wouldn't come, and if he did it wouldn't be because he hoped to find Polly.

Next day everyone but Piers and his assistants went over to the mainland in the launch, with Lewis Kent at the wheel. It was a fine day, although the sunshine was fitful and it was necessary to muffle up against chilly breezes. They had a meal at a little fishing inn, but Polly, with friends all around her, was lonely. She would have been infinitely happier back on St. Bara, if only Piers had wanted her there.

That night she dreamt they moved the stone and behind was darkness. Nothing but the dark reaching for ever. She woke stretching out her hands and there was no one to touch her, to hold her. Of course there was no one. Perhaps he never would be there, and she huddled under the sheets because that was a thought too dreadful to contemplate.

Clive had been in telephone touch with the TV company, of course, promising them something special, so that they arrived on Monday morning hoping for a worthwhile day. Their launch came to the cove of the inn, anchoring in the same spot as last time, and the crew ferried ashore in the little dinghy. Clive met them, and took them up first to the dun, where they looked around and admired the flagstones and the pieces of weapons and pottery and coins and bones, all painstakingly filed and recorded.

They were the same team, Clive's friends all of them, and Louise Brogan, glamorous in a dark-green suede suit and boots, made all the dig girls realise that the weeks on St. Bara had done little for their looks. Apart from moisture cream and a dash of lipstick there hadn't seemed much point in make-up, delving into the earth was grimy work, but Louise was beautifully made up so that her skin gleamed smooth and perfect as satin.

"Any sign of your Viking chief yet?" she asked Clive, flirting long lashes at him, and Clive said:

"We may well have found some of the belongings of the chief, there's no proof who they belonged to, but I have come across something that could be more interesting than the Vikings."

"Not to me," cooed Louise.

Clive turned to Fergus. "You met Dr. Hargraves, my geologist, last time." Fergus nodded. "A sound man," said Clive, making that sound worthy and boring. "He and his assistants have uncovered something I want to show you. This is what I promised you on the phone."

He led the way down into the bank and ditch, and everyone trooped after him, Polly too. The dark brown stone was cleaned now, the swirling patterns stood out sharply. It looked as though it could have been set there yesterday, this strange gateway into the mound beneath the castle, and Fergus asked, "What the hell is that?"

"Aha," said Clive, like a magician about to pull a rabbit out of a hat. The cameras began to turn and Fergus switched on his tape recorder and Piers said:

"You asked about the Watchers last time."

"Yes?" The reporter offered him the mike and Piers went on:

"The rock that the Watchers were made of only seems to be in one spot in the whole island. Here. It could have come up from deep under the ocean in a volcanic upsurge which might have made this sacred ground from pre-history."

"But that stone looks new," said Fergus.

"It's over three thousand years old," said Piers.

Clive took no further part in this interview. It was Piers who described the discolouration of the turf and the aerial clues that had

made him concentrate on this spot. "Like a detective story?" the reporter suggested. "Sherlock Holmes couldn't have done better." And Dr. Piers Hargraves, with his aquiline features and his obvious intelligence, would have made a good Holmes.

The whole unit was intrigued by the change in Hargraves. Last time he had been courteous but dull, today his mind and manner were so rapier-honed that it was understandable why Clive Rounsley resented him. And the dullness of Hargraves' last interview must have been because he hadn't wanted publicity at that early stage. He was co-operative now, with wry flashes of humour and unmistakable authority, although Clive Rounsley was supposed to be in charge.

What was behind the stone was likely to be more dramatic than Clive pacing out the flagstones and talking about the Vikings again, although they took several shots up on the mound while Clive discoursed with his usual flamboyance. That was fine, but against Hargraves' incisive delivery Clive's performance seemed exaggerated. Clive waffled, but Hargraves was bang on, and none of the TV team had any doubt which man would make the bigger impact when this programme was presented.

All day the dig team worked, picking away the clay-pack around the stone, and then with levers padded with sacking the heavy stone was eased outwards. The cameras were recording and everyone was holding their breath, and blackness showed behind the stone as it had in Polly's dream. When Piers moved forward she caught at his arm instinctively, pleading, "Be careful!"

As he hesitated Clive moved ahead, signalling the cameras to zoom in, so that it was Clive on film, giving the television viewers their first sight of the passage behind the stone. The passage was about four foot wide and five foot high, lined and roofed with slabs of stone. A little ahead the roof had come down, blocking the way, but it was still an eerie and thrilling sight.

