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A HORSELOVIN' ROMANCE

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POSTSCRIPT TO YESTERDAY



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Essie Summers

Nicola Trenton was thrilled when her distant cousin George Westerfield invited her out to New Zealand to share in the local Centennial celebrations, but not so thrilled when Forbes Westerfield indicated that he would rather she didn't come.

But she went, nevertheless - and in exploring a long-ago romance, found her own happy ending.

CHAPTER I

Nicola looked at Humphrey with shining eyes. 'Humphrey, I want you to tell me one thing. Did you, years ago, when I was very small, want to marry Mother? Or has this been sudden?'

Humphrey's eyes searched hers in what Nicola recognized as a diagnostic look. She added softly: 'Because you know, even when I was ten I always wished you would. Every time you came home from Hong Kong on leave, I used to add it to my prayers: "Please, God, let him marry Mother."' '

Humphrey's eyes widened, looked incredulous.

'Nicola! True? Then we need never have --' He stopped, hesitated, then said firmly, 'I can see the time has come to be completely candid. Then we need never have waited.'

Nicola's tawny eyes, usually so full of mischief, were grave. 'Waited . . . what for, Humphrey?'

'For you to grow up. Jean wouldn't risk it.'

'Wouldn't risk what?'

'Wouldn't risk you being emotionally upset. Felt that bringing in a stepfather when you had so adored your own father could do all sorts of things to you.'

Nicola grew very still, felt the tears pricking her eyelids, and blinked rapidly. Humphrey caught her, turned her face into his shoulder and smoothed her hair.

'I always felt you would have accepted me, Nicola. You didn't seem to have any awkward angles or be likely to have them.'

Nicola had a strong line between her brows. 'How could Mother have held out against you so long? I mean she herself is so uncomplicated. I know there are cases where a step-parent can upset a family, but it's quite often not the step's fault in any case. But with you—I just can't understand it!'

Humphrey looked at her with tolerant, understanding look that the sort of life he had led had given him and said: 'Perhaps your mother never told you of that friend of hers, many years older, who had such a tragic life. . . Laura Bentley?'

'No. Never heard of her.'

'Well, she's been gone many years now. Laura remarried someone who before the marriage was simply charming to her children but who, inwardly, hated the thought that Laura had been loved by someone else before him. There are people like that. The children were constant reminders of his predecessor. The daughter managed to take it, but the boy was driven from home. He got into bad company. When he came out of prison— during which time his mother almost had a breakdown- she left her husband and made a home for the children. The boy made good, but it left scars on all their lives.

'Well, it left its mark on Jean too. She wouldn't risk it. She felt any child has a right to a happy childhood— not necessarily an easy one, but a happy one. That's why I went overseas, Nicola. I couldn't stay near Jean, loving her as I did, wanting to provide for her. I've never loved anyone else. My work among the refugees made up for a lot, not for everything.

'Jean has been wonderful. She's never considered me bound to her. In fact, she wouldn't even write to me regularly. Two letters a year, that's all. And she has so often said in those letters, " Time changes us, Humphrey. If ever you meet anyone you want to marry, you must remember I consider I have no claim on you." But she knew when I

came home for your twenty-first birthday that at last she could stop saying no.'

He looked down on Nicola and pinched her chin. ' Don't look like that, child. The years haven't been wasted. We've got more to give to each other now than we would have had we married earlier.'

Nicola knew that even that couldn't make up to this man for the loneliness he must have known; that it would never make up for the children he might have had.

She smiled, through her tears, ' I said I had only the one thing to ask, Humphrey, but I've got another.'

He grinned. ' Fire away, Nicky. It never is just one question with a woman. One thing leads to another.'

'Do you really want to take up a country practice here in England, or would you rather carry on with your medical centre in Hong Kong? Is it because of me that you and Mother are thinking of that practice in Suffolk?'

Humphrey swung away from her, went to the window, and stared out at the traffic below in the London street. He came back to her, his eyes searching hers. ' Why?'

Nicola lifted her chin. 'Because I've a right to know, Humphrey. You and Mother have made tremendous sacrifices for me. And, to be quite candid, I've had a longing for some time for the chance to stand on my own feet. But I felt I couldn't desert Mother. Would you go back to Hong Kong after you're married, if it wasn't for leaving me alone in England?'

The diagnostic look was back again, it searched, held, found . . . found the knowledge that Nicola could take it.

He smiled. ' Yes. . .your mother would like it too. I feel it would be a great experience for her. She could do voluntary work in the clinic if she wanted something to do, but apart from that I'd like to give her the taste of an altogether different life, completely free of financial responsibility. But wouldn't have asked her to leave you here alone. What were you thinking of doing, Nicola? Taking another secretarial post somewhere ... up north perhaps, for a change?'

'Not north, Humphrey ... in fact about as far south as it's possible to go, bar Antarctica. I'm going to New Zealand.'

'To New Zealand?' He was completely surprised. 'But why?'

'To visit my New Zealand relations.'

'You mean the Westerfields? But—but, Nicola, wasn't there bad blood between that family and this? I mean your father's cousin went out there and got horribly involved with some of the family. It caused a real rift. Listen, Nicola, we'll think of something else—if you don't want to stay with Genevieve Walkington. You don't have to go rushing off to the ends of the earth, dear.'

Nicola shook her head. ' That must have been forgiven and practically forgotten years ago. I got this letter yesterday, Humphrey. I was home—as usual—before Mother, and haven't told her yet. I wanted last night to think it out and then today to show it to you. That's why I asked Mrs Walkington for the day off. I wanted to see you when Mother wasn't about. I felt Mother would hedge. It will really give me a chance to try my wings. Here it is, Humphrey.'

She spread it out on the table and they leaned over it together. Nicola said: ' It's not in the old man's writing —my cousin George umpteen-times-removed. He'd cracked a couple of small bones in his hand and had it in plaster. His grandson wrote it for him, one Forbes Westerfield. I didn't know much about that one. I used to write to one

cousin, when I was quite small, before Cousin Nesta spoiled things. He was Garry Broughton, son of Jenny Westerfield, Cousin George's daughter. But when that family row took place, Garry's mother wouldn't let him write any more.' The letter said:

Dear Nicola,

You will be surprised to hear from us after all these years, but to tell the truth, a most important event is to take place soon and I would very much like your branch of the family to be represented out here. I know there was a real shindy when your father's cousin was here, but I have no patience with people who carry on old feuds and I hope you will do all you can to arrange a visit.

We are having a family centennial celebration. You may not have heard of these, but they happen quite frequently in New Zealand, where our white civilization is comparatively recent. Ever since there have been these Centennials. Church Centennials, school ones, family ones. Sometimes the Centennial of the landing of a certain ship is marked in this way. In the family ones, all the descendants gather, if possible, at the original homestead. At one, only a scire of miles from here, last year, a whole family came out from England and made it a great occasion.

I'm hoping you'll do the same. Let bygones be bygones and write a happier page of family history at Puke-o-Marino. We saw a picture of you recently in a magazine, with your employer, Genevieve Walkington. I'm very fond of her books and was most interested to know you were her secretary. That clinched things for us.

One of our neighbours has collected together a lot of our family history, but though she's made a grand job of getting the research done, she says she can't face the task of putting it together and typing it. I thought with your experience you'd be just the one for the job.

I realize, of course, that you may not be able to get the time off—or even want to—or that you may be involved with a young man or something, but do, if it is at all possible, give consideration to the notion.

To be practical, I'd pay your air fare out, if you can spend only a short time, or your ship fare if you would like the cruise, and give you your usual wage from the time you leave England. If you would like to spend, say, six months, you would be most welcome. You could come before Christmas then, so you could get the advantage of the whole summer. The celebrations are not till the end of February when things will be a little slacker as far as the farm work goes. Not that it is, usually, but in view of the Centennial, we put in no crops this year—the haymaking will be over—we're just concentrating on the sheep.

I know there's no chance of getting the book published before the celebrations, in fact I don't want that, because I would like it to end with a full account—and photos—of the Re-enactment. That will make a full record of one hundred years of farming and family life. But if you can come before Christmas, it would give you a chance of getting on with the typing to date if you could come.

I'm sorry I'm not writing this with my own hand, but my right one is in plaster—I broke a couple of small bones in it last week. My grandson, Forbes Westerfield, is writing it for me. I find it hard to express myself through someone else—I'm not used to dictating—but I hope I've been cordial enough to tempt you. I will be looking for an answer by return airmail with the news that you are at least considering it.

With warmest regards,

Your affectionate kinsman, George Westerfield,

per Forbes Westerfield.

Nicola had read it aloud, though Humphrey's eyes had followed every word, assessing it.

They both straightened up, looked at each other and smiled.

'I'd say take it, Nicola. It's the chance of a lifetime. And most opportune, with Genevieve and her husband taking this trip to Canada. And listen, dear, it's not too far from Hong Kong, New Zealand. In March, when all is over, you could fly across to us. We'd give you the time of your life. And—I'll be devastatingly frank—it would give Jean and me the chance to make that world of two that is very necessary in a marriage. I'll go even further and say—because I know now you can take it— that I want to marry a wife, not the mother of one ewe lamb.'

Nicola put her arms round his neck, hugged him as she had always done. 'It's what I want for both of you. I think we can convince Mother of that.' A dimple cleaved her cheek and mischief glinted in the tawny eyes. 'I'll do it well, Humphrey, with you backing me up. I'll pretend to be very anxious lest Mother should be hurt and say how glad I am that it didn't come six months earlier when I'd have turned down this wonderful chance because I couldn't have left her alone.'

It went as they had planned. Nicola played her part well. Jean rose to the bait, even said, looking across at him, 'Humphrey, you've done nothing yet about telling the medical centre you're leaving, have you?'

He shook his head, not looking at Nicola. 'No, I felt I'd have to go back and tie up the ends, Jean. But if you feel, in view of Nicola being away from England, that we could go there indefinitely, I'd not tell them yet. Nicola could come across to Hong Kong with us, after these celebrations. Unless, of course, a romance of her own may change her mind.'

Later that evening, when the excitement had died down, Nicola wrote airmail to George Westerfield, accepting his offer. Humphrey posted it on his way back to his temporary flat.

She was no more than mildly surprised to receive an airmail from Forbes Westerfield the next day. He had his name and address on the back. It would be about something the old man had forgotten to put in the other letter, no doubt. She was humming lightheartedly until she saw it was marked 'Letter Number One'. How odd ... the letter of yesterday hadn't been numbered! She slit it open, unfolded the one page.

Dear Miss Trenton [Forbes Westerfield had written]

I am writing this by the same mail as the one from my grandfather. I want you to read this one first before you get carried away into making plans. He has written you to ask you to come to New Zealand for the family Centennial celebrations.

I'm sorry to be so blunt, but only bluntness will serve, I'm afraid. Age must have dulled my grandfather's perceptions a little. He seems to have forgotten just how much harm the two women of your branch of the family—who came out here generations apart—did to this branch. They left behind them the memory of much anguish and a certain aftermath of bitterness. My grandfather simply commanded me to write that letter. I had argued with him to no avail. Possibly you yourself might be quite harmless, but I feel it is only stirring up the mud.

It could be, of course, that you have no intention of coming—in fact, I hope so—then there will be no hard feelings. It's just a bee Grandfather has got in his bonnet. But I feel very strongly that I don't want him to suffer disillusionment at this stage. It's not at all necessary to have anyone from the Old Country at this celebration.

Whatever we have achieved in this hundred years, we did ourselves, and I think we'll all be happier to leave it that way.

By posting this at the same time I'm giving you the chance to decline graciously without my grandfather knowing I've shoved my oar in. Should you wish to answer this, you could address a letter care of Mr. J. Melford, Koromiko Gorge, Whispering Mountain Road, via Oxford, North Canterbury, New Zealand. I'll tell them there may be a letter left there for me. Will simply say it concerns the Centennial and is something I did not wish to tell my grandfather yet. But I expect you'll take the tactful way out and just inform him yourself that it is not convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Forbes Westerfield.

By posting this at the same time. He'd not allowed for the vagaries of postal deliveries. Nicola walked to the window, images forming in her mind as she stared out unseeingly . . . Humphrey, dear loyal Humphrey, waiting year after year for his Jeannie . . . because of Jeannie's daughter.

Humphrey with a boyish, eager light in his eye, such as she had never before seen, planning, planning, as he had last night. Mother, looking ten years younger, looking bride-like, despite her forty-two years, shedding responsibility like a cloak.

Nicola could see some of the lines she had written to George Westerfield as clearly as if the letter were still on the table in front of her instead of winging its way across ocean and continent to a small country at the bottom of the world.

I'll be delighted to come, Cousin George, and will hope it may serve to heal old wounds. It couldn't have come at a better time. My mother

is marrying again—a doctor we've known for years but who is stationed at Hong Kong. I would prefer to come by ship as there is no press for time. I'll be delighted to knock the history into shape. I'm not a writer, but I've naturally acquired a little know-how from Genevieve, I've typed seven books for her. And it's so convenient just now. It so happens that she and her husband are going to Canada to visit their daughter for four or five months. I will write again as soon as I can be more definite about plans, but my mother's fiance was here tonight and it was hard to get on with this letter. But I wanted you to get a quick reply to your amazingly generous offer. But please send no money. My maternal grandmother left me a legacy last year and I don't need it. I do hope your hand soon heals, broken bones can be so painful.

With warmest regards, Cousin Nicola. P.S. I am looking forward to meeting Garry. We wrote to each other when we were children, but it faded out.

N.A.T.

That had been the most tactful way of putting that. But *now!* Nicola wished it could have been recalled. Somehow, she would have to write, changing her mind. But how?

What a horrible person this Forbes Westerfield must be. Garry would never have grown like that, she was sure. Meanwhile she must say nothing to Mother. Just let her go on making arrangements about the wedding and booking their passages for Hong Kong, till everything was so final there could be no backing-out.

Jean Trenton came in, her arms full of packages. 'I've been madly extravagant, pet. Everything I saw in shop windows today looked just right for a sea-voyage. It's quite crazy, I know, because Hong Kong is just about the cheapest place in the world for shopping, but I had to buy honeymoon stuff.'

Nicola enveloped her mother in a hug. 'Of course you had to. You must do Humphrey proud on the way out. You *are* going by ship, aren't you? Air is too quick. A ship is much more romantic.'

Her mother laughed happily. 'Darling, it's so wonderful to have you so thrilled for us. I could never have left you alone in England. In fact I wasn't even too happy leaving you flapping in London if Humphrey had taken that practice in Suffolk. But to think that you too will be sailing off on new adventures is marvellous. I'm almost afraid to plan in case anything happens to spoil it. Isn't it foolish? To feel things are too good to be true. Just silly. Centennials don't just fold up, do they? After all, they take a hundred years to mature. They're certainly planned in advance.'

Nicola's mouth went dry. She went on setting the table, glad her coppery hair was swinging forward to hide her expression. The horrible part was that Genevieve was so impulsive she'd got on to her shipping agent immediately and had put her trip forward a month. She was so kind. She'd said, 'That will mean you can get away sooner and have *all* summer in New Zealand.'

Well, she'd just have to get a temporary job and trust to Humphrey to persuade her mother that she was perfectly able to live alone. There was an added complication. Mother might not have minded so much if Gran had been here, Daddy's mother, but she was taking a trip to Australia later on.

There was nothing else for it. She would have to convince her mother she would not be lonely. Only they would not go away now with quite such carefree thoughts, and if ever a pair of lovers deserved to have their minds perfectly at rest, they did.

Something might turn up . . . someone travelling abroad and needing a secretary . . . that would make Mother feel she was not deserting her one chick. Nicola felt she was mentally keeping her fingers crossed

till Humphrey turned the Suffolk practice down and booked their passages.

Forbes Westerfield could jolly well wait for his letter. If she wrote immediately saying she wasn't coming after all, then Mother would wonder why there were no more letters from old Cousin George. She'd have to play it along for a bit. Nicola didn't want to ask her mother what had happened when Cousin Nesta went out there. And really, since getting that letter, she couldn't help wondering if the fault had been all Nesta's, though her mother had no time for that relation of her late husband's. Nicola had never seen her.

They were deeply prejudiced against this branch of the family, of course. It too went back a hundred years—or very nearly.

Francis Westerfield had gone out to New Zealand as a young man to a colony less than a score of years old. He had decided not to settle in Christchurch but to strike out further north, crossing the treacherous Waimakiriri, the Cold Water. And he had worked like a Trojan to make some sort of habitation and a living, fit for his bride, a distant cousin to whom he had become betrothed before embarking on the sailing-ship that had brought him to the Southern Hemisphere.

It had taken him three long years. Then Nancy Westerfield had set out, her hope-chest in the hold, her bride-clothes in her trunk.

And, so it was said later, she had been daunted from the start. It had been an ill-starred voyage. It had been nearly three weeks before they even got out of the Channel. The captain and the crew were at loggerheads and often drunk. The seas were so rough the women passengers had to rely on the men to walk them round the decks.

They had an inadequate number of sheep on board, so fresh meat soon ran out. There was much infectious illness on board, damp, close quarters, and well-nigh unbearable homesickness among the

passengers to cope with. The noise of the children, the stench down below and the constant becalming had made the long trip a nightmare.

But at last they had sailed into the translucent waters of Lyttelton Harbour—then called Port Cooper—and had dropped anchor. They had also dropped Nancy's trunk overboard when unloading. Its contents were saturated when recovered.

But the last straw had been that her bridegroom had not been there to meet her. To Nancy, ignorant of the state of the roads and the rivers, it had been humiliating.

Friends of his, as soon as they had word the ship had been sighted, and alarmed by his non-appearance, had met her and taken her to their home in Christchurch. The next day Francis, her bridegroom-to-be, much less debonair than she had remembered him, had turned up in the main street of Christchurch riding a *bullock*, and making a joke of it!

He borrowed a horse and dray to take her back to Marino where they were to be married. To Nancy, it seemed as if they were going into the wilderness, battling against a hot, dusty nor'wester all the way. She was choked with dust, bumped and jolted, scared and furious.

Then before they even got to Oxford heavy rain set in and the dust turned to mud. The snows, melting under the heat of the nor'wester, back in the Alps, had swollen the Waipuku, normally a small river, though Francis hadn't considered it dangerous.

But when they were almost at the other side the horse had slipped and despite a wild clutch by Francis, Nancy had gone over the side of the dray into the muddy waters. Francis had had her out in no time, but Nancy was convinced it was an appalling country, grim and merciless.

She postponed the wedding. Then, finally, she told Francis it was no good and, after waiting months in Christchurch, had gone back to Hampshire.

Before she had even reached there Francis had married, on the rebound, Jane Temple, whose brother worked for him and who later owned the Koromiko Gorge Station. True enough, the New Zealand Westerfields had never had much luck with Nicola's side of the family.

This time the two letters from Puke-o-Marino homestead reached her by the same mail. Nicola opened them with trepidation. First Cousin George's. His hand was much better and he wrote himself. Thank heaven for that. He was extremely happy about her coming. Nicola thought indulgently that it probably tied up with a bit of local competition. It was a matter of pride to be big enough and important enough to have a family connection out from England. Other families had done it and George Westerfield wasn't going to do Jess!

Then, shaking, she opened Forbes Westerfield's letter.

There was justification for the shaking, she found. He was furious.

