



Sweet Deceiver

Kathryn Blair



SWEET DECEIVER

By KATHRYN BLAIR

Julian Stanville, Chief Commissioner of a group of islands in the South Seas, was an ambitious schemer out to advance his career by marrying the Governor's daughter, or so Elizabeth and Amanda were told.

To teach him a lesson, they planned to exchange identities and watch him making love to the wrong girl.

Unfortunately they left out of their calculations the possibility that "the wrong girl" might fall in love with him ..



4

HARLEQUIN

Romance

SWEET DECEIVER

by

KATHRYN BLAIR



HARLEQUIN
WINNIPEG



BOOKS
CANADA

Originally published by Mills & Boon Limited,
50 Grafton Way, Fitzroy Square, London.
England.

Harlequin edition published
February, 1965.

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

Printed **in Canada**

SWEET DECEIVER

SWEET DECEIVER

CHAPTER ONE

IT was dusk when they touched down at Bolani. A warm brooding dusk redolent of frangipani and spices, alive with the chirping of insects, and impregnated with all the soft magic of the Molucca Sea.

The plane taxied along a floodlit pathway to halt not a hundred feet from the small but very modern airport building. The metal steps were thrust into position by olive-skinned men in white overalls, the rear door of the plane opened and the half-dozen passengers appeared singly, not too sure of themselves as they descended to ground level.

The two English girls were smiling; Elizabeth gently and with wonder in her deep grey eyes. Amanda's smile, though, held all the exuberance and sparkle of her effervescent nature; patently she had been places before, and loved them.

"Bolani," she breathed. "We're here, darling! It's taken a long, long time, but I've a feeling it's going to be worth it." She took a swift, ecstatic glance up at the control tower against the hyacinthine heavens and flung out a hand in a gesture which, in another girl, would have been theatrical. But display in Amanda was as natural as were the black curls which quivered just under the brim of her dainty white straw cap. "Isn't it odd — the western influence in the South Seas? It wasn't so noticeable in Singapore, but here it's somehow fantastic. Elizabeth, I do wish you wouldn't take everything so calmly."

Yes, Elizabeth did look pale and composed, but the fact was that she felt a bit overcome by the immensity of having at last reached the capital city of the Tunak Islands, which were governed by Amanda's father, Sir Henry Penlan. She was committed to spend a year here with Amanda, ten thousand miles from home; and it made her tremble a little. A year at the Governor's Residency, friend of the Governor's lovely daughter. Would it be

horribly starchy and formal? Would she, an accounts clerk in a City office, fit in?

Sir Henry in England, when she had stayed with the Penlans in Norfolk during his leave, had been a spare, soldierly man with a sense of humor and a wealth of experience in the rather tired lines of his face. He had treated her as he had treated Amanda, teasing them and buying them presents impartially. On parting he had said, "You're good for my dancing daughter, Elizabeth. No one would believe you're the younger; you're so much wiser. I hope you two will always be friends — just as you always have been."

Elizabeth couldn't imagine a world in which there was no Amanda. They had first met at a school near Norwich, where Elizabeth had been sent after the death of her mother. In her grief Elizabeth had walked about like a little ghost, till Amanda, who had never been able thoroughly to cultivate the knack of sympathy, had first taunted her with being a prig, and then, having drawn no response, had gone through all the precocious tricks of which she was mistress to rouse the newcomer to retaliatory fury. It was typical of Amanda that when she discovered how fruitless had been her efforts she broke into a rage with herself, wept and had to be comforted — by Elizabeth. Upon such curious foundations are friendships constructed.

They had eventually finished school together, Elizabeth passing on to a commercial college while Amanda spent a couple of years travelling backward and forward to different parts of the Continent and having brief, tempestuous but fairly harmless love affairs which were confided in detail to Elizabeth,

It was during a hiatus between the last affair and a fresh one which was blowing up on Amanda's horizon, that Sir Henry's letter arrived, telling her that as it was peaceful in the seas south of the Pacific he would be glad to have the two girls out for a long visit. A year, he thought, would be as much as they would be willing to tolerate.

Amanda, naturally, had been wild with excitement, but Elizabeth's joy had been tintured with trepidation. It seemed such a big step, leaving her job and using up her small savings for clothing fit for the trip. But with Amanda taking it for granted that Elizabeth would go too, and Aunt Elsa and Uncle David insisting that it would be crazy to miss such an opportunity, Elizabeth had been left without a single objection to fall back upon. And being only twenty and full of blissful ideals, she was herself eager for the adventure.

The journey to Singapore had not been unreal. The ship had forged through Suez, then across the Indian Ocean and down through the Andaman Sea; the changes had been gradual. This morning, Singapore had teemed with folk of all nations, but before they had got the feel of the place the plane had whisked them a thousand miles east, and here they were, among people who had smooth pale brown skin and thick, black, slightly wavy hair.

A colored official in white drill and a peaked cap was bowing courteously, his attention focused on a point midway between the white-clad Amanda and the slim, blue-garbed Elizabeth.

"Miss Penlan and Miss Mayne, please? You will have the goodness to come this way? There is a Miss Brodie to meet you."

"Miss Brodie," echoed Amanda, who was never non-plussed. "I suppose Papa couldn't make it, but it was funny to send a woman."

"We're more than an hour early, remember."

They mounted the steps half a pace behind their guide, entered a wide well-lit terrace where a few people were sipping coffee and iced drinks. A woman rose from behind one of the wicker tables and came forward; a youngish woman in a tailored silk suit and a small stylish hat.

She spoke in a modulated voice which had the hint of a gush in its depths. "How do you do. Which of you is Amanda?"

"I am and this is Elizabeth Mayne. How do you do, Miss Brodie."

"Call me Anne," came the reply. "We shan't know each other for long. I'm leaving on this plane so we haven't time for ceremony. Do sit down and have a drink with me. I'm afraid you'll have to wait some while for Julian, but there's no reason why you shouldn't do it pleasantly."

The modish young woman appeared to have command both of herself and of the Malay boy who was called to serve them. She ordered passion-fruit juice and corn short-bread fingers "No intoxicants on sale here," she said regretfully, "except lager. There isn't time to take a taxi to the hotel; there's only one decrepit taxi, anyway."

"We don't mind," Amanda told her cheerfully. "I'll wait for my gin sling till I get home. Home!" she repeated delightedly. "I haven't been able to call anywhere home since I was small. It's queer to think I'm only a few miles from my father. Is he well?"

Miss Brodie's eyes narrowed at Amanda, who was quite beautiful with her creamy skin and curved red mouth — and also the daughter of the Governor. Watching her, Elizabeth got the impression that the woman hadn't much time for the world's darlings. Yet Miss Brodie's tones were light and flattering as she answered, "Yes, he's very fit, but you're slightly out of luck, Amanda. Sir Henry has had to go to one of the other islands in the Tunak group on some mission or other. For a week or two you and Miss Mayne will be alone at the Residency—if it's possible to be alone with a dozen or more servants! You'll have Julian's protection, of course."

"Oh, but how disappointing!" cried Amanda. "I was so looking forward to a touching reunion, and now Papa's spoiled all the poetic things I'd prepared to say to him." The little black wings of her brows went together, as she leaned forward. "Who is this Julian — my father's aide-de-camp?"

"Good heavens, no." Miss Brodie's features became acutely pointed and the trace of a glitter in her glance had an affinity with the acid in her voice and made her appear quite thirty. "Julian Stanville is the leader of the Governor's Council — the Legislative Assembly. His friends call

him Sir Henry's right hand man but to his enemies he's just a ruthless career fanatic."

What prompted Elizabeth to put an enquiry she couldn't have said. She found herself resting both, elbows upon the table, folding her hands under her chin and asking quietly, "Do you agree with the enemies?"

Miss Brodie's laugh was a mite delayed and not entirely spontaneous. She looked at Elizabeth's small clear face, at the candid grey eyes and soft, honey-pale hair which fluffed slightly about the gentian-blue skull-cap. The girl was being ingenuous; she had an appeal, of sorts, but beside the vivid Penlan girl she was ordinary. She was merely the companion of the Governor's daughter and as such could be disregarded.

She addressed herself to Amanda. "You're strikingly attractive, my dear — but then your father is a handsome man, isn't he? Julian Stanville is good-looking, too, in his angular fashion; you know, the long-limbed Englishman. Surprisingly enough, he's unmarried." Playful, but with a raw edge to her voice she added, "Are you in love with anyone, Amanda?"

"Not at the moment," with a mischievous smile, "but your Julian might be a likely antidote for boredom. If he leads the council, though, I expect he's old."

"Only thirty-three." Anne Brodie opened a huge handbag and took out a dainty cigarette case, waited till all three of them had lighted up before continuing, through a cloud of smoke, "Julian's unique in the tropics — a man who will stop at nothing to get what he wants. He has power, plenty of it, and he's comfortably off, of course, but what he's really after is a governorship and a rich and lovely young wife. He's the kind," she finished, her mouth scornfully thin, "to make a cold-blooded blueprint of all he intends to wrest from life, and to follow it down to the last detail."

"He sounds thoroughly objectionable!"

"That's where the danger lies — he isn't. He's far too clever for that. He hasn't a heart at all, but he disguises the lack of it very charmingly. He's the most charming

man I've ever met — and the most diabolically self-assured! One can't help but dislike him."

There was something about Anne Brodie which Elizabeth found so distasteful that she deliberately ceased listening for a few minutes. It was almost dark now, but still so early that only a few brave stars studded the deep purple sky. And then, as she watched, the purple changed to indigo velvet, and diamonds sprang alive and dropped so low that the palms at the end of the terrace reflected their radiance.

Miss Brodie was still talking. "I came here with a party of tourists a month ago. I happened to discover a distant connection with a couple who live in Kalaba Hill — not far from the Residency — and they invited me to stay for a bit. I shall catch up with my relatives at Cairo. They promised to wait for me."

It seemed that she had had marvellous times among the white residents of Kalaba Hill, which was a rambling settlement among the big trees that looked down over the port of Mueng. No, she said decidedly, she couldn't admit that she had taken to Bolani — there wasn't enough doing — but Amanda would be bound to have a thrilling time.

Realizing that Amanda, with her usual airy acceptance of favors, had neglected to thank Miss Brodie for meeting them, Elizabeth inserted a grateful acknowledgment.

"It was nothing." The silken shoulders shrugged. "I had to be here well on time to get my luggage through the customs; I'm a nonentity who must submit to officialdom. Julian was good enough to send me here in his car with a chauffeur — for his own ends, of course! He wanted to be sure you'd be met. He had to preside over a discussion in council, but hoped to be here when your plane came in. None of us knew you'd be early; in these parts it's usually the other way about. He'll be along presently, to pick you up."

Presently, a mellow loud speaker proclaimed that all passengers for Singapore should take their seats within the next fifteen minutes. Miss Brodie pressed out her cigarette.

"Julian Stanville extracted from me a promise that if you chanced to arrive before he turned up I'd see you safely into a private corner of the lounge. Shall we go in?"

Amanda grinned. "Don't worry. We'll look after ourselves till he comes. I suppose he's one of those men who pride themselves on living each minute to schedule. **I'm** rather looking forward to making his acquaintance."

The older woman's face took a faintly malicious cast. "Not so much as he's looking forward to making yours, my dear," she said with tart dryness. "He'll make a dead set at you, Amanda. A man of his kind has to marry, and marry well. He has no time at all for women who have no money, no position. You're just made to fit in with his ambitions."

"How nice! But the odious creature may **not be constructed** to fit in with mine."

"He'll make you believe otherwise!"

This to one of Amanda's light-hearted independence, was something of a challenge. "I'll lead him on," she declared, "and jilt him at the altar."

Miss Brodie gave a short vindictive laugh. "I'd give a fortune to see that happen to him," she observed, "but then if I'd a fortune he'd probably have married me even before you got here — except that my father isn't His Excellency." She looked at her watch, gathered up the big bag and her gloves and stood up. "I expect you'll both attract the bachelors — but take my advice, Amanda, and show Julian Stanville where he stands from the very start. Don't let him exploit you. He'll do his utmost to persuade you to fall for him, and he'll do it cleverly, so that you'll hardly notice it's happening. Don't forget, though, that you won't exist for him as a person, only as the top rung of the ladder he's been climbing by hook or by crook these last ten years. He's just a suave, self-centred career-man who never does a thing without an eye to his own future — he's hard all through. I'd wager right now that even before he's met you, the aloof Julian has pigeon-led a plan to marry the Governor's daughter."

"I rather think," stated Amanda, her dark eyes lively, "that I'll ransack that pigeon-hole and confound Mr. Stanville! I'm so glad we met you, Miss Brodie."

There was not much time for more. Miss Anne Brodie nodded farewell in a manner which indicated a somewhat thankfulness to have done with Bolani, and disappeared into the silver giant. Elizabeth and Amanda waved at the blur which showed at one of the windows, and went inside the white building and through swing doors into a small deserted lounge.

Amanda sank down into an easy chair near one of the mosquito-screened french doors, dragged off her hat and raked through the short and shining black curls.

"Bit flat, isn't it?" she grumbled amiably. "I do hope my father hasn't been called away on anything serious, or he'll send *us* home again. And I so want to wear those ducky beach clothes and have fun with colonial bachelors." Elizabeth, from the position she had taken so that she could gaze out at the gently-moving palm fonds, looked across at her with a swift affectionate smile. "You're incorrigible. We've hardly landed and you're ready to fall for men you haven't yet met. The people here won't expect Sir Henry's daughter to be flirtatious."

"I never flirt," returned Amanda, in mock-injured tones. "You wouldn't have me go all demure on you, would you? Besides, where's the spice in life if you haven't a man in tow? Darling, you're delightfully modest, but your existence must be awfully dull; it wouldn't suit Mandy. Perhaps there'll be someone here who'll sweep you clean off your feet and save you from going back to the grim London office."

"The office wasn't grim. I liked it."

"There, you see!" exclaimed Amanda triumphantly. "You've been plodding along with such concentration that you've actually persuaded yourself that you enjoyed doing such frightful work. I must seriously set about finding you a husband."

Elizabeth laughed. She couldn't imagine herself marrying any man chosen by her volatile friend. For one thing,

Amanda Penlan, who was nearly a year older, would never forgive her if she married first. And for another, Amanda had so far shown poor taste in her choice of swains; they had followed a pattern which was monotonous in its bright vapidness disguised by athletic good looks.

Apparently, Amanda was not disposed at the moment to pursue the subject she had opened. Her scarlet-tipped fingers drummed eagerly and impatiently on the table-top, and her dark brown eyes had the guileless brilliance which Elizabeth recognized with apprehension as a cover for new and improbable notions.

"This man Julian Stanville," said Amanda softly, ruminatively, "sounds the complete fascinating bounder."

"If he were, your father wouldn't put up with him," Elizabeth pointed out. "You've only Miss Brodie's word against him."

"But how that woman knows her men! In any case, what has she to gain by painting him blacker than he is?" Amanda sagely shook her head. "He's a beast, all right — and how glad I am that we've been warned before he can get busy with the charm. I'm such a susceptible ass!"

"What will you do if he does lay siege?"

"I don't know — but I'd love to rock him right back **on** his heels."

Elizabeth was thoughtful. "It seems unfair to judge anyone before you know them. Miss Brodie was prejudiced against him — probably because he wasn't in the least impressed by her obvious graces. She could be right in calling him a careerist, but how could she be sure that he intends using you to further his plans? The man hasn't even seen you!"

"I know more about men than you do, my pet, and I've already had experience of the type who marry money and a glowing future. A Governor does recommend someone as his successor, and Mr. Stanville would like to make doubly sure of my father's goodwill by becoming his son-in-law. To him, it's as simple as that

"He must be a horror."

"A handsome, intriguing one."

"You really think this man is counting on stepping into your father's shoes?"

"It could be. At one time they always brought in someone new to the territory, but that regulation has eased. In any event there would still be a vacant governorship somewhere, and Papa's opinion of his officials can make a lot of difference. Julian Stanville, I'd say, wants everything watertight. Miss Brodie said he's ruthless and has a fanatical determination to get to the top in a big way. Well, he won't do it with my assistance !"

The engines of the plane roared then, cutting out all possibility of conversation. Elizabeth felt a stab of fear and exultation; their link with the west had gone, leaving them on the island of Bolani among people they had never encountered before. About fifteen white officials and traders and eight or ten wives. For the rest only Malays and Dyaks and a few Chinese.

Amanda was unperturbed; she had been alone in foreign places many times before. Indeed, except that she had had to pause it seemed as if the departure of the plane had impressed her not at all. As she stared across the small mahogany wine table at Elizabeth her eyes glittered with a dawning joy which should have put Elizabeth on her guard.

"I've a splendid idea," she said gaily. "We'll teach Mr. Strong-man Stanville a lesson he'll never forget. Elizabeth, darling, you're going to be Amanda!"

For a minute Elizabeth was aghast. She gazed hard at the sparkling Amanda and saw that she really meant it. Yes, she meant it; she was burning with a delicious glee which was reminiscent of her schoolgirl pranks. A sobering influence was needed here.

"I'm going to be nothing of the sort," she retorted firmly. "If it's true that Mr. Stanvill intends to marry you, you can put him in his place in your own way. I refuse to be. . . ."

"Oh, but listen," begged Amanda in her most coaxing manner "We're supposed to be staying here for a whole year. I couldn't be horrid to the man for all that time,

particularly as he's probably valuable to my father. If I put him on the spot in the beginning we can then go ahead and have good times. Besides, it would be wonderful fun to cheat him."

"Fun for whom?"

"For us, darling — you and me." She bent over the table, excitedly conspiratorial. Her words bubbled. "We'll introduce you to him as Amanda and me as Elizabeth. He'll make up to you for all he's worth and in a few days, when we think we've gone far enough, we'll tell him the truth. What a bump for Mr. Julian! After that, he'll never dare to switch his attentions to me."

"My dear girl," said Elizabeth severely, "don't you realize that this man may have seen a photograph of you? Besides, there may be someone else who'll recognize you."

"But there won't be; I don't know a soul in Bolani. And Papa hasn't a single recent photograph of me; he's not the type to display family snapshots, anyway." The white shoulders lifted but the bright tones remained urgent and merry. "If he should happen to guess we'll have to confess, but I don't think he will. You see, he'll expect my father's daughter to have a sense of responsibility — which you have, and I haven't. Secondly, he'll expect someone of wide-browed intelligence — which again is rather you than me. I'm sure we could keep it up for a week or so, and that's all that's necessary. Do agree, sweetie-pie."

Amanda's soft-toned wheedling was guaranteed to melt the most frozen heart, but Elizabeth, being a woman and one who had, besides, good-naturedly suffered before through capitulation to a whim of Amanda's, was only slightly moved.

"You couldn't get away with it. In any case, when it did come out it might cause unpleasantness."

"But the man is clever and charming — according to Miss Brodie. Far too clever, I believe, to be in the least disagreeable to the daughter of the Governor or to her friend, however his vanity was injured. He'd probably laugh it off and relate the joke against himself. It *is* only a joke, Elizabeth."

Put that way it appeared harmless, and there was very little on the whole, that Elizabeth would not do for Amanda. A fondness existed between them which could encompass almost any situation, and for weeks Elizabeth's whole world had been rose-tinted because Amanda would not contemplate travelling to Bolani without her. It was to Amanda she owed the breathtaking sea trip, the glimpses of exotic ports, the experience of air travel above the blue distances of the sea. And at the Residency she would be the guest of Amanda and Sir Henry, though neither of them would allow her to regard herself as a guest. Thinking of the Governor she knew a second's qualm which must have shown in her face, for Amanda said quickly, "It's just a lark — till my father comes home."

"If Mr. Stanville seriously intends marrying Amanda Penlan, it'll hardly be a lark for me!"

"Of course it will. We'll laugh our heads off in private, and I promise you we won't let it go too far. Do say yes!"

"But supposing I can't carry it off?"

Amanda laughed happily, as if the query were an admission that all opposition had ended. "We're not likely to see so very much of Mr. Stanville, and I'll be right there all the time. We don't have to exchange personalities, only our names. It's going to be the hoax of a lifetime!"

Part of Elizabeth, that part which comprised her own sense of fun, wanted quite definitely to abet Amanda's little scheme for showing the cold-blooded leader of the Tunak Islands Council that a rich and pretty young wife was not too easy to come by, especially if she happened to be the daughter of Sir Henry Penlan. The rest of her doubted her own capacity for sustaining the deception; she wouldn't be able to help making revealing mistakes.

She was about to reply to Amanda when the smart little steward who had led them in from the airfield to Miss Brodie made his way purposefully across the lounge and gave his practised bow.

"Pardon, please. The customs officer wishes for the ladies to identify their luggage."

Elizabeth said, "I'll go," and followed him to the door.

There was not much to identify, and the officer and his assistant were so extremely helpful that within a few minutes she was out again, and lingering for a moment in the attractively alien night. Except for the subdued humming of insects it was very quiet; which was why she caught so dearly the whimpering sound which seemed to originate somewhere over there, against the dark wall of the airport building.

She moved towards it, peered down at a small bamboo cage in which sat a disconsolate puppy and at once got down to speak to it. Poor mite. As if the air journey weren't enough, it had to wait here till some thoughtless owner collected it.

Elizabeth slipped two fingers through the bars and felt the hot dry nose. He needed a drink and a little affection. She slid back the short bar which secured the door of the cage and lifted the puppy into her arms; he was small and soft and shivering. She hadn't straightened up before a crisp voice said right behind her, "I shouldn't do that, if I were you!"

For a few seconds the unexpectedness of those clipped English tones paralysed her, so that she remained stooping and very still. Then she found her wits and slowly stood up. She couldn't see the man's face, only the broad outline of his shoulders and the dark head, but she sensed an annoying stiffness in his attitude.

He spoke again, almost curtly, "I think you must be unaware that dogs which come in by plane have to undergo an examination and a brief period of quarantine."

Very firmly, but quite gently, he took the puppy by the scruff and deposited it back in the cage. Whereupon the heartbroken whimpering began all over again.

From astonishment, Elizabeth graduated to anger. "Your red tape!" she exclaimed. "The poor little scrap is thirsty and probably hungry, too. It's inhuman to leave it there, suffering."

The man, who was **no** doubt the official in command of the airport, answered her very coolly and deliberately. "If

there were more light you would see a pan of water at the back of the cage. And it's never wise to feed a dog immediately after an air trip. He'll be all right."

"But he's been cooped up since Singapore. He needs a run!"

"Don't let the fate of a puppy worry you," came those distant measured tones. "We've never yet had a casualty, even though the red tape is pulled rather tight."

"If your rules and regulations stipulate the imprisonment of dumb animals, they should be changed," she said. "Quarantine for dogs — unless they come from a great distance — is out of date. These days they're inoculated like human beings !"

There was a brief silence; then he enquired with a trace of sarcasm, "Have you travelled extensively in the South Seas ?"

"No," she admitted hardily, "but I happen to be fond of dogs, and I hate to see one made wretched for no reason at all."

He apparently heard only her denial for he said, still with a maddeningly casual inflection, "In the tropics one takes no chances with the remotest source of infection, even with something being transferred from one island to another. If our outmoded set of rules infuriates you, I'm sorry, but we're unlikely to modify them. If you're a tourist bound for the hotel in Mueng I suggest you go at once to the taxi. As I passed just now it was getting ready to leave. Good night."

The dark head inclined politely and he turned on his heel. Simply because she was too furious to go the way he did, Elizabeth marched round the building till she came to the french window near which Amanda still sat, smoking and leafing through a magazine.

Her friend looked up, lifted the slender black brows. "You're postively glinting. Did you have trouble with those bags?"

Elizabeth sat down and felt more normal. One couldn't for long maintain a grudge against an icy voice and an outline. Besides, Amanda had unerringly returned to the

theme of the plan they had been debating before the steward had interrupted, and her lively questioning demanded attention. Elizabeth *had* agreed, hadn't she? It would be great to show that man just how important he was going to be to Amanda Penlan, wouldn't it? Elizabeth was beginning to think there might be several men about who needed to be taught a lesson!

But even as the tall, immaculate figure of Julian Stanville came through the swing doors and purposefully strode towards them, she was still uncertain within herself, a chaos of arguments. She had automatically got up again and was standing with Amanda, watching the long, lithe stride, the imperious tilt of his head and those strong features. An arrogant nose with a faint hump at the bridge, well-defined cheekbones across which the skin was stretched rather tightly, and a sculptured mouth and chin. He had a dark, discreet tan which made one instantly aware of steel-blue eyes.

His half-smile might have turned the heart of any woman who had never learned secrets about him. It was sophisticated and magnetic, yet strangely remote.

"May I introduce myself," he said in deep, pleasant tones. "Julian Stanville, proxy in this instance for Sir Henry. I'm so sorry I couldn't be here to meet you. I would have been if the plane had kept to the time-table, but unfortunately the air service is privately run and Mueng is merely an occasional hop halt on their route. Did you see Miss Brodie?"

A warning half-wink made Elizabeth swallow upon the sudden awful dryness in her throat and manage an immediate reply. "Yes, thank you; she was very kind. We haven't really been waiting long."

Her voice brought a swift gleam to his eyes. For a mere second a dejected puppy rose between them. Then he smiled, impersonally; apparently the situation didn't exist that this man couldn't handle. "So you're Miss Penlan. I'm very happy to know you." And to Amanda, who stood with her eyes demurely downcast, "How do you do, Miss Mayne. I think you're both *going* to be very much at home

at the Residency." The preliminaries over, he took command. "I'll drive you straight there now. You'll need a quiet meal and a rest. Will you come this way?"

It was all accomplished quite smoothly. The cases were stowed into the luggage-carrier of a long grey car, Amanda, at her own sweetly hesitant suggestion, was given the back seat to herself, and Elizabeth was ensconced, as befitted the Governor's daughter, in the wide, deeply upholstered front seat next to their escort.

Elizabeth felt distinctly odd, and she was in no way helped by the knowledge that Amanda was probably scintillating with amusement just behind her. The man in the faultless pearl-grey suit was, to use one of Amanda's terms, rather much, and in view of the brief exchange with him in the darkness, she didn't somehow think it would be possible to fool him for long. A hurried, sideways glance showed him exactly as Anne Brodie had described him, only more so.

The charm was there, in the smile and in his polite mastery over two young women he had never seen before. The ruthlessness was only faintly noticeable in the well-cut mouth and thin nostrils, but his hands on the wheel, bony and brown and extremely well-kept, looked capable of gripping and crushing; and there was an almost fiendish self-assurance in the expertness with which he handled the big car on the gravel road. Rather hollowly, Elizabeth decided that Mr. Stanville could probably become coldly and violently angry if any of his plans were pushed awry.

"Miss Brodie will have explained that Sir Henry has been called away to one of the more distant islands," he said conversationally. "He was reluctant to leave before you arrived, but the matter was urgent and had to be settled firmly once and for all."

Knowing a remark was expected of her, Elizabeth said steadily, "I thought he only administered the islands, that others did the travelling."

"Normally, that's how it is. This dispute, though, has some importance. Each of the islands has its chief or raja, and when one of them dies the next chief is either the heir

by blood or chosen beforehand by the people. In this particular island there has been friction for a number of years because the chief's eldest son once insulted one of his cousins. Now that the old chap is dead — we're not too sure his death was a natural one, by the way — the cousin declares he can prove himself the successor to the chieftainship. Your father has to sift evidence and appoint the new chief. Complicated, isn't it?"

"It is, rather, seeing that he has a dozen or so other islands to govern." Elizabeth added carefully, "You're a sort of assistant governor, aren't you? It must be a relief to him to have someone like you to leave in charge."

His look at her was sharp and just a shade sardonic, as if he had detected an edged undertone to her voice. "We're all trained up from cadets, Miss Penlan. In colonial government little is left to chance."

"I suppose not. When is Sir Henry expected back?"

"In two weeks, if there's no bother. It's not too easy for him to communicate with us, but I shall send a message to his nearest telegraph station telling him you've arrived safely." He cast his glance over his shoulder at Amanda and then let it rest again, fleetingly, upon Elizabeth, before turning to give his attention once more to the road ahead. "The Governor asked me to act as your guardian during his absence. I did point out that two young women who had brought themselves round the globe without assistance might resent being placed under protection in Bolani, but I also promised to keep an eye on you. So you mustn't mind if you find your days planned ahead. I'm made that way."

"So we gathered," put in Amanda with that suspect sweetness. "It'll be refreshing to be guarded, for a change."

It was amazing, thought Elizabeth, how easily and completely one could slip into another's identity. The fact that the man actually took her without question to be Amanda Penlan made it so simple that had Amanda not been occupying the back seat she would almost have believed herself to be that spoiled but lovable creature.

They took a hairpin bend and Mueng lay before them, a shapless scatter of lights which halted abruptly at the curve of the lagoon.

"There, where the lights begin to peter out behind the town," pointed out Julian, "is Kalaba Hill. In daylight you can pick out the white walls of the Residency. On special nights we have them floodlit."

"Isn't this," queried Amanda, in her new gently-prodding tones, "a special night?"

He laughed briefly, and Elizabeth reminded herself that this was the self-seeking, studiously-charming man who expected to marry Sir Henry Penlan's daughter and eventually occupy a Residency himself. Instinctively, she knew he was aware of his attraction for women, and unreasonably she disliked him for it intensely.

"The floodlights bring up the islanders in shoals," he said, "and I'm sure you don't want to face it tonight. Tomorrow evening will be soon enough for that. I've arranged a dinner party for you tomorrow—only a small one because I realized that as most of your clothes will be on the high seas you won't have much in the way of evening apparel to choose from."

Elizabeth heard herself saying, "You think of everything; there's not another man in the world who would have remembered that."

"No?" He didn't seem to care if there weren't. "Everything will be informal till your father returns. He'd prefer it."

The Residency was near the top of the hill, a gracious, white-pillared house of two storeys with cloistered balconies above and a wide, paved terrace stretching the whole way round the house. The long driveway ran straight from the road between spacious emerald lawns from which grew the excessively tall and slender trunks of many thick-tufted palms.

Julian stopped the car at the foot of the wide, semi-circular steps and at once got out and came round to offer a hand to Elizabeth and Amanda. To the uniformed colored servant who had flung open the main door he spoke

a few clipped sentences, after which he indicated the tiled hall and followed the two girls into it.

Julian said, "I had two bedrooms prepared for you. They adjoin each other and look over the gardens and the lagoon. Kosi will take up your bags and prepare baths. You can trust him. The cook has had instructions to serve a good dinner, but I'm afraid it won't be ready before eight because these boys just can't be made to break habits. However, if you need a few savories with your sundowners, Kosi will see that you get them."

Elizabeth nodded, but before she could speak Amanda murmured, far too politely, "Perhaps Mr. Stanville wishes for a private word with you, Amanda. I'll go straight up and unpack."

Of the two emotions which beset Elizabeth, her private enjoyment of the unlikely spectacle of Amanda sedately unpacking the cases proved to be the stronger. She compressed her mouth to control a smile

"Good night, Miss Mayne," said Julian.

"Call me Liz," returned Amanda wickedly. "Everyone does." Then she took the staircase at a run and called good night to him from the top.

Smilingly, Julian turned back to Elizabeth. "Your friend has high spirits, hasn't she? The Governor told me that you and she were that rare combination—two women who really like each other. I suspect it's because you're opposites."

"Perhaps it's also because we've known one another a long time. Neither of us ever bothers about the other's shortcomings."

"A miraculous achievement, at your age." His mouth mocked, his eyes seemed faintly to appraise the honey-colored hair she shook out as she drew off the blue cap. "This is an appropriate moment for me to tell you that your visit here is very welcome. I'll even admit that when Sir Henry mentioned, tentatively, that he was considering whether it would be good policy to have you out here, I inserted a few words in favor of it."

Elizabeth swung the cap casually on her forefinger. "For his sake?" she asked.

"For all our sakes. There's no reason why the path of duty shouldn't be as pleasant as one can make it, and I knew you were of an age to wallow eagerly in new experiences. I rather think you'll have a good many new experiences in Bolani."

She raised her head and met his baffling blue gaze. He said drily, "Would you like me to apologize for putting you right about the dog—and taking you for a tourist?"

"Not if you don't feel that way!" she warmly retorted.

The next second the bell at the main door jangled musically. With a swift, "Excuse me!" he crossed to pull open the door.

A dishevelled young man stepped into the hall and burst out feverishly, "Gosh, I'm glad to have caught up with you, sir. That fellow you sentenced to be deported yesterday refuses to board the freighter, and the skipper says he must get out with this tide."

"What about the police?" demanded Julian. "Aren't they on the job?"

"They're afraid to act without specific orders."

"Very well. As' the patrol officer is away I'll give you an official chit. Mueng isn't a paradise for degenerates, and I'll see that he goes if I have to heave him aboard myself."

It wasn't the words he used which made Elizabeth stare at him, fascinated; nor was it his autocratic manner. More than anything it was the lightning change from the agreeably shrewd companion into the merciless administrator.

He came back to her, the lean face tightly smiling though his eyes were cold and metallic, as if mentally he was already away on his job. "You've had a long day," he said, "You must turn in, soon after dinner. And please don't try to explore the Residency till tomorrow, by daylight. As a matter of form there is a guard of four men posted in the grounds, so you needn't be in the least scared. I'll be getting in touch with you. Good night, Miss Penlan."

She answered and straightway went upstairs. She heard the door shut decisively, and dose upon the thud came the purr of the grey car and the sounds of acceleration as he sped down the drive.

Strangely, as Elizabeth reached the upper corridor she was not thinking of the extraordinary situation into which Amanda had plunged her. She was pitying a man she would never know, the "degenerate," who would never find sanctuary in any island which might come under the jurisdiction of Julian Stanville.

She wasn't a bit sorry she had agreed to help teach that steel juggernaut a lesson.

CHAPTER TWO

THE morning broke clear and brilliant over the island

Within an hour of awakening Elizabeth discovered a circular balcony and moved slowly and blissfully around it, savoring the absolute loveliness of the superbly kept grounds, the density of the growth beyond, the tropical roof-tops glimpsed between the billowing trees, and down there the white town of Mueng against the intense sapphire of the sea. So this vari-colored gem was Bolani!

She went back through the long elaborate corridor with its stately portraits of past governors on each side, to her bedroom, which was large and square and furnished in a golden wood that set off the green and cream of the curtains and rugs. Amanda was there, wearing a pink chiffon negligé and seated on a tapestry stool, using a nail-file.

"Hallo," she said blithely. "Why on earth are you up and dressed at this hour?"

"Everything starts early in the tropics, and it's a long time since the servant brought breakfast. I took a look from this balcony and just had to see more. Amanda, it's the most spectacular island in the world!"

"Of course it is, and don't call me Amanda. If you like," with a grin, "you may have the same privilege as Julian and call me Liz."

"I'd dean forgotten that business." Elizabeth paused at the foot of the bed, her brow puckered. "Seems so silly in the sunshine, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," returned Amanda vigorously. Then, with a speculative glance at Elizabeth's pale, serious face: "What did you think of the villain? Overpowering?"

"A little, but I believe we have his measure—Miss Brodie was a help there. He won't be easy to hoodwink, you know."

"I do see that, but it makes it all the more exciting, puts us on our mettle. We simply must keep it up!"

Rather to her surprise, Elizabeth nodded. "He's so sure of himself that you feel a decided urge to upset his calculations. I wonder if this is the right way, though?"

"It's infallible, darling," exclaimed Amanda, flinging down the file she had borrowed from Elizabeth's neat little case, and luxuriously stretching her arms. "Be sweet to him and take care always to look your prettiest. Make him realize that in you he's got just everything. Give him shy smiles from those grey eyes, keep your lips soft and inviting—you really have got a lovely mouth which even the coldest fish should want to kiss. Fill him with silent amazement at his own good fortune—you, and the pinnacle of his career." She sighed happily. "I almost wish I really were you and in your position at the moment. *I'd* shake him

Elizabeth laughed Amanda was right; she could have managed this situation much better. She knew all the tricks of attracting and dangling the male—had seemingly been born knowing them. And she wouldn't have had qualms about the consequences, because such things always smoothed out for Amanda.

Thinking about it collectedly in unemotional daylight, Elizabeth herself could not see that much harm could come of the small deception. And there really was something extremely unlikeable about a man who regarded marriage as merely a golden key to his own future.

"I'd better go down," she said. "The boy brought me a message that your father's secretary would be here at nine. It's ten past. By the way, what do I say to the secretary?"

"Whatever you like, my sweet. You know you have my full permission to be me!" Amanda laughed again, and drifted off to take a bath.