They decided that digging and filming should finish for today, but that when the clearing of the passage started tomorrow the TV cameras should stay around, not to miss the next discovery. That meant the unit leaving now and returning early in the morning, bringing camp beds and hoping to find temporary lodgings. If the worst happened they would have to pitch tents or sleep on the launch, but the landlord of the inn might put up a couple of the men if it was only for a day or two.

Bill Canning said he'd ask the MacNeils if a camp bed might be squeezed in somewhere, and Piers said, "There is a divan in my sitting room."

"I'll take it," said Louise promptly. Piers joined in the general laughter, then said solemnly:

"Unfortunately my landlord's a woman-hater."

"Oh, poor pet," Louise gurgled. "Couldn't I win him round?"

"If anyone could," said Piers, and Polly was shaken with jealousy, although they were joking and the laughter went on when Fergus said, "I'd better take it. We can't let Louise loose on the locals."

Louise was glamorous and gay with an eye for the men. Last time she had flirted with Clive, this time Piers was the attraction. She probably meant no harm, Piers certainly wouldn't take her seriously, but when Portland suggested they could make up a bed for Louise in their tiny bedroom Polly wanted to protest, because she was disliking Louise immensely.

The TV crew left in their dinghy, making for their launch, and most of the dig team waved goodbye from the shingle in front of the inn. But Polly stayed around the passage entrance hoping for a chance to

explain to Piers why she had grabbed him, that it hadn't been to let Clive step ahead.

There was every excuse to hang around, looking at the outer stone, examining the passage. Piers and Lewis Kent were the only others there, talking technically together, but as Polly wandered into the passage Piers called sharply, "Polly!" She jumped, nearly dropping the pocket torch she had just switched on, and he came to the entrance. "Don't go any further."

"Why not?" Several of them had walked in. Piers had, and Clive, and one of the cameramen. It seemed solid and safe enough until the spot where the slabs lay cracked and crushed. But Piers reached her and said:

"Because if anyone's going to bring down the roof it would be you."

"Why me?" she gasped indignantly.

"You're the one who'd try to get through the blockage."

"I would nor!" She might have tried to peer through, but she wouldn't have touched a stone. She said huffily, "I am hardly a sightseer."

"Hardly," he agreed. "But this section is closing for the night, so out you come." He sounded amused, as though he was warning off a troublesome tourist, and she walked past him, out of the passage, looking for Lewis who had strolled away towards the inn, then back at Piers. "How did you expect me to bring down the roof?" she demanded. "Did you think I might kick away the walls?"

He said, "There's always a risk. There's a great deal of rock up there."

It would have been nice to believe that he wouldn't have moved so quickly if it had been' Louise or Elsa or anyone else stepping into the

passage, but Polly knew that he would and he was paying her no heed at all now. Standing beside her he was looking out across the bay to where the dinghy had reached the launch, which meant the others would stop watching the dinghy quite soon and wander back here. She said, "I had a nightmare last night that it was black behind the stone, like a great pit. That's why I said take care, not so that Clive could get in first."

"Not very likely," said Piers drily.

No, it didn't sound very credible. Polly could see the bright flame of Louise's hair out there, and she wondered if Piers was watching Louise. She said, "I didn't expect you to believe me."

"I meant it was unlikely there would be a pit."

He was listening because he was answering, but he wasn't paying her much attention and she moved round to face him so that she was between him and Louise and he had to drop his gaze a fraction and acknowledge her.

"You haven't reached the end of the passage yet," she said. She would have said, "Be careful," again, but he said softly:

"I will reach the end, even if there is a pit," and there was steel in his voice and in his eyes as he added, "And you can tell Rounsley that I'm writing the paper on this, so he would be wasting his time."

Polly didn't tell Clive that, but if she had Clive would not have been 'Surprised. He knew now that he should never have taunted Hargraves with being "the beggar in the street". This was Hargraves' revenge. Now he was king, and Clive had no option but to hide his resentment.

Next morning the television crew rejoined the dig team, and the clearing of the passage began. Clive and Lewis Kent joined Piers and Ewan and Jack in the passage, measuring and photographing, heaving the mighty stone slabs of walls back into place, dragging out the shattered pieces and the fallen roof slabs.

The TV unit wandered around, between high and low level, and the workers on the castle site came down from time to time too, except for Polly. She stayed on the mound, getting on with her work, answering any questions she was asked, including, "What do you find to do here after work?" from Dave, the cameraman.