... You haven't even replied to my letter. As far as you are concerned, it might never have existed. You are simply accepting the lot that Grandfather offered. This gesture about paying your own fare I can see through—you have every confidence that it will be set aside. It's merely to give Grandfather the impression of independence. It classes you with your father's cousin, believe me! Very devious. I think you over-estimate what the estate can stand. Marino Homestead sounds very grand, no doubt. It's by no means an English Manor House, you know. And the cost of bringing you out here, for the mere whim of an elderly man, is not worth it.

I can't stop you coming, of course, but if I were you, I should certainly reconsider. I know it must be a tempting offer to anyone cooped up in London year in, year out. I am aware that I asked you to turn down the chance of a lifetime—so this second letter is to offer you the money for a trip, say to Italy, or Switzerland, to compensate you.

I've not tried to put this tactfully. I'm a blunt man and I happen to feel very strongly about this, and since you haven't even answered my letter I can only conclude that if I went about this tactfully you would ignore this too.

Yours sincerely,

Forbes Westerfield.

Nicola couldn't remember ever feeling so furious. If only she could have a half-hour alone with this Forbes Westerfield! He wouldn't have such a high-and- mighty opinion of himself when she had done with him.

So he thought she was an opportunist, did he? That she had made a gesture that she was sure would be brushed aside!

Well, she'd sit down this very moment and tell him she wouldn't dream of coming! Nicola picked up her pen, hesitated. There were others to consider before herself. Humphrey and Mother were so happy, idyllically so. Even if she took a trip somewhere else—paying for herself—they would worry about her. Going out to family connections, however distant, was rather different from striking out on one's own.

Besides ... a little smile began to play round Nicola's mouth ... it would be so unsatisfactory to merely write to this Forbes and say she wasn't coming. She would continue to smart under the injustice of it.

She'd like to go out there and prove to them all, and especially him, that this branch of the family was not entirely composed of chicken-hearted women or mischief-makers. She would go out under her own steam and prove to him absolutely that *she* was not on the make . . . perhaps he thought she hoped she might be included in Cousin George's will for a legacy. Well, she'd let him see that she had enough money to indulge herself in a little travelling.

There was the money Nanna had left her last year. It would pay her return fare, give her a moderate amount of spending money . . . she would loftily wave away all thought of financial reward for typing the history, and make Forbes Westerfield eat his words!

She heard her mother coming and hastily thrust his letter into a drawer.

Humphrey was with her. They came in looking like a pair of kids, an air of delight about them.

Her mother kissed her. 'Humphrey thinks he can wangle you a berth quite soon ... on the *Kowhai Maid* . . . and guess what? We're going to give you the car as a present. Humphrey says you ought to see all New Zealand while you're there and the best way is to -take your own car. Humphrey says the scenery is exciting, very varied . . . from thermal springs and geysers in the North, to glaciers and fiords in the South. He had a leave there some years ago. And with Cousin George paying your fare, you'd have a wonderful time.'

"Nicola almost said: 'Oh, I'm paying my own because I'd rather be independent,' but bit it back. Better for Mother's peace of mind not to know she would probably return to London absolutely skint!

That night when the two of them had gone to visit friends, Nicola settled to two letters. The one to Cousin George was the easier. It simply said that she was anticipating the forthcoming visit with much

pleasure but stressing the fact that she needed no financial aid. The other read:

Dear Mr Westerfield,

Since I don't know of any other way to start a letter ! —this is to tell you that I have decided not to diminish my Cousin George's natural pleasure at having an English representative of the family at his Centennial celebrations by refusing him after accepting. I'm afraid I have no patience with any Montague-Capulet type family feuds. They're completely out-dated in my world, even if they still survive in a small country like New Zealand.

I must assure you that I have no intention whatever of accepting any financial assistance from the New Zealand estate towards my expenses. I'm looking on it solely as the realization of a dream of mine ... to see as much as possible of the world while I'm young. You Kiwis do a lot of travelling—ever so many of you come here, for instance. Some of us are just as adventurous, even if I have never been conscious—as you put it—of ' being cooped up in London.' There's nothing narrow or confining about London, believe me. We may not have your great open spaces, but it seems to me that that doesn't save you from being very narrow and hidebound. I love London.

I think, seeing I was thinking about travelling this year while my employer is in Canada, that I might as well include New Zealand in my itinerary and if, by so doing, I can give a little pleasure to an old man, and assist him with this typing, then I ought to do it.

I'll probably arrive in New Zealand by the middle of November, but intend having some time in the North Island first. I am bringing my own car. I'll come to Marino Hill before Christmas, so I can get well on with the typing before the celebrations. Then I'll leave immediately it's finished. I'll spend no longer on the estate than is absolutely

necessary, and I imagine we need not see too much of each other. I assure you I will make no mischief.

In fairness to myself, though, I ought to inform you that I had not ignored your letter in writing direct to Cousin George. It was simply that I had not received it till the following day when I had already written him accepting his kind invitation. Posting letters at the same time is no guarantee that they will be delivered the same day, I might point out. Whether you believe my explanation or not is, of course, up to you. Any further correspondence I will address solely to Cousin George.

Yours sincerely,

Nicola A. Trenton.

The die was cast.

CHAPTER II

It was late November and now the miles were narrowing between Nicola and Puke-o-Marino and the tour of the fascinating North Island was behind her.

Gone was the carefree holiday atmosphere she had known up there and she was trying not to let herself become too apprehensive. She told herself sturdily that she was so fit after the sea-voyage and the long days since in glorious sunshine, she could face anything.

A reminiscent smile touched her lips. The scenery had been more than a dream-come-true. It had surpassed anything she could have dreamed up. White-capped mountains rising in the centre of the North Island, incredibly near to the area where hot springs bubbled out of the ground. Even one mountain, Ngauruhoe, had had a plume of smoke above its shining snows, indicating the volcanic fires that smouldered in its core.

The Far North had been a paradise of still serenity. She remembered the placid waters of the Bay of Islands, where once tattooed warriors had waited in their canoes, ready to sign their allegiance to Queen Victoria. There had been immense caves, their ceilings starred with the unearthly blue-green lights of myriads of glow-worms, while their little boat glided over the stream beneath. She'd loved it all . . . the dim green secret bush with its strange bird-calls, busy ports, bustling cities, great plains and rolling country, to her eyes sparsely settled; long beaches where the rollers of the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean came pounding in.

Instead of coming down to Lyttelton, the port of Christchurch, in the all-night steamer and then motoring north to Marino, through Oxford, she had crossed in the *Aramoana*, which meant The Path of the Ocean, and was a car ferry that plied between Wellington, the

Capital, and Picton in the Queen Charlotte Sounds at the extreme north of the South Island.

She had loved it so much she had lingered, to see the incredible beauty of the countless sounds, cut like fret-work into the land, with the green bush, which was really forest, sweeping down to the water's edge.

The drive through the Grove Track, sweet with bird-song and twilight green with tree-ferns and evergreen native trees, had brought her to Nelson, where a miniature English city was built round the harbour and where, prowling, just as she had decided how English it seemed, she had come across bougainvillea spilling in glowing colours over the fences and had seen lemons growing on trees, and looking like golden Chinese lanterns above the broad sweep of Tasman Bay.

Beyond Nelson she had found a little bit of Kent with the delicate green tracery of hop-vines and the rich pattern of orchards. Further on were fields of tobacco and then, climbing Takaka Hill, she had watched marble being quarried. Then she had coasted down to the glorious sweep of Golden Bay where in 1642, four of Abel Tasman's crew had been clubbed to death by Maoris.

Nicola had climbed to the Abel Tasman memorial and by the slender white column she had found a Maori mother and her four bonny children.

'Hard to believe now,' said the Maori girl, 'that this beautiful bay, so peaceful, was once the scene of such violence. They called it Murderers' Bay then.' She shuddered.

They had spent the rest of the day together, the other girl inviting Nicola to share their picnic lunch. They had swum together, explored the rock pools for strange creatures, gathered shells.

Then, lying on the hot sand in her swim-suit, with the youngest child astride her, piling up sand between her shoulder-blades, Nicola had said, ' I'm on my way to a " Centennial celebration. I'm a distant connection from England. It's in North Canterbury. The homestead is sometimes called Marino Hill, sometimes Puke-o-Marino. What does that mean?'

'The Hill-of-Peace, probably. Marino means calm or peaceful.'

Now, nearing journey's end, Nicola hoped it might live up to its name, that it might really be a place of peace, not of discord. Nice if—just as the *pakehas* and Maoris no longer warred and considered themselves both New Zealanders—her coming could patch up the ancient quarrels. Or if not patch them up, since they had happened so long ago, to dispel the distrust, restore the harmony.

She hoped she hadn't missed the turn-off to the foothills. It would be so easy in these long stretches of flat or rolling country to miss it. A small village—township they called them—came into view. Nicola stopped at an old cottage, possibly a relic of pioneering days.

Then she wished she'd gone further, picked a cleaner- looking place. This was horribly unkempt. Even the windows had a furtive-looking air. And there in the blazing sunshine was hooked a cage containing a canary that was lying gasping in its cage, just an eighth of an inch of fouled water in its drinking-dish. Oh dear, perhaps the inmates had forgotten the bird had been left out without shade. The temperature was well into the eighties.

An old crone came to the door, peered at her. In two seconds Nicola had realized that she would get no directions here. But she couldn't leave that poor bird.

She said, as politely as possible, ' Look, I think you may have forgotten that you've left your canary in blazing sunlight . . .it's almost at its last gasp. May I carry it into the shade for you ?'

'It's not *my* canary!' She almost spat at Nicola. ' Good riddance to it if it does die. The sooner it does the better I'll be pleased. It'll be one nuisance less about the place. My neighbour died ten days ago. Daft, she was, about animals. Now I'm saddled with her wretched poodle and canary.'

Nicola said, ' Couldn't you get someone else to take them ? I mean --'

'It's no business of yours. And I've no dealings with anyone likely to want a bird and a dog. Cats now, they're different. You've gotta have them to keep the mice down. Over-run with mice I'd be if it weren't for my Joseph. He keeps himself. Dogs are feckless things. Cost too much.'

Nicola felt horribly distressed and so helpless. She said, pleadingly, ' Please let me carry the bird into the shade? And give it some water?'

The old woman reached up, unhooked the cage, and thrust it at Nicola. 'There you are! If you're that tenderhearted do something about it yourself! It's all yours.' She gave a great cackle of laughter, stooped, unlatched an odd little trapdoor on her indescribable back verandah, and out shot the dirtiest, thinnest poodle Nicola had ever seen. The woman aimed a blow—a well-directed blow—at it with her foot. The poodle yelped agonizingly and rushed up the path towards the front gate. ' You can take that too, if you're that concerned about animals. And I don't know where the turn-off is. Never heard of Marino. I never go further than the store.'

Nicola, slightly dazed, with the cage dangling from one finger, hurried up the path, stopped at the gate and gazed at the poodle, trying to get through it, with despair. She couldn't leave that miserable scrap

of doghood here. Not with a woman like that, keeping it cooped up in that horrible dark little hole.

She bent down, scooped him up, hating the way he cringed, bundled him into her car, got in herself and sat looking ahead of her blankly. The bird-cage, from which rose a ghastly stench, was on the seat beside her.

She came to. Her first job was to get this poor bird into shade. She drove down the street and parked under some huge old oak trees that overhung the fence of the local pound, she discovered. She spied a horse-trough.

Nicola got out with the cage, shut the door on the k poodle, and threw a leg over the fence. Not barbed wire, thank goodness, though this was going to do nothing for her apricot three-piece suit in coolest linen. Still, she had discarded the tiny jacket some miles back, so if the jumper top got dirty, she could conceal it with that.

Anyway she had to do something. For one unworthy moment she found herself thinking it would be just as well if this bird died here and now, because what on earth was she to do with it? Then she shook her head.

'Nicola Trenton, I'm ashamed of you!' she scolded out loud. ' You're just as bad as that old hag! '

She opened the cage, took out the drinking-dish, washed it in the trough and filled it with water. Then, taking the bird in her hand, she gently sprinkled water on it, talking soothingly to it the while. It was amazing how quickly it perked up. She held it over the water and it drank and drank. With one hand Nicola managed to shake the cage reasonably free of droppings and seized handfuls of grass to sweep it out. There wasn't a grain of birdseed left.

She put the bird back on the floor of the cage and presently it fluttered up to the perch. Nicola set it on a handy tree-stump adjacent to the trough.

Now for her other problem! It was barking its head off in a frenzied shrill tone that would drive her mad. She surveyed it ruefully through the car window and then stiffened into real alarm. It was sitting on her linen jacket, scratching madly. Fleas! Nicola felt an instant itching all over her!

She had the door open in a moment and was dragging the poodle out. Suddenly she made up her mind. She reached into the boot of the little green Mini, pulled out a towel and sponge-bag.

'You're about to be bathed,' she informed the poodle, ' with Evening-in-Paris toilet soap! '

He was thirsty too, lapping up the water as she stood him in the trough, holding him up on his hind-legs because the water was deep. Poor little thing, he was not much more than a puppy. Not that she really liked poodles. Her taste was for something large in dogs.

When she and Mother had lived in the country, years ago, they had had a spaniel and a retriever. Lap-dogs weren't in Nicola's line.

Oh dear, they did look a mess when they were wet, pink skin showing through. And this one, poor mistreated thing, was not a good specimen, anyway. Some of his skin seemed rubbed off and his eyes were swollen as if he'd cried. They were all crusted too. Nicola cleaned them gently with her handkerchief and threw it away. A wave of pity surged over her.

But it was a real problem. How *could* she arrive at the Hill-of-Peace with a canary and a poodle? It was true that she had a flair for

unorthodox adventure, just as Mother always said, but she hadn't sought this one, it had been thrust upon her.

Nicola, face grim, scrubbed madly at the poodle with her good towel and was relieved to see him coming dry and a little fluffy.

Two small boys suddenly spoke behind her, making her jump.

'Jeepers! What do you think you're doing?' one demanded. He had hair as bright as Nicola's own. ' *You'll* cop it, washing your dog in the horse-trough! That trough's full of soap-suds. Animals can't drink that!'

'It's not my dog,' said Nicola helplessly.

'Well, what are you washing him for if he doesn't belong to you? That's a whopper! People just don't go round washing other people's dogs.'

'I do,' said Nicola firmly. ' Look, I --'

She was interrupted. By the other boy this time. ' Gosh, did you ever see anything like it, Ginger? She's got a canary on that stump. Do you always take your canary for a walk, when you want to wash your dog?'

'I do *not*. At least, it's not my canary. I --'

'Whaddya mean? Whose is it? Then why --'

Nicola said quickly, ' Look, boys, I think I'd better get away before a ranger comes. About a mile up the road I called on a funny old lady—I wanted to ask my way—her neighbour had died and left these two poor things, and she'd left the bird out in the broiling sun and had this dog shut up in a sort of coalhole or woodbox or something, with no air, no light. It was filthy. I asked her to do something about them

and she thrust them at me. I had to try to get rid of the fleas on the dog '—she peered at the water to see them floating like a scum on top—' so I washed it in here. Could you boys help me? Is there anywhere, away from here, where I could park the car and give this dog something to eat? I've got some biscuits and sandwiches in the car.'

Ginger and Darkie entered into the cause wholeheartedly. One scooped most of the froth off the water, the other carried the damp, squirming dog for her and they all piled into the car and went down the road to what Nicola would have called a park and they called a domain.

There was nobody else there. The boys pointed to a picnic table set up under some aspen poplars and Nicola parked the Mini beside it.

They took the poodle out and enthusiastically fed it with sandwiches and biscuits which it wolfed down.

Nicola said, 'Do you think you could go back to that little shop on the corner and get me some birdseed? It was a grocer's, wasn't it?'

They nodded. 'Sure. We'll get some.'

She took out some money. 'And get yourselves some icecream or chocolate at the same time. I could use some icecream ... I'm slowly melting. And would they have saveloys? That would keep this poodle going till I get . . . er . . . home.'

Home! Marino Hill Homestead . . . and she was going to turn up with *livestock!*

Ginger and Darkie arrived back full of virtue and with enough birdseed to feed the canary for three months. They set the cage up on the table in the shade and filled the hopper. The bird began to eat.

Nicola went to a nearby tap and washed her hands, wiping them on the car duster. She got her Thermos out of her picnic basket and said, ' We'll share the rest oi the sandwiches.' She felt nothing but tea would restore her.

She was rather sorry to part with Ginger and Darkie. Once they had got over their first shock at her unorthodox behaviour, they thoroughly approved of her rescue of the pets. They rode with her to the corner. Just as Darkie got out he thought of something. ' Will your mother mind you bringing these things home ?'

Nicola grinned crookedly. 'My mother is in Hong Kong. I come from London. I've come out here to visit relatives. They live beyond Oxford, up in the hills— Puke-o-Marino. Do you know it?'

'Not to say know it,' said Darkie, ' but we had it in pioneer history the other day. We're doing a local survey, that's all.'

Ginger lifted a freckled face -towards her, pink and earnest. ' What do you think they'll say when they cop an eyeful of this lot?'

Nicola looked sober. ' I don't know. I only hope they like pet dogs. And birds.'

Ginger evidently believed in no false comfort. ' Not much hope. Lots of farm people don't like pet dogs. Y'hardly see any dogs except working dogs on the farms here.'

'Why, don't New Zealanders like dogs?'

'Oh, there's plenty of pet dogs in town. Farmers get worried in case dogs go on the loose and become killers. They get into mischief—worry the sheep.'

Nicola looked at the poodle's pink-and-white in- offensiveness and said, ' I shouldn't think he'd be brave enough. One baa from a lamb and he'd go for his life.'

Ginger grinned. ' Yeah. Whaddya going to call him?'

'I don't know. What would you suggest?' (Not that it mattered. She wouldn't be able to keep him. She'd have to take him to some kennels or something.)

Darkie said, ' I know ... he looks exactly like Mr D'Arcy. How about calling him D'Arcy? Mr D'Arcy's one of our teachers.'

At the thought of a curly white poodle called after one of their teachers, Ginger and Darkie went into fits of gusty laughter. Nicola laughed with them. 'All right, D'Arcy it shall be.'

She said hopefully, ' Would there be anywhere around here where they board dogs?'

'Crumbs, no. Don't reckon there'd be anywhere nearer than Christchurch. You haven't a hope. Well, hooray.'

Nicola blinked. What were they cheering about? . . . then she realized it was some quaint form of bidding goodbye. Well, when in Rome, do as the Romans do . . . ' Hooray,' she said, more blithely than she felt, and drove off. She was going to feel a real Charley arriving at the homestead cluttered with livestock!

Not a good start. And Forbes Westerfield was prejudiced enough already.

Nicola wished she had been driving alone, carefree, without these two disturbing atoms in her care, so she could have appreciated this scenery. The sea must be on her left, but she was inland now and she

couldn't even glimpse it. To her right, west, the direction in which she must turn soon, were grape-blue mountains behind the foothills, and even further in, glimpses of the jagged peaks of the Alps.

There was a dry golden light over all, with great brown fields of grain, faintly green-tinged, that seemed limitless, cabbage-trees that looked like palms dotted all over the rising ground and willows and poplars to remind her of England.

She saw a signpost marked ' Koromiko Gorge ' and turned west down a long straight road heavily shingled. The rocky metal bounded up against the undercarriage all the time. The canary began to sing; she had packed it round firmly on the back seat with rugs and cases. D'Arcy had gone to sleep on the front passenger seat, quite exhausted and replete. He still wasn't exactly fragrant, the Evening-in-Paris perfume didn't by any means disguise his doggy odour.