She trod the corridor and descended the graceful staircase into the hall, where a mass of scarlet and yellow blossoms flowed over the rim of an immense bronze bowl and practically obliterated a dark and beautifully carved table. A servant in the blue and gold day uniform materialized, and told her in fluent but sing-song English that Mr. Sands was waiting in the library. Elizabeth braced herself and entered the room he indicated.

There was nothing baronial about this library, no sagging leather chairs beside an open fireplace, no priceless sets of tooled leather volumes. The walls were lined with plain shelving and there was only one window, which reached from floor to ceiling in the wall opposite the door.

Mr. Sands came from behind the desk which was placed at right angles to the window. He was a slim man in his middle forties, slightly gingery in coloring and with a suggestion of pompousness in his manner. He introduced himself.

"We're all very pleased to have you here, Miss Penlan," he said, "and I, personally, shall be only too happy to serve you in any way I can. I hope you'll remember that."

"You're very kind." She wasn't quite sure how to proceed, but thought it best to add, "I really don't think there's much you can do for us, though. Every one of our needs seems to be catered for."

"Well, if you do think of something you'd like which isn't available, let me know. I can get practically anything around here."

A thought flashed into her mind and she said, diffidently, "There is something I want rather much, but I'm not sure that it's in your power to do it for me."

Had she stopped and weighed up the correct approach to little Mr. Sands she could not have contrived a more immediate response. He became a trifle sententious and noticeably gallant.

"I would naturally do anything within my power for Sir Henry's daughter, Miss Penlan."

"Ah, but this hasn't anything to do with the Residency. Mr. Sands."

"Even so, I may be able to help you."

"Well. . . ." She hesitated, and went on, "Perhaps I'm being foolish, but at the airport last night I saw a puppy caged up and left alone in the darkness. He'd only come from Singapore and it did seem sad. I don't know who it belonged to---"

"But I do," he replied promptly. "It's a present for

Colonel Kelvey's wife, who's a bit of an invalid—but she won't get it for about a fortnight."

"A fortnight! What happens to it during that time?"

"It remains at the airport for examination."

"But need it stay so long? Puppies fret, you know."

"We have a boy there looking after animals. Our vet. lives at the research station, which is thirty miles from here. He's due at Mueng in about ten days."

"It's merely the examination?" she asked

"Routine," he nodded. "It won't take him ten minutes, but we must have the clearance certificate before the dog can be released from quarantine."

She considered. "Couldn't you," she enquired, "arrange to have the poor little chap sent out to the vet.?"

Taken aback he said, "Well, it might be done, but it's most irregular. I'll make enquiries, Miss Penlan. The dog would certainly be happier there than here for a fortnight. I'll do my best."

"I wish you would," she said gratefully.

After that he showed her some of the books, and took her into a small private lounge where more shelves were loaded with fiction and biographies.

Later, roaming the Residency alone, she thought it must be both frightening and delightful to be the wife of a governor. To run a huge establishment like this, to lead the small white community and initiate all kind of things for the benefit of the islanders. Sir Henry's wife had been dead for a number of years and he must have evolved some system whereby his staff arranged and managed official functions; but no amount of expert organization could take the woman's place in such a household.

Amanda had no interest at all in the running of the Residency. So long as everything moved efficiently and the bell she rang brought instant attention she was satisfied. But she liked the spaciousness of the government house and considered the grounds "not bad." Actually, there was much to see and enjoy outside: the formal gardens, a hibiscus maze, about twenty-five labelled species of palm, and sunken ponds matted over with pink and blue lilies and walled in

by tall tropic ferns, prodigal rubber-bush and thick trails of yellow-starred liana. There were long, shady walks where one might meet a family of middle-class Malays carefully keeping off the grass but exercising the right of all the islanders; during daylight hours only the ill-behaved could be ejected from the grounds of the Residency.

Precisely at four that afternoon Elizabeth and Amanda received two visitors. One was the doctor's wife and the other the wife of the copra superintendent; both were youthfully middle-aged and pleasant, though plump Mrs. McIver, the doctor's wife, proved the more loquacious.

"Julian asked us to call," she said, her glance flitting birdlike from one attractive young face to the other. "We're two of your guests for dinner tonight, but he thought you'd like to know some of us beforehand."

Alarmed, Elizabeth said, "We're charmed to meet you, of course, but . . . are we giving the dinner this evening? I understood Mr. Stanville was to be host."

"Well, naturally! Who else could deputize for your father? He has it all arranged—twelve of us together for dinner and a chat. Home at ten-thirty."

"Does he," enquired Elizabeth, intrigued by the thought, "even stipulate the time at which a party shall break up?"

"Not always," came the laughing reply. "Tonight's affair is merely to introduce you to a few senior officers and their wives. Julian decided you'd be fatigued after your journey and wouldn't care to endure too many people at once. I did suggest that girls of your age are never weary, but he wouldn't change his mind."

"We understand," Amanda assured her with a fixed, innocent smile. "He's a splendid hunk of man, isn't he?"

Elizabeth said hurriedly, "I suppose I ought to get in touch with him about this evening."

"Don't bother," advised Mrs. McIver. "You can be sure he has it all fixed, down to the last cherry on the last ice-cream. Tell us what •t's like in England now. We haven't been home for years."

This was a safe topic and to their guests completely absorbing. In fact, it was nearly half-past five before the two women left.

Elizabeth had decided to wear a willow-green cocktail suit, but Amanda got into a strapless white brocade that reached her calves, topping it with a scarlet bolero. Meeting her as they came from their rooms at seven-thirty, Elizabeth stifled a quick sigh of admiration. Amanda always looked delicious whatever get-up she chose, and how well she knew her type. As far back as Elizabeth could remember, Amanda had been aware of the attractiveness of pure white against her creamy-olive skin contrasted with vivid reds, greens, and blues. Tonight, she had regretfully left in its case the diamond necklace her father had ordered by post from a Bond Street jeweller for her twenty-first birthday a few months ago.

"It doesn't much matter," she pouted amiably. "I'll have plenty of time to wear it later on, when Papa is here." From the height of her own sparkling perfection, Amanda took a good look at Elizabeth and said, "You're so young and sweet in green. There's bound to be a man in Mueng who'll be wild about you."

"I wish you'd forget men for a while," Elizabeth said. "We already have our hands full with Julian Stanville."

Amanda flipped a negligent finger. "He's a machine, not a man. Come on, let's have a drink. I fancy two dry Martinis." On the way down she added, "Would you like to marry and live in a place like Bolani? I wouldn't. I'd pine for the bright lights and crowds of people. I like the heat, but I just adore cold weather when you can lie in a great warm bed with a novel half the day, have tea and cream scones near a blazing fire and go out to a theatre wrapped in soft mink. And I just can't bear monotony. After a while I daresay it becomes awfully monotonous here."

"There may come a time when even you will want to marry and settle down."

"Marry," agreed Amanda cheerfully, "but not settle

down; it sounds so deadly. I'll marry a playboy and we'll have heaps of fun."

"Supposing you fall in love with someone who's serious and hardworking?"

Amanda threw out her hands, horrified. "But I can't. It would be suicide! For one thing I refuse to share a man with his job, and for another, I'd probably find it physically impossible to love a MAN WITH A FUTURE!" The way Amanda pronounced the last few words, emphatically and half in disgust, they definitely deserved capitals. "As a matter of fact," she acknowledged grudgingly, "I did once have a wee yearning for a budding colonial man, but luckily he was whisked off somewhere and now I can hardly remember what he looked like. It was a miraculous escape."

Elizabeth laughed, and as they had by now reached the larger of the two lounges she did not trouble to reply. For Julian was there! Julian in an impeccable white suit, his dark head shining under the brilliant lights, his teeth very white and even as he smiled that restrained, slightly mocking smile, and bowed.

"Good evening, ladies." Then, appreciatively, "it hardly seems fair that two young women should have so much beauty and freshness between them and yet retain their individuality. How do you do it?"

The answer, of course, came from Amanda. "All young things are lovely and fresh, Julian, but the difference between Amanda and me is that she has brains and I have only a native wit. I don't mind. It's convenient to be regarded as a bit of an idiot; sometimes it gives you a private laugh at other people. If you're pouring, mine's a Martini."

He took the hint, and as he tilted a decanter, asked, "How have you been getting on today? Did you like Mrs. Coombs and Mrs. Mdiver?"

"They were very pleasant," Elizabeth told him. "We talked for more than an hour. Who else will be here tonight?"

He saw them seated in the damask chairs, each with a glass, before saying, "Besides those two couples, there'll be Sands and his wife, our education officer and his wife, and

a handsome young captain from the garrison. I rather thought," with a slanting smile at Amanda, "that Miss Mayne might have a warm corner for the Army."

"How right you are!" The dark eyes gleamed with mischief as they flashed a message to Elizabeth: There you are—he's paired himself with you! "I dote on uniforms. They turn even plain men into dashing heroes."

"I'm afraid Captain Cranwood will be in mufti tonight, but he's every inch a cavalry man and the best polo player in the islands."

Plainly, thought Elizabeth, he had elected the captain as Amanda's first conquest. He was shrewd and fast-working, this Julian Stanville; in the short time they had been together last night he had correctly assessed Amanda down to the details. Had he, she wondered apprehensively, had similar success with herself?

He was saying sauevely, "Just before you came down I had a word with Kosi. Dinner will be served ten minutes after the last arrival. We chose a round table so that there could be no question as to who would sit at the head. It would be a good idea to keep the round table till Sir Henry returns—when others are here, I mean."

"Very well," said Elizabeth.

His regard was curious. "Does it vex you—my making these suggestions?"

"Why should it—if you're taking Sir Henry's place during his absence?" She took another sip of her drink. "You told us yesterday that you were making plans for us. May we know what they are?"

His glance at her was still speculative, as if he were quietly determined to trace the reason for the hint of stiffness in her manner. "In the morning you might bathe in the lagoon with the crowd from the government offices; it's a standing date on Saturdays. Everyone rests for an hour or two after lunch, but at four almost every day there's tennis and badminton, and polo twice a week. You'll receive dinner invitations and the wives will arrange picnics for you. Tomorrow night I shall be giving a dinner for you at my own house, and on Sunday I'll drive you round the

island. On Monday there's a birthday party, and before Tuesday I'll look out some films so that we can put on a show."

"By then," mentioned Amanda naively, "we ought to be acclimatized and able to totter along under our own steam. Do you think I might have another drink?"

As he rose to take her glass the first guest arrived, and within the next few minutes the rest came, the men wearing white or beige suits, the women in neat informal georgette and silks.

The young Captain, as tall as Julian, but more thickly built and ruddy of complexion, hid much of his good looks under a handlebar moustache for which, Amanda murmured faintly, Julian should have prepared her. It was terrific.

Elizabeth's heart sank a little as Julian made the introductions. Pretending to be someone else became a strain as the circle to be deceived expanded, and these people were so friendly, so anxious to make life in Bolandi exciting for the Governor's daughter and her friend that she did hope they would like her just a little for herself.

It was about two minutes before Kosi announced dinner that Mr. Sands drew her to one side and said confidentially, "I've put out a feeler, Miss Penlan. I think we shall be able to send that dog to the research station."

"Oh, I'm so glad. Thank you," she answered.

And then she had to take the doctor's arm and go in to dinner.

It was quite a cosy meal. She was aware of Julian's subtle handling of the conversation, the unconsciousness with which he was looked to for a lead by these seasoned colonials. He was friendly with everyone and full of smiling charm for the women, yet he stood apart, close to none.

Coffee and liqueurs were served on the terrace, and very soon Amanda and the moustache moved off for a walk in the grounds. Music came from one of the windows, doubtless ordered and listed by Julian, but it was never loud enough to impinge upon conversation, and sharp at ten-fifteen it trailed off; a signal which Mrs. McIver was the first to obey.

Invitations were doled out and good nights said. Cars slid down the drive—all except that of Captain Cranwood, who thought this a whang-ho night for a drive and had rocketed off with Amanda half an hour ago.

Julian's hand was behind Elizabeth's elbow. "If you're not too tired we might take a stroll," he suggested. "Except during cyclone weather the night air here is matchless."

They were some way along a path, out of range of the lights, when she asked, "Where were you before you came to Bolani, Mr. Stanville?"

"Malaya," he told her. "I was a commissioner there. Before that it was Borneo, and before that, Fiji."

"Do you really like the South Seas, or have you only made yourself like them?"

A few moments elapsed before he said, with cool amusement, "Your tone is vaguely hostile. There's something about me which annoys you, isn't there? I've noticed it several times already. I wonder what it is?" But apparently he didn't wonder enough to do any dissecting. He went on, "I like any place where I work. In our job one gets interested in the people and their problems, and most of us are taken up with our own particular aspect—the education officer with his schools, the doctor with his health services, and so on. Your father is keen on harbor development."

She wished he would call the Governor Sir Henry, as she did. "And you?" she queried.

"I'm always striving towards better communications between the islands, but I like to see the thing as a well-rounded whole." A brief laugh. "I'm sure you haven't the least wish to hear a lecture on empire-building, and to be honest, I feel it's a pity to waste such a night on so **mundane** a topic."

Her heart gave a queer but definite **lurch**; she hadn't expected that kind of remark from Julian Stanville—not yet, anyway. But with him, she admitted, one should be prepared for anything.

"Well," she managed calmly. "What shall we talk about?"

"Women who've travelled as you have are never at a loss. There's the Continent, for instance. Tell me what you thought of Paris."

"Paris?" She ought to have forseen a moment such as this. What did she think of Paris—she who had never seen the gay city? "Does a woman," she enquired with studious casualness, "ever notice anything about Paris except the Frenchman's amorous glances and the French-woman's chic?"

"I don't know," he said, his tone pleasantly thoughtful. Pushing his hands into his pockets he added, "I should have said that Paris for you would never be a mannequin parade; it would be a lovable human city."

She was ready with an airy answer. "There you have it, then. A lovely human city; that's Paris." And, before he could switch to Madrid or Berne, or to some other place which he knew and she didn't: "I want to thank you very much for managing everything so smoothly tonight."

"It was my duty," he said.

Swiftly she glanced at him, sideways. He was looking ahead, along the wide path edged with flowering shrubs, and she saw his profile, the nose with the thin nostrils which would always appear arrogant, the mouth faintly smiling as if at his thoughts. What was he thinking as he walked, adjusting his stride to hers? The next second she reminded herself that she didn't care what he was thinking. When he spoke, though, she listened intently, hoping to find the answer to her unvoiced question.

"By the way," he said carelessly, "seeing that you were so upset about the terrier at the airport I wangled something which ought to please you. The dog was taken by car to the vet. this morning, he had his examination and was found to be in the pink of condition, so he was brought back this afternoon. Mrs. Kelvey will bed him down tonight in the basket that's been waiting for him. We couldn't have done it if he'd come from England, but seeing that he comes from a certified breeder at Singapore we can stretch the red tape a mite."

She was glad—and absurdly vexed. "Did you do it for me?"

"For no one else. Mrs. Kelvey was resigned to waiting two or three weeks."

She didn't thank him because it suddenly occurred to her that he might have known she had enlisted Mr. Sand's assistance and gone ahead and used his authority because it pleased him to demonstrate his power.

He slowed a little and looked down at her. "You know," he said, considering her, "you're not quite what I expected. Your father hasn't often discussed you, but from the few details he let fall I pictured you quite differently."

"Did you?" coolly. "Are you disappointed?"

"No—merely a trifle puzzled." They had turned a corner and stopped beside a stone parapet overhung by sweet-smelling ginger bush, when he added disconcertingly, "Did you know that your father is rather anxious to get you married?"

A slight dew started at Elizabeth's temples, but she kept her voice steady as she answered, "Fathers are made that way, but I don't want to marry yet."

"I can understand that," he said. "You're too young."

She didn't like the inflexion he used; in fact, she had a sudden feeling that he knew all and was getting at her. And Elizabeth, sweet and glowing with innocence though she was, did not care for being baited; particularly was she averse from being mocked at by Julian Stanville.

She felt him leaning negligently at her side against the parapet, so in tune with the strangeness of this place, so in command of every situation in which he took part, that he could afford to say whatever he liked.

"I agree," she told him flippantly. "I'm much too young. It would be too devastating to find oneself tied up and denied fun for evermore. Besides," she tacked on with a feigned sigh, "I'd never be sure of being loved for myself. That alone is enough to put a girl off marriage."

He gave a short amused laugh. "Hasn't it occurred to you that the daughter of a great man might not be much

of a catch as a wife? Think what a son-in-law of Sir Henry Penlan would have to live up to!"

She was on the verge of saying, "But *you'd* manage it all right. In time you'll probably outdo Sir Henry himself." She happened to look up just then at that masterful, handsome face with a smile pulling at the corners of the mouth, and she had again the prickly sensation of being seen through; so she made no response at all.

"Will you do me a favor, Miss Penlan? I want you to make friends with someone who's rather friendless, if you will. She hasn't been here long and she's in an unhappy position which I'm sure you could help her to tolerate. Will you do it?"

For some reason Elizabeth hardened. "Tell me more about her."

He shrugged. "Her name is Celia Cartney, and she lives with her brother on a plantation which adjoins Mueng. The brother is a wilting daisy; one of those youngsters who drink and gamble, and can't settle to a job. Celia is fond of him and she does her best to keep him at the grind. Unfortunately, for several reasons, the brother is very unpopular with the Army and the government officials, and because of him she doesn't get her share of invitations; women need social life in places like this. If you liked, you could make things much happier for her."

She drew away from him slightly and reached out to pluck a flower from a bush. "You want me to invite her to the Residency?"

"Not necessarily, though it wouldn't hurt to ask her up for an afternoon's tennis. As soon as the other women realize you're willing to admit her to your circle, they'll include her in their parties." Mockingly, he ended, "Such is the power of the Governor's daughter!"

"I see." This new facet of Julian Stanville, she found, was somewhat unpalatable. She hadn't known a third unmarried white woman existed on Bolani, and this one, seemingly, had carved an impression on the steely Chief Commissioner; which must surely mean that she was a little unusual. "If you're so keen for her to be accepted in gov-

ernment circles," she said off-handedly, "why haven't you invited her to your own social affairs? After all, you seem to be pretty well omnipotent round here."

Again a non-committal shrug, but he leant her way to give emphasis to his words. "You must realize that Bolani is by no means England. Here, you get a few people thrown together by chance, and many of them stay for years. New-comers are mostly welcomed, but if it so happens that the majority ignores them, then it would be highly indiscreet for an official to attempt to turn the scale, however great his inclination. In this case, though, you could do it, because you've only just arrived, and there's nothing to prevent your taking a fancy to a girl who isn't much older than you are. As a matter of fact, I think you'll like Celia for herself. She's modern and has plenty of courage."

She did not enquire why it would be a favor to Julian Stanville if she made a friend of Celia Cartney.

She said, "Very well, I'll see Miss Cartney. And now let's go back to the house. I'm rather tired."

As they walked his hand came again to her elbow, but she moved aside in time to avoid it. And he spoke of the island customs, of the new copra plant and of the coral reef which was strung round the island like a necklace with a few beads missing.

"While the seas are calm you must take a launch trip round the island," he said. "And in the early morning one day you must certainly climb one of the mountains. There's no experience to equal it."

"I daresay we can leave it to you to arrange both outings," she stated.

"If you wish," he answered sauvely. Then: "I wouldn't hurry like that if I were you. It's never wise to work up a heat before bed."

"I'm not hot," she said shortly.

"You soon will be. Why the sudden haste?"

That was something which wasn't too clear even to herself. Before she could embark upon an analysis, however, her heel caught between two flagstones and she stumbled. She was gripped in a vice, and he said mildly: "Moral:

never get angry over nothing at all. By the way, don't ever walk alone in the grounds after dark, will you? There's no real danger, but one of the guards might mistake you for a marauder. I'd prefer you to remain within doors."

She began swiftly, her voice unnaturally low: "I think you rather over-estimate your duties, Mr. Stanville ——"

And then Amanda burst upon them, all breathless and bright-eyed, her black curls wind-tossed and the white skirt billowing.

"Hallo, there! I've had a most wonderful drive. What a man that Captain is. What a man !" She paused, her glance merry and inquisitive. "Have you two been quarrelling-or kissing?"

Julian looked down at Elizabeth. It was much lighter here near the floodlit house and he was able to survey the flushed cheeks and parted red mouth, the eyes which mirrored vexation and the lock of pale hair which had fallen forward over her brow.

"Neither," he said to Amanda curtly. "Good night to you both. I'll expect you for dinner tomorrow."

As he strode across the grass to where his car was parked on the drive, Amanda let out a long, surprised breath. She turned to Elizabeth.

"Well, well," she murmured, "our Julian has a few stunted emotions, after all, and you've bumped into one of them. Bad luck, darling. Tell Mandy."

"It wasn't anything. I tripped and he saved me a tumble, that's all."

"That's all!" The black brows rose. "Worlds have been conquered from such beginnings."

Elizabeth was walking fast, into the house and across the hall to the stairs. She made the sort of rejoinder Amanda expected and ran up the staircase. She didn't want to think about Julian any more tonight . . . or about Celia Cartney.

CHAPTER THREE

LIVING with Amanda, it was impossible to slide into a routine. One morning she would be up when the first parakeet pecked at its reflection in her window, and the next, in spite of a beckoning breeze and the prospect of a bathe in good company, she would remain between her sheets, snoozing or reading a novel.

The ladies of Kalaba Hill regarded Amanda—Elizabeth Mayne to them—as something of a minx, but by no means dangerous. Mrs. McIver had been heard to whisper that she was glad she hadn't a daughter of that kind and equally glad that her son was not likely to visit Bolani this year; but neither she nor the others really disapproved of Amanda's lightheartedness and vivacity.

Elizabeth—Amanda Penlan to them—was different of course. She was quieter and her smile was both deep and gentle. And she had that suggestion of a glow coming from within which develops, in an older woman, into a positive loving-kindness. For all that, Mrs. McIver told her cronies, the Governor's daughter was a bit of a dark horse; anyone could see as much from the way she weighed her sentences before she spoke them.

The fact was, having plunged into deception to please Amanda, Elizabeth found herself having to be more and more careful. The officials' wives had the habit of taking morning tea at one of their houses, and naturally the two girls were invited along. Seeing that Amanda considered such meetings a bore, Elizabeth had to go alone that Saturday, and it was then that she missed Amanda's breezy acceptance of their new roles.

Amanda might be a little careless of other people's feelings and rather impatient to be about her pleasures, but outwardly she played her part in the Residency household with all the skill of a trained actress. With Amanda present, Elizabeth never felt the insecurity which assailed her whenever she was alone with the older women; she almost felt herself to be the daughter of Sir Henry Penlan.

The dinner at the house of Julian Stanville that evening passed off without incident. The home of the Chief Commissioner was quite an imposing establishment, comfortably furnished but with little about the main rooms to suggest anything but a coolness in the personality of the tenant. The food served was excellent, the bridge-tables aptly filled, and the conversation on the terrace clever and stimulating. Next morning, on an impulse, she decided to make the acquaintance of Celia Cartney. It was Sunday, and very quiet on Kalaba Hill, though many of the Malay boys worked as usual in the gardens; they were Moslems, and preferred to take time off for their own religious feasts. Sunday meant nothing at all to them, Amanda had gone riding with Captain Cranwood, and Elizabeth decided, with inward trepidation, to order a car and drive down to the Cartney plantation.

They wound upwards on a road which connected Mueng with the villages round the coast. Each side of the track was thick with many different kinds of palms laced together by strong vines, but beyond them she could see the taller, spaced trunks of a plantation. The chauffeur slowed at a lane along which, a peeling board told them, one might find the Cartney homestead.

"Yes," she answered his query. "I wish to go to the house."

It was a bamboo dwelling on stilts. Instead of windows, large areas of wall had been left open, but the palm-fibre screens which were intended to protect against the sun and rain hung ragged and useless. All round the stilts grew rank weeds, and the steps which rose to the front entrance were worm-eaten and worn much too thin to be safe. For a moment Elizabeth battled with an urge to fly before she had been seen. But the habit of politeness, and of doing the thing she had set out to do, came to her aid. She resolutely got out of the car, went up those rickety steps and knocked on the wood of the mosquito screen.

A wait of thirty seconds, and then the pale outline of a woman showed through the wire. The door was pushed

wide, and Celia Cartney stood framed against the dimness of the room.

Elizabeth hadn't quite known what to expect; possibly a mixture of herself and Amanda with an extra dash of sophistication. The bamboo house was the brother's, she reminded herself quickly.

The girl was tallish and fair-skinned. Her cap of almost straight mahogany-brown hair enhanced a narrow white brow, and the thick dark lashes lightened the hazel of her eyes into a golden yellow. Her small reddened mouth smiled uncertainly.

"You're Amanda Penlan," she said, after a fleeting glance at the car. "Julian told me you might be getting in touch with me, but I'm sure he didn't think you'd call. Will you come in?" She stood aside and threw out a deprecating hand. "I do keep the curtains drawn, but I'm afraid it's horribly dusty. The company has given my brother permission to build a brick house, but he hasn't got round to it yet."

"You live in a wonderful spot," Elizabeth said, as she sank into the chair Celia had indicated. "One could camp here in a caravan and be happy."

She was a little out of her depth. This clinging-voiced, languid girl in the beach frock didn't quite line up with Julian's brief description of her. She was modern, of course, and probably it did take some courage for a townswoman to settle into a clearing in a palm forest, but one couldn't visualize her depriving her brother of drink and stiffening his backbone.

"Do you really believe a woman could be happy in a fearful dump like this?" Celia queried. She looked round at the weathered rattan furniture, at the unpolished palm-slab floor, and her mouth drooped. discontentedly. "I hate this place—can't get used to it after life in a service flat. I've been accustomed to having everything done for me in a decent civilized fashion—not in the way these boys go about it. But Tim just doesn't care."

She rummaged among some magazines and found a packet of cigarettes and some matches. While they lit up she

talked, and Elizabeth got a fairly sharp picture of Celia and her brother. Tim was the typical easy-going son of an easy-going father. He was twenty-eight, and for five years had drifted from one job to another in the South Seas. This particular post was the best he had had, but Celia had been able to tell from his letters home that he was getting ready to trail on once more. Their parents were divorced and had each married someone else, so Tim was all she had. She had drawn a year's allowance, given up the fiat, and travelled down to see if she couldn't stabilize him—stabilize them both.

"Lord knows, we need it," she said. "It's so difficult, though. I've been here over two months but I haven't made the smallest impression on Tim. We're fond of each other, just as we always have been, but I haven't got what it takes to alter a man. The people here, the white people, don't like him." Her lashes lowered. "He actually knew the copra superintendent at the university, but they never speak to each other now, except about business. Tim's only friend is another planter who isn't too scrupulous and certainly isn't good for him. They're out fishing together this morning. Tonight, they'll probably go out and drink together."

"It's been very hard for you," Elizabeth said quietly. "I admire your pluck, particularly as you have to be so much alone."

Celia laughed briefly; it was a cracked, pathetic little laugh and sounded genuine, but it did not quite line up with the look in her eyes. "It's not real pluck. I wouldn't have stuck it out for a month if it hadn't been for Julian Stanville."

"Oh." Elizabeth didn't add anything to the monosyllable.

"You know how it is," came the soft, confiding explanation. "You find yourself near the end of your tether and someone steps in and takes it for granted that you're going right on with the task you've started; so you do. In my case it was Julian."

"Does he ... help you?"

"He's done no end for both of us. You'll hear people call him hard and merciless; that's how he is with Tim."

But he's always been exceedingly sweet to me." She flicked ash from her cigarette and asked casually: "Was it to please Julian that you came here this morning?"

To please Julian, indeed! What was she getting at? Could she possibly be suggesting . . . no, of course not. Yet there was something puzzling about this young woman, something which did not quite fit in with the obvious conception of an unhappy girl struggling to keep *her* wayward brother on the rails.

Perhaps Celia sensed a change in Elizabeth for she did not wait for her reply. With a controlled quiver of the lip she said: "I'm terribly grateful to you for calling. It's one of the best things that's happened to me since I first came to Bolani."

With muddled feelings, Elizabeth stood up and pressed out her cigarette; she hadn't intended her visit to be so brief. She too half a pace towards the door and said brightly: "Now we've met we must become friends. I understand you play tennis. Will you come up for a game on Wednesday afternoon?"

"Thanks, I'd love it. Sorry you have to leave so soon."

Elizabeth came away from the Cartney's feeling a bit ragged and cherishing the fervent hope that she would never have to enter the house again. She tried to conjure *a* full picture of Celia Cartney; a slim and pale creature of russet coloring and with the sprinkling of freckles which men often found fascinating. Not much sophistication, but sufficient knowledge of men, apparently, to get what she wanted from Julian Stanville.

One felt sorry for her, naturally. However fond one might be of a shiftless brother, living with him in the vain hope that he might reform must be gruelling, particularly as he had apparently formed the habit of going off for hours with a shady friend. But was Celia really doing anything worthwhile about Tim Cartney?

Elizabeth visualized herself in Celia's situation. In the first place she would have had those window-screens repaired and the furniture cleaned. She would have polished up that living-room table and kept *a* jar of flowers on it,

and somewhere she would have found a rug or two for the floor. Meanwhile she would have urged the building of the new house sanctioned by Tim's employers, and somehow she would have attracted as friends the sort of people who would be interested in the tribulations of a young planter. And never, in any circumstances, would she have admitted to others that his weaknesses had defeated her. That way lay utter failure.

But maybe it was unfair to judge Celia by her own standards. The girl had patently never had to earn a living, and existence in a service flat is not conducive to good housewifery. She had probably depended on sisterly affection to work the miracle, and discovered that Tim was too far gone to respond.

By the time Elizabeth got back to the Residency she felt decidedly ruffled.

The house was still quiet when she washed and went downstairs. In the small lounge she had, earlier that morning, set a bowl of magnolia buds, and she passed now by the table which was placed near a french window, and touched the cool white heads which lay among darkly beautiful leaves. The buds were opening, revealing an incredible purity. She bent over them; they had no smell except that of greenness and growth.

The doorway darkened, and she straightened up. Unconsciously her hand clenched at her side.

Julian gave her a light, appraising smile. "Blue suits you," he said, "and this particular light lends mystery to your eyes. It's an odd fact about grey eyes that they can be the clearest and the most enigmatic."

"Yes?" She looked away from him. "What are they at the moment?"

"Veiled," he said. "Distinctly so. You'd hate me to be able to read your thoughts."

"Perhaps the veil hides a void."

"I won't believe that. If anything, you think too much." He came right into the room, glanced down at the flowers and snapped one off to tuck into his lapel. As we're

driving out this afternoon I thought you might like to give me lunch today."

She moved from him and sat down. "I'd forgotten we were going out with you. Could we postpone it?"

"Meaning you'd rather not give me lunch?"

"No." Rather woodenly she went on, "My confederate is out with the Moustache. She'll be weary."

"Not she." Julian came and stood less than a yard from her chair, but his attention seemed to be on the flame trees across the lawn. "Your sparkling companion is an extrovert and tireless. I hope she doesn't intend to marry Cranwood, because he has a girl in England. I wouldn't have thrown those two together if I'd thought they get serious over one another."

"She won't marry the Captain She's behaving with him exactly as she behaves with every other man who takes her fancy. It just happens that she rather tumbles for the big, muscular type, but they soon bore her."

He smiled "She leads a full life, doesn't she? I shouldn't be surprised if when she does hitch up it will be to a serious sort of chap who won't stand too much nonsense."

"Don't ever tell her that, or she'll straightway rush to the altar with someone impossible!"

There was scarcely a pause before he enquired, very evenly, "Why do you want to call off this afternoon's jaunt? Feeling the heat?"

"Not much. Sight-seeing needs a special mood, and I'm not in it."

"We were only going along the main roads to get a few views from the car."

"I know it's treason to upset your plan, but I just don't want to go!" The instant the words were out she knew she had said them too warmly, and rashly.

But he merely raised straight dark brows and replied coolly, "Very well, let's leave it like that. It's not worth getting mad about." Then he walked back to the french window and leaned his long frame in the doorway while he stared indolently over the garden.

Elizabeth was angry with herself. She had never before burst out at any man in that way, but there was that about Julian which irritated her beyond measure. He thought he had only to make plans for them to be adhered to, no matter who might be concerned in them. He had even decided that she should contact Celia Cartney, and like an idiot she had fallen in with his desires, as everyone else did. The man had everything his own way. She wished, now, that she had kept away from the plantation.

Yet even in her anger she regretted having made her dislike of him so plain. What a pity it was to have to suspect his smallest kindness, to distrust the merest hint of charm.

She drew a sigh and said, "May I have a cigarette, please?"

With economical movements he flipped open his case and bent to her with his lighter. Steadying the cigarette between her lips, her fingers touched his and found them cool and firm. Rather than look up at him she took in the details of those strong brown hands; the bony knuckles and the short dark hairs at his wrist.

Involuntarily she said, "I called at the Cartney plantation this morning."

"So your chauffeur told me as I came in." He set the lighter to his own cigarette. "There was no need for it. A note would have done equally well. That house is appalling, isn't it, but Tim won't be helped, and Celia won't leave him. She's a loyal soul — deserving of much better, but you can't force a man to do his duty. How did you get on with Celia?"

"Quite well, though we hadn't much time together. She's coming to tennis on Wednesday, and perhaps you'd like to come, too?"

"Thank. I will if I'm free." He half-turned and looked across at her, his mouth sardonic. "Would you like me to go now?"

For a long moment she forgot that this was the man to whom she was determined to teach a lesson. The pact with Amanda was wiped out, and she saw only a faintly endear-

ing, mocking smile, a humorous glint in steel-blue eyes and six feet of virile manhood in impeccable white. He was a man, and in spite of herself he made her feel very much a woman. Almost without volition she found herself saying, "You must certainly stay to lunch, and we'll go for the drive, after all. I'm sorry I was a bit of a bear but I've been trying to write home and found I hadn't a thing to say."

"Home?"

The cigarette twisted rather violently between her finger and thumb. "To ... friends in England. I suppose out here a woman can't help thinking of England as home." Phew!

He nodded comprehendingly, and came to sit in the centre of a primrose divan, not far from her. "Men do, too. I never long to go back to England but I'd feel horribly adrift if England weren't there! That's the best of being in colonial administration; you're for ever linked with London."

"Like a branch of a family," she said. "Did you grow up in England?"

"Mostly. We had sugar estates in the Indies and I used to go there for three months of every year; my father insisted on it as part of our education. There was an old house that my grandfather built and the wildest tangle of garden you ever saw. Each year we'd clear part of the jungle and the following year it would all be there again, and so beautiful in its freshness that we could hardly find the heart to slash it all away once more. Around the house grew some magnificent trees which must have been well over a hundred years old. We knew them all by names which we had given them as small children."

"We?" she queried.

"In those days I had a young brother." He took a last pull at his cigarette and squashed it out. "When the sugar estates became mine I did what both he and I would have agreed to; I cut them up and divided them among the native workers; the house was converted into a mission."

Not a vestige of feeling in his tones; not even the flicker of an eyelid as he remembered a brother who had no doubt

met his death in the air or on the battlefield. Yet a vibrant note had entered his voice when he had mentioned the trees and the blanketing jungle. He had deeps, this Julian.

"You've had an exciting life," she said. "You must have done pretty well everything."

"Except get married," he agreed.

"Maybe," she answered lightly, "you'll even do that one day, though they do say that a man who hasn't found a wife before he's thirty is something of a connoisseur, and difficult to please."

He did not contradict the statement but took her cigarette and pressed it out on the ashtray with some deliberation. "But think how lucky the woman will be. She'll know she's the best and completely unrivalled. That's a great deal, surely?"

"A woman would rather be loved than arrived at by a process of elimination!"

"So?" he said on a note of banter. "Have you decided, on so short an acquaintance, that I'm incapable of being stirred? You may be right, of course, but I do feel you should wait at least a month before hinting at anything so sweeping."

In a month, she thought with an odd catch at the throat, she would be negligible Elizabeth Mayne, and Julian would be . . . hating her. The smile she gave him now was somewhat brittle.

"I only meant that possibly love is more necessary to a woman than to a man — to some men, anyway. Though it's always seemed to me that even men must have someone to share the joys, and fuss over. That's the essence of living."

He paused as though giving this challenge all the attention it deserved. But his manner mocked as he asked, "What would you have me do — fall hard for Elizabeth?"

She paled slightly and pulled in her lip to stop the sudden twitch of a nerve. She wished Amanda would fly into the house and yank everything back to reality. This conversation was like a tidal wave, against which she had no strength.

"It's an idea," she managed. "I daresay she'd be good medicine for a cynic."

His lazy glance sharpened and the thin nostrils dilated almost imperceptibly. But he still leaned back in the centre of the divan with his long legs stretched before him in a posture of insolent ease. "Your honesty has sharp edges," he said: "otherwise it would be refreshing."