Polly laughed, "We're back to Victorian days, we make our own entertainment. We do have a general room, though, in the pub."

"Darts and all?" said the cameraman.

"Of course," smiled Polly. "What did you expect, a casino?"

But Louise came up on to the mound during the afternoon and announced, "We're having a party tonight. Clive's idea. He says everyone is due for a party."

With the TV team here something had to be arranged and a party in the clubroom sounded fun. "Everyone coming?" Portland inquired.

"Including Dr. Hargraves?" Joan added.

"Oh yes." Louise was sure about that. "Why?" and Joan told her:

"Because he's only been inside the clubroom once since he came here."

Louise's lips curved in a satisfied smile. "You don't say? Well, he's promised me he's coming tonight."

Mrs. Munro had co-operated by putting Louise into Portland and Polly's little bedroom. She provided an evening meal for three and Louise joined them round the little table in the parlour after work. Polly would have been quite happy to have her around if she had talked less about Piers. No one seemed to have told Louise there had been a special relationship between Polly and Piers, or if they had she was discounting it.

She chattered on, and Polly was quiet, letting Portland keep up the flow of conversation, telling herself that it was because Piers was not on friendly terms with his colleagues that he had agreed to attend tonight's get-together. Not because Louise would be there, even though Louise did have his promise that he was coming.

After the meal Bess waited, as usual, for Polly to take her out and Polly said, "It will be a quick run tonight, old girl," and to Louise, "Will you join us?"

"No, thanks," Louise yawned, "I want to fix my hair, and I'm hoping to do some dancing later." You won't be dancing with Piers, thought Polly, getting a faint consolation from that, I'm pretty sure he doesn't dance.

While she walked Bess she wondered how she could start to compete with Louise tonight. Louise was quite striking in looks, she was intelligent. She could be smarter than Polly, right now Polly felt it would be hard to find anyone who wasn't smarter than she was. Louise's complexion was pampered and perfect, Louise's hair was the colour of flame. Polly's hair was brown, and she would have been washing it tonight if she had had time. But she could still brush it hard and wear it caught up, and put on the pretty dress and her prettiest face.

By the time she got back Louise had changed into a dark green linen waistcoat blouse and a flounced paisley print skirt, with half a dozen thin silver bracelets jingling on her bare arms.

Polly took out of her wardrobe the long red chiffon dress that her mother had packed, and that Polly had never expected to wear on St. Bara. She fastened up her hair with a brown velvet ribbon and coaxed down a few softening tendrils, then she went into the parlour smiling wryly. "If it starts to rain before we get there," she said, "we're going to look a real pair of comics."

"You look lovely, both of you," Portland pronounced. "I am wearing my best blouse, and we're going to have a marvellous time, there are nearly twice as many men as women."

They had to hitch up their trailing skirts and wear topcoats, but it didn't rain and they took off their coats in the bar and patted their hair, and Louise still looked glamorous and Polly could only hope she did too.

Everyone seemed to have arrived. The landlord had produced a number of bottles, and a fair buffet on three tables drawn up against one wall. The record player was beating away and the clubroom looked very full, although Ewan and Joan and Jack and Elsa were managing to dance.

Piers was sitting with Bill Canning. Both men got up as Portland and Polly and Louise entered and Louise annexed Piers, as simply as that, she just walked over to him and stayed with him.

"Migosh, it's Polly," said Jack, acting awestruck as he waltzed by. "Where did you get that dress?"

"My mother packed it," called Polly gaily. "She thought there might be a nightclub on St. Bara."

All the girls looked pretty, and the men were appreciative. Polly would have been pleased with herself if she had been getting the compliments, or even a glance, from Piers instead of from the rest. She never caught Piers looking her way once.

She danced when she was asked. Piers didn't dance and Louise didn't leave him, and Polly found herself swaying face to face with Clive. "I always liked that dress," Clive told her.

She had worn it for a couple of dates with Clive before they came to St. Bara. It was misty and romantic and completely unsuitable for an archaeological dig. But her mother had doubtless imagined her drifting along the seashore in it, under a moon, with Clive, of course, and here was her opportunity to do that. If she suggested it Clive would think it a good idea, but if she suggested it to Piers he would turn her down flat. She had made herself as beautiful as she could for Piers, and all she had done was fill Clive with tender nostalgia.

It might have been funny if it hadn't hurt so badly every time they passed Piers and Louise, to see Louise with her hand on his sleeve, or her head on his shoulder. Polly couldn't go on dancing. She moved into the group of which Piers and Louise were part, and refused to come out again, declining further invitations to dance on the grounds that she was worn out.