She went through another small township, rather a straggly one, then another, much prettier, as they got near the foothills and the road became intersected with small streams, willow-bordered. There were Russell lupins outside many of the farmsteads, making patches of colour, and tall foxgloves and mint bordered the ditches.

The road here had a smoother surface, clay, but it would be a quagmire after rain, she supposed. The hills crowded in, and twice the road dipped into little valleys where there were no bridges and water-splashes ran across the road. Fords they would call them, or watercourses. They'd be low just now, because the countryside looked very dry, but after rain, it could make driving hazardous.

The valley widened out into a river-flat and the sun began to get uncomfortably hot again. Nicola hoped the canary would be all right. She came to a bridge over a river. It carried a name . . . Waipuku. That was the river, then, where poor Nancy Westerfield had been thrown in. Nicola remembered that in the stories she had heard, that name

meant The Swelling Water. Well, it wasn't swollen now. She glanced down into the clear shallow water, purling over glinting stones and singing on its way to the sea. But she could imagine what a torrent it could become and was thankful for a bridge and modern transport.

She had to rev up to come off the bridge as the road reared up a cutting quite sharply. Round the next corner she decided to stop under the trees and freshen herself up. Her heart accelerated at the thought of the meeting ahead.

D'Arcy sat up and began to yap, his little pink tongue giving him an ingenuous look. 'You poor little shrimp.' murmured Nicola, ' . . . but oh, how I do wish you hadn't happened to me!'

She pulled the sun-visor down and studied herself in the mirror. Not as bad as she had expected, after cleaning out a birdcage and bathing a dog. But every vestige of her make-up had disappeared in this heat. She got to work. Even if she was stickily damp with apprehension of her reception . . . from that Forbes . . . she must appear cool, calm, dignified. Cousin George would greet her with warmth, she was sure, but Forbes Westerfield was an unknown and hostile quantity.

Suddenly she paused, sniffed. The engine smelled overheated. It was seeping through into the inside of the car. How strange; that last pinch had been a little steep, but nothing to some of the hill roads she'd breasted these last few days.

Nicola got out and, keeping her apricot and white striped skirt as far away from the car as possible, lifted the bonnet. It *was* hot. Surely the cooling system hadn't failed? She'd got the mechanic at the last petrol pump to check the oil and water.

Nicola checked the oil. Nothing wrong there. She leaned forward and dropped the dipstick clean down her front. She gazed at the long, black-green smear in sheer exasperation. She had to get a rag to

remove the cap of the radiator, it was so hot. But no steam gushed out to speak of and when she looked she couldn't see any water at all. But there must be! She peered closer and this time rubbed off a lot of dust from the mudguard on the plain apricot top. Nicola gritted her teeth. Well, as far as water was concerned she had stopped in a good place. Water was trickling down the steep bank beside the car and running in a groove it had worn in the side of the road, presumably right down to the river.

Nicola got her Thermos under the trickle and waited till it filled. She poured it into the radiator and next moment felt water splashing her feet. It had gone right through on to the ground!

She was appalled. So much for sweeping up to the front entrance in a natty little car and getting out, the picture of elegance!

She had an inspiration. The way that heavy shingle had flung up against the bottom of the car must have knocked the radiator tap on, the one you emptied it with. That would be it. Now where was it? These tiny engines were so cramped in it was hard to see.

She got out the car manual, began to study it, threw it down and began to investigate. But she couldn't find it. Why the dickens did they put these things in such inaccessible places? Well, she'd just have to lie down under the car and see if she could locate it.

She got a rug, spread it out and lay down on it. She lay on her back and pushed her head under the car, right into long, dusty grass and—ouch!—a Californian thistle! What a mess she was going to look.

But that looked like the tap. She put a hand up and in so doing so dislodged an enormous lump of black grease that was like solid jelly. It fell plop on to the centre of her forehead, slid down her nose and cheek and cascaded off.

If it hadn't been that there wasn't room Nicola would have drummed her heels with sheer rage.

Suddenly, because her ear was close to the ground, she heard hooves. She strained her ears . . . yes, a bit of splashing ... the rider must be fording the river, perhaps to cool his mount's feet and let it drink. Thank goodness men were usually mechanically minded.

She'd better wriggle out quickly . . . her skirt would be away up. But before she was halfway out the hoof- beats sounded much nearer . . . too near. They stopped and an amused voice said, ' Gad, beauty in distress, I fear! ' A charming voice with a faint Irish lilt in it.

Nicola held her skirts down with one hand, flipping over on to her tummy and getting up quickly, but not, she realized, in the least gracefully. That was beyond accomplishment. Even a Russian ballet dancer couldn't have managed it.

She stood up and stared ! Blinking, then continued to stare.

Here was the roughest, most villainous-looking character she had ever seen . . . with a horrible beard, one that was dark and bronze in patches, giving him a piebald look. He had long, dark, narrow slits of eyes that seemed full of malicious amusement and . . . she really couldn't believe it ... he was astride, not a horse, but a black and white bullock!

Nicola felt she knew now how Nancy Westerfield had felt when her betrothed turned up in the streets of Christchurch mounted like this. Marino ought really to be called The-Place-Where-Time-Stands-Still.

CHAPTER III

He wore indescribable trousers, patched and torn, with laces latticed round his calves. One boot sole was torn away from the upper, revealing coarse socks; his shirt had once been a dark blue, striped like a butcher's apron, but had faded to a dirty grey; he had a red spotted handkerchief knotted above a great hairy chest, and on his head a hat that looked as if it had survived a hundred soakings and was dark with grease about the band. The brim hung in wavy loops about his ears. In front of what passed for a saddle was hung a swag.

But again this most cultured voice. 'Egad, I spoke truer than I knew. Indeed a beauty!' He swept off the hat, bowed low over the bullock's neck, said, 'And always did I like that combination . . . red hair and tawny eyes!'

Nicola knew a tremor of fear. He was a rough character, no doubt of that, no matter how soft his speech, and she didn't even know where she was, or who to run to. There wasn't a house within sight.

Brazen it out, my girl . . . don't let him see you're afraid.

'I'm so glad to see you . . . there isn't a bit of water in my radiator. Do you ... do you know anything about cars?' She looked doubtfully at the bullock.

He said solemnly, 'I do, I've not always been reduced to this means of transport. Time was when I'd plenty of money in my pocket. I've come down in the world. I'll have a look. Has it been using much water? Or have you forgotten to check?'

'I had it checked about eighty miles back.'

He swung down. The patient bullock just stood, his head drooping. The man approached her. A burst of excited yapping came from the

car, and the white poodle hurled himself at the window, managing to get his head out.

'Mother of mercy!' said the bullock-driver. 'Is that meant to be a dog?'

His own dog, a sheepdog, seated by the bullock rose and bounced at the car and was ordered back sharply. He obeyed. But D'Arcy would not be quiet. Finally, in response to a cuff on the ear he settled down on the seat amid a dying succession of resentful yaps.

'*Not* an obedient dog.' said the bullock-rider.

Nicola felt nettled. She needed help, not strictures upon the way she had, presumably, reared her dog from this . . . this . . . well, what did they call them here? Tramps, no. Hoboes? No, swaggers, that was it.

She said shortly: 'Will you see if you can find the radiator tap? I think it may have got knocked on.'

'How?'

'These shocking roads. When I left the bitumen the road became just two gravel tracks ... in fact not gravel, but boulders almost.'

'Couldn't knock a tap on. It's not even exposed, or easy to turn. You must have sprung a leak.'

He began fiddling. 'Your by-pass hose has given up the ghost. A very tiny affair. They do sometimes. Well, it's a garage job. It's a new part and even then a tricky thing to replace. Sometimes you get it on first pop, other times it can take an hour or two. How far are you going?'

He wasn't going to offer her a ride on the bullock, surely! She'd rather crawl every inch of the way. That *would* be history repeating itself. This man was an anachronism.

'To Marino Homestead,' she said.

He stared. 'You're not ... oh, I suppose you must be . . . this distant connection the Westerfields are expecting, are you?'

Her tone became a little stiff. 'I am. I wired them yesterday that I hoped to reach them in time for dinner tonight. Do you know these Westerfields?'

She hadn't been able to keep the surprise out of her voice. What an impudent grin he had! Still, it was just as well he hadn't taken offence. It would be ghastly if this chap turned nasty. It was his voice, in such contrast to his appearance, that was disarming her. But it needn't necessarily mean a thing.

A faint memory of having learned, in history lessons, that in the old days the no-goods of the families were often sent out to the Colonies and paid an allowance to stay there, stirred in Nicola's mind. Perhaps they still had remittance men, who drank their allowance in the first few days after it arrived and lived on their wits for the rest.

'Sure I know them. Know them well. I often doss down there—in the wool-shed. Nothing like sleeping on a fleece. They put on a good meal too. The homestead isn't far round that shoulder of the hill if you take that track. I take it you wouldn't fancy riding a bullock . . . I'd lead it, of course . . . would you?'

'No, thank you,' said Nicola hastily. 'If you point out the track I'll take it and ring a garage from the house.'

He nodded. 'Thought you'd rather do that. Tell you what, it's getting a bit late. They'd have to come out from Oxford and they might be busy on a rush job. Farm machinery has to take precedence over other jobs. I've got to call in with a message at the next farm. It's nearer than Marino. I'll get them to tow the car—with a tractor—into one of their

sheds. It's at Koromiko Gorge, tell the Westerfields. They can get one of the chaps to take one of the cars and go over to Koromiko Gorge homestead later for your gear. That's the name of the place.'

Well, he'd been very kind. A most unprepossessing creature of course, but helpful. Nicola said, 'Just a moment, will you?' and reached on to the seat for her purse. She took out a note, slipped it into his hand. 'I—I know they don't go in for tipping much in this country, but I would like to give you something. Would you keep it, please?'

'Too right,' he said, with no animosity, Nicola was relieved to note. 'Thanks very much.' He added: 'What are you going to do with that animal ?

'I'll take him with me.'

'Then you'll have to put him on a lead.' He fished into his pocket and brought out an indescribable assortment of articles. Nicola gazed at it in horrid fascination.

He drew out a long piece of what looked like leather bootlace. It must be one of those things he had twisted round his legs.

She opened the door, said, 'Out you come, D'Arcy,' which was stupid, seeing D'Arcy didn't know his name was D'Arcy yet.

The swagger burst out laughing. 'D'Arcy . . . Good lord! What's his second name? Vere de Vere ?'

Nicola reddened and said nothing. Then, with would-be nonchalance, she said: 'I'll have to take my canary too.'

She'd never seen such a look on a man's face.

He said slowly, ' I may be just the Bushranger, ma'am, but even I think that's a bit odd, coming all the way from England with a dog and a *canary*'

Nicola lifted her chin. ' I did *not!* Until three hours ago I'd never set eyes on either of these two creatures! I rescued them from a perfectly horrible old crone who had the dog shut up in an airless hole and was letting the canary die of heat!' Her eyes flashed as she recalled it.

'Aha!' he said admiringly, ' a lass of spirit! The kind I like.'

Nicola moved back nervously as he came nearer.

He chuckled. ' It's all right, I won't hurt you. I'm known for my gallantry towards women.'

Nicola found her knees were shaking a little. She said, trying to sound natural, ' You said the Bushranger? Why? There aren't any these days.'

'Dead right, it's just a nickname. There was one hereabouts many years ago, though even then pretty harmless. Just a gipsy like me ... an old swagger. So they handed the soubriquet on when I turned up.'

Nicola suddenly lost her fear of him. ' You know, you aren't old. Is there any need, in a country like this, with one of the finest welfare reputations in the world, for this sort of thing? You look strong. Couldn't you get yourself taken on as a farm labourer?'

He shook his head. ' Couldn't stand it. I'm one of the " Don't fence me in " kind. Well, I'd better help you over that fence.'

Nicola said hastily, ' I can manage, thank you.'

He surveyed her narrow skirt with doubtful amusement twisting the line of his mouth somewhere in that horrible beard. 'You can't, you know.'

She said: 'I got over one before.' She lifted the cage over, dropped D'Arcy, still hanging on to his lead, on to the other side, and, lifting her skirt up, but not too far, tried to get her leg over the barbed wire. But this fence was higher.

The next moment the Bushranger was behind her and had lifted her up, revoltingly close to that sweat-stained shirt, and had her poised above the top strand. He held her for a moment, his face close to hers.

'Even with oil on your face you're still a beauty, my lass.'

Everything within Nicola shrank from the closeness. She contracted physically. He must have felt it.

He said, looking down on her and letting mock sorrow colour his voice, 'It's hurting the feelings of me, you are, now. Never let it be said any woman had aught to fear from the Bushranger. Sure and all, wasn't my romantic mother after calling me Gareth for my second name, and me always thankful, once I was old enough to know what she'd been at, and she'd not made it Galahad! But still and all, it means I'm a chivalrous man for all my rough exterior. I wouldn't kiss a woman against her will, not I.' He set her down on the other side of the fence, slightly uphill.

Nicola was breathing hard. He leaned forward and pinched her chin. 'And yet I'm prophesying, milady, that when you're in your sweet eighties, you'll be telling your grandchildren with pride that once you were *nearly* kissed by the Bushranger. Good day to you.' He raised the incredible hat and went back to his bullock.

Nicola's legs would hardly carry her. The track was very narrow, just a sheep-track, she guessed, though there were no animals in this paddock. They approached a clump of gorse and D'Arcy set up a shrill clamour. There was a movement and whirr of wings, and a great heavy bird—a harrier hawk, she thought—with the hooked beak of a scavenger, rose up from the bushes and made off. Its eye gleamed redly and malevolently as it did so.

Nicola stared into the bushes and saw a young hare, petrified with fear but apparently not injured.

'Be quiet, D'Arcy!' she ordered. D'Arcy lay down, cringing.

To her great relief, the leveret came out of its trance, shot to its feet and was gone through the bushes and up the green hill on the far side like a streak of lightning.

'Phew!' said Nicola to herself. 'Praise all the saints that be! I can scarcely turn up with an injured hare too!'

The fence at the far end of the paddock had what passed for a stile in this country ... a sack, rotted with age, lying over the top strand of barbed wire! There was no one to see this time, so Nicola lifted her skirt right up after she had deposited her handbag and the cage on the far side.

She looked nervously at the cattle in this paddock, especially as, with the curiosity of their kind, they began moving towards her. However, they were all obviously cows.

Thank goodness she had been driving in flatties. It would have been the last straw to have minced across in stilettos. If it hadn't been that she had wanted to arrive at Marino the picture of elegance, she'd have been in trows and a shirt, much more suitable for surmounting fences!

A stream cut across this paddock and the banks were well churned up by the hooves of the cattle. Nicola chose the narrowest and firmest part to cross, but owing to her encumbrances, especially D'Arcy whom she dared not freedom his lead, she fluffed her jump and came down short and groaned as her feet sank into bog and she felt the indescribable gooeyness of mud and cow manure splash right up her nylons. And it was going to difficult to get her feet out of it. She was sinking deeper every moment.

All she could hope was that that detestable Forbes Westerfield didn't appear till she got out of this.

'*Will* you stop prancing about, D'Arcy!' she bellowed at him, losing all patience. She leaned forward, swung her bag and birdcage on to the bank, yanked D'Arcy up and threw him on to the turf, in some way managing to retain hold of the lead.

'I might just as well never have washed you!' she said through gritted teeth as she drew one foot out with a horrible sucking noise, lunged towards the firmer ground, realized her left shoe was going to stay in the bog, tried to step back, lost her balance, and the next moment was sitting fairly and squarely in the mire. She lost the lead!

But D'Arcy was a gentleman. He didn't run away. He hurled himself back from the bank in a commendable, if mistaken, idea of assisting his deliverer and landed squarely on her chest as she was endeavouring to rise. The feel of the mire and the stench of it was indescribable.

Somehow Nicola got herself out of it. She was beyond verbal expression, beyond seeing the funny side of it. There was nothing she could do. If she recrossed the stream and made her way back to the car where at least she had a change of clothing, she would get muddier than ever in the process, and ten to one the Bushranger would have rounded up the men of Koromiko Gorge by now and

there would be nowhere to change in any case. There was nothing for it but to go on and present herself at the homestead . . . *like this*. . . .

Nicola wasn't in any mood to appreciate the beauty of the scene that gradually unfolded before her ... the bluish tinge of the mountains above glorious trees that were a mixture of native and English trees, the birdsong that sounded from every gully, bellbirds chiming, *tuis* running through the whole range of their notes from chiming to guttural croakings and chucklings, finishing with a harp-like twang that, given other circumstances, would have enchanted her and brought her to a listening stop.

But she plodded grimly on. She must be nearing the homestead, for here, now, were smaller paddocks, some with grey, ancient split-rail fences from pioneer days, some even loose-stone walls, mossy and crumbling, tributes to the back-breaking work of removing them from pastures.

She saw a tumble-down cow byre, long unused, but with a concrete path leading from it and beyond another fence, a magnificent stand of trees that somehow suggested it might hide a house.

There was a gate through the wall and she found herself in an oak wood, with last year's leaves dry and rustling under her feet and a track leading towards another gate. She looked over and saw pigs rooting. Well, what matter? She wasn't exactly as fragrant as a breath of spring now. A bit more litter on her shoes wouldn't matter.

They took no notice of her, for which she was thankful. She had no desire to be treed by a resentful boar though these would be domestic animals, not the wild pigs that New Zealanders called Captain Cookers. But she thought fatalistically that if there was an aggressive

boar among these, it would no doubt make straight for her. She wouldn't be surprised by anything that befell her today.

Beyond the next gate the path became broader, the trees widened, and there, beyond and slightly above, on the slope, with early summer flowers crowding about it, stood the homestead of Puke-o-Marino, the Hill of Peace.

It looked peaceful too, in the late afternoon sunlight, one green hill among the African-looking tawny-gold of the other tussock-covered hills.

Nicola would have been able to enjoy its beauty to the full had she come to it as she had intended . . . cool, unruffled, immaculate.

Not like this.

One path led to the front of the house. One to the back.

It was certainly the back door for Nicola. . . .

The path ahead of her led past a trim, white-painted building with the air of a dairy about it, and suddenly the door opened and out walked a woman with her back towards Nicola. She was moving towards the house.

She was short and squat and even her back looked uncompromising. She had straight black hair screwed tightly into a bun, she wore the blue-and-white spotted print frock of a former generation, and flat black shoes. Definitely a no-nonsense person. Nicola's heart sank.

D'Arcy gave tongue and saved Nicola the necessity for saying a feeble 'Excuse me.'

The woman swung round, surprised black brows arching, eyes round as boot-buttons, staring.

She dropped the basket of carrots she was carrying and kept on staring, first at Nicola's face, then at her mud-splashed oil-smeared suit, her indescribable feet, at the caked curls of the poodle, the swinging birdcage.

Then her face crumpled up into laughter. ' Land sakes!' she gasped, 'what an apparition! Where in the world have you come from and what have you been doing ? Have you lost your way ?'

What an apparition!

In all her thoughts, her apprehensive thoughts, while on the ship, about her probable reception at Marino Hill, Nicola hadn't dreamed this would be her greeting.

She gulped, found her voice, said, ' I've come from London. I'm Nicola Trenton.'

The woman took a firm hold of a rustic arch that supported a briar rose. ' You're . . . you're Nicola Trenton? That—that Nesta Moore's niece . . . Nesta Moore's niece and looking like *that*?'