For two or three minutes after that neither spoke.

Finally Elizabeth said, "Will you help yourself to a drink? I'll ring for some ice." And the chasm was tenuously bridged.

It was some time later, after Amanda had hailed them from the hall but before she had changed and come down for lunch, that Julian said, "By the way, your father's new aide-de-camp arrives on the next mail boat. It's unfortunate that he should turn up while Sir Henry is away, because he will have to take up quarters elsewhere to begin with. For convenience, the Governor prefers his aide to live here at the Residency, but this young man will have to wait. His name is Peter Gilmering."

"Will he work here at the house?"

"Not until Sir Henry is back; there'll be very little for him to do, anyway. While you and Miss Mayne are here alone we're not using the Residency council room. All our business is being conducted at the government offices on the Marine Drive."

"Do I have to do anything about this Peter Gilmering?"

"Only make him welcome. He's been working in Singapore and he angled very efficiently for this job, so he should be an exceptional young man. He's the kind we can always do with."

What was it about Julian, she wondered vexedly; how did he contrive so smoothly to persuade others to do his bidding? She supposed that that was actually the heart of his job: co-ordinating and selecting certain people for certain tasks. In this matter of the Governor's aide-de-camp he knew the importance of the first happy impression on someone young and keen, and *he* meant to procure it for Peter Gilmering.

That afternoon it seemed that he was also quite anxious to show Bolani to his two young companions at its brilliant best. He took them over the mountainous coast road into the villages. He showed them water tumbling in a strung-out series of cascades to the sea, and he pointed out the innumerable acres of sugar, and the dense coco-nut plantations where slim Malays in plaited grass hats and brief skirts shinned up palms of a tremendous height to hack free the valuable fruit which would be dried into copra and shipped to Europe; the boys were not working today, though.

They took tea at the research station with a handful of white men who apologised for staring devouringly at the two girls but went on flatteringly doing it. Amanda made them promises she had no intention of keeping, Elizabeth thanked the vet. for his prompt attention to the puppy, and they drove away again on the homeward journey.

Elizabeth wasn't sorry to say good-bye to Julian when they arrived back at the Residency. She had really endured enough of him for one day, and it was pleasant to look forward to an evening when she and Amanda stood a chance of being alone — though the Captain was bound to turn up some time between now and midnight.

During their first week or so on Bolani it happened that Elizabeth and Amanda had no chance at all of a really intimate talk. At bedtime Amanda would wander into Elizabeth's room, but yawning though she might be, it was as impossible to pin her down as it is to capture a blob of quicksilver.

"We're having such a whang-ho time," she said, her voice a mischievous imitation of the Captain's, "that it would be the deuce of a grill to break it up before we have to. Don't you agree . . . mmm? Seriously, darling, you're doing fine with Julian. He looks at you as if you were an unpredictable kitten — you know, all fire and soft fur! With him, that particular look could mean anything!"

"Or nothing at all. We may hear any day now that your father is on his way back from that island. We can't let it drag on till then."

"You fuss too much, sweetie."

"You don't worry enough!"

An airy wave of a red-tipped hand. "Have fun while it's cheap and leave the rest to Mandy. Nightie-night."

She was no help at all when they entertained. At Wednesday's tennis party she had played one game and then (in the absence of Captain Cranwood), gone off to bathe with one of the junior officials. Of Celia Cartney she had later remarked, "Interesting piece, isn't she? Clings like a tendril — but did you notice the nifty cut of the tennis togs? Our Celia's not so poor!"

Yes, Elizabeth had noticed. Celia had looked very slim and appealing in the short pleated skirt and close-fitting shirt with the powder-blue jacket which had made her legs appear elegantly long and brown. The men had readily accepted her, and the women had smiled over her with compassion and understanding. The girl was pretty, someone had commented, and it must be humiliating to have a brother like Tim; she was such a staunch young thing. How nice of Sir Henry's daughter to take the girl up; they must certainly ensure that she had a better time from now on.

Julian hadn't arrived in time for tennis, but he had spoken to Celia over a cocktail. Elizabeth had seen them on the dusky terrace, Celia's hand tucked into his arm and her eyes raised trustingly to his, and she had thought that it must be nice to be Julian and get whatever one wanted. Very nice.

There was something on every day. Dinner with the McIvers, a moonlight bathing party, a Malay procession to be watched from a convenient hilltop, a visit to the mission on the other side of the island. And one afternoon Elizabeth went to see the fragile Mrs. Kelvey and the puppy.

Amanda preferred spending most of her time on the beach. There were a couple of log bathing huts down there, and a blessed paucity of the evil-looking hermit crabs, because the island boys were paid a penny for each dead body. Amanda wore three-quarter leg playsuits with bright wooden ecklaces and delicious wide-brimmed coolie hats. Her trousers were regarded with some interest by the

Malay women, whose own formal dress comprised silk pyjama trousers with a calf-length frock that was belted at the waist and sequinned at the edges of the long loose sleeves.

Amanda's creamy olive skin was acquiring a rich tan. She seemed able, as women with such coloring often are, to stand any amount of sunshine, and she was as much at ease in the surf as the islanders themselves. Elizabeth enjoyed a swim in the lagoon but could not for long find pleasure in playing about on the burning white sand and talking nonsense with off-duty government officials, while an inquisitive brown audience crouched nearby in the shade of the palms and exchanged comments.

She liked to go back alone in the car to Kalaba Hill, and ask the chauffeur to stop at one particular spot so that she could see beyond the headland to where a freighter or two lay at anchor near the quay. It was a lovely sight, the sampans and prahus, the fine long canoes hewn from a single log, the thin bamboo sail of a fishing boat standing out with the wind, and the dean waterfront at the back where stood the copra and spice sheds.

One morning she had lingered on the road above the harbor for some time because a larger ship than usual had tied up. She was still thinking of its white superstructure and winking brass as she entered the Residency and dropped her bathing bag on one of the chairs. But as she crossed to the staircase she stopped in faint alarm. For through the doorway of the main lounge she could plainly see the figure of a man she had never met before.

Her pause lasted quite a few seconds. Strangely, her urge was to run up the stairs and close herself firmly into her bedroom. Whether that was what she would have done had she been able to choose she could never afterwards have said. She must have made the slight sound which brought him round to stare out into the hall.

Across a dozen or more feet of space she looked into a square young face whose most notable feature was a pair of shaggy brown eyebrows above which waved a thick thatch

of straw-blond hair. In height he was not much above average, but he had good broad shoulders, and the dogged chin signified a certain amount of moral strength.

"Hallo," she said uncertainly. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"How do you do," he answered, very correctly. "You must be Miss Mayne. I'm Peter Gilmering. Yes, *I am* waiting for someone. . . . Amanda."

"You . . . you know Amanda?" she asked faintly.

"We met in London more than a year ago. I don't suppose she ever spoke to you about me. . . ."

He had to break off because, suddenly, he couldn't make himself heard. A car had roared up to the Residency and apparently a horde was pouring out of it. The main door opened and they came in, Amanda with four men of varying ages in violent-hued tropical beach garb. The pink was rich under her tan, her teeth flashed between red lips and the coolie hat lent enchantment to the rough dark curls. She was like a ripe and flawless peach.

Her hesitation was only momentary. Silky lashes hid the brilliant eyes as she turned to Elizabeth. "I didn't know you had a caller. I'm sorry we look such tramps but we've only come in for a drink and my sunglasses. We won't keep you, Amanda."

Elizabeth didn't dare look at the Governor's new aide-de-camp. Neither did she trust herself to say much. Just, "This is Mr. Garnering. . . . Miss Elizabeth Mayne." The men's names came out automatically.

Amanda came to Elizabeth's side and slipped a hand into the crook of her arm, after which she gazed with curiosity at the flushed and militant jaw of Peter Gilmering.

"So you're Peter Gilmering," she crooned thoughtfully. "I believe Amanda told me about you. You're the colonial office man who once called her a spoiled brat . . . and one or two other things. Tut, tut." She smiled sweetly. "You must come to tea this afternoon, Mr. Gilmering, and we three will have a chat."

When Elizabeth was left standing face to face with a simmering young man to whom, she recalled somewhat bleakly, she had promised Julian to give a warm welcome.

"Will you come through to the morning room, Mr. Gilmering?" she said weakly. "I rather think **you and I can do with a drink, too.**"

CHAPTER FOUR

KOSI brought the drinks to the morning room and when he had gone Peter took a quick gulp of his whisky and drew a deep breath.

"So you're Amanda," he said a trifle thickly. "I seem to have been dreaming about the wrong girl. Do you mind explaining?"

"It's simple—just a joke." Of a very feeble brand, she was beginning to feel. "No one here knew either of us when we arrived, and we . . . well. . ."

He was a quick-witted young man, and it did not take long to make him understand. In fact, it seemed to Elizabeth that he comprehended all too fully.

"The idea was Amanda's, wasn't it?" he said soberly. "Only she could think up anything so entirely crazy. I won't believe that Julian Stanville is out to marry the Governor's daughter. I don't know him—I met him at the government offices for the first time when I came off the ship this morning—but he's well known in the service by name and reputation. He wouldn't do a thing like that deliberately."

"He's ambitious."

"Aren't we all?"

"Not in the way he is. In the court he deals out merciless justice, and in his private life he's equally ruthless." She found odd relief in discoursing thus upon Julian. "He's likeable,"—was he, though? One couldn't describe as liking or dislike the queer thrusts of anger and pleasure he caused—"but you do get the impression that he works out even the smallest details to suit his own plans. A man of that kind is bound to marry, if he can, with one keen eye on the future."

"Perhaps, but there are other ways of handling such a situation, if it exists. You shouldn't have agreed to this stupid business." There came muted laughter from the front terrace and the slamming of car doors. He groaned. "Does she always buzz around with an escort of four?"

"Sometimes more than four, but she doesn't favor any particular one," she told him, confident that that was what he wished to hear. Captain Cranwood didn't count. "Amanda's a dear; she wouldn't voluntarily hurt anybody." She smiled a little as she asked, "Did you really once call her a spoiled brat?"

"I did," he said, his tone stubborn. Straightway he softened, ruefully. "I wrote to her afterwards and apologized, but she didn't answer, although I begged for a letter. I was sent to Singapore, and when I heard a few weeks ago that Sir Henry's aide had gone home sick, I pulled all the strings I knew. I had vague hopes of persuading him to invite Amanda out here, so you can imagine how I felt when I was told this morning that she'd already arrived!"

Elizabeth was sorry for the blunt young Peter. He had come to a new and important job, firmly believing that when he began to prove his capabilities Sir Henry would regard him with some favor. Peter must already be half in love with Amanda, but she, obviously, considered him a nuisance to be taken in hand later, when she had time. It was like her to take it for granted that he would allow himself to be silenced till she was ready to deal with him.

"Then everything is rather better than you thought it would be, isn't it?" she said carefully. "Amanda's already here, and you know which one of us she is, if the others don't, so there shouldn't be any complications as far as you're concerned. You will come to tea and have a talk as Amanda suggested, won't you?"

"I most certainly will! And please let me say," he added sincerely, "that I think you're a complete sport. You must care a lot for Amanda to do it."

"Naturally I'm fond of her—but this isn't such a serious affair, you know. By the end of this week the truth will be out."

"It could be serious," he said. "It must have occurred to both you and Amanda that deceiving a man like Julian Stanville is tampering with big fireworks. Supposing you

yourself were to fall for him—think what a horrid fix you'd be in once he knew you weren't Amanda."

"That won't arise, thank goodness," she answered, a smile on her lips and a curious dryness in her throat. "Will you have another drink?"

"No, thank you, and I won't stay longer now. May I borrow a car to take me to Mr. Coombs' house? I'm using his spare bedroom till Sir Henry returns."

Elizabeth watched him go with a mixture of feelings. She hadn't demanded any promises from him but she was sure she could trust him to say nothing which might distress Amanda. She went up to her room thinking how impossibly tranquil her life had been with Aunt Elsa and Uncle David.

Over lunch Amanda was blithe. "Don't worry about Peter," she exclaimed, spearing crayfish from the salad bowl. "He'll keep our secret like a lamb, but we shall have to impress him with the necessity for remembering it all the time. He's all right," magnanimously. "Too grimly intent for my taste, though."

"He didn't strike me as unduly grave."

"He wouldn't—you're that way yourself. We'll ask him to keep away from the Residency till my father is back."

"*You* will ask him," stated Elizabeth. "I shan't be here this afternoon."

Amanda splashed salad dressing on to the table, mopped at it with her napkin and muttered "Bother it!" or something more pungent, and gazed at Elizabeth in consternation. "You can't possibly let me down now!"

"I'm not letting you down. I've said all I can to Peter Gilmering, and now it's up to you to convince him. Personally, I think it's time we ended the farce. If you like, I'll tell Julian myself." Her heart plunged at the prospect though.

"You're defeatists, sweetie-pie, which means that you're not putting your best into it. We're not half ready to tell Julian. He's only just beginning to show a very slight preference for Sir Henry's daughter—and he's always so charming to me that he could quite easily transfer his attentions."

Elizabeth contrived to keep acid from her voice. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

"It might. His type of flattery is so subtle that it catches you unawares. These others just blunder with it, good-humoredly, but he has no use for the sugary phrase and open glance. You must admit it would be ghastly if I were charmed into marrying a man I could never understand in a thousand years. I do like him, though."

"Do you?" Elizabeth pushed away her plate and wielded the big silver coffee pot. "In spite of what Miss Brodie told us about him? It does look as though she knew what she was talking about."

"He is a bit of a soulless brute," the other conceded, "but you must agree that he's handsome. And somehow, though he's cold as steel, he's thrilling. Have you seen him ride?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Then you should," declared Amanda. "It's an education. At the polo practice the other morning he rode like a demon; I could have swooned."

"I believe you mean it. Sure you're not getting a crush?" Elizabeth enquired slowly.

"I don't think I am, but that's his effect. I've the grisly conviction that if he set out to get me, he would—in which case he and I would be ecstatic for about a week, tear each other apart for another week, and then separate, never to meet again."

Elizabeth laughed at this comprehensive picture, which showed not the slightest knowledge of Julian's personality. He'd control his marriage, she was sure, with the same infallible touch that he used to control the rest of his destiny.

"Harking back to Peter," she said. "He's here to do a job, so be kind to him this afternoon. After all, you're going to ask him a favor."

"Do have tea with us," Amanda coaxed.

"No, for once this is your exclusive picnic. I'm afraid I'd be on Peter's side."

"In that case I'll have to brave the man alone—but not for long. He was always punctual so he's bound to show up on the stroke of four, and I'll invite someone else for a quarter past. How's that for strategy!"

Elizabeth could have shaken her, but not very hard. She was coming round to the opinion that Amanda's was the safest and least gruelling attitude to the scheme for tilting at Julian Stanville's ego.

She rested for about an hour after lunch, but well before tea-time took her hat and walked across the grounds in the direction of the sea. It was possible, without straying from government property, to leave the formal gardens and, after a short stroll through a belt of cottonwood and breadfruit trees, to come out upon a grassy slope below which coral rocks stretched, greyish-pink and craggy.

Here there was no bleach. Time had been when a ribbon of sand had run round the untenanted bay, but hurricanes and rough seas had swept it away, and now the blue waters washed the rocks, collaring them with foam in mild weather and beating up in a gigantic white spray when the trade winds blew.

Elizabeth leapt on to the rocks and was immediately caught up in the darting beauty of the many-colored fish in the pools. She crouched and, through the clear water, saw anemones opening their sultry, petal-like tentacles, and molluscs creeping over the sandy bed. It was like looking into an aquarium.

She looked back over the coastal growth to the timber, and her heart contracted. With fright, of course. She had thought herself entirely alone, that no one would find her here . . . not even Julian.

She waited while he leapt the rocks rather more expertly than she had done, and by the time he reached the broad flat surface on which she stood her half-smile of greeting was no less impersonal than his.

"Do you often come here?" he asked.

"This is only the second time; I find it peaceful. Is it a haunt of yours?"

"Not really. The rock fishing is good, but I don't have much time for a long-winded sport like fishing." He nodded towards the grass. "Let's go up there and find a shady spot. I want to talk to you."

He helped her back to the slope and gave her wrist a gentle tug as they worked upwards to the deep shades of an ancient belombra tree. She sank down on to the grass and he dropped beside her but just slightly in front, so that she could see the crisp, slightly waving hair and the teak tan of his jaw. He wore the white drill which was his usual office attire, but now he slid off the jacket and leant back on one elbow, looking up at her.

Quickly, because for her the moment was fraught with an intimacy which was the more unbearable because she appeared to be the only one conscious of it, she said. "How did you know where to find me?"

"A guard saw you come this way. Being watched is one of the penalties of being a Penlan."

"Why do they watch? Are you sure there's no danger?"

"Of course I'm sure. They're merely following orders."

"Your orders?"

He nodded. "Sir Henry left you in my care and I naturally take every precaution."

"Well, it only lasts till he gets back, doesn't it?"

He pulled a stem covered with blue star-flowers and gave it a long, dispassionate appraisal before casting it aside. "I broke off early from the office to come up and give you some news that you won't much like. I'm afraid your father will not be home for a further week or two."

"Oh!" The sound was quite as distressed as he could possibly have expected, though he could not have known the reason. "Is he . . . is anything wrong?"

"There's nothing to worry about," he said evenly. "I've already explained to you the importance of his mission. Your father likes to handle things in his own way, and this succession dispute is taking longer than he thought. His message came through early this afternoon, but he sent it the day before yesterday."

Elizabeth stared away over the sea. Her nerves were jumping. She had built herself up for Sir Henry's return at the end of this week, and the postponement posed a problem. Amanda, she was sure, would gleefully insist that things remain as they were; one way and another she was having a whale of a time. But she, Elizabeth, would rather have faced a confession at once, and have done with it.

A hand covered one of Elizabeth's which was flat on the grass. "You mustn't be anxious," Julian said. "These islanders are very keen on carrying out everything solemnly and with ceremony, and Sir Henry couldn't refuse an invitation to stay and see the raja installed. The actual installation takes ten days of feasting and dancing, apart from the preparations for it. He's probably bored stiff but he has to stick it out—just as you'll have to put up with the postponement **of your meeting with him. It's hard luck, but not a tragedy.**"

As unobtrusively as she was able she withdrew her hand; it tingled. "It was good of you to come yourself to tell me, Mr. Stanville," she said stiffly.

"Don't you think," he asked, with mocking humor in his tone, "that you might call me Julian? Your friend does—so does your father."

She gave him a pale, fleeting smile. "If I did, you'd call the Amanda, and I wouldn't like that."

A barely perceptible sharpness came into his manner. "Isn't that rather odd, coming from the modern young woman?"

"Not the way I mean it." She paused an instant before adding, with a plunge, "Would you say that the name Amanda suits me?"

"No," he said, considering, "I wouldn't, but if it's good enough for your father and the rest, it'll do for me. After all, what's in a name?"

You'd be surprised, she thought hollowly; but cheerfully she enquired, "What sort of girl did you expect from a name like Amanda Penlan?"

He gave a brief, careless laugh. "I knew your associa-

tions, remember. I can best answer your question by flatly stating that I wasn't in the least disappointed."

She ventured very cautiously on to thin ice. "Supposing I'd turned out to be someone like.. like Elizabeth?"

His smile was non-committal. "I quite enjoy our Bess," he said. "We bachelors have got into a rut and she's doing her volanic best to shake us out of it. She has the advantage of being entirely different from the usual type we get out here."

Meaning, naturally, that he had no intention at this stage of stating a preference for one over the other. Again she had the suffocating suspicion that he had detected a flaw in their set-up, that he was biding his time. Yet inwardly she was certain that at the very moment he suspected the truth he would come out into the open with it. And he wouldn't disguise his scorn, either!

Shakily, she looked at her watch, but before she could voice the conventional phrase, he said abruptly, "Did you see young Gilmering this morning?"

"Yes," she said. "I saw him."

"You didn't mention the other day that you were already acquainted with him."

"I . . . I'd forgotten."

"Really?" Sarcasm echoed in the drawl. "I gathered during a short interview with him this morning that you and he were friends about a year ago; rather close friends, if he was truthful. It seems that I over-estimated him. His anxiety to become aide-de-camp to Sir Henry was dictated more by the emotions than by a keenness to rise in the service."

Elizabeth hardly knew Peter Gilmering, but from the session with him this morning she had gained the conviction that he was steady, loyal, and hard-working. So she said: "Peter's all right. He'll make good."

"He'd better," Julian remarked pleasantly. "We've no room for slackers and philanderers in the government of the Tunak Islands." He rose casually to his feet, slipped on his jacket and offered a hand. "I must go. I'm expecting some messages at my house."

They had plodded up the slope and were walking through the trees to the Residency gardens when he queried, "Would you like to make a launch trip round the island with me on Friday? Once a month I pay a routine call to all the coastal villages. It takes a bit longer by sea, but I'm sure you'd get a kick out of it."

Her heart was suddenly light and free; not quite free, till she had demanded swiftly, "Just me . . . not Elizabeth?"

"Bess couldn't take it; she'd tire of it after the first village. Will you come?"

"Of course I will. I've been longing to see the coral reef ever since you first described it." Recklessly, because the Residency was in sight with a group of figures discernible on the terrace, she said, "Today's Wednesday, Shall I see you again before Friday?"

"Possibly, though we have a court sitting tomorrow morning and a council meeting in the afternoon. If I can't drop in tomorrow evening I'll send a note. We'll get away at about eight on Friday morning. Suit you?"

Had Elizabeth been outspokenly truthful just then she would have assured him that the arrangement suited her better than any he had so far made for her benefit, that the mere suggestion of it had made her happy. But she had to say, "You're quite sure I shan't be in the way? I mean, it won't interfere with your official business, will it?"

"No, my child," he answered tolerantly. "Nothing ever interferes with that."

Had they not arrived at the foot of the steps she might have attempted a challenge. How she would love to shake his self-assurance! Julian looked along the terrace, his expression aloof and unsmiling. He nodded distantly to three of his subordinates, one of whom was Peter, and Captain Cranwood, and at another young army officer; inclined his head a fraction more at Amanda.

"Won't you have some tea?" Elizabeth asked. "It's sure to be ready."

"No, thanks Another time. Goodbye."

He got into the long grey car and purred away down the drive. Elizabeth, perforce, mounted the steps and walked along to the young men encircling Amanda

Amanda's cheeks were scarlet, her eyes diamond-bright. "What-ho, darling!" she exclaimed. "How do you like my background?"

Elizabeth smilingly greeted the "background," and Peter assuming the role which would be his as soon as Sir Henry was back in control, said glibly, and perhaps pointedly, "You must be warm from your walk, Amanda. Come inside and I'll ring for some fresh tea."

Elizabeth chose, however, to have her tea upstairs on her bedroom balcony. She saw the party below break up, Amanda going off with the Captain and others while Peter wandered away under the trees in the direction of one of the private gates. It was only a quarter to five. She judged that Peter's session with Amanda had been of short duration and stormy.

Thursday was a quiet day at the Residency. Shunning all entreaties, Amanda stayed in bed till noon, and when she did make her way downstairs she sought a novel and took it to the hushed side terrace. After lunch she went back to it, and Elizabeth saw her through the morning-room window, the dark head intently bent over the printed word, though the jade snakeskin sandals tapped out a tune which must be running through her mind. Well, it was time Amanda settled for a spell of quietude; in this climate one couldn't for long keep up the pace she had set herself.

She went outside and along the balustraded terrace to Amanda. The novel snapped shut in Amanda's knee and the dark eyes were raised to rest in all their normal brilliance on Elizabeth's small, fine-boned face.

"Did you know," she asked with a debonair grin which made her look like an attractive boy, "that you're sweet and compassionate, and sound all through? Peter says so."

"He's prejudiced in my favor because you were mean to him." Elizabeth selected a cigarette from the box on the table, struck a match and sat down. "I hope you didn't treat him too badly, though."

"I got what I wanted, anyway. He promised to keep quiet till the weekend. Now that Papa's delayed, one of us will have to speak to him again, and it had better be you. I refuse to lose my temper with him a second time."

"Why," murmured Elizabeth thoughtfully, "do you have to lose your temper with him at all? I've never heard of your doing that with a man before. Why start with Peter?"

"He's stupid," said Amanda, "and he seems to have only two ideas in his head. One of them concerns his job, and the other. . . ." She broke off in disgust.

"The other concerns you," supplied Elizabeth. "I gather that the man wants to make you his."

Amanda tossed her black curls. "He didn't say it, so I couldn't very well tell him that I wouldn't marry a horrible bulldog like him even if he were a millionaire. And I won't have him at the Residency before my father returns. I did tell him that!"

"How did he take it?"

"With masculine conceit; I could have strangled him. **He actually had the nerve to suggest it was up to you, not me.**"

"**He could be right.**"

"I hope," stated Amanda, **her eyes sharp with disbelief, "you're not going to be partners with that shaggy-browed gate-crasher. That's what he is—a gate-crasher. He bulldozed his way into Bolani."**

"You're being unfair," Elizabeth answered equably. "You know as well as I do that a man has to be fitted for the post of personal officer to the Governor before he can be considered for it." She paused before adding negligently, "Don't quarrel with the man. If you dislike him so much, ignore him. Remember that he's keeping your secret."

Amanda smoked, and through the cloud she created she took a long inquisitive glance at her companion. "You don't seem to object so strongly to this little game of ours as you did. Are there compensations?"

"Maybe," Elizabeth admitted enigmatically, "but I'm willing **to step** down from your pedestal the moment you say.

"We'll keep it up for a while," came the dogged reply. "Because you aim to teach Peter a lesson, too?"

Amanda did not answer this. She stabbed out the newly-lit cigarette and yawned, intimating that it was time she got busy contacting her friends. She went into the house and Elizabeth finished her cigarette in tranquillity.

The thud of hooves came unfamiliarly from the front drive. Elizabeth got up and walked to the corner of the house, and for a minute she could only stare at the pony bearing a slender girl in well-cut breeches and silk shirt. Then the urgency of the girl's reining-in and slithering to the ground brought her round to the front of the house, and they met halfway down the steps.

"Celia!" Elizabeth took in the pale, unhappy face, the pretty brown cap of hair dishevelled by the wind. "What on earth has happened?"

"You'll think I'm mad, but I couldn't think who else to go to." She put a shaking hand to her forehead. "You did say I could count on you."

"Of course you can. Come indoors."

But Celia stopped in the vast hall. "It's no use my coming in; I can't stay. It's my brother. He was riding in the plantation and got thrown. I don't think his hurt is terribly serious but he's very dazed. I'm afraid he'd been . . . drinking. The boys have taken him into our house and I came up to ask if you could contact Dr. McIver for me."

"His surgery was on your way here."

"I know, but they're discussing health questions at today's council meeting and he had to attend."

Celia Cartney appeared to be well-informed. Ignoring a thrust of suspicion, Elizabeth said, "Isn't there another doctor?"

"Only the one at the inland mission. I can't very well call an Malay because they never do attend white people and Tim would certainly swear at him. Dr. McIver may be held up at the government offices till six o'clock, and I can't leave Tim that long without expert attention."

"I think we ought first to see Mrs. McIver. You may

be mistaken about the doctor's attending the council meeting."

"No, it's true enough." The topaz eyes, so large and tragic, looked straight into Elizabeth's. "You see, I've been to Katemba already, and Julian's secretary told me all this about the council meeting."

"I see." Elizabeth quelled a second stab of distrust. Celia was in distress and had to be assisted; it wasn't fair to bother whether one liked her or not. "In that case, we'd better send a message straight to the doctor in the council chamber."

"Will you really do that?" Celia swallowed gratefully. "That secretary of Julian's was a bit off-hand. He hates Tim, and I daresay his only regret was that he hadn't killed himself." Her voice quivered sadly. "They all think I ought to leave Tim—that I'm an idiot to waste myself on a brother of that sort. But what kind of creature would I be if I walked out on him when he most needs me? Julian's the only one who understands . . . and you, of course." The afterthought was a shade belated.

"Rest for a few minutes," Elizabeth bade her soothingly. "We'll go down by car together."

She slipped away, wrote the request to the doctor and came back again. The pony, she informed Celia, would be rested and returned to her. They could go at once to the Marine Drive.

As the car ran down into the town Celia did not say much. Elizabeth upbraided herself for being irritated. Behaving as if she were eighteen instead of twenty-five was just Celia's way, and until she began to look her age she would get away with it. Besides, the girl really was upset over her brother's accident, and it was uncharitable to allow niggling doubts to color one's conception of her. What if she had gone to Julian's house first? She did everything in so transparent a manner that she couldn't possibly intend to deceive or annoy.

The car swerved on to the Drive and pulled in alongside the curb in front of the imposing yet economical structure of the government building.

The chauffeur reappeared. "Tuan Doctor," he announced, "will come very soon. Not to wait—his car is here."

Celia leaned towards the polite Malay. "Did you see the Tuan Chief?" Which, Elizabeth well knew, was the islanders' title for Julian.

"No, mem, not see," came the response as the chauffeur got behind the wheel and turned the car.

"I only thought," Celia explained with apparent artlessness to Elizabeth, "that Julian ought to be told about Tim as soon as possible. He'd want to know." And thereafter she was again silent, till they were bumping along the dreadful lane to the Cartney homestead.

Within a couple of minutes Dr. McIver arrived, swearing under his breath about the risk to his car springs. He gave Elizabeth an affable nod, however, and went into the house. Celia saw him into the dim living-room and then ran back to where Elizabeth stood rather uncertainly near the Residency car.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I don't know what I'd have done without your help. You and Julian are the two most splendid people I've ever known."

"You're sure there's nothing else I can do?"

"Now that we have a doctor, I can manage." Those lustrous eyes, yellow again in the light, filled with sudden tears, but without a tremor she said, "Life's so unjust. You have everything—a wonderful home, an important father, and plenty of money. You can do just as you like and get away with it. Everyone says Julian will marry you, so one day you'll be a governor's wife, too. Even if he did love a nonentity he wouldn't marry one."

Little hairs were standing up on the back of Elizabeth's neck and her palms were clammy, but she kept her voice quite free from emotion. "You're making some rather rash statements. Are you fond of Julian?"

"I adore him, and I'm sure he loves me. I know it's hopeless—it always is when my sort is attracted to his—but I won't give up entirely till he's married to someone else." Her reddened mouth narrowed into a thin hard line, and the eyes were even more reminiscent of a cat's. "Every-

one thinks I live here because of Tim. As if I'd put up with his thoughtlessness for no reward at all! I came to Bolani because I had an affection for my brother, but I've stayed because of Julian."

Elizabeth drew in her lip; one had to cling to one's dignity whatever the price. She took a pace towards the car. "My offer still stands," she said, and climbed into her seat.

But Celia had not finished. She was at the window, actually smiling through those angry tears. "You mustn't mind me, Amanda! Tim's accident has given me a jolt, and I don't know what I'm saying. I like you so much. Don't abandon me, or I don't know what I'll do."

Elizabeth, pale and controlled, touched Celia's fingers. "You're worked up and need a rest. Let me know how your brother gets on. Goodbye."

She sat back, closed her eyes till the car reached a decent surface, and opened them to gaze unseeing at the coast road. She felt as if she had taken a beating. At one second she had known the girl was unstable, but the next had brought the conviction that Celia Cartney was, in her clinging pseudo-innocence, diabolically clever. Both of which impressions were probably wrong.

About one thing, though, there could be no doubt whatever. Celia Cartney was jealously in love with Julian Stanville. And Julian? Well, as Celia had bitterly put it, the Chief Commissioner whose next step was a governorship, was hardly likely to marry a nobody. It was possible that, in so far as it was in him to love anybody, he loved Celia. In various ways he was trying to mitigate her unhappiness, and he had openly declared his admiration of her loyalty to her brother, and her courage. He probably also admired that slim figure of hers, which she managed to keep so superbly dressed.

Elizabeth shivered and sank further into the rich upholstery of the car. A natural fortitude had sustained her during the last few minutes with Celia, but now its effect was wearing thin and a strange pain cradled the base of her heart. Incredible that it could have any connection with Julian Stanville and the pretty, unpredictable young woman who lived at the Cartney plantation.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELIZABETH had never seen such a dawn. Pastoral pink clouds sailed slowly across the soft mauve sky. The sea, viewed from her balcony, had the artificial glitter of green glass, and the merest zephyr moved the trees and bushes, wafting petals like pastel-tinted butterflies straight into her bedroom.

Not quite certain what would be expected of her, she dressed in a pale blue linen suit and a white chiffon sleeveless blouse. That way she could be both correct and cool. From the breakfast tray which a servant brought she could take only the glass of fruit juice and a wafer of toast. There would surely be something to eat later, on the launch, if she grew hungry.

At twenty minutes to eight the grey car rolled up the drive. Elizabeth poked her head round the open door of Amanda's room.

"Are you awake? I'm going now."

Amanda lifted a drowsy head. "Be careful with that man," she advised. "Cheers."

Julian was in the hall. As Elizabeth descended the stairs he looked up, and a queer weakness trembled at her knees. Steady, she adjured herself sternly; that smile is his special early-morning offering.

"Good morning," he said, appraising her. "You look like a rare type of delphinium."

She couldn't help smiling back at him. "I wondered if I ought to put on something more nautical."

"Not this time—you're just right. The jaunt is semi-official, I'm afraid. While Sir Henry is absent I don't get much leisure, but we'll make a bargain. When he's been back a couple of days I'll take a day off and we'll go over to Manai Island. We'll both wear shorts, and we'll exist for a few hours on what we can hook out of the sea and cook over a camp fire. And we'll talk as we've never talked before. Agreed?"

Her smile lost its spontaneity. When Sir Henry had been back a couple of days, Julian Stanville would have precious little to say to Elizabeth Mayne. But she nodded.

"Agreed; but I won't keep you to it."

"Scared of spending a day alone with me?" on a light, bantering note.

"I'm braving it today, aren't I?"

"It's different. I've work to do, and we'll meet the Assistant Commissioner at each stop. That ties it up nice and safe."

"It's in the nature of an apprenticeship, though."

He laughed, and stood aside at the door. "Meaning you're willing to learn? That's an ideal frame of mind in which to begin a day."

Out on the drive they were hailed by Amanda. She leaned from her balcony in a cherry-colored wrap, and called sleepily, "Julian! Will you answer a question before you set out in your gondola?"

He waved up at her. "Go inside. You're a disgrace to the Residency."

"This pompous old place needs a few unconventional splashes of scarlet—and I don't mean flowers! I said, will you answer a question?"

"Yes, just one. What is it?"

"Are you going to make love to Amanda?"

Elizabeth flushed furiously. Julian, though, appeared to accord the matter in earnest consideration. At last he said regretfully, "I'll have to give you the parliamentary reply. It all depends!"

Amanda thudded. Elizabeth swiftly took her seat in the car and Julian, not a whit disturbed, called a farewell up to the balcony and let in the clunch.

"She's one-track, isn't she?" he commented conversationally as they moved off down the drive. "There's one immense benefit about a woman like that—you know exactly where you stand with her."

He probably also knew where he stood with Celia Cartney; she was one-track, too. Upon which thought, Elizabeth resolutely padlocked a section of her mind. Celia was to have no part of today.

There was adventure in starting out for a day, or the best part of a day, with Julian. The streets of Mueng were fresh and not yet crowded, though a bamboo ox-cart here and there unloading fruits, vegetables, eggs, and chickens forced the car to writhe snakelike down the main thoroughfare to the waterfront.

Half a dozen sampans rode the smooth lagoon and a few children splashed along the water's edge. They took life very easily, these people. At all ages they swam and talked, ate large quantities of rice and smoked a pungent, home-grown tobacco. Between times they caught fish or made love or worked in the paddy fields and plantations, but not many of them labored for eight hours a day, five days a week.

"There are such large numbers of them," Julian explained as he parked the car, "that prolonged work isn't necessary. They're neither mentally nor constitutionally built for hard labor. Tropic islanders can pine away and die without a modicum of pleasure. The Governor sometimes contends that it's our duty to show them the pleasures of civilization and persuade the people to swop theirs for them."

"But that's not your idea," said Elizabeth shrewdly.

"To be candid, it isn't, though there are good arguments in favor of it. But a lot of bad things exist among western pleasures, and on the whole the islanders are contented as they are. I believe in a race of agriculturalists, and advanced education for those who can take it; you'd be surprised how few there are." He locked the car doors and pointed towards a short wooden landing-stage to which was tied a trim white launch covered with a taut canvas awning. "There's our bus. The crew is already aboard."

The crew consisted of two colored boys in smart white uniform and peaked caps. Both saluted and stood rigidly at attention till Julian had made his routine inspection and given the word to cast off.