They all had to be tired, it had been a hard day, especially for the men working in the passage, and tomorrow would be just as strenuous. But the music and the talking went on for a long time, until Bill Canning said, "Ready, Malcolm?" to the sound engineer who was sharing digs with him.

Then the party broke up, and those who weren't "home" in or around the inn set off together for their respective lodgings. The quietness of the night was so striking after the noise of the party that no one had much to say, and the little group was soon walking in silence. Louise

held Piers' arm, and Polly walked faster for a moment to get ahead so that she couldn't see them.

The Munros' cottage came first, where the three women said goodbye to the four men in a flurry of quick hugs and cheek kisses. Louise kissed Piers, so did Portland, but Polly didn't. These kisses couldn't have been more platonic, but she kept moving and kissed the TV men who were almost strangers, and Bill, and kept saying, "Goodnight, everybody, goodnight, see you all tomorrow," so that no one noticed who she had missed out. If Piers did notice that was all right by him, he could have kissed her if he had wanted to.

The dig at least realised everyone's hopes. It took them two more days to clear that fall of rock in the passage, which then continued with no further obstacles. There was no pit. Polly's had not been a premonition dream. It had meant that she was lonely and frightened and dreaming of loneliness.

A second basalt slab, packed solidly round with a mud mortar, must be the entrance to the tomb, the purpose of the passage; and very carefully enough of the mortar was picked out to insert the muzzle of a spraying machine, to fix and preserve the contents of the tomb so that when fresh air reached them they would not crumble away.

Then the basalt slab was removed and the seekers learned the secret of the hills. The tomb had three occupants, two skeletons lay curled up on the ground, and one - chief or priest - lay in the remains of a boat. All around were bronze implements, weapons and ornaments, enough to furnish them royally for the afterlife. It was a Bronze Age treasure trove, and if they never met again the archaeologists and the film-makers would always remember each other because of the wonder they had shared on St. Bara. This would be a highlight in their lives, a marvel for ever. Three thousand years had passed since men walked down this passage, leaving their great dead behind. The

passage was closed for thirty centuries, and they were there when the way in was found.

The days that followed were crammed with activity from dawn till dusk. Unlimited recordings had to be made before the tomb could be emptied with scrupulous care and the contents despatched to museums and laboratories. And then - it was over. The tomb was empty and their time was up.

There would be other digs here now, perhaps a full-scale Ministry of Works operation some time, and Lewis Kent was staying on for a while. But Portland and Clive and Bill and the students were all due to leave, and so was Polly. And Piers. Tomorrow they would catch the ferry and sail from St. Bara and go their separate ways.

Polly was finishing her packing when it hit her. She was alone upstairs, Portland had packed and Louise had left with the TV unit several days ago, and Polly put the red chiffon dress into her case and wondered how she could say goodbye to Piers. She had plans, of course, she would write and she would miss no chance of crossing his path, but she wouldn't see him.

There had been others around now for a long time, there had been no time for anything but work since the tomb was opened, although Louise had left St. Bara smiling and Clive had made sure Polly heard that Piers was doing a television programme next month and meeting Louise again.

But each day Polly knew where Piers was, she saw him, she could speak to him, and although he never sought her out in any way they were close as working colleagues and he was *there*. This was her last night on St. Bara, and his. What would he be doing now? she wondered. Packing? Playing a final game of chess with old Alastair? Or walking perhaps, saying goodbye to the island?

She threw the last two sweaters into her case and pressed down the lid. Then she put on her coat and went downstairs and opened the door into the parlour, where Portland was sipping sherry with the Munros, all of them feeling a little sad now that the time for parting had come. "Where are you off to?" Portland inquired, and Polly told her:

"To say another goodbye. A place this time."

She went to the waterfall for the last time and sat there waiting, although she knew that Piers wouldn't come. If he was out walking there were countless paths he could have chosen, why should he choose this? And he probably wasn't walking at all. She was stiff when she stood. She pulled up her collar and huddled into her coat and stepped out on to the shingle, then went rigid because he was near enough to say "Polly," quite quietly and for her to hear.

After this she believed in miracles. She whispered, "Did you come to find me?" and he reached her and touched her cheek as though he needed to touch to be sure she was real.

"I went to the Munros'," he said huskily.. "Portland said you'd gone to say goodbye to a place. I hoped it was here."