Nicola gulped again. *That* Nesta Moore. Meaning they still remembered Nesta as the mischief-maker. The one whose stay in New Zealand had meant only trouble.

She said firmly, 'I'm not her niece. Only a very distant cousin. My mother and grandmother haven't seen her for years.'

The curranty eyes narrowed. ' You mean there was bad blood between you, just as there was here?'

'Well, yes, if you could call it that. They avoided her. One isn't responsible for one's relations.'

'True enough. Well, mebbe you'll not be so bad to have in the house after all. It was Nesta's finicky ways I couldn't stand.' A grim smile softened the sallow features. ' But you, now, you don't look particularly finicky!'

At this understatement some of Nicola's tensions left her and she grinned back.

The woman said: ' But how in the world did you get yourself in a state like that? And why the livestock?'

Nicola decided she'd better keep it brief. ' I'm afraid I rush in where angels wouldn't even venture. I stopped at a cottage away back beyond Amberley and found this bird dying in the sun and this dog cooped up in an airless hole—and you know what the temperatures have been —and the old woman who was looking after them said if I was concerned about them I'd better take them.' Nicola hesitated. This woman would think her daft to let herself be burdened with them. ' I know it's dreadful to impose them on you, but I couldn't see anything else to do. But as soon as I get the chance I'll go down to Christchurch and see if I can board them out or give them away or something. I—I'll tiy to stop them being a bother for a day or two. I have an idea Christchurch isn't too far. In fact I'd go tomorrow, only my car has broken down.

'That's why I'm in this state. All the water went out of the radiator just after I crossed the river and I got oily trying to find out what was wrong . . . from underneath the engine. And a rough sort of chap who rescued me said he'd get the people at Koromiko Gorge to tow my car there and he advised me to take a short cut over the paddocks. It was so awkward trying to leap the brook—I mean the creek—with the dog and the cage, I fell in. Then I had to cross the oak wood where the pigs are. I --' Her voice trailed off.

The woman picked up her basket of carrots and reached out, surprisingly, for the dog's lead. ' Well, come away in. I'll soon sort you out. It'll be like when Gariy and "Forbes were young and fair little devils they were at that. And you needn't worry about yon animals. The dog can't do any harm, that size, and Mr. Westerfield has a fine aviary. It's his hobby. The bird'll do fine. I'm Jassy Sherbourne. I've been housekeeper here since I was at school.'

Nicola felt unmeasurably relieved. This Jassy seemed able to take apparitions in her stride.

Jassy continued: 'The family are all out just now.' (Nicola knew terrific relief. She wouldn't mind meeting George Westerfield, but to face the overbearing Forbes Westerfield like this for the first time would be beyond bearing.)

Jassy said, ' You can get into a bath and tidy up before they come home. They're hardly ever here now, always busy with some shemozzle about the Centennial. If they aren't down at Christchurch trying to identify some bit of rubbish that's been lying about here for goodness knows how long, at the museum, they're poring over records at Mary McGillivray's. It's all very fine, but someone's got to carry on the day-to-day work without any glamour about it.'

'I expect it's made an awful lot of work for you,' said Nicola with genuine sympathy. ' You must let me help you. I mightn't know much about New Zealand, but housework is much the same anywhere.'

Jassy gave her a sidelong look. ' Won't you be wanting to spend all your time writing up this history old George is so keen on?'

'Not all. A few hours a day should do it. It's not a rush job evidently, because Cousin George doesn't want it finished till after the celebrations. He seems to think that would round it off.'

Jassy said drily, ' It's more than that he wants rounded off. His grandson's love-affair is what he wants straightened out. You know what these pioneer families are . . . or mebbe you won't. They like farmers coming on in every generation. And young ones these days are so daft they hardly know how to conduct their own affairs. I could clock them both—but I'd like to clock Felicity the hardest. These broken engagements are no use. Especially when those two are so well suited. They're both stubborn, silly young fools. Neither will give an inch. But old George is sure it will be made up and that it would be a fitting ending for his book if Koromiko Gorge and Marino homesteads were united in marriage once more. There's the house.'

They had rounded a shrubbery and there it lay to one side of them, beautiful in architecture, with its steep roof with dormer windows embedded, with its long colonial verandah, the old-fashioned iron lacework curving from each verandah post, terraced flowerbeds ablaze with all the flowers of summer.

They turned away to the back of the house. No untidy farm machinery lay about on this property. Its white picket fences were gleamingly painted—no doubt in honour of the coming festivities—and hollyhocks and roses clung lovingly to the walls.

Nicola felt a little more hopeful. Jassy looked grim, but seemed as if she might prove an ally. She had unbent towards Nicola *because* she'd turned up a wreck. Maybe she didn't care for perfection. Nicola grinned to herself ... so much for wanting to look cool and elegant!

Jassy opened a laundry door. ' There's both bath and shower off here, and you needn't be worrying about the mud. It's what the men use when they come in black with dust from the header. It's just a rough place. I'll bring you clean towels and something to change into. I'll guarantee when you fell in the bog, the mud went through to your skin?'

'It did,' said Nicola ruefully. 'I hate to ask you for clothing, but till my car gets here I can do nothing else. What about this poodle?'

'I'll tie him to the back verandah post. Don't worry your head about him. I've some dog-tucker in the big safe. I'll cut it up for him. And I'll hang the bird up out of draughts and sun alike, poor thing.'

Nicola began to run the shower and strip off. She'd shower first, then soak in the bath. She pulled a face ... no doubt she'd present a queer picture to Forbes and Cousin George when they came home, tricked out in Jassy's prim garments. Would it be blue spotted print? she wondered.

The door opened a few inches and Jassy tossed in a couple of towels and said through the crack, 'I've put you some things on top of the washing-machine. And a couple of safety-pins. I doubt the bra will swim on you.'

Nicola decided Jassy must have had North of England ancestors. They often used 'doubt' for 'think'. She found herself laughing. Jassy's last remark was probably the understatement of the year. She thought of Jassy's impressive bosom and decided her bras must be more like reinforced camisoles.

The hot water was glorious. No wonder it was said that cleanliness was next to godliness. Nothing luxurious about this bathroom, sure enough. The tin roof was unlined and the rafters were a bit cobwebby. She hoped no spiders fell on her.

It restored your ego to feel so clean. She finished up with another shower, cold this time.

Well, now for the camisole, the blue spotted print, the lisle stockings! She wondered if Jassy would be offended if she didn't use the

stockings but went barelegged. She had scrubbed her plastic weave shoes. They would be damp but clean.

She came into the laundry and, amazed, inspected the clothing. A lovely green linen skirt, with drawn thread-work intersecting it, a cool-looking white and green striped blouse, a filmy slip with a pleated nylon edge, panties to match, a modern bra. This Jassy evidently knew enough about modern girls to realize they didn't wear singlets in summer. The things looked as if they might be just one size too big for her—but they couldn't possibly have gone on Jassy. Curiouser and curiouser! And there were nylons.

The skirt had an elastic grip in the back, so it kept up. She used a safety pin for the bra and the girdle was a roll-on, so fitted perfectly. Well, whoever these things belonged to, she was mighty grateful to her. It might be Forbes's sister. With her make-up on, she went in search of Jassy, assisted by the sound of her singing, in a not untuneful voice, 'Home, home on the range', which was quite a change from her previous effort, 'Take it to the Lord in prayer'.

Nicola said, 'Well, Miss Sherbourne, you were certainly an answer to my prayer. I can't tell you how I felt at the thought of having to face the family in the state I was in. I felt I was going to be like a very naughty small boy, fished out of a frog pond and dripping weed and slime on the drawing-room carpet!'

Jassy said: 'Old George is going to approve of you. He dislikes the modern way of calling it the lounge. It's always been called the drawing-room here. But don't be calling me Miss Sherbourne. It makes me feel strange. Nobody ever does. Even the vicar makes it Jassy. Every new vicar tries to call me Miss Sherbourne, but it never lasts. Well, Isobel's things didn't serve you bad.'

'Is Isobel Forbes's sister or --'

'No, his mother. She's often here, but lives in the North Island. Young George—Forbes's father—is a bank manager in Hamilton. She always travels by air, so usually leaves a few things here. She comes to help me in the preserving season. She's kept her figure very well, considering she's past fifty.'

Forbes's mother! She hoped he wouldn't mind her wearing his mother's clothes. She wondered if Garry's mother—old George's daughter—came often. They seemed clannish. It was Garry's mother who had stopped him writing to Nicola all those years ago.

Jassy had a cup of tea ready in the big kitchen that ran the full width of the house and part partitions in two places, making it like three rooms. There was the cooking part, huge it was; the dining part and the far end were fashioned for comfort and relaxation. There was a dartboard on the wall, fishing rods and guns on a high rack, well above the reach of children; a bridle hanging, a pipe-rack, a huge open fireplace, a radio, a television set and books—dozens, if not hundreds of books. Nicola looked at them appreciatively. Shabby, well-read volumes cheek by jowl with bright new dust-jackets, evidences of minds that were not static. It had enonpous chairs and two couches, covered with bright loose-covers.

She and Jassy sat down at the kitchen table, where peas were piled ready for podding and an enormous pot of soup was simmering on the stove.

'When you've had a drink you can help me shell the peas,' said Jassy.

Nicola smiled at her. 'Oh, good. I was terrified of being treated like a guest.'

Again she saw the sallow face mellow with a smile. 'We were afraid of that, too. There's too much to be done for us to be waiting on people hand and foot, but I knew, as soon as I saw you in the state you

were in and heard about the dog and bird, I was fair relieved. I've no patience wi' lilies of the field. But that kind don't get involved with suffering animals. You'll do us.'

'All of you?' asked Nicola, hopefully but doubtfully.

'Most of us,' answered Jassy, handing her a bowl for the pods.

Nicola felt her colour and her apprehension rise. She looked directly at Jassy. 'You mean I'm not likely to meet up with much of a welcome from Forbes Westerfield?'

Jassy shot her a shrewd glance, but said : ' Oh, there's no need to worry about that one. He's a bit dour and prejudiced on the subject of folk coming here from the English branch, but he'll get over it when he realizes you aren't of the kind of your cousin Nesta.'

'But why should *he* be the one to be so incensed? He'd hardly remember her.'

'Only just. But he's so devoted to his mother.'

Nicola stopped podding peas. ' Devoted to his mother? But why should that make him resent my coming?'

Jassy nodded sagely. ' It's as I said. I said to them when they were discussing your coming that it wasn't to say you knew much about it. There'd be no aftermath in England like there was here. That Nesta wouldn't let on how much trouble she had caused. Guess she'd just say she didn't care for us. She was a madam, that one. Did you not know that Nesta made trouble—big trouble—between Forbes's mother and father? His mother left his father and went away for a year, taking Forbes and Sarah with her? Forbes was only eight or so, but he's never forgotten waking up and hearing his mother sobbing in the dark. Not to fash yourself about it, girl. It's a long time since, and

as there was no truth in the stories at all, it was cleared up long ago as far as Isobel and George were concerned.'

Nicola felt completely dismayed . . . and here she was, going to meet Forbes for the first time, arrayed in his mother's clothes!

Well, it couldn't be helped. She had scrubbed her lovely suit with the nailbrush and it was hanging dripping wet on the line. It wasn't likely that these men at Koromiko Gorge would bring her cases over before the evening meal. In fact she'd probably have to ask someone to go across for them after dinner.

Jassy asked her to stand the pan of soup in some cold water and when it had set, to skim the grease off the top. 'Mebbe you'll think it too hot for soup, but men are such creatures of habit. Yon Forbes doesn't count it a dinner without soup. And we'd run out. I usually do the stock and skim it the day before.'

Nicola said: 'Will you want me to put the grease into a small pan to render down for cooking fat?'

Jassy looked at her with approval. 'Your mother brought you up on the "waste not, want not" system, then?'

Nicola said, simply, 'Yes. We had to count the pennies. Dad died when I was quite young. Mother wanted me to grow up in the country and she didn't want to go out to work till I was older. Said a child needed someone at home when she came in from school. She was a wonderful manager. Now that she's married again she hasn't got to pinch and scrape. Grandma—her mother—left us a legacy each last year. That's how we got the car. And of course I've got an awfully good job. Have you read any of Genevieve Walkington's books? You have. Well, she's just as nice as her books—she's a wonderful person.'

There was the sound of people arriving. D'Arcy set up a shrill yapping. Heavens, they'd wonder where on earth he'd come from. Nicola lost her reassurance and began to tremble.

But Jassy bustled out and began explanations. Nicola could hear her. ' Poor child . . . car broke down over the river, up the cutting. Someone came along and told her to take the short cut. She fell in the creek. What a mess! But I fitted her out with Isobel's things. No, I don't know who rescued her. One of the chaps from further on, I suppose. He said he'd have it towed to Melford's. One of you can ring up later and go across for her things. She rescued those animals, that poodle there and that canary, from being ill-treated. Scared stiff about bringing them here, too, poor lamb. None of you's to say a word about that poodle . . . she's nothing in the world like that Nesta. . . . '

Then Cousin George was in the room, beaming. Somehow she hadn't expected him to be bearded, but it suited him—an elegant, silvery beard. He caught her in an embrace, then held her off and looked searchingly at her just as two other people entered the room behind him.

Cousin George Westerfield drew in his breath. ' You're the living image of Jocelyn!' he said.

Nicola creased her brows. ' Jocelyn? You mean my grandmother? Father's mother? Yes, I know, but --'

He smiled. ' I don't suppose you've heard her referred to as Jocelyn for years. But I think of her as that, naturally. She was younger than you now when I last saw her. Just twenty. It was 1918. I was a wounded Kiwi Digger convalescing at Brockenhurst. She was engaged to your grandfather—my cousin. How this make the years roll back!

Nicola suddenly felt her eyes misting over. She hadn't realized there was any link like that. It brought Gran near.

Cousin George swung round. ' And here's Garry . . . your pen-friend of years ago, and Letitia Romans whose people live quite near. She's been helping us with costumes, digging out all sorts of things.'

Nicola liked Letty at sight, and, despite a little initial embarrassment at meeting Garry and remembering how his mother had put an end to their correspondence, found him exactly as she had imagined him from the early snaps they had exchanged, tall, fair, very pleasant, with no constraint in his manner at all. As far as he was concerned there might never have been any ill-feeling. If it hadn't been that she had still to meet the formidable Forbes, Nicola's spirits might have risen.

Dinner was delicious . . . lamb that melted in your mouth, young green peas, new potatoes, small and waxy, roast carrots and a delectable Spanish cream with early peaches, biscuits, cheese, coffee.

Jassy had remarked as she served it, ' I'll keep Forbes's dinner hot for him. He'll be some time cleaning up when he does get in.'

Nicola guessed he was probably on dirty tractor work. Just as they were finishing their dessert, she heard water running, and footsteps, and guessed he was tubbing and changing.

She felt tenseness, like a hard ball, gather in her midriff. She wanted to appear at ease, not as if she were waiting for—and flinching from—his appraisal. She wanted to treat him as if to her he was merely one among many other connections, as the most distant of all.

So when she heard the creak of a door and footsteps approaching she plunged into nervous speech, saying the first thing that occurred to her, in order not to have it appear that his arrival mattered in the least. ' I didn't tell you who came to my rescue, Cousin George. Honestly, I thought I'd slipped back in time, like on a television play. It never dawned on me that in these days, in a Welfare State, you might still have swaggers. And such a swagger I'

George's handsome old face looked puzzled. ' We have very few these days. Hitch-hikers, yes. Are you sure he wasn't one? The folk who hump their swags these days are far more likely to be students hitch-hiking home.'

Nicola laughed. ' Oh no, this was the genuine variety. A disgrace to his education, really. He had the most charming voice, with a faint lilt of Irish. In fact if he hadn't been so revoltingly filthy he might have been quite an attractive character, if you like the sort of antiquated gallantry he kept trotting out. But he was indescribable ... his boots were gaping wide, his face was covered with dust, he was rank with sweat . . . and above all things he was riding a bullock! And he had a really *sinister* look! To say nothing of the oddest beard I've ever seen . . . piebald I It was dark and curly and absolutely ginger in spots. Just like one of those alley cats you see ... a mixture of black and marmalade.

You'll know who it was. He said he often bedded down here ... the Bushranger! But how on earth in these times of good wages and low unemployment figures, a man in New Zealand can be destitute, I just wouldn't --' Nicola stopped dead.

Cousin George was gaping at her. Jassy's face was deadpan and sort of frozen. Letty and Garry wore expressions of complete shock beginning to crumble into delighted laughter.

Then a voice, a suave voice, *educated, charming, yes . . . but only too familiar*, spoke from the doorway, ' Sure, and it's hurting the feelings of me, you are. Cousin Nicola . . . though when I think of it and all, you did say *one* nice thing about me . . . and I have removed the sweat and filth! '

Nicola swung round, almost capsizing her chair, clutched wildly at Garry, who steadied her, and she beheld a bowing figure.

It straightened up. It wore a piebald beard. *Forbes Westerfield.*

CHAPTER IV

Nicola felt as if her blush rose right from her toes. Then they all shrieked with laughter.

She knew she had to subdue the fury that was superseding the embarrassment, but her laughter, as she joined in, did not reach her eyes.

Forbes Westerfield stood there, grinning in a way that was unbearable, immaculate in an open-necked silk shirt and light fawn trousers, a green spotted cravat tied beneath the atrocious beard, a freshly tubbed look about him, narrow dark eyes that she strongly suspected had a green glint to them, brows that she told herself were positively Satanic, arched sardonically.

As the mirth died down and Nicola's colour subsided, she said, rather caustically, ' What *were* you doing in that preposterous get-up, anyway? And how could a greenhorn like myself expect to recognize one of her relatives, however distant, disguised like that? '

The narrow eyes met hers mockingly. ' Don't restrain yourself so, my dear cousin. You've dropped the adjectives. One thing I'd like to know, though. Have I kept the sinister look? Or was that just a bit of local colour?'

Nicola could not help it. ' It wasn't imagination, Cousin Forbes. You now look sinister but clean. I expect you can't help it. It's the eyebrows. You'd be a godsend to any company doing Faust . . . for Mephistopheles.'

Old George had tears rolling down his rosy cheeks. He wiped them away. ' Forbes, you've met your match at last. Girl, you'll do us. We like them with a sense of humour. And we like the straight-hitters too. It's the sly, sugary-sweet ones we don't like here.'

An odd silence fell on them. Nicola recognized the description.

Cousin Nesta. Mother had said of her so often . . . ' Always the pill under the sugar-coating, the jibe under the compliment.'

Nicola recovered. She managed an ordinary tone. ' But could someone please explain why?'

Old George said, chuckling, ' In the old days there was a character who used to travel these roads from Christchurch to Nelson and down to the West Coast. He often dossed down at Puke-o-Marino. He was called the Bushranger, because at the time when the Burgess and Kelly gang were roaming the roads and attacking and murdering miners carrying gold, he was once arrested on suspicion. Forbes is taking that part—among other parts—for the Centenary. He's getting in as much practice as possible bullock-riding, and today was his biggest ordeal. He was timing a stretch of the road and must have made it quicker than he'd thought, if he came on you an hour or so ago. How did it go, Forbes ?'

'Reasonably well. My shorter trips have toughened me up. I can sit fairly comfortably now, but oh, boy, has that bullock got a backbone! I got slowed up on the first part. People kept stopping me. And a bus-load of tourists, American and Australian mostly, held me up taking photos. I didn't want to rebuff them'—Nicola raised her brows at this evidence of consideration—' but I was glad to strike off west on to the back roads.'