The government vessel, a sleek affair with a forward cabin lounge, arrowed out into deeper water and, with the rocks and dense green vegetation on one side and the glistening, sea-washed outcrops of coral on the other, set a

course which in less than an hour would bring them to the first port of call.

In the cabin, Julian had opened his brief case and selected the first batch of papers he would need. He brought cigarettes out to where Elizabeth sat facing the breeze, and took the deck chair at her side.

"All right?" he queried, with a soft inflexion which, to Elizabeth's heightened perceptions, converted the enquiry into an intimacy.

"It's lovely," she answered gratefully. "This is the coolest I've been since I came to Bolani. I can't think why the white people don't live in houseboats!"

"A matter of caste, I'm afraid. An occasional white trader does so for the convenience of entering rivers and visiting inland villages which are nearly always located on river banks, but it would hardly do for us to transfer Kalaba Hill to mid-reef. In any case, the whole works would disappear during the first hurricane."

"Are they terrible—the hurricanes?"

"Only a small portion of them. We generally get a couple of bad ones during the season, but we miss a good many, too. The waterfront is always the hardest hit, but we put out a lengthy warning, and by law no one is permitted to live within half a mile of the most vulnerable spots. You'll always get foolhardy ones who are anxious to be first on the beach when the wind is blowing itself out. You'd be amazed at what a hurricane throws up."

Elizabeth felt she wouldn't be amazed at all. Julian himself was like a strong wind blowing through one's life, and he was revealing unguessed-at oddities in her own nature, not the least of which was a tendency, in his company, to feel that nothing was out of reach. Which might, in time, become dangerous.

"When is the season for hurricanes?" she asked.

"About a month from now it becomes really hot. After that, for four months, we get intermittent warnings from the met. station on Manai. Don't let the thought of it scare you. You'll be perfectly safe in the Residency."

"Why should I be more scared than anyone else?" she retorted.

His glance at her was quizzical and slightly mocking. "New experiences can be terrifying as well as interesting," he said. "Don't refute it till you've remembered your first kiss."

She caught his mood and laughed lightly. "What am I supposed to say to that- Oh, sir, but I've never been kissed' ? Would you believe me?"

"Taking your Continental travels into consideration- no."

"I suppose," she said unaccountably nettled, "you judge from the masculine viewpoint. A man would write off a visit to Paris as a failure of it didn't produce an *affaire!*"

"Personally," he rejoined lazily, "that type of sport has always seemed to me a colossal waste of time. The focal point of my existence has always been my job."

"I know," she admitted resignedly, but with a trace of acid; before she could add to it, however, he said drily, tantalizingly,

"I've worked pretty well for my country. You wouldn't deny me the devouring pangs of love, would you?"

"No, I merely doubt whether you could feel them." Just perceptibly her tones hardened. "I don't doubt that you'll marry, but when you do it won't be because you've met a woman you can't live without."

"Don't you think so?" he asked in a ruminative, provocative voice. "Maybe I'd just as soon be spared the torments of white-hot passion, at that." He flicked his cigarette over the side of the launch and leaned forward with his forearms along his knees. Idly he commented, "There's something about the sea which makes people more aware of each other. Don't you feel it?"

"Vaguely. I wonder what it is?"

He shrugged. "The sense of isolation, I suppose. On the whole, I daresay it does you good, once in a while."

He was cool and charming, unruffled and completely baffling. He pointed out the headlands and told her their native names and association, and when the first village was sighted he made her memorize the name of the headman because the old boy would love the compliment.

She turned to him anxiously. "You won't introduce me as the Governor's daughter, will you?"

"Why the deuce not? They'll be tickled pink."

She had to lower her glance but her manner was no less urgent. "Please! Just call me a visitor."

"Nerves? But that's absurd. Your father is very popular with these people. They send him gifts and salute his birthday with drums. They know you're in Bolani—they get to know everything, and they'll be flattered that you're visiting them so soon."

"If you won't promise to do as I ask, I won't go ashore," she answered stubbornly.

Impossible to explain to him the horrid sinking of her *heart* at the thought of deceiving the more primitive islanders. Duping the white people was bad enough, but they could be relied on to see the humorous aspect. Most of them, anyway, she thought bleakly.

"Very well, you're a visitor, though I think you're being foolish." His regard was a keen steel-blue. "You've gone pale. Not feeling rocky, are you?"

"Not a bit."

"You're sure? If you like, I can send you back in the launch, and travel on by road with the Assistant Commissioner."

She said flatly, "Don't fuss. Julian. *I'm* as well as you are. The fact that I won't give in to you on this particular point doesn't necessarily mean that I'm ill!"

He gave her a spontaneous, if rather tight, little smile, but the lean face was otherwise inexpressive. She thought despairingly that she would never know what he was thinking; not that it mattered, or could matter. The time would come when she wouldn't enter his thoughts at all.

The launch neared the small bay, and though they still stood side by side he seemed to have drawn right away from her, become isolated and imperious. The smile had gone from the firm jaw and his mouth had the set look of concentration.

With a strange clairvoyance, Elizabeth knew that he was systematically recalling the current problems of this village; his decisions upon how to handle them had already been

made. She was no more to him now than an appendage of the Governor's, whom he was politely escorting round the island.

The village was built on stilts, a collection of bamboo-and-grass houses strung along the back of the beach and hemmed in by wind-curved palms. The villagers lined the short walk up from the landing-stage to an adobe building which Elizabeth took to be the local court-house, and inside the cool walls she met the Assistant Commissioner, whom she knew as one of Amanda's escorts, and the thin, leathery headman, who wore his most colorful island skirt with a sports jacket of impeccable English cut.

After the preliminary flowery greetings, Julian took his place at the back of a long table with the Assistant Commissioner on his left and the headman on his right. Elizabeth, from her lone chair at the side of the courtroom, was able to view both audience and judge.

The headman was proud of his English, and even though Julian hadn't the smallest difficulty with the Malay dialect every statement was painstakingly translated for him. To Elizabeth, who had experienced his autocracy, Julian's unfailing courtesy was a miracle.

When the cases had been disposed of, a shy man came forward with a request. He had a son with so much brain that the teacher at the mission school could teach him no more. The Tuan Chief would know that it was bad to keep one so clever on the island; the boy must go to Singapore and learn to be a doctor or a lawyer.

Julian heard him out, and then leaned across the table. "Bring your son," he said. "I will speak to him."

The boy came forward importantly, a plumpish, black-haired twelve-year-old wearing new khaki shorts and a White shirt for the occasion.

"You like school?" Julian asked him in English.

"Yes, tuan. It is better than anything."

"What do you like best at school?"

"I like to read English and do sums "

Julian tore a page from a book and pushed it towards the boy. "So you are good in arithmetic. Will you do a sum for me?"

The smug expression on the young face slipped a bit. "Yes, tuan," he said, with less assurance.

Julian gave him a simple problem involving three baskets and an even number of mangoes, and told him to take his time. While the boy worked on it the court was hushed. Elizabeth found herself crossing her fingers for the youngster. In her bones she felt that Julian was sceptical of the child's powers, and quite desperately she wanted him to be proved wrong. The boy did look intelligent, and his father strained towards him with the utmost anxiety, as if willing his son to make no mistakes.

The boy stood back from the table and spoke with bowed head. The pudgy hand clutching the sheet of note-paper trembled. "I have finished, tuan, but the answer is not right."

Kindly, Julian said, "How can you be sure it isn't right?"

"One cannot put half a mango into two baskets only; there is the other basket. But if the tuan will give me more time.....

"Your father has said," Julian stated quietly, reasonably, "that the teacher at the mission has taught you all he knows. Do *you* believe that?"

"No, tuna," said the boy, with a wooden kind of sorrow.

"Why have you been begging your parents to have you sent to Singapore?"

"I think it will be best, tuan. I . . . I do not like to work in the fields. I want to be a . . . scholar."

"One who is never tired of learning is always a scholar," Julian told him, "and to work in the fields is good for everyone. When I was a boy I would help to cut and load the sugar cane in my father's plantations."

The round face rose, showing a tear runnel from each dark shining eye. "It is true? The tuan really worked at the sugar? I do not hate the fields, but I was afraid to be the same as my brothers."

Unconsciously, Elizabeth had tensed. Yes, the boy was bright; the fact of his getting the wrong answer to the problem meant nothing at all. He had seen his brothers drop away from the mission school and take wholly to the land, and some deep and as yet unfathomed need *in* him

had made him revolt against a like fate for himself. He had to be priggish and different, because he knew he *was* different.

She looked across at Julian in an agony of supplication, but the aloof face was still inclined towards the coffee-skinned boy.

"Go back to the mission school for a year," he said, "and work faithfully *for your father* also. At the end of that year I will get a report from the teacher at the mission and I shall ask you to bring me a bowl of rice which you have grown yourself from seed."

"And then, tuan?" demanded the boy eagerly.

"And then," said Julian tolerantly, sitting back and shuffling his papers into a tidy pile, "I shall probably find that you have been both an excellent scholar and an excellent son, and I shall recommend you for a scholarship in Singapore."

Less than half the spectators could have understood the final faintly humorous sentence, but appreciation of it spread like a flame. For a moment or two the noise was tremendous, but when Julian stood up the people stood, too, and were quiet as he passed through their ranks into the open air.

Elizabeth, to her shame, had a lump the size of a walnut in her throat; impossible to explain why. She couldn't look at the Assistant Commissioner who had been detailed to escort her to the beach, and she was grateful for the dusky village maidens who had gathered there to hang a string of flowers about her neck and wave goodbye as she trod the landing-stage and stepped into the launch.

As they left the bay, however, her emotions eased. One of the launch boys had made some tea and opened a tin of biscuits, and Julian, after shoving one sheaf of papers into the back pocket of his brief case and extracting another from the front pocket in readiness for the next halt, relaxed with her in the cabin, and took his cup. He had probably put a mental tick beside the first name on his list, and forgotten it. Only by organized dealing with one thing at a time could he accomplish so much. She realized that now.

Casually, he indicated the even, porous formation of the coral, and the lines of rust-pink under the water where the reef still existed, an unbroken line all round this south-eastern side of the island. She nodded but made no comment, and over his second cup of tea he gave her a slanting, amused glance.

"You're unusually preoccupied. I don't believe you've been listening."

"Yes, I have." And to prove it she recited: "This reef is of limestone foundation composed of skeletons of various kinds of coral, and it is all under the mean tide level. On continued exposure to the air, coral crumbles into sand, and a coral island is so called because that's more or less what it's based on, coral sand."

"Ten marks. But you're thinking of something else, all the same."

"Yes, I am." She paused and stirred her tea. "I was remembering that boy in the court-house. It may seem silly, but he did appear to be intelligent, and I was so afraid you'd turn him away without encouragement. I'm very glad you didn't."

"Oh, that," he shrugged. "We can't be sentimental over these cases. He'll get his chance, but for one who goes away for higher education we're left with a hundred who are jealous of him because he's having something from the government that they aren't. These boys with an urge to train for one of the professions dedicate themselves to a merciless future. It takes them years to adjust themselves to a city, and the competition and unremitting brainwork are heartbreaking to a people who are naturally indolent. Many of them come back, failures; some we never trace, and every few years one climbs to the top."

"Aren't you ever . . . afraid?"

"Why should I be?"

"The responsibility is heavy. I should have thought that. . ." She stopped, aware that his gaze was becoming sharp and curious.

"Just what are you getting at?" he asked coolly.

She laughed deprecatingly. "I'm not sure. Sir Henry has been a governor for eleven years, hasn't he? Was he a Chief Commissioner before that?"

The next second she became conscious of a peculiar stillness in him. In a panic she went over word for word what she had said, but except for the distant "Sir Henry" could recollect nothing reprehensible. She was certain that Amanda had never followed the steps in her father's career; eleven years ago she had been only ten.

Had she flicked the tenderest spot in Julian's ego—his driving ambition to reach the highest rung? Had he, perhaps, from their various exchanges, divined her reluctance to help him to his goal?

"Yes," he said off-handedly, and with the suggestion of a glitter in his eyes, "Sir Henry was a Chief Commissioner." Then he put down his cup and without a further word went out to the narrow deck.

Elizabeth felt a little sick and annoyed with herself. She couldn't tell Julian that her desire to learn all there was to learn about him had nothing whatever to do with her being the Governor's daughter. It had been a natural question to ask and if it had angered him to have his aims prodded at . . . well, she couldn't help it. He had invited it.

By noon they had put in at four villages, and at twelve-thirty they tied up at the fifth, where they lunched with a resident government officer who lived, with a medley of pets, in the quarters adjoining the court-house. At one-thirty they were off again, and twenty minutes later they came to a workers' settlement where Julian had to consider claims for new machinery and more pay.

Days later, Elizabeth could not but admit to herself that the launch trip with Julian had been the unheralded yet fatal occasion which comes to every woman who is unwittingly and irretrievably falling in love. She did not leave the launch at every halt—he insisted that that would be too tiring for her—but in the course of that day she saw him ruthless with wrong-doers, scrupulously just and sometimes generous, and unerringly courteous, whether dealing with a headman, a raja or a ragged fisherman. And by the

time the fiery disc of the sun was sliding down below the horizon she knew, infallibly, that Julian Stanville would not have to marry Amanda Penlan or any other governor's daughter in order to be eligible himself for high honor. He would get there, whoever he married.

Dusk came down as they sighted Mueng. In the cabin, *Julian fastened* the straps of his case.

"You've worn wonderfully well," he said, smiling at her. "To me you look as bandbox-new as you did this morning."

"I'm wilting at the edges but otherwise sound."

"Not sorry you came?"

"Of course not—it's been a marvellous experience. I'm grateful to you for having me." She raised to him eyes that were a little tired and luminous. "Julian . . . I didn't mean to say anything hurtful this morning."

"You didn't hurt," he said a shade crisply. "Forget it."

"It's been such a lovely day that I . . ."

He slid a hand into the crook of her arm. "I refuse to plunge into that type of discussion until you're fighting-fresh. I like my debates to have a climax. Come outside and watch the city lights."

So she stood with him in the breeze, his arm hard and companionable against her side, and watched the lights flowering all over Mueng and up on Kalaba Hill. It was an interval of peace and wordlessness she knew she would look back upon with longing.

The launch pulled in and Julian helped her on to the landing-stage. They walked up the beach to the road, and at the grey car came upon Dr. Mayer, his brows bristling in the headlights of his own car.

"Hallo," he bellowed bluffly. "I was just writing a note to stick under your windscreen-wiper, Julian. Thought I might get you to call in at my place on your way **up**."

"Trouble?" demanded Julian swiftly.

"None that can't be put right. Old Solai has at last agreed to an op. for his rupture, but he wants you to sign the form of consent. Full of his own importance, as usual." He laughed gustily. "He means to have the government on **his side before he trusts himself to me. I suppose you**

can't really blame the old boy; he's lived most of his life in the wilds."

"Have you got the form with you?"

The doctor rummaged in an inside pocket. "Here it is. Sorry to bother you with this the minute you're back, but if I don't hurry the old idiot will change his mind. What sort of day have you had?"

"Smooth," said Julian, writing his name.

"And you, Miss Penlan?" In the slanting beams of light the doctor appeared to be giving her a ferocious wink.

'Julian's pace takes some living up to, doesn't it? He needs someone like you to tame him, and make him realize that there are some spheres in which colonial law doesn't work."

Julian sounded as if he were grinning. "You're garrulous, doc."

"Maybe, but I know what I'm garrulous about." Again he addressed Elizabeth. "If you like excitement, take him in hand and give his heart a wrench. The man's always had things too much his own way."

Elizabeth was thankful that neither could see the tide of color which swept up from her neck. She contrived demurely, "I'll think it over," and murmured good night. Julian unlocked the car and she got into the front seat. But he did not at once join her. The two men were still talking. She saw the doctor give a huge shrug, and caught part of Julian's reply: "He deserved more than concussion. The fellow's a swine!" Then they broke up.

Her heart contracted. Tim Cartney, of course. Julian was keeping himself posted about events at the plantation.

"You really are flat out," he said as he got in beside her. "I can see it now. You must go to bed early and have a quiet day tomorrow."

At the Residency, Elizabeth asked politely, "Will you come in for a drink?"

"Thanks. A short one." He came round the car and went up the steps with her. "I shall have to work this evening."

He was tireless, and her own spirits were zooming down to zero. She had a cocktail with him and walked out with

him to the terrace. As he faced her his lean dark face seemed to be very close.

Then he was saying, very coolly, "Here comes your last year's soul-mate. Shall I send him away?"

"No, don't do that," she said on an impulse, her gaze shifting to the thickset young man who was crossing the lawn **to the drive**.

Julian's brows rose, sarcastically. "Are you **in** a condition to tackle a resurrection tonight?"

Against her will she hardened. "I think this will be a pleasant one, a relaxation."

"A re-hashed calf-love is more likely to be revolting than pleasant!"

She thought of the confiding Celia and said, her tones as airy as she could make them, "Oh, but there's nothing warmed-over about Peter. He's quite a dear."

He came up the steps, ruggedly attractive in a white dinner jacket. "Good evening, sir," he said cheerfully. Unconcernedly, he added, "Hello, Amanda, I've been up here twice. There's a bit of a party on at the Kelveys and I wondered if you'd go there with me?"

"Miss Penlan has had **a** long and tiring day," said Julian, almost sourly.

Elizabeth's smile was hard and bright. Her voice was the same, because she was fighting down an inexplicable surge of tears. "I'd love to go with you, Peter. Come in and have a drink while I change."

Julian made no further demur. He regarded Peter for a minute as if he were an interesting but unappealing specimen destined for a zoo, said good night to Elizabeth without looking at her, and drove away.

As she dressed, Elizabeth knew she was too spent to enjoy even a modest party. Her head ached a little from the refracted glare of the sun on the sea, and her mind was a jumble of primitive courtrooms and the endless, thick green coastline of Bolani . . . and that wretched conversation with Celia yesterday afternoon.

Peter had no car yet, and Elizabeth did not care to call out the chauffeur, particularly as the Kelveys' house was less than half a mile up the road. So they set out across the

grounds towards the private gate which Peter had formed the habit of using.

He had passed the morning, he told her, in Sir Henry's library with Mr. Sands. Not a bad old coot, Sands, even if he was a shade too keen on drawing comparisons which gave a secretary rather more privileges than an aide-de-camp.

The afternoon he had spent at the government offices, learning the ropes. This job with Sir Henry was going to be easier in many ways than the one he had done in Singapore, but it would be far more demanding in the way of responsibility and dignity. He was still thrilled to the teeth to have hooked it; and so on, till they reached the Kelveys'.
6189—"Sweet Deceiver"—Oct 20 — (829) — John Hall

Naturally, Amanda was there, scintillating in vivid sea-green brocade and dividing her attentions unequally between Captain Cranwood and the government accountant. To Elizabeth she said, her head mischievously on one side, "Why take on Peter, darling? Reaction from our Julian?"

And Peter answered her, smiling stolidly, "Don't you wish you could get a thorough change from old Horsehair?"

The reply was brief and sweet. "You should see him in uniform—on a horse!" After which Amanda drifted out to the veranda on someone's arm, and Elizabeth crossed the lounge for a talk with the semi-invalid Mrs. Kelvey.

A couple of hours later Peter took her home and she went to bed, to lie wondering with a painful intensity just what it was that had caused the abominable ache which seemed to be taking permanent possession of her heart

CHAPTER SIX

A WEEK slid by more or less uneventfully. There was no further news from Sir Henry Penlan, which probably meant that he had, as yet, nothing to tell them.

Elizabeth discovered that if you forgot you belonged to the Residency and investigated Bolani because it was fascinating and oriental, there was a great deal to be learned. The temples, for instance. There was one which glittered all over with tourmalines and crude amethysts and was surmounted by a beautifully sculptured coronet; this was dedicated to the goddess of rice. Another was a fiat ornate behind which the tin building cowered like a poverty-poor relation, and still another nestled among magnolias and oleanders, and pushed a bright blue-enamelled dome into the sky. All were relics of pre-Moslem days and were still used by some of the islanders.

On most of the jaunts Peter Gilmering was Elizabeth's companion. Officially, Peter had nothing whatever to do until Sir Henry returned, but he had been instructed by Julian to report every morning at the government offices in order to familiarize himself with procedure.

"He doesn't altogether trust me," Peter ruefully told Elizabeth one afternoon as they strolled towards the rocks, "and I'm afraid that with him my stock would go even lower if he guessed that I'm helping you and Amanda to put one over on him. I feel pretty mean about that."

"Don't worry about it, Peter. When the time comes we'll do the explaining, and I'm sure he'll understand your position."

"But supposing he tells Sir Henry. What a jam I'm going to be in then!"

"We'll have to beg him not to say a word, but if it does come out I'm sure Sir Henry will be lenient, and make allowances for the spot you were in. He may not have seen very much of Amanda during the last few years, but he knows her very well."

"I don't want him to be angry with Amanda!"

"My dear man," said Elizabeth, stepping lightly from the grass on to an outcrop, "it wouldn't get him anywhere if he were. She'd give him a melting, tearful smile and a kiss of forgiveness."

This drew a laugh from Peter, albeit a rueful one. "She always has her own way and everything always comes right for her," he said, and added very casually, "Do you think there's anything serious between her and the Handlebar?"

"She makes fun of him."

"Does she . . . make fun of me, too?"

"No. She called you a horrible bulldog."

He looked blank and said soberly, "Good lord, did she really? Do I strike you that way?"

She shook her head. "You're just nicely stubborn ... and keep it up, Peter. She must be getting awfully tired of being petted and admired."

"Oh, well," he said, hanging on, as any young man of grit would do, to his pride, "She'd be a frightful handful to have as a wife, anyway. I wouldn't dare take her on unless she loved me to distraction, and there's hardly a hope of that."

"You may be sure," Elizabeth stated, "that when she does fall in love she'll do it as thoroughly as she does everything she sets her mind to, and the man who gets her will be lucky. There's much more to Amanda than that bright exterior of hers."

He picked up an outsize abalone shell, ran his forefinger along the mother-of-pearl inside of it and definitely left the subject of Amanda. "Have you heard about the pearling grounds off the reef near Manai Island? If I can get a permit will you go with me to have a look at them?"

"I'll do anything once," she said, reflecting that she would think twice before consenting to go on the launch trip round the island again with Julian.

"Good, I'll see what I can do about it."

Peter was excellent company, and he never talked over-much about Amanda. True, he mentioned her every time they met, but he was too sane and considerate of Elizabeth to persist in a discussion which could have no satisfactory conclusion and might, for one of them, prove boring. Be-

sides, he admired Elizabeth. He thought she always looked so cool and fresh in her tailored silks and linens, and in addition to the prettiness of youth she had those fine grey eyes set well apart, and the generous line of mouth which even Peter knew it was good for a woman to possess. Had Amanda owned Elizabeth's frankness of expression he might have known where he stood with her, he often thought morosely. He also thought it was very strange to know someone like Elizabeth and yet be in love with Amanda. So many things in life were inexplicable.

Elizabeth, of course, did no deep thinking about Peter. He was companionable, interested in many of the things which interested her, and he was a little in love with Amanda. And he, of all the people in Bolani except Amanda, was the only one who knew her true identity; she could be herself with Peter.

He took her to the polo that *Saturday*. Usually all organized sport took place in the brief cool of evening; it was too hot for much play during the day and night fell at six. The polo began sharp at five, and they watched it from the small wooden stand with a tin roof at the side of the ground. In the interval before the final chukka a few of the spectators moved towards the pavilion to order sundowners, and on the path just below them Elizabeth saw Celia Cartney walking with a man who could be no one else but her brother. He had the same straightish mahogany hair, and a nose which was the twin of Celia's. The chief difference between them lay in the chin. His was indeterminate, the jaw a trifle loose, but Celia's, Elizabeth noticed with a tiny shock, was beautiful and firm in profile.

Then Celia turned her head for a friendly glance over the faces of the stand, and all at once those light topaz eyes were bright and focused.

"Hallo, Amanda," she called, in a modulated voice which was just loud enough to draw attention to the fact that, though she might be accompanied by the unpopular Tim, she had no fear that the Governor's daughter would object.

Elizabeth leant forward. "How are you, Celia—and how is your brother?"

While the introductions were made she looked him over and briefly wondered why the women on Kalaba Hill had not persuaded their men that there could be no real harm in Tim Cartney. In appearance he was attractively thin and well-tailored, and whatever weakness there was in him might have been partially overcome had he had plenty of the right type of friends.

"Why not come with us for a drink?" he suggested now. "When the match ends the bar will be too crowded."

It was Elizabeth's first polo match and she would rather have stayed; but she was incapable of slighting Celia. The girl had now been more or less taken to the bosom of Kalaba Hill, and it was possible she had a secret hankering to make Tim realize that a bounder isn't always a bounder. His social level was equal to that of the rest of the community, and he had a right to take his place among them, if he would.

So Elizabeth said, "We'd like to go with you—wouldn't we, Peter?"

Peter, who considered Celia one of the best-looking women he had seen in the South Seas, answered, "I dare say we all need a refresher. The result of the match is a foregone conclusion, anyway."

The pavilion was a large but modest log building with a bar at one end, seats around the walls, and an odd wine table here and there. A gramophone played a once-popular dance tune and two couples were waltzing in the confined space which had been deared in the centre of the room.

After seating the two women both Peter and Tim went to the bar, and Celia sat back to regard Elizabeth with a narrow-eyed smile. She looked like a lovely tortoiseshell kitten who has just lapped up the cream off the milk.

"Peter Gilmering looks nice," she said. "You're fortunate; you get first go at all the eligible men. I've seen you with him, walking about in the town. Are you fond of him?"

"Fond?" Elizabeth was startled. "I wouldn't say that. Peter's at a loose end till Sir Henry returns and the island is as new to him as it is to me. We go exploring together."

"Exploring," Celia echoed, nodding knowledgeably. "I think you're each lucky in the other." Her smile faded

with a peculiar swiftness, leaving her face pained and shadowed; she really was an artist in expressions, this Celia. "I've been so terribly afraid you'd be attracted to Julian. It's such a relief that you aren't."

"Is it?" Elizabeth swallowed to strengthen her voice. "What difference would it make to you if I were?"

"Well, you'd have an unfair advantage over me, wouldn't you—and you don't need his friendship as I do. It would break my heart if I lost Julian's trust," came the naive reply. Then she relaxed, utterly composed. "Here come the men. I hope Tim remembered that I like a spot of *gin* in my drink at this hour of the day."

Tim had remembered. He had also instructed the steward to send over a dish of snacks, and for about ten minutes the conversation at the table was light and amusing. Then the match was over and the pavilion became crowded.

As far as Elizabeth could tell, there was no display of hostility towards Tim Cartney, though to be sure no one spoke to him. She recalled dark hints from Mrs. McIver about men who slipped into the habit of drinking too much and eventually became degenerates, and she thought it was unkind to stand apart and let the man slide. Had she really been Amanda Penlan she would have taken a chance and invited him to the Residency.

The two couples parted outside the pavilion. Tim still pleasant but slightly bored, and Celia looking still like a tortoiseshell kitten, but less self-satisfied.

Before Peter and Elizabeth had reached the Residency car, he was accosted by one of the young government officials.

"Say, Gilmering—Good evening, Miss Penlan—Gilmering, I'm sorry, but you can't have that permit for the pearling grounds. The C.C. turned you down flat."

"Turned me down! Why?"

"No reason given. You can appeal, but I wouldn't advise it. He's in a grim mood these days. There's nothing to stop your going to Manai so long as you're back before dark, but no watchum catchee pearlee. See?"

Peter shrugged. "I suppose he has the last word. Thanks, anyway, for what you did."

They were halfway back to the Residency before he said, rather glumly, "I half wish I'd never applied for the job with Sir Henry. Since I arrived everything's gone wrong. I made a false step in telling Julian Stanville that I knew Amanda Penlan in England, and since then I seem to have made several more. It's such hellish bad luck. Every official I've spoken to has been allowed to take a look at those pearling grounds. Why should he refuse me?"

"He must have a good reason, even if he didn't give one. Maybe he'd rather you didn't go till Sir Henry's here."

"He could have said so. It's just one of those things, I'm afraid. I've never had an enemy in my life before, but I seem to be making up for it now. Julian's as good as ten normal enemies!"

"Don't make it too important. He's never unjust. With Sir Henry away he has lots on his mind."

"I know I'm talking like a droop, but he makes me feel that way—treating me like a child."

"He'll probably explain to you some time."

Elizabeth could talk like that to Peter, though inwardly she smouldered against Julian. It was he who had asked her to welcome Peter Gilmering and help him to settle happily. Even if it did happen to be true that part of Peter's eagerness to work on Bolani had nothing to do with his pride in being a member of the colonial service, Julian ought, by now, to have assessed his junior's character. He was being officious and nasty because, it seemed, that was how he felt at the moment.

Since the launch trip round the island she had not once been alone with him. They had met a few times but not socially, and Julian, while preserving an austere charm, had appeared not unwilling to cut short his official visits to the Residency.

The car dropped Peter at the Coombs' and took Elizabeth to the Residency. Tonight she would be alone for the evening, because Amanda was going with others to the research station to celebrate somebody's anniversary. In fact, she might already have left.

But upstairs in the corridor Elizabeth heard a husky warbling which told her that Amanda was only just dressing. She tapped at the bedroom door and opened it.

For tonight Amanda had chosen a petunia pink organza with a monstrously wide white collar which met in a point at the centre of her waist and deep white cuffs that stood out above the elbow. Elizabeth couldn't help reflecting affectionately that she excelled in wearing extravagant styles. The diamond clips in her ears added a ravishing touch.

She turned from the mirror. "You're fagged, darling. Polo treats me that way, too. Bring anyone with you?"

"If you mean Peter—no."

Amanda touched the stopper of the perfume phial to her hair. Her lips came together while she added to their soft redness. "You've been out with him all the afternoon, haven't you? What is he like these days?"

"Why don't you spend a few hours with him and find out for yourself?"

"I might even do that—as a change from the Army. I wouldn't want to deprive you of your most constant escort, though."

"You have my consent," said Elizabeth with irony. She paused. "Amanda, I really think it's time we told everyone who we are. The longer we go on with this the more involved it becomes."

Amanda groaned prettily. "What a moment to start an argument! I'm going out to dinner, sweetie, and we have to travel thirty miles before eight."

"There's always something. If I tackle you tomorrow morning you'll say you're too tired."

"So I shall, be. I can't imagine what you're fretting about. No one will really be involved but Julian, and where he's concerned we haven't done what we set out to do. You'll admit that."

"Isn't it possible that the Brodie woman was mistaken? Even at the time she struck me as vindictive. Now that you know Julian, do you honestly believe he'd marry to further his career?"

Amanda went wide-eyed with ostentatious surprise. Curiously she said, "What have you found out about him—that he's been generous to some of the young officials and extremely considerate to the Cartney girl and her brother? I've heard it all, too, but it hasn't shaken me. Julian's as charming as he was painted and, as I've said before, I like the man, but I'd still wager that he loves his position too much to subordinate it to his emotions. Have you heard the latest? By edict of the Chief Commissioner the Army has to go out on practice manoeuvres in the peaceful Tunaks! Don't tell me that such a man would bother to fall in love. He couldn't."

"Celia Cartney," said Elizabeth very evenly, "is privately of the opinion that Julian is in love with her."

Amanda stared, and then she nodded comprehendingly, "She's a neat little limpet, and she may be right. About Julian, one wouldn't know. He looks at her as if she were about sixteen and highly fragile. Still, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't marry her."

"We haven't discovered a thing to prove that he means to marry Amanda Penlan!"

Amanda grinned. "He did take you round the island."

"He took the Governor's daughter to look over her father's domain," said Elizabeth shortly.

"And nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened!"

Amanda spread her hands, innocently, "There, you see? That's how it'll go on if you don't lead him a little way up the garden. You don't get half the glee out of it that I would." A klaxon sounded below and she added, "There's the convoy. I must go."

"But look here, Amanda Why can't we be candid with Julian? If you told him exactly why we agreed to change names he'd realize you don't want his attentions, and it would be such a relief if ..."

Amanda leaned over to lay fingers which were delicately scented upon Elizabeth's lips. "Don't be so solemn, there's a pet. You're altogether too grim over this. I've promised to tell Julian the moment we hear my father is coming. It can't be long now!" She dropped a butterfly kiss upon the

lobe of Elizabeth's ear and snatched up her purse. "I know I'm behaving badly to you, but I'll make up for it. 'Night!"

She was gone, gaily clattering down the staircase in high-heeled sandals of petunia kid.

Smiling to herself, Elizabeth went to her own room. She took a bath and, because she was alone, decided to change into her blue housecoat and have her dinner on the side terrace, where the french door of the dining-room opened. That way she could use the light from the chandelier and sit in comparative darkness, which would discourage the mosquitoes.

Elizabeth finished her meal, lit a cigarette and pulled her chair nearer to the terrace wall. The table was carried away and the light in the dining-room reduced to a single glow, so that she could just see a few feet of grass and a bush of pink oleanders though she herself sat outside the rectangle of light. She heard the measured tread of a guard on the path, and after it had receded there came footfalls of a different type.

Quickly, she turned her head, and at the end of the terrace where it angled round to the front of the house she saw a tall figure hesitating, and her heart beat with a queer insistence, as it always did lately when Julian was near.

As if in hurried self-defence, she squashed out the red tip of her cigarette on the wall and sat palpitatingly still. Julian had not called as late as this before, and she had known herself safe from other callers because those who had not gone to the research station were watching a film at the house of one of the officials. Elizabeth had been invited there herself but declined because she felt the need of a quiet evening.

Julian looked along the terrace, and parched dryness came into her throat. Her housecoat was royal blue, and in the darkness hardly lighter than the night. But he either saw it or decided to come as far as the small illumination from the dining-room. He was approaching at a long, almost silent stride.

"Good evening," he said coolly. "Were you deliberately keeping quiet?"

... wasn't expecting anyone, least of all you. It's late."

"Only nine o'clock. I called in at the film show, but as you weren't there I came on here, hoping to see you alone."

His tones were still chilly and uncompromising, and though he had come to stand beside her at the wall she remained seated with her chin in her hand, looking out over the gardens.

"Why did you want to see me? News of Sir Henry?"

"It hasn't anything to do with your father. I'm giving a dinner party on Wednesday and I'd like you to come. ..

"Thank you very much." This was no cause for seeing her alone. Elizabeth knew more was to come, and she tensed, expectantly, yet asked without much expression, "Is it to celebrate something?"

He shook his head. "Sir Henry normally entertains on a large scale about once a month. He says, and I agree with him, that the officials need to be brought together socially at intervals, because otherwise they tend to form small groups which have little to do with each other. He's been gone some time now, and it's well over a month since he last entertained. You've been here five weeks."

"It seems much longer."

"I suppose life should really be measured by what you crowd into it," he commented. Then abruptly, "How did you enjoy your first polo match?"

Involuntarily, she looked up at him. Was it coming now? "It was exciting. Were you there?"

"No, my assistant saw you. Don't take it," he said quietly, "that I have you watched wherever you go; until Sir Henry returns I naturally take an interest in you. My assistant mentioned it because he saw you sitting with Tim Cartney in the pavilion. The men here don't care for Tim—it's chiefly a matter of gambling debts that he'll never be able to pay; the type doesn't go down among these chaps, and they won't be too pleased if you favor him."

"I see," she said flippantly. "Celia is in but Tim is out."

"You don't have to put it that way," he told her sharply. "I'd be the last to victimize any man, but Tim has simply asked for trouble. You haven't heard the half and I don't

intend you to hear more, but you've got to realize that the fellow wouldn't be shunned for nothing at all."

"On my first night here," she reminded him, "you had a man deported for what you called degeneracy. He was turned out to slip from bad to worse."

"He'd already been helped as far as we were able. We're here for the benefit of the Malays, not the whites, and we won't tolerate the presence of anyone who's a bad example."

"But don't you think it's possible that it's your kind of justice that makes young men into degenerates? They slide a little and your system of ostracism pushes them down still further. They don't stand a chance." With some of his own deliberation she added, "You're too conscious of being the government, Julian. It makes you inhuman."

"Go on," he said crisply.

"*That's all. If I've offended against your code I apologize,* but I could hardly be expected to know that if a man is on the way down, in these parts, one has to kick him."

The breath he drew was blade-sharp. "You haven't the least idea what you're talking about, and I've no intention of wallowing in Tim Cartney's exploits. He's a rat who doesn't deserve to have friends, let alone a sister like Celia."

A pain stabbed at the base of her throat, so that her voice was not quite steady when she demanded: "Would you have had me decline his invitation to take a sundowner in the pavilion—even at the risk of wounding Celia?"