Everything was right now. She had wished on the waterfall and her wish had come true. She put out her arms and drew him against her, laughing softly. "I must have second sight after all. I was wrong about the pit in the passage, but I did know you'd come here." She looked up at him. "The very last night," she said, and it was frightening that this had been their last chance.

He told her "That was why I went to find you, because it's the last night and I had to see you alone before you went away." His eyes were dark and the expression in them made her catch her breath. She asked simply and directly:

"Do you love me?"

"You know I love you," he said. "You brought me to life."

She knew that he had brought her to an intensity of feeling against which what she had felt for Clive had been a pale and passive thing. "Then how could you believe what Clive told you?" she demanded.

"Because it was true. You were being kind when you sought me out." She tried to protest, but his fingertips pressed over her lips keeping her silent.

"Of course you were," he said. "I knew that, although I wanted to kill Rounsley for telling me. If I hadn't had pride and anger to fall back on it would have broken me, and I couldn't break, I had to better Rounsley first. If we hadn't found the tomb I'd have taken over on the dun."

He would, Piers could do most things he set his mind to. He was brilliant and he would be ruthless, and he could become world-famous. Clive had stood no chance at all.

"All that to show Clive?" Polly mused.

"There's more," he said drily. "This is a long-term campaign. Interviews, lectures, from now on I give them. I write papers, books, I've already agreed to do a colour supplement series of articles." He grinned, "Even your mother is going to admit I'm good value on television."

"I'm sure," Polly nodded, and he said, unsmiling now:

"But of course it wasn't to prove anything to Rounsley, nor to myself. It was to show you. In future it was going to be what I could do for you. I would be doing the giving. In six months' time I go to Peru, I

planned to get you along on the team. Then I thought we might start again."

"Oh," said Polly. Her heart was beating furiously and why was he talking about six months' time when she needed him to stop talking and kiss her now?

"But we leave here tomorrow," he said, "and all I know now is that wherever you go I shall come to your door, because any door you open is home. And if that makes me still the beggar in the street I can't help it."

Her eyes filled with tears as tenderness overwhelmed her. She blinked the tears away and sniffed, "I'm not crying. It was the spray from the waterfall."

"Polly, no!" There was anguish in his face and he held her gently. "Don't, my dear love, for God's sake don't cry."

"Why shouldn't I cry?" These were happy tears and she could cry now. "I've been crying for weeks," she gulped, "only no one saw me."

"You were smiling every time I looked at you," he said.

"But you never looked at me."

"I looked. I knew every time you turned your head."

She understood that, seeing with your skin, being so aware of someone that your eyes could look away, but you saw.

She said mischievously, "Even when Louise was there? I was jealous of Louise."

Piers laughed, "You were not," and Polly laughed too because it was absurd that she should have been jealous. "You are the only woman," Piers said. "And I'm going to be the only man."

The laughter stopped. The desperate need that she saw in his eyes was in her too. When his mouth came down on hers her lips parted and the clamour of emotions he could evoke almost took over her senses. No other man would ever be right for her. This man alone could satisfy every longing. She almost sobbed against him, "I go up in flames when you kiss me."

"What the hell effect do you think you're having on me?" he groaned, and they began to smile at each other, then laugh again, still in each other's arms.

"You were cool enough last time," said Polly. "You asked me if I thought Clive should get the credit for finding the tomb."

"If you'd said yes I'd have let him take it," said Piers. "That's what you do to me." He meant that, and Polly said:

"I love you, I love you. Don't ever go away from me."

"I promise you that," said Piers.

As they left the little cave of the waterfall he told her, "I came back once, the morning after you told me you'd found a passage. To see if it was the kind of place where you might get yourself trapped."

She felt warm and safe with his arm around her. "It's only so wide." She held forefingers a few inches apart, looking at him with dancing eyes. "Hogboon size. And I'm not really accident-prone."

"I have to take care of the breath in my body," he said quietly.

She was that to him. There would be great happiness ahead, their future would be together and wonderful, but she would still be sorry to leave St. Bara.

As they climbed from the beach up to the heathland she asked, "Shall we come back?"

"As soon as you like," he said. "How about next month, for a honeymoon?" She drew a deep slow breath of complete content and he said, "I'll take you anywhere in the world you want to go, but you will marry me, won't you?"

"Of course I will." That hardly needed saying, she was so sure. He was holding her hand and he lifted it to his lips as she said, "And here for a honeymoon would be the loveliest place in the world."