Nicola said, ' I remember my mother telling me about the early days. Dad and Gran had told her. Francis Westerfield turned up on a bullock—very tardily—didn't he? To meet his Nancy. That's what gave me such a turn. Though I realized Francis would hardly be dressed like that.'

Forbes Westerfield's eyes met hers. 'Hardly. And if you're thinking that was enough to put a bride off— well, might I remind you she wasn't coming out, as some adventurous spirits did, to marry a man she didn't know. She was coming out to someone whom she had known— and presumably loved—in the Homeland. A gentleman of his day, cultured, studious . . . but she couldn't take it.'

The derision in his voice was astonishingly personal. But why? What could it matter now, a hundred years on?

Nicola's chin came up a little. This was *her* Sorebear they were talking about! 'I admire her,' she said.

She saw the jaw under the beard tighten. 'Admire? Might one ask why? It seems odd, to say the least.'

'I think it took courage. It's better to admit a mistake one had made than to condemn two people to years of unhappiness. After all, she had to face the scene with Francis, then, most likely, an even worse scene with her parents when she returned home.'

Forbes Westerfield's voice was sardonic. 'But then she *didn't* find the courage to face her parents, still unwed, did she? She arrived home married. Not half as uncomfortable as having to live at home in the shadow of your parents' displeasure. Not only that, but she married money and became the mistress of a considerable estate.'

Nicola wouldn't let the heat of what she was feeling creep into her tone. She said calmly: 'You're speaking of my father's great-grandmother. She is remembered yet as a wonderful person, quite a legend. I don't think you know enough about her marriage to judge her like that. I know a lot of our family history, and it was regarded, I know, as a real love-match.'

Forbes merely looked amused. ' Oh, the Victorians were wizards at keeping up a good facade. I've got the impression that life had to be lived on Nancy's terms. She made her husband give up the sea, didn't she? I wonder if he was ever really happy. If men do, ever, forgive women who dictate and rule their lives. I'm of the opinion that she was an imperious, spoiled beauty.'

Jassy got up. ' Well, I think you're downright daft, Forbes Gareth Westerfield. And if you don't start eating, your dinner will be completely dried up, and serve you right. Here's your soup.'

Forbes grinned and picked up his spoon.

Cousin George got up. ' Well, I was never one for liking to watch the lions feed. We'll take our coffee down the Far End, Jassy.' He paused. ' Forbes, I've had an idea. It flashed into my mind the moment I saw Nicola. I'll ring Felicity and tell her we're letting her off Nancy's part. She's not keen, and here's Nicola, red hair and all, and I wager she'll not shrink at the thought of a ducking!'

His vivid blue eyes came up to meet Nicola's. What a fine, winsome old man he was. She couldn't have said no to him. ' Well, all right, as long as the Waipuku isn't in flood.'

He tucked a hand into Nicola's arm. ' You'll do me, and I'll make yon Forbes not put too much energy into tipping you off the dray.'

As Forbes Westerfield's laughing slits of eyes met Nicola's she realized how much he would enjoy that part of the Re-enactment.

She found herself seated by Garry. ' How come that *you* haven't grown a beard? I remember now seeing a short on television about

some Centennial celebrations in New Zealand and a beard-growing contest among all the young men.'

Garry grinned. ' Oh, there's to be a short tableau at the end—of the nineteen-sixties. I'm to be a modern sheep-farmer. I'm with a firm of stock and station agents in Christchurch and they're putting on a display of modern farm machinery. I'm to demonstrate it. Saved me the scruffy discomfort of growing a beard, the early stages are horrible. Besides, I'm here just spasmodically. All right for the locals, but I can't go round town looking like a bushranger.'

'But I'm sure you'd never sport a beard like Forbes's. Yours would be consistent in colour and much more civilized-looking.'

'Hear! Hear!' said Forbes, dropping into a chair beside them. ' Garry's would be golden and silky. I was most disconcerted when my beard came on patchy. I really did feel like . . . what was it you said ? ... a mongrel tomcat.'

Goaded, Nicola said, ' I did not! I said an alley cat.'

Forbes stroked his beard and said, ' A nice distinction.' He got up and strolled to a mirror and studied himself. ' But you're dead right about the sinister look, Nicola Trenton. "A fellow by the hand of nature marked, quoted and signed to do a deed of shame." That's me.'

Nicola ignored him.

They had just finished their coffee when the phone rang and Forbes was called to it. Nicola felt relaxed immediately, and found herself able to carry on conversation that wasn't stilted, where she didn't watch every word. That was how antagonism and disapproval affected you, made you stiff and unnatural.

Forbes returned, seized the coffee-pot and poured himself some more.

Garry said: 'Who was that on the phone?'

Forbes didn't seem to resent the curiosity. ' Oh, Felicity. She's much relieved she doesn't have to take Nancy's part.'

Nicola was sure the ensuing silence was an awkward one. Still more sure when, the next moment, everyone rushed into speech, with every remark about the weather.

She pondered it and when the spate of small talk died down she leaned forward and said to Forbes, ' Are you sure she really doesn't want to take part? I remember once at a club, a woman who had done a certain job for years and always grizzled about it suddenly got relieved of it. She was madder than ever. She'd liked doing it but had wanted everyone to think her a martyr. Oh, dear, I don't mean this Felicity is like that, but just that some people like to be persuaded into things.'

Forbes said promptly, ' Oh, nothing like that about this. Felicity has very good reasons for wanting to keep more in the background.'

Nicola looked up and surprised a twinkle in Cousin George's eye.

But she hoped there were not too many cross-currents in his family. She'd be for ever putting her foot in it.

She said to her elderly cousin: ' I'd like to have a look outside. I was in no state to appreciate its beauty when I arrived. Would you like to point out the local landmarks? I was most intrigued by the sound of the Whispering Mountain.'

'Someone mention that to you on the way?' asked Cousin George.

Forbes looked sharply at Nicola, even anxiously. Of course ... he had mentioned it in his letter, the one his grandfather didn't know he'd written.

She hesitated, then on a burst of inspiration, said, turning to Forbes, 'You mentioned it, didn't you? Said you'd get the people at Koromiko Gorge Homestead along Whispering Mountain Road to pick up my car.'

'Yes, I mentioned it to you.' His tone was short. 'By the way, they've arranged for a mechanic to come out from Marino township tomorrow to tow your car in and fix another by-pass hose on. We can go across soon and pick up your gear. No doubt you'd like to thank the Melfords for all they've done.'

It had the effect of making Nicola feel a nuisance. She said quietly, 'Yes, I would. Would you like us to go now?'

Garry got in quickly. 'First of all I'd like to take you for a dander outside, Nicky.' *Nicky*. That's what he had called her in those letters long ago.

'Oh, good show,' said Forbes in a tone that made Nicola feel he was glad not to have to take her. 'Then you'll take her over to Koromiko afterwards, I suppose.'

Garry sounded brusque, unlike himself. 'No, I'll leave that to you. I was there on business today, about their lambs. Once is enough.'

It sounded as if he too wanted to throw Felicity and Forbes together.

Nicola turned to Cousin George. 'Aren't you coming outside with us? I expect you know more of the history of Puke-o-Marino than anyone.'

The older man rose with alacrity. ' You can keep your seat, Garry. It's not every day I get preferred to the younger generation. I'll be very pleased to show my young kinswoman round.'

Nicola looked back as they went out of the door. She was sure the look in Forbes's eye was a derisive one. No doubt he thought she was making up to the older man. Well, he could think it. She wasn't going to let his attitude force her into being distant with Cousin George, who was a darling.

It was amazing how much heat still rose from the earth. There wasn't a breath of wind.

'Not the night to hear the whispering,' said Cousin George, pointing to a bush-clad mountain that rose beyond the river.

'Then it really does whisper?'

'Yes. Some people find it eerie, but I love it. Gives personality to the place. It's only when the wind is north-west, which in Canterbury is practically all spring, summer and autumn. But it isn't the sound of the wind in the pylons, because it dates back to pre-European times. The Maoris named it.'

'Is there some legend connected with it?'

'Yes, but Forbes could tell it to you in full much better than I could. His best friend, Hal Macpherson, is a Maori from Kaiapoi and Forbes is well up in such things.'

'Hal Macpherson . . . that doesn't sound Maori.'

'Oh, his great-grandfather was a *pakeha*—white man. His name is really Henare, though, not Hal, but as that's the Maori form of our Henry, the diminutives are the same. He went to school with Forbes.'

Forbes's father was stationed at Kaiapoi once. I'll remind him to tell you the legend. It could go in the book.'

Nicola's delight in the surroundings of Marino Homestead more than satisfied old George. Beyond the grape-blue mountains and foothills that clustered about the estate, the sunset daubed the sky above the more distant Alps with tongues of flame that seemed to be leaping up from some inferno far below their western slopes.

Over to the east, twilight was creeping up with purple shadows and misty blues. On the homestead lawn the vivid green stood out, contrasting with the shadows of the trees. Aspen poplars crowded together in one corner, quivering with dryad laughter. Silver birches gleamed whitely among darker-foliaged shrubs, the scent of roses filled the air. Everywhere were little stone tables and seats, evidences of the loving labours of the pioneers and those who had followed them. Most enchanting of all was the sound of running water mingling with the bird- song.

'The evening chorus of the birds,' said George contentedly, as he puffed at his pipe.

He put a hand under her elbow, turned her away from the house, walked her along a path beaten white and smooth with many feet, through many years, between great hydrangeas, as opalescent as the *paua* shells on the New Zealand beaches.

Beside a seat under a great Norfolk pine, Cousin George stopped, ' Sit down for a moment, Nicola.' He put one foot up on the seat, and looked down at her from his great height. ' Nicola, you've heard the name Felicity?'

'Yes, Cousin George. You'll mean Felicity Melford? Let me see . . . she's a daughter of the people who own Koromiko Gorge?'

'Yes, the two estates are almost like one. Have been for nigh on a hundred years. A pity, just when we're celebrating our first century, that there's—well, disharmony. Felicity was engaged to my grandson. They quarrelled and broke it off. And, quite frankly, although they're breaking their hearts for each other, they're acting so mulishly, and neither will make the first move. It was mainly over the fact that Felicity doesn't want to continue in the same rut—as she puts it—she's always been in.'

Nicola said slowly, 'Cousin George, are you sure that they're breaking their hearts over each other? I mean perhaps they just found out they weren't suited. Sometimes families think a match ideal merely because all the other members of the family are happy about it. Perhaps they just drifted into this because they were encouraged. Much better a broken engagement than a broken marriage.'

'No, it wasn't that. There was never anyone else for either of them. Under all their quarrelling as kids there was always something more. They're both tempestuous, but now they're so careful with each other, so damned polite. I know what it is—neither of them will risk losing control in case their real feelings get the better of them. I'd like to see them really go for each other, a slap-up row.' He chuckled. 'Maybe when Felicity sees you—a lovely redhead—right on the spot, she might get a little anxious, not so sure of herself. Play it up, would you? Give herself something to be anxious about?'

Nicola felt instant alarm. She hadn't come out here to tinker with the tinder-dry emotions of these Westerfields. 'No fear, Cousin George! I couldn't. You know the mischief my father's cousin Nesta made here? I know it's still remembered. I don't want anyone to class me with her. I absolutely refuse. They detest Nancy Westerfield because she couldn't stomach the life here. They hate Nesta because she made such mischief between Forbes's father and mother. I've even got the same initial, and I'm of the same branch. I came because I thought I could help you with this family history. And partly because I thought

it would be rather nice if someone from our side could dispel the idea that we're fickle creatures. So—no plotting, you old matchmaker. Even if a little jealousy *might* bring your grandson and Felicity together, you can use someone else, *not me*'

He chuckled and changed the subject. ' Tell me, how is your grandfather, my cousin Vincent Trenton? He must be over seventy.'

Nicola blinked. ' You didn't know? He died five years ago, quite suddenly. A thrombosis. We were glad it was that way. He had suffered so much when he was younger—you know, from his war wounds, but for many years, apart from his wooden leg, he'd been so fit. He used to say he owed it all to my grandmother. I suppose he did. She's a wonderful person. Still carries on her antique business. Granddad said he would probably have wallowed in self-pity but for her, when first he had to adjust to life with one leg and couldn't carry on with the job he'd been trained for, but that depression and misery just couldn't thrive where she was.'

'That's me. She was gallant about it from the start. Her people lived not far from Brockenhurst, as you'll know, and when I was convalescing there myself after I got my packet, they visited me constantly. It was tough luck when Vincent copped his the day before Armistice was Signed.'

Nicola nodded. ' My mother says she didn't know what she'd have done without Gran when my own father died. All Gran's concern was for Mother, not for herself, though *she* had lost a son just as Mother had lost a husband. Father was Gran's only child.'

They heard someone calling. Forbes. ' Grandfather, where are you?'

They turned back. Forbes said as he came towards them, ' I'll take you to Koromiko now, Nicola. You'll want to unpack.'

Nicola saw Cousin George grin to himself as she got into Forbes's Humber. She wished there had been no situation like this. Forbes and Felicity evidently preserved a sort of polite neutrality for the sake of their families. She had an idea that Garry had refused to take her because he too wanted Felicity and Forbes to make it up. -

Little was said till they neared the other homestead. Forbes took his pipe out and said, with no trace of feeling in his tone, ' Since you and Grandfather were out so long, I presume he told you about the situation re Felicity, to make things less embarrassing?'

Nicola kept her tone level too. ' He did. But it doesn't concern me in the least. I'll be here a few short months —just an interlude in my life, soon over, soon forgotten.'

'Your Cousin Nesta found six weeks long enough for *her* purpose.'

Nicola turned on him. ' I have no purpose. As far as I know I've never made mischief in my life. I find your prejudices ridiculous. It seems strange to me that a *man* should think this way. But since Cousin George told me what he did, I realize you're probably resentful of a stranger being brought into the family circle while there's discord over this broken engagement. I've told Cousin George I'll have nothing to do with it. Though it was only grandfatherly concern that made him propose it.'

'Propose what?' He barked it out.

Nicola said coolly, ' Well, I'd made up my mind to tell you—in case, without my aid, which I refused, Cousin George tries any manoeuvring. He suggested that it might be a good thing if I tried to make Felicity jealous! But I will *not* be used like that. It would only make you, for instance, put me down as another snake in the grass like my Cousin Nesta, whom I've never met and whom my mother

and grandmother most cordially detest. I can just picture how that lip of yours would curl if I tried any such thing.'

To her amazement he burst out laughing. 'Imagine Granddad trying on anything like that. The cunning old fox! I wouldn't have thought strategy in his line. Of course he might have something there, just the same. Why don't you play ball? If you managed to make a match instead of almost busting one up like Nesta, I might look on you in a way free from all prejudice. One would cancel the other.'

Nicola said through her teeth, 'Cousin Forbes, I don't find that funny. In fact, it's offensive. Nothing could appeal to me less.' Then she added, 'And I don't care *how* you look upon me!'

'Well, I'd have thought it sporting. But never mind, our family heartaches aren't your concern. I can see that.'

He drove up at the side of the homestead and put a thumb on the horn till a door was flung open and out came three people—Lucy Melford, Jack Melford, and their daughter, Felicity.

She was tall, with nut-brown hair and almond-shaped dark eyes and winged eyebrows. Nothing more natural or friendly could have been imagined. Nicola, braced for stiffness, relaxed.

'Hullo, Aunt Lucy, Uncle Jack,' said Forbes. 'Hullo, Fliss, here's Nicola who arrived at the homestead in the sort of pickle you're always getting into. You'll find her a kindred spirit. We do. No stiff and starchy English connection here. Not content with getting axle grease all over her, she sat down in the cow-bog getting across with a birdcage and a poodle she had acquired on the way—and despite all that, charmed the heart out of our Jassy! That's why she's wearing Mother's duds. Isn't she something?' And he surveyed Nicola admiringly and audaciously.

Nicola, startled by this commendation, lifted her eyes to his to find them full of devilry. Quite right, there *was* a greenish tinge to those mocking dark eyes. She realized something with a great sinking of the heart . . . this man had a contrary streak in him. If she had agreed to Cousin George's proposal, he would have been scathing. As she had not, he vowed she was not a sport.

He was going to use her to bring Felicity to heel, against her will!

CHAPTER V

Well, at least Felicity seemed uncomplicated. She was most friendly towards Nicola. Perhaps Cousin George had imagined—and wished—her to be heartbroken over Forbes. It was evident that Forbes still had strong feelings, since he approved his grandfather's scheme, but from Felicity's natural but careless manner towards Forbes, Nicola was sure the broken engagement had spelt nothing but relief to her. As well it might with a man like him!

After a few moments, Felicity separated Nicola from the others and whisked her upstairs to see the view and explore the rest of the fine old homestead.

Felicity's room, with a corner window in the tower, looked north-west to Mount Gray.

Nicola stood, enraptured. The sky had lost its fiery tints, the clouds were mother-of-pearl now, curtained in grey and lavender. Beneath them dreamed just such another old garden as Marino. The heady perfume of night-scented stock came up to them.

'How this place would grow on one,' said Nicola dreamily. 'One would never want to leave it.'

'Places aren't enough,' said Felicity, in a strong, clear voice. 'People matter more, and doing things. Not going on in the same old rut year after year. I've been here all my life. Next year, after all this nonsense about the Centenary is over, I'm off. I'm going on a conducted tour of England. I wanted to go on my own, but Mother and Father were worried, poor pets, so I agreed to this. I'm looking forward to it. Will you be back in England then, Nicola?'

'Not right away. My mother has remarried and she and Humphrey are in Hong Kong. They want me to visit them there for a few weeks. But

you could look up my grandmother while you're in London. She has an antique shop.'

'I'd love to. We have about five weeks' free time in Britain. And, unlike the Westerfields, we have no relations back Home. I'm glad you're taking the part of Nancy, Nicola. It's much more fitting that a Westerfield descendant should take it. They thought I was marrying into the family, of course. They'll have told you that? . . . Yes, well, I'm not now. Not for me these pigheaded Westerfields.'

Nicola knew a faint depression. They were all very history-conscious. No one liked the memory of Nancy. Felicity was glad to be shot of the obligation of taking that part, though it could be, in her case, that she felt it was embarrassing when Forbes was taking the part of Francis. But evidently old George was so keen on the whole thing being authentic that he wouldn't leave Nancy out of it. He seemed to be the only one who bore no resentment.

He had been quite fond of his Cousin Vincent, evidently, and Vincent's bride-to-be. But then those days—World War One days—had been too concerned with big things for any room for pettiness.

'Oh, there's Forbes calling,' said Felicity. 'He's an impatient beggar at best.' She went out to the landing, called over the banister, 'Don't rush us, Forbes. We're getting to know each other. Mother, give him some coffee to keep him quiet!'

Nicola heard her laugh and add: 'And even if you are falling for her yourself, Forbes, you'll have lots of time.'

Nicola wondered how Forbes would take that! It seemed as if Felicity could give as well as she could take. Yet old George had said they were being too damned polite with each other—careful not to lose their tempers; it didn't sound like that to her.

She contented herself with asking as Felicity came into the room, 'Why do they call Cousin George Old George?'

'To distinguish him from Young George, Forbes's father. Our family and theirs are far too fond of retaining family names. What mix-ups there've been! I'm all in favour of introducing new names. Or at least to skip a generation with them.'