"She would have understood and accepted the situation," he said curtly. "And if Gilmering had spent his time with the men instead of hanging around the Residency every day he'd have realized that Sir Henry's daughter should not be seen with a hard-drinking cheat!"

"Oh, so Peter's in your bad books, too? I might have guessed it," she threw back at him as she swiftly got to her feet. "You've picked on him whenever you could, haven't you? You seem to have forgotten it was you who asked me to help him to settle down."

Julian stepped back a few inches and leant his shoulder against a pillar. His face was dark and angular, but she could visualize the twist of his mouth as he replied sardonically—

cally, "I wasn't aware then that in his mind he had already settled down so thoroughly that he even saw himself with a wife and an eminent father-in-law. From now on, you're absolved from all duties towards Gilnaering—if you want to be."

She shrugged her slim shoulders, more to disguise the trembling of her body than to indicate indifference. "You're intolerable," she said jerkily. "Power is the breath of life to you, isn't it? You do love to bend others to your will. I expect it gives you immense satisfaction to know that Peter turns up at the offices every morning, even though there's nothing for him to do, and it must have been quite thrilling to veto his request for a permit to see the pearly grounds. What a . . . beastly autocrat you are!"

A brief silence. Then, the words like pebbles on ice: "I acted exactly as your father would have done in similar circumstances."

"I don't believe it. All the men go to look over the pearly grounds, and there was no reason . . ."

"I refuse to discuss it," he cut in. "What we do at the offices is no concern of yours, and if it annoys you when Peter doesn't get what he's after, it can't be helped. After all," with heavy sarcasm, "if you feel for him so intensely there's quite a lot you can give him to make up for what he's missing."

The taunt was too obvious to parry. Momentarily, she caught a lethal glint in his eyes, and she was certain that he derived a fiendish pleasure from making her furious. He would, of course. A *sauve* brand of cruelty was consistent with his normal charm.

She straightened away from the wall. "I don't think we've anything more to say to each other."

"On the contrary," he observed austerely, "we've a great deal more to say to each other, though this may not be the appropriate time." A pause. "Have a cigarette?"

"No, thank you. I'm going to bed."

"Will you listen without getting angry while I tell you something?"

"Not if you tell it in that tone."

He gave a short hard laugh. "You can't expect a caressing inflexion from someone you've just called a beastly autocrat. Let's leave it till another time."

The silence throbbed, as if her heart were thumping so loudly that he must hear it. He seemed determined to wait till she spoke. She turned abruptly to cross the terrace to the open dining-room door, and he was close behind her so close that as the sweeping hem of the housecoat brushed over the step he trod upon it. She was brought up sharp, the hem ripped.

He muttered an exclamation and bent quickly to examine the damage. "I'm afraid there's a six-inch tear," he said. "I'm terribly sorry—wouldn't have done that for anything. I hadn't realized what you were wearing."

He was holding on to her elbow and looking down at her in sincere contrition. But in the soft lamplight she didn't see the apology in his glance; she saw that the blue eyes, still keen as steel, had a faint tiredness in their depths, that though he was unsmiling, his expression was anything but . . . hateful.

Her breath caught, and she said unevenly, "It's too long; I knew it was. I'll snip that piece off and make a new hem. It doesn't matter a bit."

He looked into her face, studying her. A sudden sweet breath of air stirred the honey-colored tendrils at her temples, and to Elizabeth it came as an unidentifiable but heavenly gusts of perfume. She held herself rigid, willing herself to pay no attention to that searching look and his *hand* on her arm. It was a moment so concentrated, so emotional, that a tiny pulse was visible at the hollow of her throat.

He gave her the ghost of a smile and dropped his arm. "A torn skirt hardly merits quite such intensity, does it? The way you're looking at me we might be sharing at least an earthquake."

No mention of the way he was looking! There was a little quiver in her voice which might have had its source either in laughter or in tears. "I'd forgotten the skirt. Out there, I thought you were in a glittering rage and thoroughly enjoying it, but in the light, you . . ." She broke off, and

tacked on gently, "I wish I hadn't crossed you just now. You must be having a horrid time, what with your own work, and the Governor's."

"I can take the world," he answered with grim humor. "What I find less palatable is the decision of the Governor's daughter to tell me how to set about it."

"You forgive me?"

"On one condition. Allow me **to** know best till your father comes back."

She stood facing him, straight and pale, with something untouched about her. She pushed back her hair with a quick, unsteady hand. "Very well. I'm all obedience."

"Fine. I'll keep you to it."

It seemed, for an interminable minute, that his head bent and that the very next second she would feel his lips at her brow. But the minute passed, and she turned to him the calm profile which revealed nothing of what went on in the young heart.

"Good night, child," he said quietly. "Sleep well." And he was gone.

Elizabeth did not linger in the dining-room. Methodically, she pulled in the french doors and switched off the lamp, and then she went out into the hall and up to her bedroom.

Her balcony doors were wide, and as she stood at the opening it occurred to her that the doves had muted their cooing and the cicades sweetened the chirring of their wings. Unconsciously, her fingers smoothed the arm round which Julian's fingers had closed, while her whole being felt an acute yearning which was pain. She had forgotten everything save the exquisite torture of knowing herself in love with him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A PICNIC tea had been arranged for the following afternoon, and for a change Amanda and Elizabeth were scheduled to sail to the chosen river-mouth in the same boat. Peter and a young research chemist named Hendry made up the four, and each man took turns in helping the expert Malay boy to pole along the lagoon and round the headlands.

Amanda, though she was glad to be paired with Elizabeth, patently considered it a bore that Peter had at the last minute taken the place of Captain Cranwood, who was still on the other side of the island putting his men through a refresher course in jungle warfare.

Peter didn't bother to speak to her. In *his* white shorts and shirt, his forearms muscular and brown as he leant on the pole and drew it up for a fresh thrust, he appeared to be annoyingly and silently enjoying himself. Elizabeth made use of Hendry's binoculars and excitedly declared at one point that she could see the tufts of palms on another island. Hendry scooped a coral-fish from the lagoon and disgustingly pointed out to Amanda the cunning form and coloring which made it indiscernible when near the reef. No wonder, with such companions, that she felt cross.

It was not much better when they turned between sentinels of mangroves and palms, and tied up beside the other two boats. The older men were already wolfing a quick tea in order to get in some river fishing before dark, and nothing specific had been provided for the younger ones' entertainment. They were supposed to amuse themselves.

While tea was in progress, Celia Cartney listened devotedly to a discourse from the copra superintendent, and afterwards she allowed herself to be embroiled with Mrs. Sands. To older women Celia must be the ideal listener. Her large-eyed, sweet-smiling interest was making her into a firm favorite with Mrs. Sands, Mrs. McIvor, and the rest of their generation. After all, they agreed between themselves, there was a bad hat in every alternate family if you cared to probe, and Celia had enough goodness for two.

"She's wonderful," murmured Amanda with a hint of malice. "And she spends every penny she owns on dress—or else she's much better off than she pretends. She intends to make a perfect governor's lady . . . so chockful of sympathy and understanding."

"Intends?" Elizabeth moved round in her folding chair to glance more closely at her lounging companion. "Aren't you rather taking too much for granted?" She felt light and sure, able to cope with this kind of thing.

"Could be. I must confess, though, that I've never yet met a woman who so naturally combines innocence and sophistication as the lady with the yellow-brown eyes."

"Perhaps," suggested Peter, who sat cross-legged on the grass beside Elizabeth, "you've mistaken something else for innocence."

"Are you insinuating that it's a quality I can't know much about?" demanded Amanda.

"Hell, no," he answered equably. "I'm merely casting aspersions on your powers of judgment. I'm not very bright . . ."

"The modest truth!"

"But even I," he went on, blandly ignoring the , "can see that Celia Cartney is a thoroughly knowledgeable and unconceited woman. You've no room to sneer at her, because she's only doing what you do. You cultivate sparkle and vivacity, and she accentuates her freshness and absorption in the problems of other people. That's all."

"A fat lot you know about women!"

"Restraint!" pleaded Elizabeth. "I feel as if I'm sitting between a big gun and the ammunition. Let's change the topic. What about a game of cards?"

"Hendry's cleared off with the fishermen," said Peter. "I believe I'm supposed to take you two along as well."

Amanda said sulkily, "Why come all this way to catch a few fish? There are millions in the lagoon and dozens of boys on the beach to net them for you."

"You're not sport-minded," he told her kindly, "and you've formed the bad habit of staying up much too late at night."

"Oh, be quiet!" she cried.

"Look here," said Elizabeth patiently, "you two either have to fight it out or make it up. I'm going after the anglers."

She left them, without looking back, and soon she was caught up in the mystery and magic of this lovely tropical river.

Amanda stared dispassionately for some time at the palms on the opposite bank. Among them crowded plantains whose tattered leaves had a brilliant green grace, and from every high branch hung festoons of violently luxuriant liana, the commonest and most beautiful parasite of the tropics. Unimpressed, she closed her eyes.

Presently, Peter enquired casually, "How long are you going to keep up the farce of being Elizabeth Mayne?"

She could have pretended to be dozing, but she didn't. "Just as long as it suits me," she said.

"You do realize that you've put me in a spot with the Chief Commissioner and the rest, don't you? If you're really getting a kick out of it, I don't mind, but you don't strike me as being full of joy."

"Probably that's because I never am full of joy when you're about. For an up-and-coming colonial servant you're an awful damp squib."

"You didn't think so when we had fun together in London last year. In fact, I don't believe you turned down one of my invitations. You let me kiss you, too, more than once."

"Did I?" indifferently. "I also smacked your face."

"I suppose I sat up and begged for it. Amanda Penlan had never before been called childish and spoiled, and she must have had rather a jolt. The mistake I made was to quarrel with you only the day before I sailed. I must have been worked up to do that. But I did apologize by letter from the ship, and it wouldn't have hurt you to acknowledge it."

Amanda's dark eyes flickered open and she glanced at him fleetingly across Elizabeth's empty chair. But he was staring broodingly at the river. "I didn't get your letter," she said.

"No?" His head swerved, the shaggy brown brows were drawn together. "Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. I went on a cruise a few days after you left and I was away for three months or more. A number of letters were forwarded to me at different places on the tour, but yours wasn't among them."

"So you went on loathing me?"

"I can't say I did," she returned distantly. "I'm afraid I didn't bother all that much. I just didn't think about you at all."

"Well, you hate me now."

"You flatter yourself," she said languidly. "I merely hate inaction, and there appears to be a surfeit of it when you're around." She yawned and stared up into the branches. "I wish I hadn't agreed to come on this silly picnic."

He looked her over speculatively before asking, "Why did you come? You must have known your particular talents wouldn't get a chance in this setting, with dull people like me about."

There was no piercing Amanda. "One always hopes for the best," she said with a dismissive shrug, and once more closed her eyes.

Not far away the group of older women and Celia were talking about the forthcoming dinner at Katemba. They were discussing details of dress which would have meant nothing at all to Peter even if he'd heard them clearly. He picked up a long stem of lalang grass and examined it minutely, after which he leant forward with his arms along his bare brown knees and gazed down towards the bend in the river round which the fishermen had disappeared.

He wouldn't have believed a year ago that the merry creature who 'had twined herself about his heart could have become so completely pleasure-seeking and hard. She'd probably always been a little selfish, but who isn't? There had been an indefinable charm about her, a sweet elusiveness which had goaded him because his time in England had been running so fast to its close. His mistake had lain in being proprietorial. She'd had an independent spirit and the means with which to give it rein, and he, at that

time had known the frustration of earning a salary which would only comfortably keep himself at the rate he was expected to live. So much had lain unspoken between them till the last moment, and then because he'd had the sinking knowledge that if he couldn't pin her down he was lost, he had idiotically been too frank, too little romantic. A tiny spark and she was ablaze, and he, poor simpleton, hadn't had what it takes to combat a human bush-fire.

He looked at her, openly and reminiscently. Her dark beauty suited the tropics. Her gaiety matched that of the young islanders and, like them, she gave the impression of always living on the surface of life. He had never really been able to discover whether she had depths, but he wished very much that he had.

As if in continuance of his thoughts, he said, "Have you ever visited the. Mueng hospital?"

She came upright, snapped open the bag which lay on her lap and drew from it a pretty gold cigarette case. The cigarette she took from it was tapped hard on a red fingernail. "What is it now—an attempt to push me into social welfare? Why should I go to the hospital?"

He tore a match from a book and rested on the seat of the empty chair while he held the flame for her. "No particular reason, except that it's very interesting. There are two Malay doctors, a Chinese medical assistant, and a whole squad of colored nurses. It's the only hospital in the islands, and Dr. McIver was telling me that they're inundated with applications by girls who want to train. Imagine that, when there's such a shortage of nursing staff all over the world. Elizabeth thinks the island women are beginning to fancy themselves emancipated, and I shouldn't be surprised if she's right."

She blew a cloud of smoke and said coolly, "So you went there with Elizabeth. From what I hear you go practically everywhere with Elizabeth."

"She's nice," he said sincerely, "the sort to whom one can say almost anything and know it won't be misunderstood. I suppose it's because she hasn't travelled much that she finds everything so intriguing."

"And that, of course, makes her remarkably refreshing to an old colonial man like yourself."

"Well, why shouldn't it?" he asked with a degree of belligerence.

She drew with tantalizing deliberation on the cigarette. "It rather looks as if it's a pity all round that Elizabeth isn't really the Governor's daughter."

Peter jumped to his feet. He didn't give himself time to remember that being angry with Amanda was as precarious a procedure as walking on eggs. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his shorts and bent over her, his rugged jaw stiff, and spoke vigorously, close to her face.

"Did I once call you a spoiled brat? I take it back. You're much worse—disloyal, selfish, and without charity. You used to be a darling, but you're not any more. Elizabeth has let you do what you like with her, and in return you make unpleasant cracks. Well, I think she's the nicest girl I've ever known, and I'd sooner trust her than you, any day!" And he stamped away without troubling to reflect that a strong-minded person like Amanda would hardly allow the incident to pass without reprisals.

For Elizabeth, one result of the picnic was an invitation to spend a few hours on one of the government copra plantations. So on Wednesday she had mid-morning tea at the manager's dwelling in a clearing, and drove with him in a jeep to a place where agile boys were climbing the sixty-foot palms on plaited rope supports. The coco-nuts dropped heavily and regularly, and when the pickers had moved on other boys loaded deep bamboo trolleys with the nuts and wheeled them away to the dumping ground.

The size of the mountain of nuts hardly altered. Men and women, all of them in sarongs, squatted at its edge and systematically stripped off the fibre and tossed the nuts to a second, smaller heap, where the workers hacked them in two and set them on trays for drying. Elizabeth saw the coco-nut meat shrivelling in the hot southern sun with a fire of shells underneath. In two or three days it became hard copra, ready for shipment.

From the fresh coco-nuts a palm oil for immediate use on the islands was extracted. The fibre was made into mats,

clothing, and woven for furniture; the discarded leaves thatched the houses, and the older palms were felled and seasoned for timber. On an island such as Bolani, Elizabeth realized, one had every necessity.

It was about half-past three when she arrived back at the Residency and the whole building was very quiet. She stood in the hall above the great bowl of shrub flowers and thought how cooling they were, with their pale pink and dead white waxen petals against the dark, thick, shiny leaves. A single white petal had fallen on the beaten silver salver, and it lay on the edge of an envelope which was addressed to Miss Penlan.

Mostly, she and Amanda together opened fetters for the Governor's daughter, but this, she saw with a sudden sense of uplift, was in a hand which was daily becoming more familiar; the strokes were bold and individual, the words well formed. Swiftly, she slipped her fingers under the flap and took out the sheet of Residency note-paper.

"I called in to make sure you were having a rest before tonight's party," wrote Julian, "and find you're away among the coco-nuts. Glad you're interested in the plantations, but do please take to your bed as soon as you come in and stay here for at least a couple **of hours. You'll be expected to dance till two. So-long.**"

Nothing intimate about it, except that the very fact of Julian's penning her a note at all was an intimacy. She folded it tightly into her hand and went upstairs to obey him.

A servant brought tea. "It is five o'clock. No, mem, there has been no caller."

Everyone who could, she supposed, was resting. The older women said that in preparation for a big night they always lay down from two till six, then took such a while over bathing and dressing that they were ready only just in time to leave at seven-fifteen. Couldn't hurry, of course, because it was fatal to start perspiring at that hour.

Elizabeth had decided to wear white. It was a frock of classic cut in stiff silk, and she had a string of aquamarines, her mother's, which somehow drew attention to the

delicious youthful bloom on her skin, and to the delicate line of her neck.

Soon after seven she pulled a chiffon stole about her shoulders, gave a final pat to the soft, light hair and went out to the corridor. At Amanda's door she hesitated, then tapped.

"Come in," said Amanda, as though expecting a servant. Her brilliant dark gaze took in the fair picture of Elizabeth, and she turned back to her mirror to clip on her earrings. She added, "I shan't be a moment."

"I . . . say!"

And well might Elizabeth exclaim, for Amanda simply glittered. She looked glorious, though, in the flowering gold and black frock which breathed Paris, and the costly diamonds she had so often bemoaned being unable to flaunt. Elizabeth had several times told her to go ahead and wear them, and now, apparently, Amanda was no longer able to resist the temptation. The result was breathtaking.

Amanda shrugged and said off-handedly, "It's supposed to be a big occasion, isn't it? Let's go."

In the car Elizabeth asked her if she had rested. Amanda, it transpired, had passed the morning on and around the beach, had lunched with the Kelveys and slept on the divan in their lounge till four-thirty, after which they had had a round of refreshments and played bridge. Mrs. Kelvey and bridge were not usually Amanda's cup of tea, but Elizabeth forbore to comment.

In any case, at the moment she was savoring the quiet delight of Julian's short avenue of casuarinas, and his big square house all lit up, with doors and windows wide.

And there he was, in pillared entrance, tall and heart-breakingly handsome in a white dinner suit, his head inclined to them in greeting as his servant correctly helped them from the car.

"Two beautiful ladies," he murmured.

Amanda cast up at him a glance of calculated archness. "Which is the princess and which the maid? Take your choice, Julian."

In reply he crooked both elbows. But his smile rested momentarily on Elizabeth as he said, "You're both beyond

comparison. Only a fool would dare suggest that one excelled the other."

"And you're no fool, Julian my pet!"

"Thank you," he said gravely.

Elizabeth was content. She knew that way of his—it was part of his charm. Julian would never deliberately hurt the feelings of a woman; she would have to hurt him first—and Amanda had never hurt him. Which opened up a field for speculation that she would have to indulge some time, in the future.

About half the guests had already arrived, and the others were queued up in half a dozen cars on the drive. Cocktails were served in the lounge and on the front veranda, and the chatter was noisy and high-spirited. All the women looked lovely; even the plump Mrs. McIver, who usually wore uncomplicated frocks of her own design and make, tonight shone in stylish lilac touched with purple. The men wore the unvarying white dinner jacket, though Peter, in rakish mood, sported a blue cumberbund while several of the other young men wore black ones.

At eight dinner was served at two tables, a huge one in the dining-room mainly for officials who had wives, and another on the lighted veranda which was taken over by the bachelors. To Elizabeth the whole ritual and the superb food and wines were of banquet proportions. They had to be, of course. These people, especially the women, needed to be given this kind of thing to look forward to fairly often; they could best help their husbands by leading a highly-organized social life, because there was so little else they could do.

Amanda, diagonally opposite Elizabeth, was satisfactorily placed between Colonel Kelvey and a young geologist. There was something purposeful in the way s/he sparkled and ignored Peter. He was at the terrace table but he could see her easily enough, if he wished, and conversation was passing between both tables.

The early part of that evening was the gayest and most enjoyable Elizabeth had ever known. She danced and played games, walked in Julian's garden with one man and had a long and one-sided discussion about pineapple

culture with another. It was well after ten before she had a word with Julian, and then she had to choose between dancing with him, which she wanted very badly, and strolling with him into his library, which, she had to admit to herself, she wanted still more.

He closed them in and gave her a cigarette. His nod indicated the room. "What do you think of it?"

"This is a cosy room," she said, taking one of the chairs. "Quite unlike the rest of the house."

"Oh. Don't you care for the house?"

"It's impersonal," she said smiling. "Like you. Did you furnish it?"

"Only this room and a couple of the bedrooms. The prints in the lounge are mine, and one or two other pieces, but government property of this kind is invariably government furnished."

"Don't you ever feel you'd like to have a place of your own—one that's really yours, I mean?"

His shoulders lifted. "It wouldn't be any good. When I leave Bolani it will be for a colonial post elsewhere. Normally, one is left alone in these places for years, but a change sometimes comes when you least expect it. You just have to go, and it would be the devil to have to dig up roots every time."

"You're right, of course. You wouldn't mind having roots, though, would you?"

"I never think on those lines, because it wouldn't do any good if I did. I suppose that's why I've never before thought of getting married."

He spoke so calmly, expelling smoke towards the open window as he did so, that she did not immediately notice the phrasing of the last sentence. By the time it sank in he had leaned forward in his chair and was indicating the big moon which rose theatrically from the trees.

"Unbelievable, isn't it?" he said. "I've seen it hundreds of times but I'm perpetually amazed that in the South Seas the moon can be pale gold and cast a yellow light over everything. Quite soon now the nights will be hotter and the days more humid, and you'll hear thunder grumbling

occasionally in the distance. **We're on the verge of the sticky season.**"

"Shall we have rain? I'm longing for it."

"We'll have rain such as you've never seen **before, but** between storms there are long spells of warm, gusty weather. I'm hoping, though, that we shan't have any early freakish squalls."

The merest shade of anxiety darkened his eyes, and Elizabeth asked quickly, "Because of Sir Henry? Are you worried about him?"

He shook away ash. "He knows the season as well as I do, and the government yacht has an excellent crew of Malays who are at home in these waters. You can be sure he'll leave Villune as soon as it's practicable—certainly before the weather changes."

"Will you be glad to **have him back?**" she asked curiously.

"Yes, I will," he said, "**for your sake.**"

Dismissing the subject he went to the carved **table, set the** bowl of orchids on the floor and opened the table-top to disclose a shallow box. Involuntarily, Elizabeth found herself bending beside him and staring, almost stupefied, at three tremendous pearls, each lying separately **in a** polished shell. One was **a magnificent white thing, and the others, hardly smaller, were a glistening pink and the palest of pale green.**

"Heavens," she whispered excitedly. "I've never **seen anything like them!** Are they real?"

He laughed a little at her breathlessness and tipped all three into the hand she held out. "Feel them. I bought them because they're unusual, **and almost certainly could never be matched. The reason for the pastel pink and green is unromantic—merely a matter of coral limestone in the composition. But they're pretty, aren't they?**"

Gently she replaced each one in its shell. "What will you do with them?"

"I don't know." He smiled at her whimsically. "I dare-say a woman would find that sort of gift an embarrassment; the pearls are so large and round that as a piece of

jewellery they'd get in the way. One of these days I'll send them to a museum."

He closed the table, replaced the flowers and took a look at his watch. "I'm afraid that being the host means that I musn't disappear for longer than one dance. Finished the cigarette?"

"Yes, thank you."

He took it and stubbed **it Out**. "**Shall we** go, then?"

He opened the door, and lightly touched her shoulder as she came level with him. "I don't see why we shouldn't have a dance as well. I'll demand one later."

She looked up at him, grey eyes bright and lips parted. "Please do. They tell me you're quite good."

"I'd rather have your opinion," he said, and she glowed, knowing that the way he danced could make no difference to the sweetness of being held by him.

They were out in the glaring light of the lounge, amid music and laughter. He handed her over to Mr. Coombs and invited Mrs. Coombs to dance. He was indefatigable. By midnight he had danced with all the women and twice with Amanda and Celia.

On the veranda Peter, perhaps because it had been the only chair available when he turned up, was sitting next to Elizabeth and sharing with her a plate of savouries.

Even when many people are taking part in several conversations there inevitably comes a moment's complete quietude. There came one now, and Amanda ended it with a gurgling laugh which was just a shade off-key.

"The witching hour," she said. "You should have provided us with a ghostly surprise, Julian."

He turned about so that he could see her fully. "What's the matter—feeling flat?"

"Not a bit. I could go on **till** morning and finish up at seven with a bathe in the lagoon. This is the best party since we've been here."

"Every party," said Julian tolerantly, "is the best while it lasts. Don't you ever get tired?"

"Of course I do. Quite often I sleep till lunch time. I've even had lunch in bed once or twice."

"Have you really!" ejaculated Mrs. McIver. "How can you bear to eat meals in bed while the sun shines? It's so stuffy."

"I certainly couldn't!" stated Mrs. Sands.

Amanda apparently enjoyed the minor shock she had administered. "I just don't wake up till about noon," she answered blithely, "and luckily I can always fall asleep in the daytime when I'm bored—can't I, Peter?"

"How should I know?" he returned, quite surlily. "You didn't fall asleep when you were with me; you only pretended to."

Amanda joined in the the laughter against herself, but Elizabeth knew by the hard sparkle in the dark eyes that Peter had had another mark chalked up against him. She smiled across at Amanda, was tempted to shake a disapproving head, but the other girl twisted aside to address Julian again.

"All right. If you won't provide a surprise, I will. You think I'm Elizabeth Mayne, don't you, Julian?"

Elizabeth's heart took a precipitate plunge; she seemed shot through with electricity, and then her face and neck were burning unbearably.

"I think you're a wee bit tight," Julian answered lazily.

"Oh, no, I'm not." Amanda gave a merry laugh. "I knew you wouldn't believe me because Elizabeth is such a perfect Governor's daughter—but she's certainly Elizabeth." A very brief pause. "Peter Garnering will tell you that I'm Amanda Penlan."

For some time after that Elizabeth didn't hear anything very clearly. She seemed to be in the centre of a mild pandemonium. Dr. McIver pumped her hand and roared that she'd had him fooled. Mr. Sands pompously exclaimed, "Dear me! What a thing it is to have two spirited young ladies in our midst." And one of the younger men grinned an open confession that he would never dare to say to Elizabeth some of the things he had said to Amanda—even now he knew.

At last Julian's cool, expressionless voice made itself heard. "Why the deception? What did you hope to get out of it?"

It would be the end, thought Elizabeth desperately, if Amanda blurted out the truth. But mercifully, the effect she had created was satisfactory.

She chuddled. "Papa wasn't here and it seemed such a heaven-sent opportunity for some fun." Innocently she tacked on, "Nobody minds, do they? We haven't hurt anybody, have we?"

She got the response she wanted: a chorus of approval for anything which might snap the monotony which is inevitably the white man's lot in the tropics.

Peter had stayed close to Elizabeth. As soon as the music started up again he took her arm and marched her down into the garden. His rugged young face was set as he paced beside her, his hands jammed into his pockets.

"I shall be for it tomorrow," he said. "Ignominiously hauled on the carpet to give an explanation. Elizabeth, you did promise to speak to Julian Stanville about it. Will you see him first—before he sees me?"

From a haze of uncertainty and pain she answered, "I'll have to feel my way with him. I'm hoping he isn't taking it too seriously."

"You heard his voice. It was like highly polished steel, and I'm pretty certain it was directed at me. He can't say much to you and Amanda, but he can certainly take it out on me. Why," he demanded in exasperation, "did she have to bring it out in front of everyone, without warning us? Her sense of drama, I suppose!"

"It's done," said Elizabeth bleakly. "Don't be annoyed with her. She has more power to put everything right for you than I have."

"I'd sooner resign than ask her," he growled. "Promise me you'll have a word with him, Elizabeth."

"Not tonight," she said. "I'll try tomorrow."

He walked for a minute in silence, then stated morosely, "If your friendship with Amanda survives this, you're a miracle."

But Elizabeth wasn't thinking about Amanda. She was thinking that if Julian did ask her to dance with him she must be prepared to make light of the part she had played. She would make him realize at once that she had kept her

side of the game as slender as possible. The whole idea might irritate him; he had no patience with childishness. But he would not blame her for Amanda's whims, only perhaps be vexed that she had lent herself to this particular scheme.

The last hour or two of the party she found nightmarish. Naturally, Amanda's bombshell provided the chief topic of enjoyment; indeed it had so thoroughly roused everyone that the dancing and games took on a new zest. But Julian did not dance any more. Elizabeth saw him in deep converse with his assistant and others, and noticed, with despair, that he kept to the veranda with them. Only once did he meet her eyes, unsmilingly, across the room; and she trembled.

The night had to end. Julian stood in the wide entrance to his house and bade his guests farewell individually. Elizabeth was one of the line which passed him, and she received a nod and a quiet, "Good night," just as Mrs. Sands had done a second before.

A servant opened the car doors and closed them. The cars moved away at intervals of a minute or so.

Elizabeth and Amanda, alone in the Residency car, kept each to her corner and surveyed the passing trees. Amanda might have been reflecting that it wasn't such immense fun after all to hurt the only close friend she had ever had. She looked like a dejected French doll.

Elizabeth, though, kept visualizing two faces, both Julian's. One appeared to be whimsically regarding her against a background of rich teak panelling while she eagerly examined his pearls; the other was as cold as stone, the blue eyes remote as the stars as he wished her good night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELIZABETH'S first sensation upon awakening the following morning was one of resignation and relief. She was herself again. In the Residency itself it would make little difference, for the servants addressed both young women as "Mem," and it was unlikely that they bothered very much which was which. Among friends, she was almost bound to be called "Amanda" every now and then, but the joke would soon lose its savour.

Fortunately she had never envied Amanda. In fact, she had never been sorry she had had to earn a living and keep a careful watch on her purse. Aunt Elsa had often said it was a pity to have a friend as rich and uncaring as Amanda, that it might make her too aware of the deficiencies in her own life, but Elizabeth hadn't minded. She had had so many compensations, not the least of them dear Aunt Elsa herself. How would she and Uncle David react were they to hear of the most recent piece of folly!

She had some tea with lemon, took a bath and got into a thin flowered frock. Resolutely, she was keeping her mind dear of Julian. He would have to be faced some time before lunch, and she had a niggling presentiment that the interview would be anything but pleasant. She ought to see Amanda first, though.

She was about to open the bedroom door when the handle turned and was pushed. Amanda stood there, tousled, wrapped in green silk which was girdled in cerise. The red mouth pouted slightly and her glance flickered. There was a flush high across her cheekbones; she might have been pushing her face into the pillow, or weeping a little.

"I'm a horror," she said, "and to you, of all people. It didn't make me a bit happy."

Elizabeth stepped back so that the other could come right in. "Don't take it too much to heart. I'd rather have known that you planned to spill the beans, but I'm quite

glad you did. You had it in mind before we left here last night, didn't you?"

Amanda nodded miserably. "I wish I'd told you, but I didn't because you'd have told Peter, and I didn't want that."

"He had a right to know," Elizabeth pointed out reasonably.

Amanda crumpled down into a chair. "The whole thing was beastly, but you don't hate me for it, do you?"

"Don't be absurd. I've said I'm glad."

"I know, but you sound a bit numb. Are you upset because Peter's in a jam?"

"I'm not upset but I do feel sorry. He hasn't merited that kind of treatment. It wasn't fair to get back at him, that way."

Amanda looked up, obliquely. "As fair as any other way. Are you in love with Peter?"

"Of course not!"

"He's fond of you."

"He isn't," impatiently. "He came to Bolani because he was anxious to work for your father, and also with the hope of getting in touch with you. If I seem to have had more to do with him, it's because you wouldn't have him near you. You may not think it, but Peter's sensitive."

"Sensitive!" she echoed disdainfully. "He's about as sensitive as that stool. No sensitive man would ever talk to a woman as he's talked to me."

Elizabeth persevered. "You don't understand him. You don't even try, though there's nothing complicated about him. He won't jolly you along as Captain Cranwood and the others do because that isn't his nature. He's keen on his job, and when he met you while he was on leave in England he began to fall in love with you . . . and not in the way these others pretend to; it was serious. If you're not attracted to him it can't be helped, but at least you should avoid being unkind to him. A woman owes that to anyone who cares for her."

Amanda sighed. "You're awfully hard to live up to, darling. I don't think I shall ever be able to be kind to

Peter; I'm not noble enough. As soon as I felt myself relenting, I'd remember that he called me disloyal and without charity."

"Did Peter say that?"

"And more. You know, this year is going to be horrid, after all. If that pugnacious creature comes to live at the Residency I shall go back to England. I couldn't stand being perpetually under the same roof with him."

Elizabeth took her time before asking, "Aren't you rather over-rating his importance? After all, he'll have his own apartments, and his presence here will be strictly as personal officer to your father. You need hardly ever see him. There's the risk, of course," she ended carefully, "that after this episode Julian will consider him too frivolous for such a responsible position and recommend that the Governor appoint someone else."

Ungraciously, Amanda said, "I suppose it's wrong that he should suffer for agreeing to keep our secret. I'll put it right with Papa. I'd better see Julian, too."

Elizabeth straightened one of the jars on the dressing-table. "I promised Peter that I'd see Julian for him today," she said casually. "He seems to be more scared of the C.C. than of your father."

"Will you do it?" Amanda queried gratefully. "You see, I got the impression last night that Julian guessed what was at the back of our little plot, and that he despised us for it. On the other hand, we may have been right about him; he was beginning to lean your way, and he may have had a shock. Anyway, I don't fancy a session with him today. I've had enough!"

Which was really rather comic. So far, Amanda had not done much but make a spot of bother and evade the results of it, but one had to admit that she did look glum this morning. Her resilience was such that she would recover quickly, but like most gay people she wilted under disapproval; and possibly she couldn't help feeling that Elizabeth had been more deeply wounded by her thoughtlessness than was apparent on the surface. As far as she was able, Amanda probably hated herself.

She stood up. "I'm going to be very good and very quiet today. I'll have lunch with Mrs. Kelvey, I'll wheel her out in the chair and play cards with her."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Again?"

"She's nice," said Amanda defiantly, "and she has so much pluck that she makes me feel superfluous. It's chastening, but maybe I can do with it once in a while."

They arrived at the door together, and Elizabeth slipped an arm through Amanda's. "Do you know," she said with a musing smile, "I've half an idea that Peter is a bit of a fool. There's a gate open but he will persist in butting his head against the brick wall."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about," returned Amanda somewhat forcefully, "but I agree he's a fool. He's also a pig-headed mule!" She gave Elizabeth a quick kiss on the cheek. "You couldn't possibly marry a mix-up like that, sweetie. Send him packing!"

Elizabeth laughed and went downstairs; nothing connected with Amanda could ever be really grave. Breakfast was set on the terrace but she felt she couldn't eat. She was tingling with a kind of nervous excitement. She longed to see Julian, to hear him say that nothing was changed, yet an odd reluctance to face him surged in her.

She drank some coffee, saw it was not yet nine o'clock, and drank some more. They started work at the government offices at eight-thirty, and she thought nine-thirty a good time to send in a message requesting an interview. All very businesslike ... just in case.

Another glance at her watch. Ten past nine and she had yet to order the car. It occurred to her suddenly that she no longer had the right to order a car whenever she wanted one; after this morning she would have to be more careful altogether about giving orders.

Ten minutes later the Residency car was winding down the road towards Mueng. Once the thickly-treed residential area lay behind them there was a clear view all the way of the city, glaring white in the sunshine against a band of blue sea. The headland stood out like a giant green animal, crouched and on guard.

At the government building, a splendid white edifice in a border of green velvet lawn with half a dozen ornamental palms spaced regularly at each side of the imposing entrance, the chauffeur pulled in. Elizabeth suppressed a qualm. She had never yet entered the offices and her business there today was not strictly official. Julian might object, though she didn't think he would. He had told her to call upon him at any time, wherever he might be.

A voice whispered, "But that was when he thought you were Amanda," and she refused to listen to it. She walked up the steps and into the delicious chill of the vestibule which was lined with palmettoes in polished tubs. The uniformed Malay boy in charge of the lift stepped forward with military precision.

"The offices of the Chief Commissioner, please," she said, and knew a fatalistic calm as the lift door slid softly into place and she was drawn upwards to the first floor.

A messenger preceded her along a corridor and opened the door into a stern-looking waiting-room. The chairs were in dark green leather which matched the carpet, and on one wall hung a large portrait of Sir Henry Penlan in full dress.

Elizabeth had decided long ago that Amanda must have favored her mother. In looks she had nothing in common with the aquiline-featured, soldierly man who was her father. It was easy to understand why everyone here had been so readily hoodwinked into believing that Elizabeth was Sir Henry's daughter.

An inner door opened and Elizabeth tensed. But it was only the Assistant Commissioner. He came in gravely, closing the door behind him.

"Good morning, Miss . . . Miss Mayne." A perfunctory smile as he remembered. "I understand you wish to see Mr. Stanville?"