Later, downstairs, Nicola said to Forbes, 'I think we should be on our way. That poodle's not at all settled and I don't want him disturbing the others.'

Forbes shook his head sadly. 'I don't know what Marino has come to. Imagine a white poodle running round there!' He laughed heartily. 'Apart from the sheepdogs, we've always had bull-terriers. They're good for pig-hunting.'

Nicola said, a little stiffly, 'I've never had a poodle myself, if you want to know. We had a spaniel and a retriever. But you don't specify that it must be a certain breed before you rescue an animal '

Forbes, playing a part, she knew, gave a playful slap on the knee. 'Know what, Felicity? She's just like you. Rises to any bait! It's going to make the next few months interesting.'

Felicity yawned. 'I used to bite, I know. But not lately, it doesn't seem worth it. But it will be good for you, Forbes, having Nicola at Marino. She won't let you have it all your own way.'

Nicola got up from beside Forbes on the couch. 'Well, now I'd like to get unpacked and settle down. Tomorrow I'd like to explore Marino. Garry will take me over it. I can't believe I've really met him. We used to write each other the longest epistles imaginable when we were children. It was marvellous, feeling he wasn't a stranger. And he's just as I imagined him, tall, broad, fair and handsome.' Nicola gave a

dreamy smile. There! That would spike Forbes's guns. Now Felicity Melford need have no pangs, imagining Nicola and Forbes going round Marino tomorrow.

She added: ' And the following day I hope to get down to starting the history. I've got my portable typewriter with me.'

the way home Forbes looked at Nicola speculatively. ' Mellowed a bit over there, didn't you?'

Nicola returned his look just as searchingly. Her tone was cool. ' I wasn't on the defensive with those people as I atn with you. You make my hackles rise.'

Forbes grinned. ' I don't mean that, and well you know it. You couldn't resist, after all, making Felicity a little jealous.'

Nicola looked puzzled. ' I did nothing of the kind. I was just myself. If I seemed warmer in my manner to you, it was just that good manners demand it.'

'Oh, I see . . . you'll be polite enough in company but continue to bawl me out in private.'

Nicola let her tone be as dry as his. ' I wouldn't have thought bawling out was in my line. Sounds crude.'

His tone was drawlingly offensive. ' Perhaps we New Zealanders *are* crude. No, you won't bawl me out, dear Nicola. You'll just be witheringly sarcastic. It doesn't let your dignity down as much as good old honest shouting match. But it's every bit as nasty.'

She looked at him and sighed. ' Look, I don't happen to care what you think. I don't have to. I don't even have to see very much of you. If we are thrown together it won't be of my seeking, just remember that,

Forbes Westerfield. Garry is much more in my line. I like *pleasant* people.'

He glanced up from the empty road to regard her with narrowed eyes in which she glimpsed real hostility. 'Just what *is* your game, Miss Nicola Trenton?'

She met his gaze levelly. 'You have the quaintest ideas. But I'm not even interested in finding out what they are. I won't be used by either you or Cousin George. Garry happens to be the type I like. Therefore I'll probably spend more time with him than with you. I'm playing no game, either yours or your grandfather's. If I like Garry's company and he likes mine it's no business of yours. For Cousin George's sake I'm hoping for harmony while I'm here. Ah, we're back. Good. Now, can we behave like two civilized beings in front of the others?'

'What else?' His tone was light but his expression grimmer than ever. He opened the car door for her, picked up her cases and walked out of the garage with her.

As they drew level with the bathroom off the back porch, he put them down, swung open the bathroom door, peered in after switching on the light, then shut the door again.

Nicola, sheer curiosity in her voice, said, 'What *were* you looking for?'

For a moment she thought he was not going to answer her, then he said, almost grumpily, 'A spider. He fell in my bath. But it wasn't too hot and I dried him out on blotting-paper. He's climbed up again. I wanted to make sure he hadn't fallen back again.' Then at the startled look on her face he said: 'Well, if *you* can rescue poodles and canaries, I suppose I can rescue a spider!' And the next moment they were both laughing helplessly.

Oddly enough, instead of relieving Nicola's feelings, it made her crosser than ever. She would rather he was consistently nasty—also that it didn't remind her, suddenly, even poignantly, of her father. She could hear him now, saying to her, 'I know we have to kill flies and other carriers of germs, but I agree with Cowper when he says:

'I would not enter on my list of friends
(Though graced with polish'd manners and fine sense,
Yet wanting sensibility) the man
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.'

She gave an impatient wriggle of her shoulders, banishing the memory.

She felt tension tighten within her as Forbes opened the door into what they all called the Far End. Back in the bosom of the family the situation between herself and this darkly antagonistic man could be unpredictable. When they were alone together they could take the gloves off and develop no inhibitions. She did not want to hurt Cousin George, to have him feel she had brought enmity and discord into Marino as had Nesta and Nancy. Though, to be fair to Nancy, it had been heartbreak she had brought, not enmity. Nicola was determined to be fair to Nancy, her own forebear.

As she stepped in a white streak hurled itself at her in ecstatic welcome—D'Arcy, once more tubbed and fluffy.

'OK, I'm so glad he's getting over his timidity,' cried Nicola, forgetting tension. 'I so hate to see any animal cringe. But who bathed him?'

Letty Romans said: 'Garry and I did. I'm used to bathing bigger dogs. We couldn't seem to get hold of this one.'

There was a pile of used towels on the hearthrug and beside Letitia on the couch, a heap of period clothing, shawls and bonnets, chip straw hats, feather boas and bustles, long skirts braided and tucked, fragile-looking silk bodices all beads and bows.

'Oh, how enchanting!' said Nicola, as any girl might. 'What fun this is going to be.' She picked up a watered silk skirt and jacket in a ravishing shade of green, held it at arms' length, then against her. 'I'd love to wear clothes like these. I know they'd be pretty awkward getting up to the top deck of a London bus, but they really had something, didn't they? So feminine!'

Cousin George's blue eyes twinkled. 'They were also awkward for falling off drays into flooded rivers.'

The tawny eyes looked into his and widened. 'I—you mean—no, no, they couldn't be the same clothes, could they? I mean Nancy would have taken them back to England.'

'They're the very ones she was wearing. It was summer. The river floods not with winter rains but with snow melting in the hot nor'westers. She said the dust of the appalling roads and the ducking had ruined them. But it wasn't so—the material has lasted nearly a hundred years.'

No, it hadn't ruined the moiré silk. It had only ruined the romance of a hundred years ago . . . and clouded one a hundred years later. Aware of what she was thinking, Nicola blinked, then laughed inwardly. What *was* she thinking? She'd meant: 'And snarled up a family reunion a hundred years later.' No romance about *this*. Not for Nicola Trenton.

Cousin George said: 'Letitia has been fossicking to some purpose. We feel it will give the scene an authentic touch if you actually wear the travelling clothes your ancestress did.'

Nicola measured the waist against her own, anxiously. 'The hips will be all right, but the skirt-band will have to be let out. I refuse to tight-lace!'

Letitia said: 'That won't be hard. I'm used to this.'

I've produced so many amateur shows in this district and been wardrobe mistress for all of them that I think it will present no problems as long as we unpick very carefully. The material won't stand much strain. I'll let a gusset in and the basque on the bodice will hide it. Good job you're taking the part—Felicity would never have got into it.'

Nicola saw Forbes's mouth tighten. So he does still care, she thought. But no wonder they had quarrelled. It would be easy to quarrel with this man.

She said quickly: 'It's a pity, though. She'd have looked wonderful in this.'

Letty shook her head. 'In the style, yes. But not the colour. With your red hair it's perfect. Felicity is the rose-red type.'

That was true. Nicola suddenly realized how much happier this Centenary would be if Forbes and Felicity came together again. Perhaps Forbes had no idea that Felicity was planning to go overseas. Well, she could hardly say it to him directly, but there was another way, the indirect.

So she said to Garry: 'Did you know Felicity is off to England as soon as the celebrations are over? On a conducted tour. I'm going to give her my grandmother's address. Gran should be home again by then. She's always flitting off to sales in America or the Continent, and this year she's going to Australia too. Some old Colonial stuff she wants for her Colonial room. I hope I get home before then too, though I

may not. I'm off to visit my mother and stepfather in Hong Kong after this. But I'd love to show Felicity my best-loved haunts around London. She's a lovely girl, isn't she?'

What a silence descended upon them! As if she had made a gaffe. But how? She hadn't said it to Forbes. This family certainly had awkward angles. How ridiculous this was, when Forbes and Felicity seemed quite capable of meeting and behaving naturally. Yet, presumably, one ought not to talk about her.

Garry's voice held that same dry note that Forbes used when Felicity was mentioned. 'A very lovely girl,' he agreed. Once more everyone rushed into speech. Cousin George won the contest in striving to continue and told Nicola that the canary was settling nicely in the aviary.

'I daren't risk the others pecking it to death, so I've hung it in its cage on a hook in the centre of the big canary house and in a day or two they'll never notice it if I let it out.'

'It's this one that worries me, Cousin George,' she said, 'he's so highly strung, a real yapper. I wonder if I ought to have him in my bedroom tonight so that he'll have company. I'd hate him to keep everyone awake.'

'No,' said Forbes decidedly (he would). 'You'd only lose sleep yourself. We'll put him in the laundry on a sheepskin. He'll be jake.'

Probably didn't like dogs inside at all . . . Letty picked up a big chip straw hat with a brown velvet ribbon falling from it and a cluster of cherries. She went over to a mirror, tied the ends in a bow under her chin. She had sherry-coloured eyes beneath a fringe of golden hair that fell to her shoulders. It was entrancing. Forbes whistled.

'Nicola is right. Those styles really did something for a girl. What a pity you're fair, Letty. *You* could have been Jane—that is her hat, isn't it?'

'Yes . . . but Jane is the part Felicity ought to take. She's got Jane's dark hair. It would look marvellous on her. I wonder if we can persuade her.'

'You never know,' said Forbes. ' Now that Nicola has arrived on the scene to take Nancy's part, Felicity might.'

Nicola stifled an impatient sigh. He was determined to push her into trying to spark off jealousy in his former fiancée. Well, she wasn't playing ball. She'd attach herself to Garry. Then Felicity wouldn't connect her with Forbes. 'I beg your pardon, Forbes, what did you say?'

'That Felicity, of course, is much prettier than Jane. Or, more correctly, prettier than Jane herself thought she was.'

Nicola wrinkled her brow. ' But how would you know —a hundred years on—how Jane regarded herself?'

'By her diary. Jane was an inveterate diary-keeper. She poured out all her bitterness of heart in them. It went deep with her that she was only ever Francis Westerfield's second-best. It's all in her diaries.'

Nicola said slowly: 'What an unwise thing to do. Diaries are all very fine, but it's not wise to put things like that into them. Perhaps she looked for slights. Perhaps some of those things were written in the heat of the moment and once she'd poured it out the sting would be gone. But to anyone else reading it, it would seem freshly poignant. And if ever her husband had come across them it might have made the gap wider.'

Forbes shook his head and said slowly as if he really hated the thought of it, ' I think she desperately needed the safety-valve of writing out her pain. I doubt if Francis ever knew. He probably thought her an admirable helpmeet. He was a blind bat of a man. You see, she made sure he never saw them. She found a perfect hiding-place. In the drawing-room was a china cupboard with glass doors and china handles with roses on them. It's still there. But some years ago, we found dry rot in the bottom and ripped up the boards. One was loose. Jane had secreted all her diaries there. It was quite full. She had a lot of heartache to pour out, you see. In those days women were very loyal. They didn't talk to other women about their husbands' failings. They were women of courage, fortitude.'

Nicola swallowed. Suddenly it became important for her that Jane Westerfield, nee Temple, had known some measure, at least, of happiness.

'But surely her *later* diaries would reveal more happiness. I mean, no one stays all the time in the very depths of unhappiness. She would mellow, the sting would grow less. Francis would come to love her, wouldn't he? I mean, how could they help being happy here, in these lovely surroundings, their children by their side? I think it may have been all in her imagination in those early years. She may never have realized that even if he did marry her on the rebound, men are creatures of habit and he was bound to grow to love her. Wasn't that revealed in her later diaries?'

'There are no later ones. Or if there are, they've never been found. We've all hunted at some time or another for a hiding-place. The fact remains that Jane Temple, orphaned when quite young, and coming through great hardships on sea and land, as an emigrant, never found what she craved . . . love.'

Something in his voice caused constriction in Nicola's throat. A hundred years since, yet the unsatisfied longings of Jane Temple

could bring tears to her eyes. But perhaps when she read the letters for herself—as she would have to do for the history—she'd find not pity in her heart for Jane, but scorn of the way Jane had given way to self-pity.

She was vividly conscious of the magnitude of the task she was facing. Even Cousin George would want the book written to please him. And certainly Forbes would have a say in it—a strong say. He'd want none of Nancy Westerfield's failings glossed over, none of Jane's virtues under-emphasized. For one revealing moment Nicola felt she hated that paragon, Jane Temple, diarist. Better that she should have taken her bitterness to the grave, unchronicled.

CHAPTER VI

Nicola had thought she would not sleep, but, exhausted not only by the adventures of the day but by trying to adapt herself to personalities, she went forty fathoms deep.

But she woke at two in the morning from a nightmare in which the formidable Jane was pursuing her up the Whispering Mountain with a pack of wolves, while she clambered sobbingly with a small, pathetic poodle, yapping madly, in her arms, hampered by a long, clinging green moiré skirt . . . Nancy's!

It was a relief to wake. The next moment relief fled as she realized, with mortification, that the yapping was real. D'Arcy! He only stopped now and again to howl and whimper. A poor, homesick, bewildered poodle, longing for the touch of a hand that he knew. But to all the others, especially one Forbes, he would be nothing but a dratted nuisance that was keeping the entire house awake.

Well, no matter how much he objected to dogs in the house and particularly in bedrooms, she'd just have to go down and get him.

She shut the door so the light would not disturb the others on that landing, found a brunch coat to put over her flimsy nightgown, and then took a few exasperating moments to find her torch.

Fortunately, during that time, D'Arcy's yappings and howlings had died down forlornly, into silence. But no doubt he'd start up again any moment. Why, oh, why has D'Arcy had to happen to her?

In the best detective fiction style, treading on the outside of each step in case it creaked, Nicola made her way downstairs. She hoped D'Arcy wouldn't start up in a shrill burst of excitement when he saw her. If he did, and Forbes heard, he'd go for her for being so foolish as to disturb the dog again. Nicola crept down a passage leading to the

laundry and paused in a horrible embarrassment of indecision. Perhaps she ought not to disturb him. But it would be just like the thing if he started up again the moment she got back upstairs. Oh, blast it!

At that moment a voice came out of a door beside her. 'Who's there?' it asked, and a light came on.

'Only me,' whispered Nicola, idiotically, then added: 'Nicola.' It would have to be Forbes's voice, of course.

'Come in,' he invited—or rather commanded, despite his whispering tones. 'What's the matter? Can't you sleep?'

She pushed the door wide and gazed in surprise . . . there, on his side, Forbes lay, and, tucked into the angle at the back of his knees, a curled-up bit of canine absurdity, fluffy and curly. Two little pink-rimmed eyes regarded her angelically.

'That poodle!' said Nicola, and didn't know where to go from there. Then she said, most forlornly, 'Forbes, I'm sorry. I've been nothing but a nuisance and a complication. I ought never to have come. This must be the last straw, having an animal you don't even like parked on your bed so that the rest of us can get some sleep. I heard him and came to get him.'

He grinned at her quite disarmingly. 'Oh, don't worry, Stranger-from-over-the-sea. I've often done this with sheepdog puppies. Poor little scrap! I got up to him three times. Gave him a hotwater bottle once, thinking, even if it is a warm night, it might be a comfort to him, but he's got ideas of his own. Sort of Great Dane ideas in a lap-dog container. He dragged it to the far end of the laundry. He wanted company, that's all.'

'Three times!' said Nicola ruefully. 'I wonder if it disturbed the others. I was sleeping like the dead, except that I was having a horrible nightmare.'

Forbes put out a hand and began fondling D'Arcy's ears. There was real amusement in the narrow dark eyes, not the sardonic gleam of the earlier evening. 'Were you being pursued by a horribly bearded bushranger trying to snatch a kiss?'

Nicola was annoyed to find her colour rising. How ridiculous! He'd think her stupid and prudish. So to dispel that she blurted out, 'No, I was being chased up the Whispering Mountain by Jane. With wolves. And D'Arcy was in my arms, yapping.'

The eyes opened widely and held hers, searchingly. Then he said, quite nicely, 'I'm sorry, Nicola. It must have got on your mind. You'll think us odd bods to be so concerned about something that happened a hundred years ago. I can see it preyed on your mind. And don't run away with the idea that Jane was unhappy all the time. Granddad remembers her, you know. Jane lived till she was eighty-four, and died in 1928. He said she was gallant and gay till the last, a very happy woman with her grandchildren. Which, in a way, made us sadder still, to think she never really felt loved. We think she must have found happiness in little things since the big things—the biggest thing there is—failed her.'

Nicola suddenly saw his face through a blur. She looked away hastily, stared fixedly at D'Arcy, smugly comfortable.

The surprising Forbes put out his hand and took hers. 'Don't try to hide your emotion, Nicola. I like you better for it. Maybe we've become too obsessed with the past this last year or two. And I must confess I didn't relish the idea of someone coming from your side of the family. I thought it might just revive for my mother some of the

very real anguish she suffered over that other woman—your cousin—who came out here.'

Nicola said, brushing away her tears with the back of her hand, ' I didn't know—about your mother—till Jassy told me. I knew Nancy Westerfield had come out here to be married and couldn't face the conditions and went back, but all I knew about Nesta was that she didn't get on with her New Zealand relations. When you wrote I thought it was just stupid prejudice. I didn't realize it might stir up things best forgotten. I'm sorry. I'll make some excuse—not now but later—so no one thinks I'm going off in a huff, or because I don't like my New Zealand relations—and when I've got the history done, I'll get away. My grandmother is coming to Sydney. I can pretend she's not well and wants me. Then your mother need never see me. I could go just the week before the Re-enactment.'

Forbes said slowly, ' That's a very handsome offer, Nicola. You're evidently a cat of a different colour from Nesta. No, I won't allow you to do that. For one thing, it's Granddad's big day. He's set on having you play Nancy's part. It makes it authentic for him—the copper hair, the relationship. Let your hair grow. You'll need it in curls over your shoulders, if those portraits Letty has dug up are right.' He grinned. ' I don't suppose you'll find it half as uncomfortable as my beard. Honestly, I don't know what to do with the darned thing when I come to bed. It sort of pushes against the top covers. I've tried tucking it down, but it won't stay that way. It's such a ridiculous jutting sort of beard.' He glanced at her sideways, wickedly. ' To say nothing of it being such a piebald one.'

Nicola found herself giggling with him.

'That's better,' said this astonishingly kind Forbes. ' Look, sit down in that basket chair and have some of this coffee. I couldn't get off to sleep the second time I got up to D'Arcy, so I brewed myself some. Something to be said for sleeping downstairs. I put it in that Thermos

jug. Mind having it out of my cup? I'll have some with you, but I'll drink it out of the jug. We don't want to risk waking everyone, going back into the kitchen. There's just two biscuits left. D'Arcy ate the rest.'

Nicola hoped no one came to investigate. It would look decidedly odd if she were caught drinking coffee in his bedroom in the 'wee sma's,' but he didn't seem to think anything of it . . . all in the family, she supposed . . . and she wouldn't risk introducing embarrassment by saying so. After all, they were related, no matter how distantly. But Nicola felt wildly unreal. Certainly when first she had beheld that wild, bushranging figure, she'd never dreamed she'd be here at three, drinking coffee with him in this matey fashion.

As she put her cup down, Forbes said, 'I won't escort you back, I dare not risk disturbing this atom. No—no, for heaven's sake, don't think about removing him. He'd probably howl the house down wanting to get back to his snug nest here. Goodnight, cousin, sleep tight.' Nicola crept up as silently as she had down, and slid into bed, warmed, comforted, fed, to sleep dreamlessly till glorious dry sunlight flooded her bedroom window.

She came down to breakfast bright-eyed and ready to explore. How different one could feel in two sets of twenty-four hours. Last night she could have run away. She hoped that this new situation between her and Forbes might last, that it might be not just a truce, till something else upset him. But she had a firm conviction they had laid a few ghosts.

They were having breakfast in the kitchen end. Forbes looked up in as friendly a fashion as last night. 'Oh, good morning, Nicola, pity you woke early after such a broken night. We'd decided to let you sleep on and give you breakfast in bed.'

Nicola looked at him in surprise. ' You had a much more disturbed night than I. I heard only D'Arcy's last yappings—you'd coped with the lot. By the way, where is that animal this morning?'

Jassy grinned, ' You may well ask!' She lifted a corner of the tablecloth. ' There!'

D'Arcy was sitting on Forbes's farm boots. His eye held no recognition of Nicola. ' There's gratitude for you,' she said, sitting down. ' I rescue him and he doesn't even acknowledge me.'

Old George, beaming patriarchally at the head of his table, said, ' Well, he doesn't look like a man's dog, but he must be.'

Forbes's face assumed an expression of horror. ' He'll make me a laughing-stock. If you think I'm going to turn up at the sale-yards with a thing like this at my heels, you're mistaken. Besides, Border Bill will make mincemeat of him.'

Nicola said: ' He's my responsibility. I'll take care of him. He's too timid to be disobedient.' She said to Jassy, ' Will you have any objection to him being in the house with me while I help you with the chores, Jassy?'

'No, he seems to be past the slipper-chewing stage. He's better here than getting into trouble outside.'

Cousin George said: ' Jassy, you could cope with chores today, I'm sure. I would like to start showing Nicola round the property today, then get on to the Family Chronicle later in the day.'

Forbes said: ' How'll you take her, Granddad? Shall I harness up Ginger Moll to the jogger-cart?'

Nicola said quickly, ' How do you usually go ?'

'Oh, on horseback, but --'

'Well, have you got a spare mount?'

They all stared. All spoke at once, said the same thing: 'But you come from London!'

'I've always ridden. We lived in the country when I was small, right next to the local riding-school, though Gran bought me a pony of my own. And I spent many holidays back in the country with the people who owned that riding-school. I used to spend most of my time giving lessons. And '—she couldn't resist it—' it so happens quite a few London people hire hacks and ride.'

'Sorry,' said Forbes. 'Serves us right. We often get supercilious about how little people overseas know about New Zealand. It evidently cuts both ways.'

Cousin George said, 'This is splendid, lass. We'll ride over the place this morning, and if you're going over to Koromiko this afternoon, Garry, to look at those fat lambs they've got, you could take Nicola with you. She and I could go over the Chronicle tonight.'

Nicola was conscious of faint surprise. Under that beard Cousin George appeared to have a most determined chin. She'd had an idea that—even against her will—he'd try to wangle her into Forbes's company as much as possible. But now he was pairing her off with Garry. She saw Forbes give a quick glance at her and thought he looked surprised too.

Nicola felt she ought to be glad Cousin George had given up the idea. She didn't want to become embroiled in things at Puke-o-Marino. You never knew what it would lead to. For the first time she felt sympathetically towards Nesta Moore. Could it be she had got drawn

in willy-nilly? Though Gran had always said that she thought her husband's cousin was pure poison.

When breakfast was over and Nicola had dried the dishes she went out into the yard to see how her suit was drying. As she passed the farm office she heard Forbes on the phone.

'Tell your mother she may have company for afternoon tea, Fliss. Garry's asked Nicola to ride over with him. How mistaken we've been in her, wondering how a London girl would fit into this setting. She's a crack rider. Bet she looks something in jodhpurs. She and Garry have been recalling the things they used to write to each other. I was going to ride her up Waipuku Gorge this afternoon, but Garry got in first. She's keen on birds, too. We're going to take her bird-watching. Anyway, I've got the chance of taking her up our gorge later, so I've horned in and I'm coming with them this afternoon. So is Letty. She's sewing flat out this morning. You ought to see the get-up she's rigged for Garry. He looks really something in it. She's finally persuaded him into a pioneer part as well—someone's kid brother since he hasn't got a beard. A young farm cadet, coming out from England. Then switching him to a young sailor, a dashing uniform. Nicola was quite fascinated with it all last night. Letty's marvellous. Well, I must be off. Not often we get the chance of toting someone like Nicola around. See you later, Fliss.'

Nicola hurried on. She was conscious of indignation. As if *all* the men at Marino were falling over themselves for Nicola's favours! Suddenly she giggled, unpegging her skirt. Felicity would be only amused. Any girl would see through Forbes's attempts to make her jealous.

And she was sure he was wasting his time. Felicity had probably realized she'd made a mistake and had no intentions of making it up. Something akin to pity for Forbes stirred Nicola for a moment. It was

not easy for a man to accept that the girl he loved no longer loved him. '

It might be kind to play up to him a little. Then if Felicity did care, it might bring her to her senses. If she didn't, what then? Well, Forbes would just have to accept it. Nicola found her mind dwelling on that possibility and switched her thoughts away.

She heard Forbes calling her and went inside. He was laughing. ' Nicola, will you hold this animal till I go out and get the horses saddled up? I'd better keep him out of trouble with Border Bill till he gets used to having a poodle round the place.'

D'Arcy had been prancing round full of joy, but turned into specimen of woeful doghood as soon as the door was firmly shut between him and his hero.

'Really,' said Nicola, thoroughly exasperated, ' you're nothing but a nuisance. Come upstairs with me while I make my bed.'

She carried him up, howling all the way. ' You're just a slobbery, sentimental thing.' Then relenting, remembering what he'd been through, she began fondling him. D'Arcy submitted with an ungrateful resignation.

Nicola put him down on the padded window-seat of the dormer and turned to her bed. There was a white flash and D'Arcy was gone through the open window!

Nicola gave a dismayed yelp, yanked the catch off, flung it wide and leaned out in terror . . . D'Arcy was skidding down the roof. She saw Forbes crossing a courtyard far below. She shouted: 'Forbes! Forbes! Look out for D'Arcy!'

She saw D'Arcy glissading towards the spouting on the top roof, noticed another lower roof below, but even so, he'd undoubtedly fall from that too, and crash on to the concrete. Her stomach turned over.

Neatly, as he reached the edge, before the spouting could trip him, the poodle leapt daintily into the air and landed on his four feet on the lower roof and continued to slide and slither. She realized Forbes could hear but not see him.

'Right in the middle, Forbes!' she screamed. She saw Forbes lift his arms in what he must know was a hopeless gesture and saw D'Arcy launch himself into space towards his hero, a foot from the edge.

He landed clean on Forbes's chest. Forbes's legs slid from under him and he fell back on the pavement with D'Arcy on top. The poodle bounded off him and began frantically licking his face. Nicola saw an arm come up, attempt to push the dog off and waited no longer but rushed for the stairs, passing Jassy, carrying linen, like a streak of lightning.

'For land's sakes!' said Jassy bewilderedly, to Old George, 'what in the world's come over that girl? You'd think the Ould Nick himself was after her.'

She and Cousin George took after them.

Forbes was sitting up and, to Nicola's relief, laughing. D'Arcy, seemingly proud of his efforts at reuniting himself with this demi-god, was prancing round him, yapping shrilly, with Forbes trying to push him off and quieten him down.

'This dog,' said Forbes to Nicola, 'isn't a poodle at all. He isn't a lap-dog. He's a whirlwind in concentrated form. Did you ever hear of a dog daft enough to hurl himself out of an upstairs window? The crazy, mixed-up animal I Here, grab him . . . *quick I* '

Round the corner by the stables and across the courtyard had come a blue streak. Border Bill!

They were all too late. Border Bill's head was down, his teeth bared. He was going to scuttle this upstart of a thing! When he was six inches away from D'Arcy, the poodle leapt nimbly to one side. Border Bill's rush carried him on madly. Forbes had one hand on the ground and was starting to turn over to get up when Border Bill's head caught him in the midriff area and turned him completely on his back, the dog somersaulting over him.

Nicola was appalled. She flung herself on the ground beside Forbes, but realized even as she did it that Border Bill was on his feet again and there was going to be trouble. She decided to grab D'Arcy, but missed by quite a lot, and the next moment D'Arcy had hurled himself at Border Bill who'd not really got himself into the correct attacking position.

Border Bill got such a shock that he actually retreated a couple of feet, and D'Arcy, growling in miniature fashion, followed him, the two of them nose-to-nose, with D'Arcy looking as menacing as a poodle could.

Border Bill, looking surprised, sat back on his haunches. Then the next moment they started leaping round each other, full of doggy delight, tails waving.

'Starve the lizards!' said Forbes elegantly, getting to his feet, Nicola assisting and asking anxiously if he'd hit his head on the paving.

'No, but Border Bill knocked all the wind out of me.'

They both swung round to find George and Jassy helpless with merriment, on the back verandah.

George was wiping tears away. He said, between gasps, ' And Jassy actually said, before you came, Nicola, " I hope she's not one of these stiff and starchy Englishwomen!" Jassy's got the weirdest ideas of anyone who lives beyond the shores of New Zealand. But really, you can even outdo Felicity. I thought there'd never be another girl to rival her for adventure, but in just tw^o days you've rescued a dog and a canary, wrecked your car, had an encounter with the Bushranger, and now just about knocked out Forbes, our tough hombre!'

'I did not,' said Nicola. ' It was the dogs.'

Old George pinched her chin. ' You're going to add a lot to the joy of life, I can see that,' he said.

'I wouldn't call it joy, exactly,' said Forbes, rubbing his tender middle. ' Bill's got a head like a prize ram.' He added, ' Well, I don't think we need worry any more about this scrap. He can fight his own battles but probably won't need to. If he's going to be pals with Bill, Bill will keep the other dogs off him. Nicola, you can come and help me saddle up.'

It was a glorious morning, with already a dry heat that was gilding the paddocks and beating down comfortably on their backs. The air was full of fragrance . . . the fleeces of the lambs and their mothers were dazzlingly white, and the happy blend of birdsong and running waters added beauty of sound to the beauty of eye before them, to the green, dark and mysterious, of the forest- covered hills, the tawny-brown of the tussocky ones, the blue of the far ones and the green of Marino Hill itself.

Further west still the shimmer of snow on the highest peaks melted into a sky where a great bar of cloud was pushed up like a ruched theatre curtain leaving a patch of sky, perfectly clear, and green rather than blue, above them.

'That's the nor'west arch,' said Forbes, pointing. 'It's left its rain on the West Coast—that's what we call the narrow province between the Tasman Sea and the mountains, and it's blowing the clouds up from the tops. It will be a good day for the whispering. Come on round back of the stables. You get it faintly even from there. Further in, it's inescapable. Here you have to listen hard.'

'Cousin George said you knew the Maori legend about the Whispering Mountain. What is it?

'Oh, just that once in a blue moon, the whispering wind catches the song of the *tux* and throws it against the gorge walls. And for the one who hears it, it means that the dream of one's heart comes true within the twelve-month. Seemingly, centuries ago, some mischief was made between a Maori maiden and her lover. She was on her way to throw herself over the cliffs of the gorge when suddenly the wind tossed the *tui's* song back at her, echoing. She knew then that her lover must be true, that what she had heard was false. That she must ask him for the truth. She did, and it's still said that there was no happiness like Parehuia's.'

Nicola felt deeply moved. To break the spell she said : 'Has anyone round here . . . anyone you know . . . ever heard the echo?'

Forbes hesitated.

Nicola wondered at that. He wasn't the hesitating kind. But then men hated to be thought sentimental. Then he said slowly, 'Granddad says that all his life he's wanted to hear it but never has. Mother did once. Sheer coincidence, of course, but it did happen that her dearest dream came true within the year—what a year. Her greatest anguish and her deepest happiness.'

.Nicola found herself flinching from the knowledge that that must have been the year Nesta had made the trouble. Then Forbes said in a

queer voice, 'I heard it myself this spring. In September. A *tui* singing in the *koivhai* trees in the pass. And the echo suddenly flung back over the water from the Sounding Cliff.'

He didn't look at her. He was turning over a stone with his foot.

She knew why his voice sounded strange. How ironical to hear it the year he and Felicity had broken their engagement. So much for legends!

It gave her the courage to say something, however. 'Forbes, I heard you on the phone. I didn't deliberately listen. Is this really the way to move her? I mean, dragging in Garry like that? Any girl would see through it. Making out all the chaps round here are finding me irresistible. I find it rather ridiculous. It's not as if I were a dazzling blonde, or something. I'm not the type. *They* don't go round falling in bogs or rescuing dogs and birds.'

He looked up at her quickly, put up a hand to shade his eyes against the sun. 'Not dazzling? You've picked the wrong adjective there, my dear cousin. Your hair is like a newly-minted penny. I wouldn't be surprised at anyone falling for you. In fact, for the first time I can dimly understand what it must have meant to Francis to lose Nancy, if she looked like you.'

Nicola shook her head. 'It's wishful thinking. You want Felicity to think I'm a danger. If you must use someone why not Letty? I thought last night she and Garry were attracted. He seemed to be getting quite a kick out of her arraying him in those pioneer clothes.'

'Oh, we can't use Letty. She's on the brink of falling in love with the chap she's been getting all the gen from, at the museum.' He suddenly seized Nicola's arm. 'You've not said anything to Garry about what I've asked you to do, have you?'

Nicola said: 'It was Cousin George who asked me in the first place.'

'Yes . . . but I thought it sheer inspiration. Are you stalling? Have you told Garry?'

'Definitely not. I wouldn't dream of it. And might I point out to you, Cousin Forbes Westerfield, that you have a grip like iron and that redheads bruise easily.'

He laughed and let go. 'Sorry, I've been het-up about the whole situation. Damnable that it should have happened just before the centenary. But I'd be embarrassed if Garry saw through my plotting.'

'Well, you could give up the idea. Though Garrystrikes me as such a decent, uncomplicated sort of chap, he might not notice.'

'Then you don't know him, but how could you? You've been here only five minutes. When Garry is roused we all go for cover. But listen, Nicola, there's a lot at stake. Are you going to play ball? Doesn't the happiness of two people mean anything to you?'

Nicola looked him straight in the eye. 'Forbes, are you sure it's the happiness of *two* people?'

A line appeared, drawing down the arched brows. 'Of course it's two. What --?'

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. 'I—I— well, I didn't think Felicity looked as if she were exactly pining away. I mean—oh, this is so hard to say—but what if she simply doesn't want to make it up? That she found the courage to end it and wants it like that.'

He turned away, hunching a shoulder against the suggestion, then back. 'It wasn't like that. It was a bitter, ridiculous quarrel. I know her

so well. She's breaking her heart every moment of the time under that flippant facade. It would take just something little to splinter it.'

Nicola looked sideways, unobserved, at that dark, unhappy face as he continued to shuffle the stone in the dust. She made up her mind.

'All right, Forbes. But don't be too outrageous. Be more subtle. Get her wondering. I mean, if you keep on insisting that Garry is falling for me, she's likely to see through it and be more determined than ever not to take notice. I know my own sex. It will probably be enough if she thinks *you* are falling for me. Make her think me a potential danger. If you thrust it under her eyes,.-she'll see what you're up to. And you're here all the time, Garry isn't.'

'Oh he's here nearly every weekend. He's got a flat in Christchurch and likes Jassy's cooking better than his own. His folk live in Nelson Province, too far for him to go every weekend, so he comes here. Well, thanks, Nicola. I appreciate your willingness to help.'

As they saddled up Nicola told herself it was a good thing she and Forbes had become allies, even in such a doubtful enterprise. Better than the enmity she had dreaded. Of course he was just using her . . . but it really did seem as if, under his need of her, to help restore Felicity to him, he thought she was a pretty good sport. Perhaps if she helped the two of them to make it up, it would cancel the harm Nesta had done, all those years ago. Perhaps if it brought happiness to her son, Isobel Westerfield would think more kindly of the English branch.

It was for so short a time. A few months. Then she, Nicola, would be back in London, with this behind her like a faintly remembered dream. How strange, then, that at the thought she knew a sudden lowering of the spirits.

Why? New Zealand was nothing to her. *London* was home.

CHAPTER VII

Despite everything Nicola's spirits rose as the four of them left on the horses. There was something about riding that kept you above worry level ... the movement under you, the feeling of the horizon being pushed further away, the sheer physical exercise.

Good to feel the hair lifting back from one's forehead, one's ears; good to breathe air that knew only mountains, plains and sea. A sense of exhilaration arose within her. She wanted to laugh at herself. Marvellous boost to any girl's ego to have three men attendant on her!

Forbes was laughing too. 'Poor Jassy! I wonder how she'll console D'Arcy. Nicola, how in the world did he come to have such a ridiculous name?'

She told them. Then became absorbed in listening to the three of them pointing out landmarks and boundaries.

'We're having a breathing-space in which we're concentrating on the preliminary Centennial arrangements before we plunge into haymaking and shearing,' said Cousin George. 'We have to take advantage of every moment. We're skipping our holiday this year. We always try to squeeze a week in, in January, to go up to the Sounds, or to Kaikoura for some fishing, but we'll need to be home. Today's excursions will help you get your bearings, Nicola, and tonight we'll get out the papers.'

They slowed their mounts to a walk as they came to a gate between the huge grazing paddocks. In front of them the ground sloped gently down to the river.

Nicola thought of something. 'The celebrations themselves, Cousin George—will there be a terrific crowd attending? I mean apart from family?'

'Yes, a huge crowd. All the district, plus umpteen sightseers from Christchurch, I daresay.'

'How are you going to cater for them?'

'Oh, the whole district will pitch in. There'll be sheep galore killed and cooked on every farm, plus hens and geese and turkeys. We've a huge deep-freeze—so have the others—already packed with pork and venison. There's plenty of deer and wild pigs to be had for the hunting. Jassy's venison steaks and pies are delicious. Forbes's mother and sister will be here to help Jassy with the house guests and I've got a chap coming to cook for the not-so-close relatives and friends who'll be bunking down in the shearing quarters. They'll bring their own bedrolls. He cooks for the shearing gang when they're here.'

Forbes said quietly, ' I'm not sure if Mother and Sarah can make it, after all. There's a chance they'll be in Australia at that time.'

George sounded quite incredulous. ' But they wouldn't do that to me. Not Isobel and Sarah. They've known for ages.'

Nicola hadn't thought that dark skin of Forbes's could so betray the blood rising under it. He said, ' Well, this is something that just cropped up. I can't quite explain it, Grandfather, and anyway, I've an idea I can change their minds for them now.'