"If he's not too busy, please."

"It isn't really personal." A lie, because there was nothing she could discuss with Julian which did not affect her inward being. "But it isn't business, either. I know it's irregular to come to the offices. . . ."

"Not at all," he hastened to assure her. "Normally, the Chief would see you straight away, but the fact is," he paused and gave her a bewildered smile, "he isn't here."

"You mean he's late this morning?"

"It's not a hangover from the party, if that's what you're thinking. He's one of those rare creatures to whom hangovers don't happen. No," again that puzzled and unmirthful smile. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Stanville has left Bolani, and no one knows why."

Elizabeth couldn't take it in. Julian had left the island, walked out on his job without a word of explanation. Julian! It was fantastic, incredible.

"When did he go?" she managed.

"Around dawn, I think. His servants only know that he had a bag packed and ordered the launch, and his secretary knows nothing at all—he left with the rest of us when the party was over. Mr. Stanville must have called in here, because I found a letter from him in the safe, lying on top of a despatch box which I always go to first thing every morning."

"What did the letter say?"

His regard would have been quizzical had it not been anxious. "He merely wrote that he had to go away for a while, and gave instructions as to how to deal with any important matters which may arise during the next week or ten days. I have to postpone the meeting of the Legislative Assembly till Sir Henry's return. I'm afraid I can tell you no more than that."

"Haven't you any idea at all of where he's gone?" she demanded desperately. "Didn't he mention anything to you at the party last night?"

His shoulders lifted helplessly. "Not a thing. I thought he seemed a bit stiff when we said good night, but it was very late and he'd put in a long day's work yesterday, as he does every day while the Governor's away. It so happens," he took an interest in the half-view visible through the window, "that I was just trying to decide whether to get in touch with you, when you came. You and he have been, well . . . friendly, and I wondered if you might have gathered something that we haven't."

"No," she answered swiftly. Her lips felt frozen as she added, "I can't believe he'd just . . . go like that. Has he ever done it before?"

The Assistant Commissioner shook his head. "I'm quite *as* fogged as you are, but I'm sure he'll be sending us a message some time today. When he does, I'll let you know."

There was nothing left for Elizabeth to do but thank him and make a half-smiling exit.

Somehow, Elizabeth walked with her usual grace to the car but the ground she trod felt as if were hinged. Julian was gone from Bolani. Her brain kept repeating the sentence yet she could not quite absorb its import. It was beyond belief. Bolani without Julian was bleak as a desert in a night wind; Julian was Bolani.

The fears which had kept her wide-eyed almost till day-break crowded back. Perhaps he had known he must soon make a visit to one of the other islands, and had chosen today because . . . because he had no intention of pursuing his friendship with the girl he had thought the Governor's daughter.

That was it! He was angry, much more angry than he had shown himself when Amanda had merrily exploded her little bomb. He had seen right through to the purpose behind the deception, and doubtless congratulated himself with cold cynicism on a narrow escape.

It was . . . horrible! More so, because there appeared to be no alternative to the way she was thinking. He would actually have married her, without loving her; which meant that had she and Amanda not exchanged identities for a while, he would have married Amanda, without loving *her*. It was too humiliating for words.

By the time she entered the lounge of the Residency, she was pale and trembling. Amanda was there in a crisp white frock, a book open on her lap.

"Hallo," she said. "How did you get on?" Then, with some concern, "Was he a brute?"

Elizabeth shrugged a negative and turned to place her hat on a chair while she performed the task known as

pulling oneself together. In light, strengthless tones she told Amanda the news.

"Great stars!" Amanda stared. "That proves it, doesn't it? Yet, do you know, I don't like having to believe it. In spite of myself I've always thought well of Julian, and whatever else he is, he's not a coward."

"On the other hand," said Elizabeth, "he's not likely to lay himself open to unpleasantness. He's too shrewd, too much master of himself."

"And, of course, his going away will create an upheaval. As soon as the white population learn that he's gone, our little diversion will be forgotten, and his absence will be the nine-day's wonder. I always knew our Julian was clever—and how fast that man can act!" she exclaimed admiringly. Her dark eyes brightened with mischief. "I'll bet he's gone to one of the smaller islands for several days of quiet fishing."

"He wouldn't do that. He's in charge here."

"So he is, and he's disgustingly upright. I daresay you're right, then. He's gone somewhere on business, and when he comes back he'll pretend it was urgent. Only you and I will know differently, darling." She thought a moment. "So you weren't able to do anything about Peter?"

"There was nothing I could do."

"Oh, well, there haven't been any serious consequences, have there? By the time he gets back Julian may have forgotten that Peter was in league with us; or it may, anyway, have ceased to be important. I'm half inclined," she finished, narrowing her laughing eyes up at Elizabeth, "to be very glad we deceived the C.C. I'm just the sort of nitwit who'd have been flattered into marrying him and never discovered that he wasn't passionately in love with me. The man's dangerous!"

How dangerous, Elizabeth began to learn during the next few days.

No message came through from Julian that day, or on the following two or three days. The ladies gathered for mid-morning or afternoon tea, and because she had to know the latest trend, Elizabeth joined them. After the first day or so it became apparent that Julian's absence was accepted

as something normal and unavoidable. Everyone knew his code and it was taken for granted that he had had to visit one of the islands on a matter of administration. The fact that he had gone off in the launch with only his personal servant meant that *he* could not have travelled far. It was odd not to receive word from him, but the inter-island communications were not foolproof. There was nothing to worry about.

But Elizabeth was rent by an emotion far more shattering than mere worry. It couldn't have been a coincidence, his having to go away only a few hours after the party at which he had learned her true identity. He had gone deliberately for several reasons which had one root cause: he had shown leanings towards the wrong woman. Elizabeth had to realize that this was the end.

Julian would come back preoccupied with his work, and probably be too tearingly busy catching up at the office to bother much with the social side of life. Next time they met he would be cool and smiling, as he was with the other women, and she would know that a woman's heart can awaken to a man without rousing the smallest response.

What it was that persuaded Elizabeth to go down and see Celia Cartney, she could not have said. She had endured five days of inaction, five days of gossip, five days of slightly reformed Amanda, and she was beginning to feel that if she didn't see someone different she would go mad. Oddly enough, Celia's was the first name which came into her mind, and she did not pause to question the wisdom of a visit to the bamboo house among the coconut palms.

Because there was no other way of getting to the Cartney plantation she used the Residency car. If possible, the road leading to the house was in an even worse condition than before, and the dwelling itself sagged like a reprobate in the last stages of decay. The structure was literally falling apart, and where the canes had split the termites were in evidence, busily eating away whatever strength remained in the place.

Elizabeth knocked on the frame of the mosquito-wire door. As on her first visit she saw the outline of Celia

before the door was pushed open, and had to steel herself for the encounter.

Celia smiled radiantly. Today her eyes were a clear, bright topaz, and the delicate pink of exertion bloomed in her cheeks. "Elizabeth! How *nice* of you to call. I'm in the dickens of a mess but do come in."

Her disarray was pretty. She wore yellow linen slacks and a white shirt, and the cap of mahogany hair was tied back into a little bush. A smudge across her nose made her youthful, but her mouth could not quite rid itself of the hard curve.

Elizabeth looked round the little living-room which appeared to be more bare than ever. "Spring cleaning?" she asked.

"Not I! This was how the place looked when I arrived—I've packed my photographs away." Her eyes narrowed, and immediately she was older and less attractive. "How does it feel to be yourself after masquerading as Amanda? You must be awfully strong-willed."

"Why do you say that?"

"It would take a woman with backbone to make Amanda agree to changing identities. Not that I blame you in the least." Her lip curled. "We people who haven't much money usually get the thin end, and no one can blame us if we go all out for something better."

Elizabeth did not contradict her. It was hateful to have it thought she had initiated the foolish notion which had been Amanda's, but she could not discuss it with Celia. Already she was beginning to regret the impulse which had brought her to the plantation.

Conventionally, Elizabeth asked, "Has your brother thought any more about building a new house?"

"Tim only thinks of anything connected with work when he has to. With the warmer weather the billions of ants seem to have tripled their numbers, and the Health official told us the other day that this shanty will be gone in the first hurricane. So far it has been sheltered from the worst winds, but even that won't save it now that it's disintegrating. Tim told him he'd just as soon sleep under canvas, anyway."

"What about you?" she asked. "Surely it's dangerous to stay on here now that the stormy season is beginning?"

"Oh, yes." Celia's voice was strange, languid yet with an edge of excitement to it. "Julian's forbidden me to stay, you know. That's why I look like nothing on earth this morning. I'm filling my trunk."

"Julian's forbidden you?" Elizabeth echoed slowly. "When was that?"

"The night of his party. Quite a lot happened that night, didn't it?" She smoked negligently and flicked ash wide of the ashtray so that it splattered the scarred table. The thick brown lashes fluttered once. "He was very sweet to me, and made me promise to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. You see, a complete change has come into my life."

"Did you . . . know he was going away?"

"He didn't tell me, of course, but when I heard about it next day things added up. I can't tell you any more than that."

Yet Elizabeth had the conviction that she could, had she wished. The gleaming smile with which the girl had greeted her had been eloquent. The light eyes might now appear limpid and clinging, but there was no doubt that a few minutes ago they had been brilliant with a kind of triumph. Julian had given her something to hope for; something she wanted rather badly. "A complete change has come into my life."

Elizabeth shivered inside. Celia was really very pretty, and she was not pretty and dull; she had several facets to her personality. There was the adhesive, trusting little girl who looked so confidently at Julian when he danced with her, the dashing young woman with slim brown legs and a strong racquet-wrist, the sophisticated twenty-five-year-old, who was clever enough not to take the initiative where men were concerned. And perhaps there were other facets that a man became aware of; a softening into passion, for instance.

Not that she thought Julian ever made love to Celia. He was too circumspect for that. But he must know what went on within the woman. He knew his own appeal, and

had doubtless spent years acquiring the aloofness and *steely* control which were indispensable to a man placed as he was. The fact was, he could be in love with Celia without a soul realizing it.

She enquired quickly. "Will you move to the hotel?"

The narrow shoulders lifted. "I'll do whatever Julian directs. He's been such a dear that I couldn't refuse him anything."

Elizabeth drew in her lip and bit on it. Queer that the casual friendly term could hurt like a knife-stab.

Stiffly she stood up, and automatically she said, "Well, I'll leave you to go ahead with your packing. Do let me know if I can help you in any way."

"Spoken in the manner of the Governor's daughter!" Celia laughed on a light, jarring note. "But don't think I mind. To be quite honest, I've never been so happy since I discovered you were merely Elizabeth Mayne. I'm sure Julian would never marry the real Amanda—she's definitely not his type — but I did have a grim feeling that he might find you to his taste. However, that's over. You and I are level now. It doesn't annoy you — my being frank like this ?"

"I've no objection at all," Elizabeth returned evenly, "but it's quite unnecessary. Give my regards to your brother, won't you? Good-bye, Celia."

Though it was five days since she had driven up from the government offices after hearing about Julian's sudden departure, it seemed to Elizabeth that she was continually sitting in the back of the Residency car bearing a load of grief homeward.

Fortunately, Amanda was out this morning. Elizabeth went to the small lounge and collapsed into one of the damask chairs. And there, in the cool richness of Sir Henry's home, she realized with shattering clarity just what had happened.

Julian loved Celia. That night, after his guests had gone, he had done some hard thinking. Obviously he was no longer able to offer marriage to the Governor's daughter, and that, probably to his innermost relief, left him free. With **Celia as his wife the road would be harder going,**

but he would reach the apex of his ambition even if it took him longer; nothing would halt that.

Perhaps he had always been doubtful of the wisdom of pursuing Amanda Penlan. Perhaps (her mouth compressed with bitterness) Celia had not been far wrong in her surmise that she, Elizabeth, had attracted him a little; not enough, though, to draw him from Celia by the mere strength of her charm; she would have had to be the daughter of Sir Henry to accomplish that. He was first a careerist; the man in love came second.

But simultaneously with hate came the knowledge that even under his tuition Celia would not make the kind of wife he needed; did he see that as dearly as an onlooker saw it? Celia might be magnetically feminine and sufficiently sophisticated to carry out the duties connected with his position, but she lacked the cardinal virtue of sincerity.

Celia wasn't in love with Julian; she was in love with the picture of herself as his wife. She hadn't it in her to be deeply in love with anyone. Fundamentally, she was aimless, but circumstances had forced her into the role of huntress. In England she had got by on the small income from her divorced father, hoping, possibly, to marry money. She had reached the age of twenty-five and realized that from now on her prettiness might diminish. She would have known that a clinging, childish appeal becomes in time ridiculous and made plans accordingly. Tim must have written her that there were plenty of bachelors in Bolani, and she had attached herself naturally to Julian as does a cat to its bowl of cream. Strange how difficult it was to dissociate Celia from her similarity to a kitten.

Elizabeth jumped up. She was being downright horrid. There was nothing to prove she was right about the woman and, in any case, Julian was too shrewd a judge of human nature to be taken in. He could see — none better — whether Celia had what he wanted in a wife. His feelings about the woman weren't muddled, as Elizabeth's were. The most he had to offer, anyway, were his position and a tepid devotion. All the considerable force and drive and passion of his being were concentrated in his job.

There came a morning when Elizabeth and Amanda were seated in the shade of the terrace, hardly daring to breathe because the slightest movement bathed one in sweat. The thermometer was down in the eighties, but the humidity was tangible. It darkened the terrace wall and made dangerous the stone floor. In the shade it dripped from the leaves, and where the trees were thick a hot mist had formed about their trunks. Blossoms were weighted with it, their scents masked, and insects were forced to rest.

Elizabeth had been trying to sew and found it impossible. Amanda wasn't trying to do anything. She lay back in her chair with her arms behind her head and contemplated the deserted length of the drive. It was she who first saw Peter.

"What will that idiot do next!" she said crossly. "He's just driven up in a pony-taxi. I thought only the Malays used them.

"He hasn't a car, remember."

Peter hadn't only come up from Mueng in one of the two-wheeled atrocities pulled by a stuffy pony, but he was now charging along the drive like a bull-terrier; not quite on all fours, but doubled up to create the least resistance to his speed. When he pulled up on the terrace he was purple and steaming.

"Gosh, I'm glad you're both here," he burst out. "What do you think? They've had a message from the yacht."

"The yacht?" Elizabeth was on her feet, her face white. "You mean the launch."

"I mean the yacht — the Governor's yacht. Your father's home, Amanda — or he will be in about half an hour.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. The message came through to the government offices while I was there."

Amanda's cheeks were scarlet, her eyes danced. "At last I shall see the old darling! Let's all go down to meet him."

"Will you wait for me?" he pleaded. "I'm his new aide and I'd better look like one. Can't present myself in messy shorts."

"You'll have to. It'll take us a quarter of an hour to get to the harbor."

"But *he* was well out —only just in sight, using . They thought it would be at least half an hour before the yacht put in. I made that pony gallop like fits, and if the car puts on speed we can be down there in seven or eight minutes. That'll give me ten minutes to change, but I'll guarantee to do it in five. Be a sport, Amanda."

"All right," she said grudgingly. "You'd better take the car now and come back in it. If you're not here in ten minutes we'll order another and go ahead. I wouldn't miss meeting Papa at the quay for anything."

"I did come and tell you," he reminded her.

Amanda flashed him a glance of exasperation. "You couldn't have done less. For heaven's sake go and prink, if you must."

As she turned away his smile had gone. "You're the most ungracious wench I've ever come across," he muttered, and strode off across the lawn.

Amanda's mouth went tight. To Elizabeth she said furiously, "Did you ever in your life come across such an obstinate beast!"

Elizabeth was too rigid *and* cold inside, too shot away by sudden hope and swift disappointment, to care what she said. "Peter's right. You *are* ungracious and you treat him abominably. You can't blame him for being fed up with you. I'm going to get my hat."

She was thankful to get away from Amanda if only for a minute or two. She had to recollect her scattered emotions and slip into a frame of mind in which she could take part in and enjoy Sir Henry's arrival. At least with the return of the Governor, life would stand a chance of reverting to normal.

CHAPTER NINE

AN orderly crowd packed the quay. Nearest to the edge a small military guard was lined up. Next came the Assistant Commissioner and the two Malay members of the council in their best robes. The rotund old raja, garbed in a white suit and a red plus cape and seated under an enormous ceremonial red-and-gold tasselled umbrella, was surrounded by his elders, and it was he who ordered that the islanders be kept back behind a cordon. Very conscious of the dignity of his position, was the raja; his people adored him.

The big motor yacht was a splendid sight as she neared the quay. Very white, the decks covered with an awning against the sun, her lines sleek and beautiful.

Amanda leaned forward in the car. "He's not on deck," she said anxiously. "There's only a few members of the crew."

Peter, who had managed to make himself handsome in a white suit and navy tie, and somehow got the car back to the Residency in time to pick up the two girls, answered off-handedly, "A Governor doesn't stand on deck waving himself into dock. He won't show up until the ship is fast and the gangway down."

On the point of bluntly retorting, Amanda checked herself. She made do with a vexed glance at the back of his head — he was beside the chauffeur — and turned her attention once more to the yacht. The vessel had slowed right down and was edging gently towards the capstans. Ropes were thrown and made fast, the gangway slid into position and the seamen on deck stood at attention.

The Governor appeared from a forward cabin, tall, thin, and soldierly in formal tropical dress. He took the salute and came smartly down to the quay. Peter got out of the car, closely followed by the girls, and the three watched the Governor's progress towards them, Amanda so impatient that her fingernails *dug* into Elizabeth's wrist.

Sir Henry bowed to the councillors, paused for a word with the raja and let his aloof, kindly smile wander over the cheering islanders. Then he saw Amanda and the quality of his smile changed. He took the pace or two which divided them and kissed her, holding her chin affectionately between forefinger and thumb.

"Hallo, my dear. I heard you were still blooming as brightly as ever. And how are you, Elizabeth? It's so good to see you here with Amanda."

A cool, detached voice said, "This is your aide-de-camp, Sir Henry. Peter Gilmering."

Elizabeth's world rocked. Almost, she put out a hand to steady herself. Had she done so her elbow would have caught Julian. He was right behind her.

"Oh, yes," said Sir Henry. He took in Peter's rather heightened color, his squared shoulders, and one felt that he instantly knew all about him. "You must come with *us* to the Residency, Gilmering."

The car door was opened. Sir Henry and Amanda got in, and Peter, because it seemed to be expected of him, resumed the front seat. The car purred slowly away, and Elizabeth, in spite of the stickiness of the atmosphere, felt as if she were being left out in a cold blast.

Then Julian's big grey affair moved forward, and she wondered, dazedly, why she had not seen it before; it must have been standing immediately behind the Residency car, and a single glance over her shoulder would have prepared her for this.

Without a word Julian put her into the back and went round to get in beside her. The driver was given the word to move, and the next minute they were following the official car along the waterfront and through streets where islanders had gathered outside bazaars and blank-fronted dwellings.

They had entered the dark avenue of trees above the city before Julian spoke. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly and with cold mockery. "Don't you care for being relegated to the less important car?"

If possible, she drew further into her corner and stared even more rigidly ahead. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do." His tones were still low, even though it was very unlikely his chauffeur could catch their meaning. "You're only Elizabeth now, you know."

This was unbelievable — Julian baiting her as if only five minutes had elapsed since Amanda's revelation, and as if there were nothing strange about his having been absent from the island for so long. He sounded devilish and cruel, but she just hadn't the courage to look at him.

"I've been only Elizabeth all the time," she said. "It was ... merely a joke."

"In your type of humor." A pause; then, satirically, "That was a great welcome you gave me; the averted head and an icy shoulder."

"What did you expect — a band playing 'See the Conquering Hero comes'?"

"Never mind," he said on a drawn-out breath. "Perhaps I'm tired." And he lapsed into silence.

The accumulated wretchedness of the past days, the unexpectedness of his arrival on the yacht and now this cold dislike from him were more than she could bear. With a tremendous effort of will she sat very still, looking at the houses and gardens on the avenue without seeing them. The worst of it was, there were so many things she ached to say, so much she longed to ask — that she had no right to ask.

They were swerving into the drive before he remarked formally, "If you've been worrying about Gilmering's part in your little bit of fun, you needn't any longer. It has been on your mind, hasn't it?"

Now she turned and looked at him, and was unprepared for the harsh arrogance in the steel-blue eyes. Her sinews contracted and her chin went up. "Yes, it has," she returned flatly. "He was in it against his will, and it seemed very unfair that he should suffer."

"Did you," he enquired mercilessly, "promise him that you would ask me not to tell Sir Henry?"

"Yes," she said in bewilderment astonishment. "How did you know?"

"I didn't — I only guessed. As a matter of fact, I did what I thought best. I told Sir Henry about the whole business on the yacht, and made light of it. He took it as a madcap prank of Amanda's, so I doubt very much if you'll hear any more about it."

"Thank you," she whispered, "very much."

"I did it for Sir Henry," he said abruptly. "He's had a very wearing time, and it wouldn't have made him feel any better to come home to a load of trouble. Fortunately he was able to get in plenty of sleep on the yacht, but he'll have to take it easy for a couple of weeks."

The car stopped at the foot of the steps, and Elizabeth joined the others at the entrance to the Residency.

Amanda was saying, "This is so exciting — such a marvellous surprise. Wouldn't it be lovely to have a party tonight — a real party with the Governor in residence! We could send a servant round with invitations. . . ."

Julian broke in: "Your father needs a rest, Amanda. Do without your party, and be glad he's here with you."

She gave him a large stare and pouted. "You do sound irritable. I only wanted to give Papa a welcome home."

"It can wait, my dear," said the Governor. "Come in for a drink, Julian, and stay to lunch."

"I think not, Sir Henry, if you don't mind. I'll go home and change and get along to the office. The work must be piling up down there."

"Let it, for once." A glance passed between the two; it was full of understanding and the deep sort of liking that does exist, if only rarely, between some men. "Don't overdo it, Julian. Even you can only take so much."

Julian said a brief good-bye, and got into his car. The rest of them walked into the lounge, where Amanda flung her arms round her father's neck and said it was terrible being a Governor's daughter; more terrible for her because it hurt so to be restrained!

The four of them had a drink without talking very much, and then Sir Henry went away to get into a fresh suit, while Peter installed himself in the library and braced up for his interview.

Lunch, although there were only three of them to it, began with a slightly festive air. Amanda didn't put any questions. She chattered about the trip out from England and the parties they had already had in Bolani, and her father smiled at her continually and indulgently. Elizabeth noticed he was not eating too well; a little fish and some fruit seemed poor fare for a man. When they had moved to the terrace and Kosi had served the coffee and vanished, she learned the reason for the Governor's malaise and lack of appetite.

Amanda had answered a question of his with: "Oh, yes, we've managed here awfully well. We occasionally got mad with Julian because he's so tyrannical, but we didn't really fight with him. He doesn't fight fair, that man. He merely plans something and sticks to it, which is infuriating. He seems to run the whole darned island."

"Julian Stanville," said her father impressively, "is by far the most valuable man we have in the Tunaks; my constant fear is that he'll be taken from us and put in a higher position elsewhere; that will certainly be his next step. If it weren't for Julian I wouldn't be here now. I don't wish to sound melodramatic, but I really was in what you would call a first-class jam, and he got me out of it."

"*You*, darling?" cried his daughter. "In a jam! Why, you're a complete sobersides. What happened?"

Sir Henry tossed down his coffee and took a cigar from the box which had been placed at his elbow. With some precision he clipped it and placed it beside his cup. "At first," he said, "I was against telling you, but you're bound to hear rumors, and it's better to know the truth than to conjecture about it. Julian has always had a strong aversion to my habit of travelling the islands informally and almost alone. He's tried many times to persuade me to take *a* military guard, but I've clung to my old methods in *a* changing world because my endeavor has always been to inspire confidence rather than fear. When I left for Villune I took with me a servant and an assistant secretary. The secretary was a young man who hadn't much experience out here, and I took him more for his education than anything

else. I'd have taken someone more seasoned, of course, had I anticipated that there would be the least trouble."

"Did the islanders get nasty?" demanded Amanda.

Sir Henry gave his tired smile and struck a match. It was a moment or two before the cigar kindled, and when it did the match-flame was a fraction of an inch from his fingers and he blew it out quickly.

"At the start everything went fairly smoothly," he said, leaning back and looking ruminatively out over the shimmering garden. "You'll have heard that my visit to Villune was to settle one of these succession disputes; they crop up in the best-run colonies. Well, I discovered that the old chief had died in somewhat violent circumstances, but his people were afraid, and begged me not to investigate it but to appoint his successor at once. On thinking it over, I decided to do as they asked, so I merely compared the claims of the pretender to the chieftainship with those of the old chief's son, and made a decision in favor of the son. It had to take a long time or both sides would have been dissatisfied. The new chief was proclaimed and the preparations for the festives went into full swing. That far, everything was quite smooth."

"Poor pet," murmured Amanda, "how absolutely boring for you. What on earth did you eat?"

He laughed a little. "You have such a practical brain, my dear, yet you must be one of the flightiest creatures living . . . or is the flightiness a well-practised pose? We must find out some time." This required no comment, apparently, for he continued: "The yacht lay off Villune and there were tinned and chilled foods on board; the islanders brought me plenty of fruit and eggs. But you're right about it being boring. I knew you and Elizabeth had arrived, and I was chafing to get back here to see you."

Elizabeth, who had so far remained only a listener, found herself asking urgently, "Did Julian go to Villune, Sir Henry?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you're ahead of me. Am I digressing too much?"

"Of course not," she assured him warmly, but she did wish he would hurry on with his tale.

He stroked his thin jaw. "It seems that I trusted the islanders too fully — over-estimated the losers' capacity for sportsmanship. One afternoon I went riding alone. I was suddenly surrounded by about fifty sympathizers of the pretender's and escorted up into the mountains."

"Heavens," breathed Amanda. "Do *these things really* happen? I thought you only found them in books!"

"It wasn't very nice," he admitted mildly. "Villune is a primitive island and their camp was crude. They treated me as well as they could, but I was a prisoner, and I must confess that I didn't care for the sensation."

"It's hateful! To think we were having grand times while those . . . those savages were trying to bully you into changing your verdict. What did you do?"

"Nothing, really; I wasn't in a position to do anything. I couldn't impress them with legal argument because they were quite convinced that the old chief had come into the chieftainship through a quarrel between grandparents. They had the idea that if they kept me long enough I would give in. Somehow I managed to eat enough of their appalling food to help keep up some semblance of dignity and vitality."

"You're so brave!"

"That kind of behavior isn't bravery, Amanda. It's code, pure and simple; the merest cadet has it." He took a luxurious pull at the cigar, then looked almost fondly at its tip, as though remembering those days when his two cigars had been denied him. Elizabeth was clinging tightly to her patience, willing him to come quickly to the part where Julian entered the story. "Only four days after I'd been ambushed my servant traced me. I saw him hiding near us and managed to scribble a note for him to take to my assistant secretary, who was still down in the chief's village. After that the days dragged on endlessly. I could feel myself growing weaker, but if I could have got near the horses I'd have made a dash for it."

Two big tears ran down Amanda's cheeks and she sniffed hard, but said nothing.

"Actually," he went on calmly, "I knew very little more till Julian came. My captors had changed our location

several times to evade raiding sorties by the rest of the islanders, and it's such a wild little island that I despaired of ever being found again. However, they didn't get wind of Julian's arrival, because he foxed them by leaving the launch at Yefuang and travelling the rest of the way by native canoe." He gave a reminiscent chuckle. "It was odd, the way he appeared. He came at dusk with a small band of islanders. They rose straight up from the mountain rocks all round us, Julian fired once into the air to show he meant business, and in no time at all the cause of all the trouble was trussed up and I was free. We've brought the bounder to Bolani with us. Byt this time he's in a nice cool detention cell thinking over his past misdeeds."

The rest of the incidents, as later explained to Sir Henry, came out gradually while he smoked the cigar. His assistant secretary, though still on the island, had been rendered powerless, but he had been able to instruct the servant who had brought the note from the Governor. The yacht must remain in the bay, a symbol of authority, and the boy must do his best to get a message through to the Chief Commissioner at Bolani by canoe. It had taken a long time.

Julian had actually received the news late on the night of his party. He had straightaway had a bag packed and ordered the launch to be made ready for a long trip. He had had to slip away while the island slept and to leave no word of his mission. An insurrection on Villune might cause big trouble throughout the islands if publicised.

"But why in the world didn't Julian take soldiers?" demanded Elizabeth. "It was crazy to go alone. He's supposed to be so sane!"

"Soldiers wouldn't have landed unnoticed, as Julian did. You must remember that this man's fanatical desire to be chief had already led him to commit treason, for which the penalty is death. He had nothing to lose."

"You mean Julian was afraid that if they knew soldiers were after them, they'd kill you?"

"It was the logical conclusion. Fortunately, they had no guns, but when Julian came there was quite a stabbing affray. We took to the horses with our prisoner and left

them to it. Seeing that Julian was the only one carrying a firearm we had no other course."

Amanda shuddered, but her eyes shone with tears and excitement "Julian's marvellous, isn't he?" she said. "I somehow knew he could do things like that."

There was a good deal, Elizabeth felt, that the Governor had kept back. His own mental *suffering*, for days and days on end, would have been acute, and physically he must have been well on the downgrade when Julian appeared. He couldn't have felt very much in the mood for staying on at Villune for a couple of days after his release, but he and Julian had decided it was wiser to leave as he had come, the peaceable authoritative Governor. He had promised the new chief that he would station a detachment of soldiers on Villune for six months.

About Julian's part in the affair she could not think without a violent, inward trembling. Mad, cool, daring, relentless . . . she could think of a dozen adjectives to describe his actions, yet none of them was adequate. He made her both angry and humble, proud and frightened.

But on the ebb of this tide of emotion came the recollection of his mockery in the car. He had known then that the Governor would relate his exploits, and he had meant her to realize well in advance that he wanted no facile admiration. The Governor was home and in command, and he himself had a backlog of work to make up.

The rest of that day passed quietly, but already a difference was noticable in the atmosphere of the Residency. Next day it was even more apparent, because Peter moved into the apartments set aside for him at the other end of the upper corridor, and he straightway plunged into learning exactly what the Governor would expect of him

The days of the casual caller were over. Indeed, Amanda's young men were not even anxious to come to the Residency by invitation. One liked the Governor, but didn't care to spend one's leisure hours under his eye. In any case, since discovering that the vivacious young woman was Sir Henry's daughter they had all withdrawn slightly. Their philosophy was that it had been great fun while it lasted!

Amanda had belatedly to learn that she had a position to keep up. There were island charities in which she would be expected to take an interest, and it was usual for the Governor's lady to inspect the grounds every so often. She should visit the kitchens and probe a little into the boys' domestic arrangements; they appreciated that kind of curiosity from white employers. Sir Henry told her all this with a twinkle, but Amanda said primly that she would try, and added the surprising information that she had already met the wife and children of the chief garden boy.

For Peter she spared not a glance. He had his own sittingroom where he took his meals and spent much of his time. If they happened to meet on the stairs or in the hall each would politely murmur, "Good morning," and pass on. She had no time for Peter, and he, seemingly, had become too engrossed in his new job to care. The winds of love had swept on, leaving a cold calm. Elizabeth craved a similar fate for herself.

Her conception of Bolani had been wide of the reality. She had seen herself on a sun-drenched island leading a useful life, and Amanda perpetually gay and lovable. Peter, of course, had not existed; nor had Julian. Yet Elizabeth could not now conceive of a world which did not hold Julian.

He had formed the habit of calling at the Residency every day on his way home from the office for lunch. At his suggestion Sir Henry was keeping to the house and resting a great deal, and he took it upon himself to bring along all matters needing decision or discussion. The first day he came, Elizabeth saw him.

The flowers had been brought in late from the gardens that morning, and after arranging them quickly in the out-house, she carried the bowls singly to their places. The one for the small lounge had overflowed with an exotic climbing flower which grew in sprays of small, orchid-like blossoms. She was right inside the room before realizing that Julian was there, alone.

He greeted her briefly and took the bowl. "Where **do** you want it?"

"Over there on the chest, please." Her voice did not betray her pulses. "Thank you. Does Sir Henry know you're here?"

"Probably. Kosi saw me come in." Very non-committal; his expression set in an unreadable but not very pleasant smile. "Do you always do the flowers?"

"Mostly. I snaffle all the jobs I can."

"Because they help to pass the time quickly?"

"It isn't that," Yet she knew it was; the hours move slowly when one is unhappy. "I'm not accustomed to unlimited leisure, and I'm happier if I have definite tasks to do. Would you care for a drink?"

"No thanks." He paused. "By the way, I'm now able to *give* Gilmering his permit to visit the pearling grounds. It wasn't possible when he asked for it because I was very uncertain about the Governor and felt that all movement outside the island should be restricted; it was a matter of form, but necessary. I'll see that the permit entitles Gilmering to take a companion."

She looked away from the aloof taunt in his eyes. The pearling grounds were off the coast of Manai, and Julian had promised — long ago, when she had toured the island with him in the launch—that when Sir Henry returned he would take a day off and they would go to Manai together. She remembered the quizzical light in his eyes when he had said they would exist for a few hours on fish cooked over a camp fire, and talk as they had never talked before.

Her breath drew in audibly between her teeth. "I'll tell Peter," she said.

"Good. I expect it's cosy having him in the house with you. I hear from the Governor that he's going to be good at his work as well, so you shouldn't have to wait too long for permission to marry."

"Marry?" she echoed. "What made you think of that?"

"Am I going too fast? I beg your pardon."

His sarcasm made her so furious that she couldn't speak for a moment. And when that moment had passed the wish to wound him had gone, too. Because she had seen him shrug and turn towards the bookcase, and the angle of his face now presented to her looked a bit weary and fed up

. so totally unlike Julian that she could not have said anything which might sting. Desperately, she longed to make some allusion to his rescue of the Governor, but she was well aware that if she did, he would return an answer both bitter and cynical. He had no time and no softness for Elizabeth Mayne.

And as they stood there, Julian glancing without interest at the spines of the books, and Elizabeth erect beside the chest upon which rested the profusion of russet and gold blossoms, the door was pushed wider and the Governor came in with his daughter.

Amanda, that mercurial creature, lit up beautifully. She stood stockstill for an effective second, then sped forward and clasped her arms about Julian's shoulders, pressing her curls against his cheek. Then her head went back and she applied her mouth to the corner of his, loudly and rapturously.

"Good lord," said Julian, as light and rallying as if he had never for a second been stern. "I hadn't a notion you cared!"

Amanda giggled and hugged him again. "That's for bringing Papa home safe and sound. I think you're just splendid, Julian."

"How refreshing." Did his glance flicker towards Elizabeth? "I wish I'd known a reward like this was waiting. I'd have come sooner."

"Darling," crooned Amanda, "you're almost human! I must get to know you better."

"Why not? You're a woman of courage!"

He was smiling down at her in an uncomplicated way, but when his head rose, the smile which reached Elizabeth was unmistakably tinged with a sharp malice which bored straight into her heart, and lodged there.

She knew what he was conveying. Whatever she and Amanda had contrived between them, however difficult they had tried to make things for him, the tables had turned without his lifting a finger. Here was Amanda, the Governor's daughter, merrily inviting his advances!

Sir Henry broke in tolerantly, "It's amazing the way women about a place change everything; one notices things

one never bothered with before. You should try it, Julian."

"Maybe I will, one day," he replied, and gave Amanda a gentle, dismissive pat on the arm.

After which the two men went off to the library.

Elizabeth had avoided meeting Julian again around lunch time, though she saw him from her balcony once or twice. Sir Henry complained that he would never stay to eat with them, that he had too little relaxation. He had invited Julian for dinner, but there was always something which prevented his accepting. Perhaps, like the rest of the white community, he was feeling the heat. He never had before, but that seemed to be the only explanation for his reluctance to make social calls at the Residency.

One night the islanders held a weird water carnival. Their canoes, lighted at each end by a flaring torch, circled on the black, moonshot waters of the lagoon, moving out farther and farther till they came to the reef.

It was at this point that Elizabeth reached the beach with Amanda, Peter, and several others. Fascinated by the flames of the torches in the darkness, she watched flowers being strewn on the ocean, myraids of them in great armfuls.

"If red flowers are washed in first there will be terrible hurricanes," explained one of the men. "At least, so they say. White ones first mean a placid season."

"Does it work out?" she asked.

"I don't believe so. It's generally neck and neck. They love the ceremony, though."

Tonight the lagoon was like silk and the palms hung over it seductively, unstirring. The crowds moved up towards the Drive. It would be hours before the first flowers drifted in and the canoes would stay out at the reef till given the word to race back. Indeed, the boatmen were up on the coral, waving their lights and stepping lithely from one peak to the next. They would probably do some fishing while they waited.

Elizabeth turned with the others, and almost at once she saw Celia Cartney, some way ahead. It had just crossed her mind that it was strange for a white woman to be alone among the milling throngs of islanders, when she realized

that Celia was looking about her in a panic. She was scared.

Elizabeth caught at Peter's cuff. "Look, there's Celia Cartney," she pointed out. "I think she must have come with her brother and lost him. Can you get to her, Peter?"

"Not without trampling someone to death" he answered blithely. "I'll try to keep her in sight, though, and we'll catch her up on the Drive."

It sounded easy, but the islanders were out in their thousands tonight and progress was slow. But when they did step on to the unyielding surface of the Marine Drive she saw Celia again, and urged Peter to follow her. It was not so bad here because the people were making for the side streets where they lived, and an odd vehicle or two weaving along the roadway compelled a certain amount of caution.

They were about twenty yards from Celia when the grey car approached. The hawk's eyes of the driver had picked her out swiftly, a delicate white flower among the darker, tropical islanders. The car stopped, he got out and, in the manner he had of fixing on something and making towards it as if no obstacle existed, he pushed his way to Celia's side. Head and shoulders above most of the people here, he looked down at her, his hand at her elbow. Protectively, he guided her across to the car and put her into the front seat.

A paralysis had seized Elizabeth. She saw the lighted interior of the car, the face Celia turned to Julian as he got in beside her. The topaz eyes were smiling through running tears, the red mouth had lost its hardness and was tremulous with real fear and relief. He was saying something soothing; Elizabeth could almost hear the gentle, mocking tones. He started up the car again and moved off.

"Well, that's that," said Peter, grinning. "Julian once more to the rescue. I wonder who'll be the third?"

The small incident answered a question for Elizabeth. She knew now why Julian would only come to the Residency on business. Before leaving Bolani for Villune he had made his decision and he now saw no reason to change it. He could afford to marry Celia, if he wanted to. He had

told her to pack because he intended to install her safely in the hotel — perhaps he had done so already. When he those, he would tell everyone that he was going to marry Celia Cartney.

Elizabeth was shaking as Peter led her back to join the others. But courtesy and reserve are wonderful qualities. They ensured that she behaved normally for the rest of that night, that she laughed with Amanda and jested with the men. They got her home, dry-eyed, and helped her to say a bright good night to Amanda.

Once she was alone there was no need for the unwavering upper lip, but she could not cry. Her emotions had dried up; she was merely heart-wrenchingly desolate.

CHAPTER TEN

ELIZABETH did go to the Manai pearling grounds with Peter, after all. He had come to her pointedly on the terrace the previous day, excused himself charmingly to Amanda, and said:

"I've got that permit, Elizabeth. Seeing that you were good enough to put in a word for me, will you come?"

She had felt Amanda's focused attention, but cared very little. Peter was restful, and the prospect of a day away from the Residency had its appeal.

"Of course I will," she had answered.

"Tomorrow's Saturday, so we can get away fairly early. Nine o'clock suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"That's fine. I'll meet you right here on the terrace at nine."

He had been gone some time before Amanda offered a caustic comment. "I can't think what's come over the aide-de-camp. He's gone all manly and official. Do you suppose he's picked up the infection from Julian?"

"No, I think he's always been like it on the job. When you met him in England he was on leave, and he didn't start work here till your father came. Now, you see him as he normally is."

"You're hot in his defence, aren't you?"

Elizabeth said evenly, "I'd be equally hot in your defence if someone were unjust to you. Do you object to my going with him tomorrow?"

"Why in the world should I?" she replied tartly. "The burden will be yours, not mine!" Then moodily, exasperatedly, she had got up and gone indoors.

So there were several reasons why Elizabeth was glad to step down into the prahu that Saturday morning, and watch the Malay boys pole across the lagoon and out, through a rift in the reef, into the ocean.

She knew a mild and unexcited sense of adventure, a faint lifting of the torment she seemed unable to throw

off at the Residency. This was what she needed—to get away to where one ran no risk of encountering a cynical blue glance or hearing those clipped and painfully impersonal tones.

The boat moved steadily over the heavy, oily sea, nosed through the reef which surrounded Manai and made a slow progress along a lagoon which was shallower than Bolani's. The whole way you could see clear to the coral bed, where anemones clung and a hundred varieties of tropical fish darted for food.

The boys made straight for the landing-stage alongside the pearling grounds, which were marked by gaily-painted, bouncing barrels. At the back of this beach stood a long, low cement building, in front of which a number of canoes were drawn up.

The superintendent of the industry, who came to meet them, was a small old man with oriental features and a delightful English accent. Oh, yes, he would be most happy to explain the process of culturing pearls. Here, one also found natural pearls after every high sea, but the cultured jewels were the backbone of this rich industry. They must come with him into his workshop.

For practically the whole of that morning Elizabeth was able to relegate Julian to the lower reaches of her mind. She was allowed to examine the oyster shells and to watch the superintendent use the little instrument with which he inserted a bead of mother-of-pearl into a living oyster. Thus treated, he explained, the oysters were placed in large wire cages and returned to the sea, where they remained for from three to five years while real pearl formed about the mother-of-pearl nucleus.

"It is long-term," he said with a humorous shrug, "but we have been established for many years, and there is never a week but we haul out a cage and count our pearls. The Dyaks here," he indicated half a dozen workers sitting crosslegged on the floor, "pierce them by hand and they are strung into dozens and sent to the pearl merchants in Singapore."

Elizabeth fingered some of the pearls. They were lustrous and perfectly spherical, cultivated here in the warm and

unsophisticated tropic seas for the smart women of London, Paris, and New York. Women who never spared a single thought for the manufacture of the glistening beauty they wore.

Their guide took them out in a canoe and pointed to the cages of small oysters beneath the surface of the water. Each was numbered and none was ever taken from the sea except under his supervision.

Before saying good-bye to them he drew from his pocket a small package. "You are friends of the Chief Commissioner, Mr. Stanville?" he asked.

Peter had the expression of one on the verge of facetiousness, and Elizabeth answered at once, "We know him quite well. Do you wish to send him a message?"

"I would like you to take this to him. It is a very large black pearl which we found in a giant dam. I promised to let him have one for his collection."

"Isn't it valuable? Can you let it go — just like that?"

The man shrugged blandly with eastern fatalism. "It is safer with you than it would be with one of my boatmen. Mr. Stanville will pay the Pearling Company as he did before."

Elizabeth took the package gingerly, and pressed it deep down into the large pocket of her frock. She would send it up to Julian's house this evening. Her foolish brain even began composing a careful note to accompany it.

They left the pearling grounds and had a picnic lunch on the prahu. It was good, afterwards, to lie back in deck chairs under the awning, dozing and talking by turns. They had left the boat-boys on the beach fraternizing with the Manai islanders, so that they themselves could drift round the lagoon, utterly at ease.

"You know," said Peter presently, "it's the greatest pity in the world that you and I didn't fall in love with each other. We get along so well together."

"We might not," Elizabeth responded wisely, "if we were in love. That condition, I believe, is anything but restful in the early stages."

"It must be tolerable if you're both affected. It's only uncertainty or the positive knowledge that you haven't an

earthly chance of succeeding with a woman that makes love unbearable."

He spoke so deliberately that she felt sure he was harking back objectively to his own experience with Amanda. Envy-ing him his detachment, she enquired curiously, "Peter, how deeply were you in love with Amanda?"

He was still staring up at the underside of the bamboo and palm awning with his hands joined under his neck as he replied thoughtfully, "They say there's no such thing as one-sided love — that that kind of emotion is pure in-fatuation. Do you believe it?"

"No, I don't."

His head came forward so that he could see her face, pale with sudden pink patches on the cheeks. "Why don't you?"

Before, she had replied too quickly. This time she took a moment or two to meditate, and said logically, In couples who marry it's sometimes apparent that one is more in love than the other. You hear of broken engagements, too — from the same cause. Infatuation is swift and dynamic, and I should think it consumes itself fairly soon. Love doesn't."

"No, it doesn't," he agreed broodingly. "Devil, isn't it?"

They were quiet for a while. The boat rocked slightly on the sideways roll of gentle waves over the almost sub-merged reef. A black and white sea bird dipped dose, uttering a raucous plea for food, and Elizabeth threw a biscuit which it caught in mid-air. Another bird appeared, and another.

"You've done it now," Peter said resignedly. "Can't sleep in that darned racket. I suppose we ought to think about getting back."

"Isn't there anything more to see on Manai?"

"There's the meteorological station, but I don't suppose they'd let us in without another permit. It's run by one white official and two Malay clerks."

"Don't you think we ought to let the official know we're here, in case he has a message of some kind he'd like to send to Bolani?"

Peter never answered that question, because the next second both he and Elizabeth were jerked from their small

chairs by a bump and a lurch which slewed the boat round and jammed its nose into a cleft in the reef.

"Gosh," he ejaculated, scrambling to his feet. "I'm crazy! I forgot all about steering." He hung over the side of the boat and groaned. "If we don't get her off quickly she'll smash. Look, you'd better give a shove with the paddle at that side, while I use the pole against this. Think you can do it?"

"I'll try.

Though a calm tide, it was now at its peak. Rollers washed right over the reef and sucked backwards. Their only hope was to give a concerted heave at the pinkish rock as a wave rose over it. They tried it and heard an ominous splintering.

"Oughtn't we," asked Elizabeth apprehensively, "to swim to the beach and send the boys out? They've probably handled this kind of trouble before."

"I can't let you swim all that way. There may not be another boat to take us back to Bolani, and we daren't be late or they'll send a search party. We simply have to get this boat off before she's damaged. Just a minute."

He climbed out on the reef and was immediately knee-deep in water. He leant against the boat's side to give a gargantuan push and with the next wave the craft moved a few inches.

"If there were someone the other side, too, we could do it," he panted. "When I shout, dig your paddle in on that side for all you're worth."

Elizabeth did; it snapped jaggedly and drove a great splinter into her forearm. Because of the stabbing pain she became infected with his frenzy; she threw down the half of the paddle and shouted; "Shall I use the pole?"

"It's too heavy for you." A wave for which he had been unprepared nearly washed him from his feet. He called himself several kinds of a fool and gave another mad shove at the craft.

Elizabeth comprehended the mixture of anger and despair within him. He blamed himself bitterly, while desperately imagining what a humiliating business it was going to be if the boat broke up and a launch had to be sent out from

Bolani. In any case they were going to arrive back looking like shipwrecked mariners, and Sir Henry would want to know the reason. Her thoughts did not go much further. Peter's needs were so obvious that she simply had to help him. The sun was shining and the waves, though big and noisy, were only those of a normal high tide.

Without warning him, she slipped over the side of the boat and found foothold on coral. She saw under-water caverns, the frightened scattering of fish which seemed all pink and green fins.

"Get back," he yelled hoarsely. "If anything happens to you they'll string me up."

She laughed, braced herself and answered, "Three big shoves ought to do it. Give the word!"

It took four shoves of almost superhuman dimensions. The prahu was free and bounding away with heartless gaiety. Peter called something she didn't hear and struck out. She followed him, keeping her eyes averted from those weird caverns where octopuses were known to lurk. Peter flung himself into the boat and twisted so that he could lift her up beside him. For several minutes after they were safe both sat with their heads bowed in their arms, regaining their breath.

Then Peter said shakily, "If you'd got hurt, I'd have dived under and stayed there."

She kept a hand over the ugly, throbbing lump on her right arm and raised her head. With a pale smile she said, "That wouldn't have done me any good. Don't you think you ought to take over the steering now?"

Ten minutes later he brought them up on the beach. Islanders, working there on nets and tackle, watched interestedly as the man and girl stepped ashore. They were very peculiar, these white people; they would ruin good shirt and shorts, a pretty frock, because they did not happen to bring with them their usual swimming clothes. They had only to ask and sarongs would have been given to them gladly.

As a matter of fact Peter did ask for sarongs, and for a blouse as well, for Elizabeth. The boat was found to need

slight repair, and while this was done and their clothes dried they sat in the shade of the coco-palms and rested.

While changing, Elizabeth had taken a good look at the wound in her arm. The hefty splinter, covered with congealing blood, was buried deep down in the thickest part of her forearm. Had it been her left arm she would have tried to pick it out, but seeing it wasn't and that her left hand had not the sureness and control of her right, she had to leave it for fear of only half-doing the job. At the moment her arm was bound by a dean strip of silk begged from one of the women, and Peter had been persuaded to believe that the silk hid only a scratch.

By the time they were ready to leave it was dusk. They sat very quiet while the boys poled away from Manai and into the darkening open sea. The night was warm and almost windless, but there was no beauty in it for either of them; the incident on the reef had spoiled the day. Elizabeth was deathly tired, and the throbbing which had begun in her arm seemed now to find an echo all over her body. She tried to remember whether Amanda would be out to dinner tonight, but her brain was strangely empty.

It was about a quarter to eight when the prahu ran alongside the government landing-stage and tied up just behind the launch. As Peter helped Elizabeth up on to the planks a young official appeared at his side.

"What-ho," he said pleasantly. "We've been standing by to come out to the rescue. Sir Henry and the C.C. have both made enquiries, and there's a car waiting for you."

"That's something, at any rate," Peter answered glumly. "It would have been the last straw if I'd had to cart Elizabeth home in a pony-taxi."

"Did you have trouble?"

Quickly, Elizabeth put in, "The **boat hit a rock and had to be repaired.** We just had to wait for it, that's all."

She was thankful he could not see the rough-dry condition of their clothes. Peter would be able to evade enquiries more easily than she, because there was a side entrance to the Residency from which a staircase led straight up to his end of the corridor. She, though, would have to cross the **brightly-lit hall and go up the main stairs,**

"We'd better be honest about it," Peter said, as the car moved off. "I'm sorry it's been like this, Elizabeth."

"There's no real need for an explanation; we're not so very late. Let's wait and see how we get on at the Residency."

Suddenly, sickeningly, she remembered the black pearl. Her hand went to her pocket and found it empty. For a long moment she sat completely dazed with the immensity of what had happened. She had been entrusted with a rare black pearl for Julian, had put it into her deep, square pocket thinking it was safer on her person than in the small bag which held her compact and lipstick. When they had hit the reef the bag had remained in the boat, but she must have lost the tiny package from her pocket while swimming. The black pearl had gone back to where it had come from—the sea.

The whole way to Kalaba Hill she could think of nothing else. Peter spoke but she had no idea what he said, though she did manage, as they pulled up at the Residency steps, to remind him to use the side entrance.

"I suppose two of us would make rather more impact than one," he agreed, "but if you're held up don't try to shield me."

The big main door was unlocked, and she came quietly into the empty hall. The door of the large lounge was slightly ajar, but only a dim light shone in there, as if someone might be reading under a lamp, alone. Sir Henry, probably. Amanda must be out.

Carefully she crossed the hall and mounted the stairs. She would have to change swiftly and decide what she must do about the pearl. There was this pain in her arm, too, though comparatively it was negligible. She would rather have a dozen outsize splinters in every limb than have lost the pearl. And how on earth was she to explain it?

She reached the top of the stairs, looked left and saw Peter hesitating at the door of his room, waiting for her to appear. He waved and vanished. She drew a breath, turned right, and felt the blood go still and cold in her veins.

For Julian was coming in from that wide balcony under the dome. He pulled closed the glass door with a click

and came stalking towards her; he must have seen their arrival. Perhaps it was a natural attempt at self-defence which made her move forward so that she was standing where the light was least merciless.

For a minute he stood looking down at her, wordless. Then he indicated the arm she was unconsciously nursing in the other hand. "Had an accident?" he asked sharply.

Strain cracked her voice. "Nothing serious. I . . . I didn't know you'd be here."

"Sir Henry invited me for dinner and wouldn't take no." He bent closet. "I've never seen you so pale. What the deuce has been happening?"

Her tongue stole out to moisten her lips. "Julian," she whispered, in a rush. "I've done something terrible. The superintendent at the pearling ground gave me a black pearl for you, a large one for your collection. I . . . I've lost it."

"Is that all?"

She stared up at him, eyes large with weariness and amazement. "Isn't it enough? If it was as big as those you already have it must have been valuable as well as rare. I can't forgive myself for losing it."

"Do you mind if I have a look at this arm?" he said.

"But the pearl—what am I to do?"

"You can't do a thing, unless you have some idea of where you lost it," he replied off-handedly. "I don't care for the look of that native silk round your arm; it may be grubby. Do you keep any dressings in your bedroom?"

"There are some plasters in the bathroom, next door—I'll find them. About the pearl, Julian. . . . I believe I must have lost it in the sea."

"Then that's the end of it, isn't it? Come to think of it," he added coolly, his hand barely touching her left elbow as he pushed wide the bathroom door for her to enter, "you look as if you've spent most of the day in the ocean without bothering to undress; your hair smells of it, too. You'd better sit down."

His proximity alone was almost too much for Elizabeth. The restrained gentleness with which he unwound the strip

of stuff about her forearm tipped the scale; her eyes smarted with tears she dare not shed.

"Good God !" he muttered savagely, as he laid bare the purple swelling with the deep dark wound in the centre. "What have you got embedded in there?"

"It's a scrap of wood—a splinter."

"How many hours have you been walking round like this?"

She did not answer. Julian already had the basin half-full of water and had tipped into it some antiseptic. As if she were a child he bent her forward till the arm was immersed, and swabbed away the dried blood. He turned back to the cabinet, found a pair of tweezers and dipped them into the bottle of antiseptic. As he gripped hard on her wrist his mouth was tight."

"It's going to hurt like hell," he said, "but you mustn't move or we may leave some of it in. D'you hear me?"

Elizabeth nodded. Her eyes were already glassy with pain and quelled tears, and as he worked a sweat broke out from every pore though she managed not to quiver. The top of his head was close to her face, but she gazed over it, at the green tiling of the wall.

He said surprisingly, "Don't worry about the pearl. Black ones aren't beautiful, and their market value is much lower than that of other pearls. A large one of the species would have been a curiosity, that's all. They'll send me another some time, if I ask them."

Then the splinter was out and he showed it to her on the palm of his hand; an inch long and thick at one end, tapering to a jagged point.

"I've a good mind, ' he said through his teeth as he selected a dressing, "to have young Gilmering sent back to Singapore. Any man who can take a woman out for a simple morning's pleasure and bring her back at this hour and in this condition is a lunatic or a swine. Either way, he's not fit to be the Governor's personal officer !"

Worn though she was, Elizabeth hastened to defend the absent. "It wasn't Peter's fault, and he hadn't a notion that this was anything more than a surface scratch. I didn't show it to him."

"How did it happen?" he demanded.

"We were out near the reef. I was fooling with the paddle and it snapped."

"I see, and you fell into the water. That's why you look such a scarecrow." His lips had thinned, so cruelly that she could hardly credit that he had been gentle a minute ago. "It conjures a pretty picture—the two of you having fun in a boat on the Manai lagoon and not caring what time it was. Didn't it occur to you that there might be someone here who would be anxious if you failed to turn up before dark?"

"It was just bad luck," she said tremulously. "I almost believe your beastly pearl put a hoodoo on us. If you're angry with me, why are you bothering?"

He let out a sigh of exasperation. "I'm not angry with you—only darned annoyed that Gilmering should do things which upset Sir Henry."

"Oh." She withdrew her arm and looked down at the pink dressing he had pressed on to it. "You're extremely considerate where the Governor's concerned, aren't you? Should you keep him waiting for dinner, then?"

He had rinsed his hands and was drying them. His glance at her was withdrawn and oblique. "I'll deal with that. You'd better go to bed—I'll have a tray sent up to you."

"Won't that worry Sir Henry even more?" she asked bitterly.

He made no immediate reply. They came out into the corridor and found it still very quiet. The portrait of past Governors looked down benignly from the walls. A trifle hysterically she wondered how it had been here, in those early days. Had other emotional scenes been enacted in this corridor? Had some foolish young woman in a crinoline pined for a sign from a man as impregnable and self-sufficient as Julian? The very thought was heartbreakingly comic. Thank heaven for a sense of humor.

Julian must have seen the painful smile which passed over her features. His regard keen, he said, "As Amanda you were a much happier person. But then, as Amanda you were in a very strong position, weren't you? It shouldn't

make any difference to Peter, though. He knew who you were from the beginning."

Involuntarily she queried, "How much difference does it make to you?"

"Not much—now." His nod indicated her arm. "It's perfectly clean. Keep it covered and don't play any tennis tomorrow. By the way," his tones deepened, subtly, "thanks for being kind to Celia. Due to your initial efforts she's had some good times during the last few weeks. It was particularly nice of you, because it's quite obvious that you don't like her."

"That's unfair. I don't dislike Celia. There are qualities in her I don't understand—but nothing else."

"In that case you'll be pleased to know that everything is turning out very well for her. At the moment she's having the first real holiday of her life, at the hotel in Mueng, and she's enjoying herself immensely. I'm taking her to Yefuang tomorrow."

A muscle tautened at Elizabeth's throat and she had to wait till it eased a little before saying in a dry, husky voice, "I'm a little more tired than I thought. Thanks for the first-aid. And don't bother to send up a tray. I'll have some coffee later. Will you please make my apologies to Sir Henry?"

He opened her door and inclined his head. Then without a word he twisted towards the staircase.

Elizabeth went into her room and leaned back upon the door. One hand pressed to her heavily beating heart and the other lay flat upon the cool, painted surface of the wood. In this life, Aunt Elsa had been wont to say, we are called upon to bear only what we can. Which must mean, Elizabeth thought hollowly, that each blow hardens and conditions us for the next.

She had known for some time that Julian found Celia attractive, and for even longer she had been aware of Celia's conviction that Julian loved her. Now, he was coming out into the open and it might not be long before he announced his engagement. After all, it must have been he who transferred the woman to the hotel, and for a man like Julian that in itself was a declaration.

Feeling her knees weaken, she crossed to sit on the stool in front of the dressing-table. She ought to be glad he was not making up to Amanda; at least, Celia kept him away from the Residency.

There was a tap at the door and, expecting a servant, she called a dispirited "Come in." But it was Julian, carrying a drink.

"It's whisky," he said, not looking at her as he placed the glass on the dressing-table. "I know you don't care for it, but it will do you good. Kosi is going to bring you a light meal, and I want your promise that you'll eat it." He knelt down and drew off her shoes, dusted sand from her toes and pushed slippers over them. Her will felt drugged, his crisp hair dipped near her cheek, and this time she noticed it vaguely and caught its faint scent. When he stood up he put the tumbler into her hand.

"Come on. Drink."

Elizabeth touched her lips to the glass and set it down. She felt better now, cooler and less like collapsing. She was able to meet his glance, to say steadily, while her heart felt like lead in her breast: "I've got along for a good many years without a big brother, Julian, and I'm afraid that at this stage I'd find one merely an embarrassment. I'm sorry if I sound ungracious, but I don't mean to be. Only . . . our friendship hasn't been a particularly fortunate one, has it?"

"It might have been," he said abruptly, "if you'd been honest. I'm not going to quarrel with you, but I have to admit that much of what I liked about the first Amanda Penlan seems to be absent from the present Elizabeth Mayne. I'm pretty sure I know why, too."

The note of finality in his voice lingered sharply in the door with a fatal quietness. Deep inside, Elizabeth knew that she and the Chief Commissioner would never again meet on a friendly plane.

In the middle of that night the trade wind freshened and veered, and dry-white lightning flashed into Elizabeth's room. She got up and peered out at a cloudless sky, where stars hung above madly threshing palms. This was too far from the shore for the waves to be audible, but she felt

sure that the roar which had an ominous evil echo came from that direction.

Back in bed she listened till the wind lowered and the roar was gone. There was nothing to it, after all. Julian would be able to take Celia to Yefuang.

And it wasn't for Elizabeth to judge whether Celia was the right woman for him. Possibly he had chosen her deliberately, knowing that he could make of her whatever he willed. Chosen her, that is, as soon as his heart told him he could love her enough to make her his wife.

One could imagine Julian's inward, cynical satisfaction, the malice with which he would look back upon Elizabeth Mayne masquerading as Amanda. Probably he was congratulating himself on his own circumspection during those weeks he had thought her the Governor's daughter. It would have been just too bad if he had slipped from his pedestal and kissed her. He could afford to be generous over the lost pearl.

Next morning, of course, Elizabeth was white with blotches of fatigue under her eyes. Oddly, Amanda was colorless, too, but she laughed a great deal. Captain Cranwood was back in circulation after his refresher course in jungle warfare, and she had forgotten what a delicious idiot the man was. By the way, how had Elizabeth fared yesterday with the aide-de-camp?

Peter passed them on the path below the terrace. He looked up and wished them good morning, and there was no mistaking that someone—and Elizabeth was pretty sure it could not have been Sir Henry—had given him a severe dressing-down.

She came to the bleak conclusion that it would not be long before the unhappy undercurrents at the Residency would become completely intolerable.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A BREATHLESS, pulsing heat settled over Bolani. Occasionally a burning wind got up, whipping sand high into the air and tearing off a branch here and there, but mostly the atmosphere was heavy and still. The very smells of the island became redolent of heat and humidity, those partners in fertility and growth.

The white men went about their duties more or less as usual. Their concession to the heat was a regular bathe at mid-morning and white shorts and short-sleeved shirts to the office. Sir Henry stayed within the cool walls of the Residency, and he insisted that both girls do the same. They took their bathe just before dusk, to the repeated thunder of the surf as it broke over the reef with the hissing sound of rain on hot stones.

"The worst of the heat will only last till we get a storm," he comforted them. "It won't be long before the clouds gather, and soon afterwards they'll burst. Then it will be cool and lovely."

One morning, while they were drinking iced tea in the tranquillity of the small lounge, Peter brought a letter. The Governor ripped it open and sat for a few moments, considering.

"Gilmering," he said at last, "this is a task you'll have to do. Have you ever been to the research station?"

"Yes, sir, on a social visit."

"Good—you know the way then. give you a letter and explain what it's all about." He looked at Amanda's bored face, which was half-turned to the window. "Take this daughter of mine with you. Elizabeth, too. They need a change."

"You've forbidden us to go out in the daytime," protested Amanda.

"I've forbidden you to lounge on the beach and in the gardens. A drive won't do you any harm, and the research station is deep in trees."

"There'll be mosquitoes."

"No more than there are here, my dear," he said, getting to his feet. "Come to the study for the letter and your instructions in half an hour, Gilmering."

When he had gone Peter stood rather uncertainly near the door. "I have one or two things to do before I can leave," he said. "Will you both be here when the car comes round?"

"I'm not going," flatly from Amanda.

Peter glanced at Elizabeth. His *rugged* young face was harassed but dogged round the mouth. She nodded, ever so faintly. He turned back to Amanda. "The way you avoid me," he stated, "anyone would think I had the plague, or frightened you."

"It must be the plague," she answered. "I'm certainly not afraid of you."

"You can't possibly prefer to stay here, doing nothing. Can she, Elizabeth? Your father will think it odd if you make a point of.. . well, behaving as if I were a toxin of some sort. If he'd detail some other chap to drive you out to the research station you'd have gone, wouldn't you?"

"I don't have to do anything I don't want to do."

A danger signal flashed in Peter's eyes, and Elizabeth put in hastily, persuasively, "You've enjoyed the trip out there before. Besides, Peter's right. If you continue to snub him Sir Henry will notice and wonder why. You wouldn't like your father **to think** you're half in love with Peter, would you?"

Amanda's teeth snapped tightly together and Peter looked awkward and red. He murmured something unintelligible and escaped.

For some minutes Amanda was silent. She lay back in her chair staring at her dainty scarlet sandals, and presently she gave an impatient thrust at her black curls.

A shade forlornly she said, "That wasn't a very clever thing to say in front of Peter. You might have thought a bit before trotting out that kind of remark."

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth was awfully tired of having to be careful with Amanda. "It does seem that you should be kinder to him. In fact, considering that he has an important position **with your father, it's your duty.**"

He doesn't need the admiration of us both!"

Elizabeth sat up rather straight but curbed an impulse to voice a retort. Amanda looked so pretty and disconsolate that inevitably she spoke gently. "Aren't you being a bit of an ass? You have to live here, with Peter very dose all the time, and there's no reason at all why you shouldn't be kind to him. Please go out with him today, Amanda Give him a chance to apologize for whatever he's done to hurt you."

"Supposing we're horrid to each other instead?"

"Decide not to be. Peter's good fun if you don't try to squash him all the time—and he has much more intelligence than the others you run around with. He won't remind you that he was once in love with you—unless you want him to."

Amanda picked at the raised pattern of her sea-blue frock. "Did he tell you he was once in love with me?" she asked casually. "Did he put it like that—as if he's over it now?"

"Not quite. I think you're still his ideal."

"How utterly silly!" But her voice shook. "I'm such a selfish blighter that I can't imagine any man bothering seriously with me, once he's met you. Has he ever made love to you?"

"He has not!" Elizabeth answered firmly. "If he had, I wouldn't be urging you to go with him today. He wouldn't deserve it."

Quite a while passed before Amanda queried in chastened accents, "Oughtn't we to get ready?"

"I'm staying here," said Elizabeth. "I'd rather."

Amanda digested this and stood up. "All right," she said nonchalantly. "I'll get my hat."

Alone, Elizabeth sat feeling slightly stunned at the ease with which it had all worked out. She had not had the least inclination to go with Peter and Amanda to the research depot. Their bickering when she was near was likely to reach simmering point, and she really had had enough of acting as buffer between them. Maybe alone they would come to some sort of friendly understanding. At present

Amanda was in the mood for it, though her moods seldom lasted long. In any case it was up to Peter.

Sir Henry, she thought a trifle guiltily, wouldn't mind the two of them going off together. The best plan was to avoid meeting him again till they got back. She could take a picnic and a book to the rocks. There were cool caverns at the headlands where you could feel the wind off the sea and be surrounded by wet walls of rocks. She remembered shivering from the touch of those rocks only a week or two ago; they were much cooler than the sea. A perfect spot on such a day.

A servant came to collect the tray of tea glasses and she asked him to prepare some sandwiches. The car drove up with Peter at the wheel, and she went out to speak to him. But Amanda arrived at the same moment, so all Elizabeth said was, "You'll have to count me out today, Peter. Be sweet to Amanda, won't you?"

He gave her a confused smile and opened the front door. Amanda, with a debonair flourish, slipped into her seat and held her skirt while he dosed her in. She looked up at Elizabeth through the window, her eyes sparkling and roguish, as if she intended to give Peter a rough passage. He, back in his seat, grinned at Elizabeth in pure amazement. She felt, as the car moved off, that it was carrying two distinct brands of high explosive.

She went upstairs and changed into the rubber-soled sandals which were safest for the rocks, and from her balcony she saw Sir Henry go off in the other car, driven by a chauffeur. He thought she had gone with Amanda and Peter, which was all to the good. Perhaps he was as tired as they of staying indoors.

Elizabeth chose her book and put it with the small picnic basket which Kosi had placed on the hall table. Her frock was a plain rose-colored linen which she wouldn't mind if she spoiled. Her arms were raised, the hands pressing on the crown of her white straw, when Julian drove up.

And with Julian came the unbearable pain of loss, sharpening from the dull ache to which she was becoming accustomed, into something so acute and urgent that had

she had time she would have leapt the stairs and stayed in her room till he had gone.

He came into the hall with his usual lithe stride, and stopped. He looked her over unsmilingly.

"Good morning, Elizabeth."

"Good morning," she managed with reserve. "Sir Henry has just gone out—to the government offices, I believe."

"Yes, we have a meeting at twelve." He paused. "I haven't seen you for several days. Has it been by accident or by design that you've been missing when I've called?"

"Half and half," she admitted. "I find the heat enough to contend with."

"I see." He sounded cold and uncommunicative. "Where are you going now?"

"Down to the sea. Not Mueng—the rocks."

"Alone?"

She nodded off-handedly. "I fancy a quiet read in the open air."

"You could have that here."

"So I could—but this morning I prefer the sea."

His keen glance took her in; her pallor and the fixity of her smile, the picnic basket on the table, and the book. "I knew Sir Henry would be out, but I came to tell you and Amanda that a hurricane is brewing. There isn't any official information from the met. station yet, but there's no doubt at all that it won't be long before a warning comes through. You can't go out, Elizabeth. It's dangerous."

"Sir Henry is out."

"He'll be back by lunch time, but you," with a curt nod at the table, "apparently intend to spend several hours by the sea."

"It's only twenty minutes' walk. I'd come back if the wind started up."

"If the gale blew up while you were down there, my child," he said with sudden roughness, "you might never come back. You haven't the smallest notion of the ferocity of a hurricane. You're not to go out!"

Then he said, his tone edged, "You're being stubborn because it's I who am asking you to take care. If I had my way I'd shake some good feeling into you."

"I'm quite sure you would," she said stonily.

There was a brief, exasperated silence.

He shot back his cuff. "I'm already late—I'll have to go," he said finally. "Please do as I say." An odd softness in him brought the liquid warmth of love to sting at the back of her eyes. "There have been hurricanes further south and they're moving this way. All the signs here indicate hurricane weather during the next twenty-four hours. Don't, for goodness' sake, take a senseless risk just for the pleasure of defying me. I know that's how you feel, but don't!"

If he'd stayed just a minute longer and kept the vibrant note in his voice she would have given in unconditionally. Every nerve in her longed to obey him, now and for ever. But he was the Chief Commissioner, due to attend a meeting of the Legislative Council. He pulled in his lip between his teeth, lifted his hand a fraction as if, had there been time, he would have touched her, reassuringly.

But without completing the gesture *he* turned abruptly and left the house. His car sped away. Elizabeth had stiffened and her throat was choked. She took off her hat and swung it nervously in her fingers as she walked slowly out to the terrace to look at the sky.

There was still only one white cloud and a feathery breeze. Nothing ominous or sullen about the sun, either. No islanders walked the grounds, but very few of them were tempted so far at this season. If Sir Henry was safe till lunch time there could be no harm in strolling down to the rocks. She simply had to get away from the house for *a* bit.

The time had come when she was unable to contemplate Julian without pain. She couldn't stand the insufferable waiting to hear his name publicly linked with that of Celia Cartney; nor was it possible to sustain much longer the pose of being agreeable and charming, while she was so tensed and anguished underneath.

She heard the sweet, lonely song of a bird, and turned swiftly, as though at the end of her endurance. Blindly, she scooped up the book and the little basket, put on her hat and went out. Soon she entered the teeming stillness of the

belt of timber. Yes, the heat had rendered even the parakeets noiseless. But the sea, as she neared it, was turbulent and beautiful. Breakers erupted skywards in brilliant phosphorescence and poured white foam over the coral and into the gullies. Here, among the natural chaos of rocks and waves, one might find a savage kind of solace and peace.

Amanda, meanwhile, had decided to be gay, for which Peter, naturally, was infinitely thankful. He was so relieved, in fact, that he drove far more recklessly than was normally permissible in a government car. But the road, though surfaced with gravel, was quite good, and a fair speed created a fine breeze between the open windows. Amanda's curls rippled and a bright pink was whipped into her cheeks.

At first their conversation was light and pointless, but if Peter felt a throb of hopelessness and renewed disillusionment he forbore to show it. It would not have been wise, on the outward journey, to remind Amanda that he had called her disloyal and without charity.

When they were nearing the reasearch station, however, he did observe, "Do you remember that awful little bus I borrowed for my leave in England? You always said you were sure it had solid tires—till we sprang a puncture that day, coming home from the races."

"Riding in that contraption was the only thing that ever made me wish I was boneless. Do you suppose it'll still be on the road?"

"Bound to be. It was only just over a year ago."

"A year is a long time."

"Has this year seemed long—to you?"

"No longer than any other," she replied blithely, not to be caught. "It's been so exciting that our time in Bolani has winged away. First of all there was our little joke. . ."

"Which might have cost me my job!"

"And then there was Papa's triumphal return after being captured by the natives. It's a bit deadly now, but something else is sure to happen in a place like this." Unexpectedly she asked, "Are you happy here, Peter?"

"Fairly," he replied guardedly. "Are you?"

"I'm always happy, because I've learned that the art of living is to live in the present."

He gave her a swift, sideways stare, and said boldly, "I've seen you look much happier than you do here, in Bolani."

She laughed. "We seemed to be two different people in England, didn't we? The trouble is," she told him confidently, "that the minute you appear these days I'm irritated, just as one is irritated by an ant running over one's bare arm. But Elizabeth says I've got to be kind to you for my father's sake. Strangely enough, you're a good aide-de-camp."

"What's strange about it?" he demanded bluntly. "I've been in the service five years. They'd have kicked me out if I'd been no good."

"That's Elizabeth's contention, too," she said sweetly. "She's awfully understanding."

"Elizabeth," he told her rashly, "is everything that you're not."

"How clever of you," she responded brightly, her dark eyes hard. "I hoped no one else had noticed that."

Fortunately they were running down the lane between tall trees which led straight to the research station, so there was no time for more.

Peter delivered his letter and the two of them were entertained to lunch by the vet. and the chemist, who shared a rambling bungalow. Amanda effervesced. Her moodiness of the past week had dissolved into a bubbling joy at which the jaded bachelors marvelled. Patently, they wondered among themselves that the "Old Man" should possess such a pretty, vivacious daughter.

It was as Peter was preparing to leave, just after two, that the hurricane warning came through. Instantly, his shaggy brows took a frown of worry.

"Do you think we ought to leave?" he asked the vet. "I can get back to the Residency in little over half an hour."

"You ought to do it easily," was the answer, "but perhaps you'd better put it to Miss Penlan."

Amanda was in favor of setting out at once. The idea, of being marooned till next day at the research station was distasteful, nor did she want the Governor distressed by her absence. As Elizabeth had done earlier, she took stock of the elements and found them anything but frightening. True, the sky had darkened, and the sun acquired a sulphurous haze but there was, as yet, no wind to speak of. She gave it as her opinion, that they had plenty of time before they waved their good-byes.

As it happened, they had left the research station only three miles behind when the first onslaught of the hurricane hurled itself at the Residency car and sent it ploughing into a field of young sugar cane.

The appalling suddenness of it left them both speechless. Peter recovered first.

He said queerly, "We've hit it. Now you really will have something to hate me for."

"I made you come. Is it the hurricane?" she demanded, gazing in astonishment at the bending cane. "Wasn't it weird—the way it lifted the car! And, heaven, what a noise. It's exciting!"

Thunder had added itself to the roar of the wind, and the daylight was fading behind a purple pall which was rent at intervals by flashes of lightning. Peter put the car in reverse and trod on the accelerator. The wheels turned but the car remained where it was, anchored in soft soil. He smote the steering wheel with a frustrated fist.

"We'll never *get* out of this without help, and I can't leave you here with glass all round you, while I find someone to give me a hand."

"Of course you can't. We're *in* this together. I'll go with you."

It was sweet of her to say they were *in* it together, but it didn't help materially. He'd a thousand times rather have been alone. "There are huts at the bottom of the hill," he said, "near a stream; I remember a child waving to us as we passed. You'll have to take shelter there till we get the car on the road."

Privately, he doubted whether the car could possibly be shifted *in* such a wind. They wouldn't dare to travel in it

anyway. He cursed himself for doing this to Amanda. He'd experienced the fury of the tropical elements before, but she never had. In the car, with the storm whipping itself up about them, it seemed to Peter like the end of everything.

He jerked open the door and instantly the air was driven from his lungs. Somehow he got out and fought his way round to Amanda. He was too fed up to speak. His concern for her was like a rope pulled tight about his heart.

She pushed dose to him and automatically his arm went round her shoulders, and he made her walk with him. Slithering, forced off the road by one gust after another, they moved down the long gradient. He knew that this was only the preliminary to the real hurricane. He could see the stream at the bottom of the hill, already high and gushing; soon it would wash up over the road and render it impassable.

They ran the last twenty yards and without any preliminaries he rushed her into the first bamboo hut. For a moment they stood gulping and staring at each other. Then they became aware that the but was bare, stripped of its pandanus mats and cooking pots, though a small heap of clean sago indicated that flight from the dwelling had been recent.

"These huts aren't safe," he said a little hoarsely. "They've been evacuated. We can't stay here, Amanda."

The bamboos rattled and something hit the roof with a rending sound. Peter dragged aside the grass door-covering and saw a huge branch floating away on the swollen river. There was no rain yet. He would have to get her back to the car, put her in the back seat with the windows down. There should be a *rug* in the luggage carrier which might shield her a little.

And then, as he watched, with Amanda pressed dose to his side, a tree crashed diagonally across the next hut, only a dozen feet away, and reduced it to a heap of smashed bamboos and palm thatch. He felt Amanda trembling; then felt her wrench away from him.

The next moment she was beside that fallen tree, clawing away the ant-ridden bamboos, dragging at the great

strong branches of palm which had been the roof. He thought she *was* mad, was after her and tugging at the blue frock which had plastered itself to her body.

"Amanda! Come away, you idiot. Another tree may fall. The whole lot must be rotten—that's why the cottages are empty."

"There was someone in the hut," she panted. "I saw a movement . . . an arm."

She worked with such frenzy that she must have torn her hands, but her strength seemed to be phenomenal. She snapped away branches, uncovered the man's sweat-dewed face. Peter was beside her, feeling over the man's side, shoving with all his might at a tree-trunk which it would take a team of oxen to move.

"We must save him, Peter. We must!" The wind bowled her over, suddenly, but within seconds she was on her feet again, tugging and thrusting, while little gasps came from deep down in her throat.

Peter was beside himself. He had never felt so helpless in his life. He had forgotten that Amanda was the Governor's daughter, that if he did not return her to the Residency unharmed he might easily be thrown out of Bolani—indeed, out of the service. He had forgotten everything save that this was the spirited, courageous creature he had always deep down, known to exist under that brilliant and beautiful exterior.

His fingers twitched on the man's pulse. He said sorrowfully, "He's dead, Amanda."

She was stilled, her hair straining in the wind, her arms crossed and the hands gripping her shoulders in dry misery. Dust and twigs rose from the ruins and were swept away, a gale-driven sapling nearby brushed its frond over the grass in a crazy semi-circle.

Then she pointed an unsteady forefinger, leapt the tree and went down on her knees. "Look," she cried, her voice a croak. "There's a . . . a baby!"

She was laughing and crying, flinging aside the debris which covered a surprised-looking, coffee-skinned child of something over a year old. With the freakishness of such incidents, the baby was unhurt, and not even resentful. He

actually opened his mouth as if he were crowing, poor fatherless scrap. Amanda took him into her arms, soiled blanket and all.

At least we've saved him, Peter," she said shakily. "If we hadn't come he'd have died of exposure."

Afterwards, Peter could never look back on that day without a most unmanly lump coming into his throat. He always remembered every detail. The wind tugging and battering, the great gobbets of rain as they started back up the hill in an eerie half-darkness illumined at intervals by lightning, and Amanda, the darling, hugging and shielding the child while he did his best to protect them both from the fiercest gusts. And then the lorry from the research station bearing down on them. The superintendent had come after them in his heaviest vehicle.

And he recalled sitting inside the flapping cover of the lorry with Amanda opposite, her sweat- and tear-streaked face lovelier than he had ever seen it as she smiled at him over the little brown baby's head. He'd felt so humble as he bent forward and kissed her mouth, and felt it cling.

But all she'd said, flippantly, was, "Wouldn't Papa have a shock if he could see me now!"

It so happened that Sir Henry was not very concerned about Amanda. He had been in the government offices when the official hurricane warning had come through, and had given immediate instructions that the news be telephoned first to the research station. No one had told him that the met. station had been trying for several hours to contact Mueng, and he had come home to lunch feeling rather glad the weather was changing. One had to put up with violence in tropical regions.

To his gratification Julian had agreed to have lunch at the Residency. Recently—ever since his return from Villune, in fact—the Governor had been perturbed about Julian. He worked much harder than he should, and did not appear to derive his erstwhile pleasure from it.

However, it was something to have persuaded him to call in for lunch today. Come to think of it, he hadn't needed

much persuasion, which perhaps was a sign that his Chief Commissioner was getting back to normal.

But half an hour or so later, when he and Julian were drinking coffee in the small lounge, Sir Henry was rather less sure that his condusion had been the correct one. Julian sat carelessly, with one long leg thrown over the other, and he smoked one of the rich cigarettes he favored. But at the corners of his eyes showed thin creases which in another man would undoubtedly have denoted a degree of strain. In Julian, reflected the Governor, they might prove nothing more than that he had gone too long without leave. Which could be remedied.

A shadow was creeping over the sky and the palms tossed with sudden fury. Julian came quickly to his feet.

"I think we'd better get through to the research station, to make sure they haven't left," he said abruptly.

"All right, my boy. Go ahead. But you needn't worry. Amanda might insist on driving home in it, but Gilmering would hesitate and Elizabeth is cautious. Besides," with a smile, "there are half a dozen bachelors at the research depot. They won't be in a hurry to send the girls off."

Julian, whose politeness to his senior had so far remained unshakable, said brusquely, "You shouldn't have let them go."

Sir Henry eyed him in mild astonishment. "My dear chap, I *sent* them. They were bored and overheated, and I thought it would be pleasant for the three young things to go off together." He looked towards the terrace. "I haven't much of a nose for weather. In fact, the hurricane warning came as a surprise; at the most I expected a storm late this evening."

Julian dug his hands into his pockets, drew one out again and went to the telephone. It took him about seven minutes to reach the government exchange in Mueng, and when at last he snapped the receiver back on its stand, his lip was pulled in tight between his teeth.

"I appreciate your concern," said the Governor wonderingly, but you'll have to be patient. It never takes less than half an hour to get in touch with research. I *always* say it's as quick to drive there."

"I wish I could be sure they'd stay there, under cover," Julian answered savagely. He had flushed darkly, and for several moments he looked at the Governor as though he were not there. In a voice gone harsh, he added, "Are you quite sure Elizabeth went with Amanda and Gilmering?"

"Of course. Where else would *she* go? She certainly isn't here."

"Do you the exact time at which they left?"

The Governor raised his well-kept eyebrows. "They would stay there to lunch, Julian. . . ."

"I'm trying to get at whether Elizabeth really did go with them! Did they leave before or after the meeting?"

"Oh, before. Around eleven-thirty. I heard the car, but I didn't see them go."

Julian's eyes had the glint of steel. "Then Elizabeth didn't go with them. I saw her here, after you'd left for the meeting. She was going down to the rocks . . ." He broke off, his whole demeanor taut and a muscle working at the corner of his mouth. Through his teeth he said, "I told her to remain here."

"Unwise to *tell* a woman, Julian; it's safer to plead if you want to be obeyed. But she may be with Mrs. Mdiver or Mrs. Kelvey. Why don't you phone them?"

Julian spoke quietly, his eyes still narrow and glittering. "No, she's gone to the shore. I had a feeling she would, but when you said she was with Amanda . . ."

He didn't wait to finish. To Sir Henry's complete perplexity he went out to the hall, leaving the lounge door wide, and took the stairs three at a time. Almost at once he was down again, a waterproof flung over his arm. No word at all from him. The main door thudded and a roll of thunder overlaid the sound of his footsteps.

Sir Henry gazed very seriously at the tip of his cigar. What extraordinary behavior, for Julian. Julian, who this morning had sat in council imperturbably and cleverly outlining his plan for the expenditure of half a million pounds. The man was suddenly all nerves; a danger didn't do that to him. On Villune, risking *a stab in* the back at

every step, he had given an impression almost of carelessness and unconcern.

Sir Henry's thin fingers roved his chin, speculatively. He got up, opened the french window to the terrace and dosed it again, precipitately. He bent forward to get a glimpse of the dark, copper-flushed sky. Yes, it was going to be a first-class hurricane. The palms were driven on the wind, lightning illumined the great hairy trunks and immense lumps of rain smacked hard on the stone-flagged floor of the terrace.

This was only the beginning. In an hour the whole island would be battered down till the ravening gale blew itself out. He was glad now that Julian had put through the call to the research station. During storms communications were apt to be disrupted, and he could feel satisfied once he was sure Amanda and Gilmering were safe.

As for Elizabeth, poor child; had she started back when the wind first rose she would be here already. He did hope Julian would soon bring her in. Meanwhile, it might not be a bad idea to get in touch with the Mcivers and the Kelveys. Anything was preferable to inaction. Which was probably what Julian had thought when he had gone of with such alarming haste.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELIZABETH awoke to the deafening thunder of the waves. At one moment she was sleeping the drugged sleep of mental and physical exhaustion, and in the next she was wrenched upright, her eyes large with horror as they watched the mountainous seas flung up to fill the view from the mouth of the cave. It was like night. Between those explosions of white water she saw the boiling ocean, gunmetal grey like the sky. She couldn't believe it.

All had been calm when she had picked her way round the rocks to the headlands and sought the cool interior of one of the caves. She had sunk into the coral sand in the back of the cave and after an interval of sick dread had tried to read the book she had brought. But between her vision and the printed word had come a continuation of the unhappy conjecture, and she had had to ask herself, "What in the world am I to do?"

There was no clear-cut answer to it. She might pretend to be overcome by the climate and persuade Sir Henry to send her home, but it was such a horribly bleak prospect. Her work in England had been absorbing and in a way rewarding, but could anything ever fill the frightful void which Julian had created in her life? Strange that he could cause an emptiness, a terrible ache of loss, without knowing anything about it.

She tried to see herself brightly wishing them all good-bye; Sir Henry and Amanda, Peter, Dr. McIver and the rest. Julian would be one of "the rest." She was obsessed by the harrowing picture of a group gathered to wish her *bon voyage*, chief among them Julian, with Celia Cartney at his side.

It was so difficult to dwell on a future that was bound to be barren and loveless, yet sometime she would have to face up to it, and conquer it. Sometime she would have to go back to Aunt Elsa and Uncle David, submit to their kindly curiosity and to her aunt's well-meant endeavors to get her interested in "some nice man." Well, she loved

the two of them as much as ever, and maybe in time she would be able to make them realize that marriage was out. She would never be able to tell them about Julian, though, never. He would always be locked away inside her heart.

She thought back to their first meeting and the speed and ease with which he had had the small terrier delivered to Mrs. Kelvey, for her sake. She remembered his suave charm, the half-promises which had made warmly exciting the trip with him round the island; his ruthlessness and generosity in the court-houses. She recalled seemingly idle conversations which had left her glowing . . . and the fatal change in him when he had learned she was not Amanda. He would still do anything for her; she was sure of that. But now his kindness was cold and automatic, informed with distrust.

Elizabeth was weighed down by an accumulation of pain. Through heat and an excess of emotion she had been sleeping badly, and almost without volition she had lain back in the yielding sand, had stared for a while at the wet roof of the cave and then slipped over the rim into unconsciousness.

To come alive in a world gone dark and threatening, with tumultuous breakers leaping from the rocks thirty feet below to spray her haven, was like stepping into a kind of nightmare. Steadying herself, she stood up and moved to the cave's entrance, and it was only then that she became aware of the wind which tore along the rocks, and of the appalling density of the ceiling of cloud through which broke jagged streaks of lightning. She supposed that part of the noise was due to thunder; it was indistinguishable from the continuous, nerve-racking roar of those dreadful waves.

Yet she was not **frightened**. Her heart was too heavy to admit physical fear. She saw that the sea had come much higher than usual and knew she must get out of the cave before the furious combers filled it. The spray drenched and cooled her, so that her brain worked detachedly.

No use trying to carry anything. Her hat, the book, and the unopened picnic basket would be washed away but she couldn't help that. She would have enough **to do to keep**

her balance out there in the wind, without cluttering herself with the oddments she had brought. She wished she were wearing shorts. A soaking wouldn't hurt her, but the skirt of her frock would definitely be in the way.

Both hands to the rock, she emerged from the cave into the full blast of the gale. The breath left her lungs and she choked, leaning with all her weight against the rock. She took a few panicky gulps, and felt her nerves responding to her will.

The caves were fairly high above the ocean. She knew that by climbing a short way she would reach the springy grass and low bush of the headland; a perilous spot in a hurricane, but there she would be able to lie flat and drag herself from the edge. If only she could get up there.

The lightning, almost incessant now and slanting from the sea, showed the precipitous wall of rock and the angry ocean covering the outcrops she had scrambled over two or three hours ago. It seemed there was no alternative to climbing the headland.

The wet strips of hair stung her face, her limbs hurt with the effort of withstanding the force of the relentless wind yet she had to move or go numb. With as much care as she could summons she groped for the ledge to her left, and somehow managed to pull herself on to it. Now the next . . . and the next. Her fingers slipped disastrously on the wet stone, she went deathly cold with premonition and miraculously kept her footing.

It was no good. The slope of the headland was as far away as ever, and she just hadn't the kind of nerve it takes to swing from rock to rock above turbulent, greedy seas in a tropical hurricane.

It seemed as if she clung there, flailed by the elements, for hours. Her eyes accustomed now to the dark greyness, saw gulls and big fish dashed to death, and her inward vision witnessed her own body at the mercy of the waves. She was well aware that had it not been for the fact that the wind held her there, she would have fallen, headlong. It would hardly have mattered, she thought bleakly, if she had

Her heart did not leap when Julian appeared. Rather, it ceased to beat, as if she were suspended in time, lifeless. When it began to thud again her whole sensation was one of dreadful anxiety. He must have seen her already because he was dimbing this way, but she wanted to shout at him to take his time; she wanted to drag her eyes away from watching that lithe figure in shirt and trousers against a background of black sea and foam and dripping rocks.

He was nearly level with her now and not ten feet away. He looked up, shook the thick, wet hair from his brow, and she saw his face, lean and dark and terrifyingly set. He took the last long pull upwards, swung over on to her ledge and damped an arm about her.

She felt the thudding of his heart, heavy and rhythmic, the huge breaths he was taking, and in a moment of utter humiliation and despair, she turned away her head and pressed her cold cheek to the rock.

"Don't shake," he said, a thickness which might have been due to exertion in his tones. "We'll get out of this. Are you cold?"

What a thing to ask! She could have laughed hysterically. As if it mattered whether she were cold. Thunder cascaded, lightning flashed, and the fiendish wind wrapped them to the rocks, and he wanted to know if she was cold! She turned her face back to him; a small, white face, taut with anguish. She thought his arm tightened.

"I wish you hadn't come, Julian. There's two of us in danger—there need only have been one." Her throat worked painfully but she tried to speak louder, against thunder and wind. "Tell me exactly what to do, and I'll do it."

"Move with me," he said close to her ear, "just as though you were . . . part of me."

In other circumstances she might have smiled ironically, but now she absorbed his instruction like a child, and acted upon it. He kept one arm about her, but she had both hands free and her will obeyed his automatically. They moved upward in a series of slow, zig-zag steps. Suddenly, she saw grass and a great thicket of threshing wild banana, and within a minute she was lying flat on her front in the lee of the thicket, and there was a coldness across her back

where Julian's arm had been. Her eyes pressed against her forearm, her breath rasped as she fought to fill her depleted lungs. She felt him take her shoulders and twist her on to her side, looked up into his leaping, odly-dark eyes. His cheek came close to her own.

"We can't stay here, Elizabeth. The rain is nothing now, but soon it will be torrential. I had to leave your raincoat and my jacket down on the rocks. Have you got your breath back?"

She nodded. He took her elbows and helped her up, gripped hard so that she should not be swept from her feet. He stared into her eyes, then away, as if he had not found in them what he sought.

He spoke loudly, to combat the wind. "We must go back to the Residency; it's nearest. Hang on to me and keep your face this way. You'll breathe better."

It took half an hour, yet it seemed much longer. They battled across the wind-scoured grass, found the comparative shelter of the madly waving belt of timber, and had to leave it again to cross the gardens to the house. Several times he saved her from falling, and in the timber he had had to clear the path of snapped branches before they could get through. She felt battered and torn, yet had she been in a condition to reflect upon it, there was nowhere else she would rather have been than there in the storm with Julian.

She was past hating herself for having disobeyed his injunction that she stay near the Residency. Past wondering how it was that he had come out to look for her. Yet some small spark of awareness told her there was a difference in him, a sort of caged violence she had never known in him before. It had an affinity with the waxing storm.

He raced her up into the terrace, tried the handle of the big door and when it did not yield he fiercely thumbed the bell-push in its ornate circle of sculptured leaves. He was shielding her with both arms now, and cursing below his breath because the servant took so long to answer.

Actually the door was opened in a matter of seconds. Elizabeth was unceremoniously bundled into the hall and the door was again thrust to and bolted.

The relief from the noise and wind was overwhelming. She stood limply, nearly all her weight taken by Julian while she strove to quieten her nerves and the drumming in her ears.

The servant said uncertainly, "The Tuan Governor say I must tell him when the Tuan Chief comes."

"That's all right," Julian answered in odd, dry tones. "I'll tell him myself." He waited till the man had gone before saying to Elizabeth, "When you feel you can move I'll help you upstairs."

The Residency had been shuttered, and there was a light on halfway up the stairs, though for some reason the main hall light was off. When she looked up at Julian his face was all angles and shadows, his eyes unreadable yet glittering.

"Julian?" she whispered interrogatively, a little scared.

His hand came up to rake his hair. "I was searching for you for more than an hour," he said indistinctly. "I thought I should go mad. I can hardly believe you're . . . safe." He gave a brief, strained laugh. "I've never been so shaken in my life."

He couldn't possibly realize how bruising was his grip; but she wished he would hurt still more. This was unbelievable; the two of them, wet and wild, staring into each other's eyes as if neither had seen the other before.

A lock clicked, a beam of pure light fell across the hall, and Sir Henry said anxiously, "Is that you, Julian .. and Elizabeth? Thank God you're back." He switched on the merciless light, and Elizabeth found herself standing alone, without support. "Heavens, child, you are in a mess! You, too, Julian. You'd better go straight up and get changed, Elizabeth; I'll hear your story later. Julian .. I can fix you up with something, though it'll be a tight fit. You certainly can't go home."

Somehow, she drew herself well away from Julian. She heard him say swiftly, "I'll go with you!" and was able to reply with a clearness with astonished herself, "I can manage, thank you."

"Don't take a bath," he said, in spite of Sir Henry. "It's dangerous in an electric storm. And come straight down—I'll be in the library."

And then she was on her way up the staircase, willing her groggy legs not to fail her. She was nearly at the top when Sir Henry remarked, so buoyantly that she caught every word, "We'd better go up, too, Julian. I've something amazing to tell you."

Lightheadedly, she got out of her frock and used a towel. With the balcony doors barred and shuttered, and a lamp glowing above the dressing-table she was shut away from the roaring, thunderous elements. Now she could not see the lightning; the noise, though still fairly shattering, was not nearly so terrifying.

While she put on a fresh printed silk and combed up the drying hair, Elizabeth did not consciously think about Julian. Her emotions were too complex to permit lucid reasoning, but all her senses were aware of his presence in the house; they couldn't fail to be. She felt as she had felt out there on the rocks when she had first seen him climbing; suspended, breathless, and waiting. It was almost as if her heart had stopped beating.

Yet as she came into the corridor and dosed the bedroom door behind her, there was no doubt at all as to whether her heart was working. Its heavy hammering was suffocatingly close to her throat. She wouldn't be able to go into the library; she just hadn't the courage.

But Julian was there at the bottom of the stairs. She felt him rather than saw him, and her movements towards the library at his side were mechanical. She passed him and entered the room, heard him dose the door. Soft lights and a tea tray upon the desk muted the normally business-like atmosphere, and she sank down into the chair he had placed with a fatalistic sigh.

And strangely enough it was she who spoke first. "Saving people's lives seems to be a habit of yours," she murmured, not very steadily. "I don't know how to set about thanking you."

"Then don't bother," he said. The grim mockery in his voice made her the more determined to keep her head lowered. "Can you take a spot of bad news?"

Her glance lifted, but no higher than the second button of his shirt. "Bad news? About whom?"

"About Peter. You've lost him completely. Sir Henry has spoken to Amanda on the telephone, and it seems that your best friend has stolen him from you. But he was Amanda's first, remember."

"Do you mean they're engaged?" she asked dazedly.

"As good as. She said she's going to marry him, and the Governor's not displeased."

"That's wonderful." But there was no disguising that she spoke unemotionally. She wasn't yet capable of taking in many facts. A trifle woodenly, she added, "You were right, weren't you? You said she would have to marry someone solid, who wouldn't stand too much nonsense. I think he'll make her happy."

"Is yours the calm of desperation?" he queried with sharp cynicism. "Doesn't it sting to know he's making love to Amanda?"

"Why should it? It was through me they went off alone this morning. I was supposed to accompany them, but I managed . . ." She stopped, and at last looked up.

"What are you trying to ... to find out?"

He was sitting on the edge of the desk, bent towards her. The angular face was darker than she had ever seen it, and his eyes were hot and piercing. "Aren't you just a little in love with Peter Gilmering?" he demanded.

"Not even ... just a little. I like Peter, but I knew from the beginning that he was attracted to Amanda."

He gave a brief, harsh laugh. "Was that why he sought you out on every occasion—because he was attracted to Amanda?"

"Yes, it was!" She contrived a show of spirit, though the leashed anger in him made her feel weak. "Amanda tried to ignore him, and whenever they did speak together it caused fireworks. He couldn't get near her, and I daresay it comforted him to be friendly with me."

"You seemed to derive enjoyment from his friendship yourself!"

"There was no reason why I shouldn't." She seemed to sense an approaching climax and instinctively, in self-defence, she jumped up. "You're being beastly. I'm glad Amanda and Peter are going to be married, and I don't have to stay here and endure your taunts. If you think that saving me from the storm entitles you to . . ."

"Don't say it!" He was close and glaring down at her, gripping her wrists with bone-snapping fierceness. "Why didn't you ever refute it when I coupled you two?"

"Because . . ." Because her heart had been so entirely given to Julian that it was safer to allow him his innuendoes about Peter. "Julian, you're hurting!"

"I want to hurt you," he said in dipped tones, but his grip slackened slightly. "You've hurt me enough, heaven knows!"

A cracked little laugh came from her throat; now, *suddenly*, her every nerve was conscious of him, urging her to stab at him. "That's funny! You, hurt! You weren't hurt—you couldn't be, Julian; you're too insensitive, too cruel. We did upset your little plan, didn't we, but you've made a swift recovery, and you must have congratulated yourself many times on your own circumspection and caution. It would have been just too bad if, while you thought I was Amanda, you'd made the little slip which a more normal man would have made. Just supposing . . ."

The rest of what she had to say was stifled on her lips. For Julian's grasp loosened from her wrist and she was pulled against him, his arms tight across her back while he found her mouth with a force so savage that her neck was unbearably stretched. It seemed as if that merciless, silencing kiss would never end.

It did, though, but he didn't let her go. If he had, she would have sagged. She hung on to him, suffocated and nerveless, and unable to think. His breath came raging hot across her forehead.

"Don't ever dare to speak to me like that again," he said thickly. "One way and another you've put me through hell, but I won't stand any more of it. When I came upon

you out there clinging to the rocks I knew it would have to come to this—a quarrel which could have only one end. I knew I couldn't live through another day of grinding uncertainty." His tones were so odd; he didn't sound a bit like Julian. "I've got to have the right to forbid your running into danger. I'm not demanding that you marry me right away—not against your will, anyway—but I must have your promise that you'll let yourself love me. I'll do the rest."

It was all crazy, of course. Soon she would come alive to find him gone and the hurricane stilled. That was it; it must be the hurricane—they were known to do peculiar things to people. But, to Julian?

Thinly, carefully, she whispered, "Did you say . . . marry you?"

That's what usually happens when two people love each other." He took her shoulders and held her away from him. He was as pale now as it was possible for him to be, and his eyes had darkened with a passionate, vibrant need. "We're going to love each other, Elizabeth. I love you, and you . . . well, you've got to love me. There's no other way out. I can't do without you. You've spoiled my pleasure in my job, made me too much aware of what I'm missing every moment of the time when you're not somewhere near. I tried keeping well away from you, but it was hopeless; I thought of you more than ever. That foolish deception of yours and Amanda's set us back, but you must swear to be honest with me from now on; we'll live it down. I love you, do you hear?"

She nodded weakly. "You don't have to bark. I can't believe it, but I do .. hear." There was a brief silence. Then she added, rather flatly because the whole scene was unreal: "I love you, too, Julian. I can't imagine what's been happening to us, but I do."

He made her say it again, as if she meant it, after which he kissed her with more love and less cruelty than before; kissed her mouth and her eyelids, her throat, and again her lips. Quite some time later he lowered her back into the chair. The fires still burned in the depths of his eyes.

"Was it overwhelming?" *he* said, faintly smiling. "The

trouble is, I've waited too long. Shall I pour some of this tea?"

"Yes, please." Elizabeth's weakness had passed. She felt strong now, as every woman is strong when she has been convinced she is beloved. She smiled up at him. "Soon, I'll be capable of taking it all in. It's such a relief that you love me, Julian, such a blessed relief!"

"That's nice, if inadequate."

"You know, you've been a brute to Peter. You ought to apologize to him."

"Apologize, hell," he said, popping a knob of sugar into her cup. "He's given me too many black moments. Trotting you around Mueng and showing you the sights, taking you to your first polo match—and to Manai. All of them were privileges which should have been mine, but in the beginning I was too tied up, and after Amanda had come into her own you and I disliked each other pretty thoroughly." He put her cup conveniently within her reach and added, somewhat tersely, "Pretty plot, wasn't it? I wish I'd guessed it the day you arrived. I'd have given you both plenty to think about!"

"I'm sure you would."

"What I can't make out," he commented, taking up his own cup and sliding down into the chair he had pushed near to hers, "is what gave you and Amanda the idea of deceiving me. It was *me* you set out to hoodwink, wasn't it—not the rest, particularly?"

"Do you recall Miss Brodie? She didn't like you, Julian. According to her you were ruthless and self-seeking, and it was fairly certain that you'd make a dead set at sweeping the Governor's daughter off her feet; you were after a rich wife, and so on. Amanda, poor sweet, is susceptible, and she painted a lurid picture of what would happen if a fascinating bounder were determined to make her his. While I was pretending to be Amanda she got very annoyed because I wouldn't lead you on."

"As a matter of fact," he said casually, looking into his half-empty cup, "I got the impression, after Amanda confessed, that you *had* been leading me on,. During those early *days* I was purposely careful. I knew I was falling

myself, but I couldn't be sure of you. At times you were darned awkward, and at others you were a very sweet Governor's daughter. Do you remember the night I came upon you alone, on the terrace?"

She nodded, lips parted. "You ripped the hem of my housecoat. I couldn't bear to mend it."

"It was strange that night," he said. "I was getting really anxious about Sir Henry. I'd sent messages and got no replies, and when I met you on the terrace and you were so hard and off-hand I had the feeling you were blaming me for his prolonged absence. Then we stepped into the dining-room and you were different—gentle and understanding. I wanted so badly to hold you, and kiss you, and tell you I loved you."

"I wish you had," she said softly. "I'd have told you everything."

"I'm afraid I was glad, afterwards, that I hadn't. I don't believe I've ever been so furious as on the night when Amanda pulled her little surprise; it knocked everything to pieces. I could understand how easy it had been for you to fall in with her wishes before we knew one another, but I was sure that if you'd begun to feel about me as I felt about you, you couldn't have kept it up all those weeks."

"That part wasn't easy." She gazed at him pleadingly. "But I couldn't be certain you weren't purposely being charming to the Governor's daughter. Need we talk about it any more, Julian?"

He put down his cup and bent forward to kiss her temple. "Not today, anyway. Did anyone ever tell you you're beautiful? You are, darling. I love the feel of your skin and that delicious, half-apprehensive smile in your eyes; and there was never a softer, more kissable mouth. But don't be too shy, will you? That sort of thing slows a chap down."

Elizabeth smiled tremulously. She saw Julian's dark head against the bookshelves and loved it; loved the width of his shoulders in the white silk shirt. She wished he would look ecstatically happy, but knew that what with the storm and the beginning of a quarrel, everything had been too sudden. Herself, she still tingled with amazement, but it

was so good to be able to love him with a look, or a touch, though she still felt shy of touching him. She only knew that because of Julian the storm-rent day thrilled with beauty. At least, it would do, as soon as she had put a few more questions.

"Julian," she said, studiously cheerful, "tell me about Celia."

"Celia?" he echoed blankly. "What made you think of her at a time like this?"

"Isn't she . . . bound up with you in some way?"

He leaned back, narrow-eyed and infuriatingly confident. "Ah, a spot of healthy jealousy. Serves you right. Why should you escape it? What do you want to know about Celia?"

"Wasn't she . . . didn't she. . . ."

He laughed outright. "She wasn't, and she didn't. She's in Yefuang at the moment."

"In Yefuang!" The agonies she'd experienced over the intimate day she had visualized them spending together! "Did you leave her there?"

"You knew I was taking her to the island. I took the two of them—Celia and her brother. They're there now."

"Oh." It was a long-drawn sigh of happy understanding. "Weren't you a wee bit fond of her?"

"Don't be a halfwit, there's a good girl. I liked her well enough, and I was sorry for her. When she first came she had a shock; any sister would, at finding her brother living in a bamboo shack and not caring whether his boys worked or took their pay for nothing. She came to me and said she would stand by Tim, so I gave them what help I could. But Tim Cartney refused to be yanked on to his feet by his sister. There may be a woman somewhere who could do it, but I doubt it."

She was on the point of saying, "Celia could have improved the interior of the house and urged him to build a new one." But to speak ill of the woman now seemed like treachery; and she was too heartily thankful that all her fears had been groundless. She did ask, though, "What made Celia think you were in love with her?"

His smile vanished, and he smacked his fist so hard on to the desk that the tea things rattled. "Who told you that?"

"I . . . gathered it." Perhaps it would be wiser, she thought in trepidation, to say no more about it. Julian—even Julian in love—could be terrible in anger, she was sure.

But he was not prepared to leave it there. "Celia herself gave you that impression, didn't she? That was one of the reasons I got them away from Bolani. All the time Celia was here I tried to think the best of her, but I couldn't help noticing that she kept well away from the other men. With fie, she'd ding and unload her troubles. She was very easily hurt"—Oh, dear, thought Elizabeth, the woman did take him in a bit, after all—"and that was the reason I asked you to befriend her. For a girl she was in an intolerable position."

Elizabeth recalled the morning she had visited the plantation and found Celia packing her goods. That radiant young creature had taken a lot too much for granted. Sometime, she would speak to Julian about it, but at the moment she could tell that he found that aspect of Celia distasteful. She slid on to safe ground.

"Has Tim given up the management of the plantation?"

"He had to. We can't condone his type in the islands or we'd be overrun with them. His company has been requested to send a new manager and to see that the new house goes up at once. I was in a quandary as to what to do with Tim, but in the end—for your sake, my sweet, because you insisted there was good in the man—I had him taken on as a superintendent on a government plantation in Yefuang. He's on trial for three months under the keen eyes of a very good manager."

"Will Celia remain with him?"

He gave a humorous shrug. "Who knows? The manager is unmarried, and I noticed him give Celia one of those startled, famished looks which *you* must have encountered a good many times since arriving here. None of the men will dare stare at you like that from now on, though. You're mined"

He drew her to her feet and raised her fingers to his lips; she pressed them there. Rise petals bloomed in her cheeks and her eyes were starry with all she was thinking yet unable adequately to express.

"We'll marry soon," he said urgently. "I'm due for six weeks' leave, and we'll take a cruise. We'll touch at Singapore, and you can order some new furniture, if you like. I know you consider mine a bit soulless."

"We can make your rooms cosier without buying much. Is there any likelihood of your being transferred yet?"

"Shouldn't be, for a year or two, but one can't be sure. My next move may be my last."

"A ... a governorship?"

He grinned at her teasingly. "Does it frighten you?"

"A little."

"It needn't. Everyone will adore you, and when we have children the news office will *hang* out bulletins.. ."

"Julian!" She was crimson.

His head went back with laughter, and then he hugged her without restraint. But presently he said seriously, "You're a home-pigeon, Elizabeth. Are you *going* to mind being unable to put out roots?"

She answered softly, "We won't be able to avoid growing roots. When we move on we'll take the things we love with us, and you and I will grow together; that can't help but happen to people who are really in love."

"What wisdom," he scoffed. "Are you sure you love *me* enough?"

"Enough to marry you?" Her cheek lowered to brush the reassuring strength of his hand on her shoulder. "I love you with all I have, with all I am."

"You're going to have to put up with *an* awful lot of lovemaking."

"I'll do my best to bear it."

He looked down at her, mocking and tender. "I'm very glad you're Elizabeth and not Amanda. There have been times when I could cheerfully have spanked Amanda, but I'll never forget that it was she who brought you here." He paused. "We're going to *be* happy, *my darling* girl,

because I love you so much that even the rough patches, when they come, won't matter so long as we're together. I shall be a possessive husband!"

She smiled wordlessly, listened for a long moment to the gigantic battering of the hurricane and the tumbling thunder, and slipped her hand into Julian's. She would like him to be possessive, in a nice way. There was nothing in the whole world she wanted more than **to belong** to Julian.

THE END