Old George looked at his grandson with perplexity. ' That's certainly a cryptic speech for you, lad. What's up? Something wrong up north?'

'Let's leave it at that, Granddad. Do you mind? Anyway, if the worst came to the worst, I'm sure Aunt Lucy and Felicity would take their place.'

George looked sideways at his grandson. ' All right, Forbes, I'll leave it, meanwhile. By the time you get to my age, you've learned to be

patient, to live and let live. But I'll be very disappointed if Isobel and Sarah are not here.'

Nicola knew without being told that Isobel had decided not to come when she had learned that a kinswoman of Nesta's was coming. There must still be a sting in remembering that painful visit and all its repercussions. It was a bitter thought, though there was a faint recompense . . . Forbes had said he might be able to change their minds *now*. Did that mean he was going to write and tell them that she, Nicola, was not Nesta's type?

The track through the next gate didn't lead them down to the river as she had thought, but took them into bush, winding down through glorious native trees, beech, which they called *tawhai* and had tiny beech-shaped leaves; cabbage-trees or *ti-kouka*; *ngaios* with leaf spreads almost like fans and tree fuchsias with tiny blossoms, called *kotukutukus*. Tree-ferns, which were *pongas*, pronounced *pungas*, made delicate lace-work leaning out over the banks, *tuis* and bellbirds called, fan tails flirted in front of them, darting at insects, friendly and inquisitive.

The narrowing track meant they couldn't ride abreast. Forbes was slightly behind Nicola, his horse's head nodding and dipping just past her shoulder. The other two were in front, Garry in the lead.

Nicola turned. 'Forbes,' she said in an undertone, 'did your mother decide on the Australian trip as an excuse when she heard a relative of Nesta's was coming for the celebrations?'

The narrowed eyes met hers. She could see the little specks of green. She thought his answer was nicely reluctant.

'Yes, I'm afraid so, but --'

'Yes, Forbes?'

He hesitated again.

'But what --?' She badly wanted to hear the answer to that.

He shook his head. 'I'd rather not finish that sentence, Cousin Nicola. You aren't the age of Grandfather, so you won't have his patience.' He smiled a smile of such unexpected sweetness that it almost took Nicola's breath away. 'But you could start learning that gentle art, couldn't you? I will finish it some time... When I'm more sure --' he broke off again and once more she had the tantalizing desire to know exactly what he'd started to say.

When he didn't continue and she was aware that they were catching the others up and this moment might not come again, for it seemed to her that in a situation like this she could put her foot in it times without number or warning, she said quickly, 'Forbes, I would like to know one thing, please. I'm not just being inquisitive. Would your mother be happy to see this affair of—of Felicity patched up?'

He didn't seem offended. 'Yes, everyone would be, but Mother most of all. Felicity's mother is my mother's best friend. That's how Jack and Lucy Melford met. She's convinced that the marriage would be ideal in every way. But why do you want to know so particularly?'

Nicola came straight out with it. 'Then if anything I did furthered that—I mean brought about that reconciliation, then she might perhaps look more kindly upon me, do you think? It might not exactly wipe out the way our branch of the family has injured yours, but it would perhaps compensate a little. That's something I'd like. If you feel I can really help, Forbes, by making Felicity aware that there are other fish in the sea . . . making her jealous enough to want to make it up . . . then it's a deal.'

Forbes came up level, leaned forward, caught at the bridle close to the bit and brought her mare to a dead stop. Their knees were touching, his fitting neatly at the back of hers. She could feel its warmth.

Nicola slackened the reins, let her hands fall loosely on the pommel of the saddle. Forbes put one of his over both hers, smiled into her eyes and said, ' You're a good sport, Nicola. Thank you . . . and on with the masquerade.'

They both looked forward over their mounts' ears. The other two had halted at the water's edge and their horses were drinking, blowing delicately on the surface of the water first.

Garry and Cousin George both swung round a little in their saddles to see why the other two had stopped.

They wore slightly surprised and definitely amused expressions. Cousin George's expression was caused, no doubt, by the fact that he'd deduced she had decided to play ball. But why should Garry be amused? If, like the rest of the family, he desired nothing more than that Felicity and Forbes should make it up, he ought not to look like that.

Nicola said hastily, ' We're holding them up. You lead, Forbes.'

As she followed him downhill, she looked down on her hands. How strange! She was still conscious of the touch of his hand. That brief contact that had been merely an expression of gratitude.

Merely. Now why had that word sprung into her mind? Because what more would she—*could* she—look for other than gratitude?

Suddenly Nicola's vision dazzled. The sun and the water and the trees were quite oddly glittering and waving. Waving before the impact of it. *Impact? What impact?*

Her heart framed the answer, the answer she didn't want to recognize because there was no future to a realization like that. The impact of knowing she had fallen in love. In love with Forbes Westerfield who hadn't wanted her to come to New Zealand, but who was now prepared to use her, even to be friendly with her. Forbes, who loved Felicity Melford!

CHAPTER VIII

Nicola was glad they were joining the others, that she wouldn't need to continue talking to Forbes, needn't dread their eyes meeting. Given time, she'd crush this thing under, be able to match teasing remarks with light, meaningless repartee. At the moment she felt that the self-revelation she had just experienced was imprinted on her face for all to read.

They walked the horses through the ford, came up the other side and turned along a fairly wide track into Waipuku Gorge itself.

This was country that could easily cast a spell over one . . . enough native trees to give one a sense of adventure, enough English ones to stop one feeling homesick. Pity there hadn't been English trees here all those years ago to tell Nancy Westerfield that one *could* put roots down into strange soil, that oaks and *kowhais*, European and Maori, could live happily together.

Blackberries were in bloom, promising purple-rosy fruit later, elder bushes were clotted with cream blossom, poplars rose like paler green spears from the native bush and forest.

Cousin George was in his element, pointing out the landmarks. Nicola edged up to him, leaving Garry and Forbes behind. They turned a bend on the hill, high above the water now, and the Swelling Water became Leaping Water and further up the noise seemed even louder as the gorge narrowed and the waters thrust through.

'We go through the bush here and up that gully, then round the shoulder of the next hill and come back to the gorge, high above it, Nicola,' said Cousin George. 'That's Puketui Point—the Hill of the Tui—where Parehuia heard the *tui's* song echoing back and turned again, turned back to happiness.'

Nicola felt strangely moved. Perhaps one was suddenly more receptive when experiencing for the first time something that could be—must be—love. All at once she felt as if she knew all the people who had ever lived on these hills and in these gorges . . . right through the ages, back through unhistoried years, before even Parehuia went despairingly up the gorge, right to pre-Maori times when the small Morioris roamed the land ... she felt at one with all the women who had lived here, loved, hated, feared, rejoiced ... all the women who had hidden their true feelings.

They came through the dim greenness of the enchanting, scented bush to a sunny shoulder and looked down into a chasm that the Waipuku had carved into sides so straight that she instinctively shuddered, picturing what a leap it would have been. The water boiled out of the gorge here, over rocks that had been tumbled down through thousands of years, in floods long unremembered. There was no blue water here, only foam siphoning out and forward in mad leaps. Impossible to believe that below the homestead, at the ford where Nancy had received her ducking, it widened out into a purling, gentle river, shallow and sunlit. But of course it bent back and twisted in its course for many miles before looping back to water the lands nearer the coast.

Nicola came out of her trance to say simply: ' I'm so glad she didn't do it, so glad that *tui* sang.'

Old George's eyes were soft as they rested upon her. Then he gestured towards a great silver-white cliff, pocked with holes where birds nested, reared up. ' Yonder's the Sounding Cliff. Let's listen. Nice if on your first time here, the *tui* sang.'

They fell silent. Even the lark in the sky above plummeted to earth as if it too listened, willing the *tui* to sing. The whispering wind was coming down the mountain.

Nicola's pulses feathered with magic as she heard a twang and a chuckling. It started, stopped, started again, as if the bird was diffident as yet. Her eyes sought Forbes's. He nodded, smiling. Then a sound rose, very like the bell-bird's song but richer, stronger, chiming over the gorge and ending in that harshly-sweet twanging note. What was it like? Like fingers brushing over a lyre.

But, though they listened intently, the Sounding Cliff didn't echo it back.

'The *tui* is on the wrong side of the gorge,' said Garry. 'It needs to be on this side. Never mind, very few people ever do hear it. But you might just be lucky while you're here, Nicky. You'd better haunt this spot.'

Cousin George said, 'Aye, there's plenty of time. And who knows? If you do hear it, lass, it might mean you might find your happiness here . . . within the year.'

Nicola spoke quickly. 'Oh, no, Cousin George, that couldn't be.' (They mustn't even guess what had just happened to her.) She added, rather unevenly, 'You see, though I think this is lovely country . . . my heart is in England.'

The horses suddenly became restless, shook their heads, moved on.

Back at the homestead Forbes helped Nicola to dismount. It gave him the opportunity to say to her in a low voice, 'Nicola, you promised to help. Don't, whatever happens, say to Felicity that your happiness lies in England, will you? I want Felicity to think you're fancy-free ... to think, given the chance, you might stay. It could mean so much to us.'

Nicola blinked, a crease appearing between her tawny brows. Then it smoothed out. Oh . . . Forbes thought she had meant she was in love with someone in England. She'd meant England itself held her heart.

Well, it would serve. No danger then of him guessing that she had fallen in love with a man who hadn't wanted her here, but was now prepared to use her to heal the breach between himself and the woman he loved.

She managed a light laugh. 'I'm not used to intrigue, Cousin Forbes. You'll have to teach me. I'll have to watch my tongue.'

They went in to dinner, Forbes receiving a frantic welcome from a little white poodle. D'Arcy ignored Nicola. He had switched his allegiance.

That night Cousin George brought out the old diaries. They were huge affairs, most of them with tarnished metal clasps that looked as though they had been broken open, probably when first found. So Jane hadn't thought even their ingenious hiding-place security enough. She had locked them too. She must have needed the solace of their pages desperately.

George said: 'Mary McGillivray has done a wonderful job of picking out the bits to use. Rather regretfully we had to let the emotional side go, because it didn't have a happy ending—no use bringing out all that heartache for everyone to read. You'll find Mary's notes most useful, but I felt you'd get the atmosphere more authentically if you read the diaries first. They'll make Jane Temple come alive for you in a way nothing else could, not even her photo.' He waved towards the big oval photographs of Francis and Jane that flanked the fireplace. 'Where'll you have them, Nicola? On the big table? Plenty of room to spread them out if you want to copy out bits as you go. You might want different extracts from Mary's.'

Forbes said suddenly: 'She'd be much better to take them upstairs to her own room.'

George looked surprised. 'Why, lad?'

Forbes hesitated, then said firmly: 'Well, we'll want to talk and it will disturb the thread of her study. After all, Nicola is used to just copying someone else's tales, not weaving one of her own. And she'll want to make at good job of it.'

Nicola felt uncomfortable. He certainly had awkward angles, this man. Even though he was prepared to use her for his own ends, he seemed unable to help resenting her. He need not remind her she was here for a job of work. She hoped nervously that it would please him when it was finished.

Hp, didn't wait to hear what she would prefer. He picked up the old diaries, motioned her to precede him. It was a beautiful staircase, reminder of another generation, lovingly polished, the reddish-brown of the wood smooth as glass from all the hands that had travelled down it. Nicola wished she didn't love the homestead so. She mustn't become too attached to it. It was just as if her own roots were here too. There must be something in clan loyalty.

The old rosewood writing-table was in the window, looking out to Waipuku Gorge. Beyond the trees rose the Alps, their snows silver-lit against the flaming sunset sky. Forbes put the diaries down on the table, dusting it first with his handkerchief, almost lovingly.

He pulled out a cane-seated chair for her and said, 'This, I suppose, is the very desk she wrote them at.'

A certain poignancy touched Nicola. She said, gently, 'Forbes, perhaps the beauty of her surroundings compensated her a little. Sunsets like these . . .'

He shrugged. ' I don't think she'd have made many entries at sunset. More likely during the day when he was away out in the paddocks. She wouldn't want him to know. Poor Jane 1'

He added, with a note of real regret in his voice, ' Pity Felicity wouldn't have taken this on, but she's no flair for it at all, she's not introspective enough, and not interested in history. It seems odd for your side of the family to be doing it.' He looked at her sideways. ' I trust you'll do Jane justice.'

Nicola's lips tightened. ' My sense of fair play will insist that I do . . . even if I may have inner reservations that Jane possibly over-dramatized herself. After all, Jane's been a long time dead, and the churchyards are full of folk with endless virtues and no faults. It's the living we find fault with. She may not have been the pathetic and saintly character you imagine her to be.'

Immediately she wished it unsaid. But Forbes didn't seem to have taken offence. He looked down on her patiently. ' I can understand you thinking that—hoping it. But Jane wasn't that way. You'll find out as you go. She was a tomboy, full of pranks, always laughing at herself . . . it's there for you to read. In another day and age, she would have been an author. But under it all is the underlying loneliness, the sense of always being second-best. I don't think her nearest and dearest would have guessed. Though I'd like to have shaken Francis. He ought to have known.'

And he went away.

The first diary wasn't a locked one. It hadn't needed to be. Nor was the second. The first had been started on board the sailing ship that had brought Jane and Henry Temple to New Zealand. The conditions on board had been frightful . . . the cramped and uncongenial conditions of the cuddy, the dampness of the sleeping quarters, the constant becalming. Yet Jane had obviously enjoyed the adventure. There was

first a hint of heartbreak as they mourned the parents they lost with typhoid and evidence of a real bond between the young sister and her brother.

'Henry could have wished to come out unhampered by a sister,' she wrote, 'but though Aunt Eliza would have taken me, he would have nothing of it. We stick together, he says. How I do hope we get settled with someone who will give us our own quarters.'

She wrote of families with children desperately ill in the stuffy quarters, of helping with them, of reading the other children stories, setting them simple lessons, to organize their time wrote of the beauty of sunsets and sunrises over the limitless leagues of ocean, of rainbows shining through tropical squalls of rain, of the stars and the moon that were, she said, the only familiar things in a new, sometimes bleak world.

She had recorded irresistibly funny word-sketches of some of the rather pompous individuals on board, who'd been unimportant, she surmised, in the world they had left but who now wanted to be big frogs in little puddles.

'But I long now for this New World, for its space and freedom. I so miss my privacy. I've never minded solitude.'

Nicola didn't take any notes, she raced through page after page of blackish-brown copperplate writing. She couldn't cold-bloodedly assess this yet. She had to, just had to find out what was happening to Jane day after day.

She read of Jane cutting up her best petticoat to make a shroud for a darling three-year-old who had succumbed to pneumonia following the measles that had swept the ship, and found she was smudging the page with her tears. She read of Mrs Flora Cunninghame, high-stepping along the deck, nose in air, and tripping over a rope to fall

headlong into a bucket of pitch, and found herself laughing as if she had seen it.

She felt she heard the Captain's voice raised in the Psalm for the day, Psalm one hundred and seven, when they were allowed up on deck after three days of being battened below in a storm fierce enough to strike terror into the hearts of the most seasoned sailors . . . ' Oh, that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! . . . They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep. For He commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths ... He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. They are glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them unto their desired haven.'

Nicola read on, chin in hand, turning page after page. Not yet impassioned outpourings. What a pioneer spirit that girl had! How she loved it all . . . the hills and mountains, the broad paddocks, the hot, raging wind that was the nor'wester, the gentle whispering that resulted from it . . . the singing of the strange, beautiful birds, the sound of rippling waters in the pass. Her concern for her brother. ' So relieved to find that this Francis Westerfield, despite the difference in their station, can recognize the dormant qualities in Henry of leadership and responsibility. I am glad that I can cook to please him. And he is adding a wing to this small homestead so that Henry and I can have our own rooms.'

There was never a word—even later—of loving Francis, but it was there between every line. What Francis liked best for breakfast, how handsome he looked in his Sunday clothes, how strong he was, how gentle with the lambing ewes, never minding how many hours he spent out of his bed, when snowstorms swept the spring countryside. ' We are fast preparing for his bride now. I hope, for his sake, that she loves this place. I hope she will not miss the elegancies of life at home

too much, for she is gently-born. Francis has ordered a piano to be sent out for her. And he is working every night to make his home beautiful for her. But of course it is so raw, so new.

'I am helping him. We lined all the rough walls with copies of the *Lyttelton Times* before we put the papers on. Such pretty papers. True lovers' knots and wreaths of roses for the bedroom, a very handsome striped one for the drawing-room in gold and white. He has put a lantern at the door, in wrought iron, to light her home. I have polished up the spinning-wheel. It has had some rough usage. I gather up the bits of wool the sheep leave on the thorn bushes, *matagouri* the Maoris all it. We call it Wild Irishman. I have woven Francis and Henry socks from it. The white and the black together make a very pleasing grey. . . . '

Jassy brought Nicola a tray of supper. Nicola ate it mechanically. The asparagus rolls were not nearly as real as Jane's boned and stuffed leg of mutton . . . Colonial goose they called it . . . that they had that first Christmas day with the sun blazing down.

Francis and Henry had made it a real gala day for the young Jane. They had taken her in a borrowed trap to the beach, with two other families. ' Henry and the other men fished off the rocks, but Francis and I and the two Wilberforce children gathered shells, the like of which I had never before seen. A happy, happy day.'

Had she known she was falling in love with him?

Nicola was fiercely glad that she had had that one perfectly happy day. A day such as he and his Nancy had never shared. Nicola remembered reading somewhere that there can be an hour in which a woman can be happy all her life. Had that been Jane's? Had it meant more to her, always, than all the years of wifehood and motherhood? One little day.

The entries grew shorter for each day. A reserve crept in. Jane was leaving her joyous girlhood behind. There were a few terse sentences interspersed between items such as: ' Made candles today. Not for downstairs use, but for the bedrooms. Used the new fancy moulds Francis bought in Christchurch, for after she comes. Francis thanked me. . . .

'Henry dreams night and day of having his own place, too. At first I thought I could never bear to leave Marino, but now I think I could. When Henry mentioned it to Francis he said, very quickly, "Perhaps in a year or two, Henry, I can understand you wanting your own place, but I need Jane here just now. Nancy is going to find it very lonely and strange and she is not used to waiting on herself." And Henry said, quite roughly for him, "Then before long you'd better put your name down for one of the girls from the ships to maid your wife," and added, " You might need two—they won't all slave as Jane has done, outside as well as in." I felt very, worried. It's the life out here. Henry would never have spoken so to his employer at Home. But here Jack is as good as his master and so often the Jacks become masters.

'Francis didn't take offence. He said, quite mildly, " I know Jane has been worth her weight in gold. If for nothing else, the fact that she has never complained that she has had only two men for company."

'Complained.'

That last word was underlined. Nicola, reading it a century later, felt she had suddenly become Jane. The word stabbed her as it must have stabbed Jane. Complained? When she was able to serve the man she loved, cook his meals, make his bed, wash and iron his shirts . . . ride over these glorious hills with him, share the sunsets and moons, even if to him it meant less than nothing, sentimentally. Jane was just someone to minister to his comfort, never to the things of the spirit.

Nicola turned a page. 'The bedroom furniture came up by dray from Christchurch yesterday. Francis rode down a fortnight since. It is beautiful, from a home sold up by people who have returned to England. There is a beautiful mahogany bed and washhandstand with muslin drapes for a splash-board and violets on the china. There are two chests of drawers. Francis says Nancy has a lot of clothes. One of the chests has a mirror with a swinging stand. Very convenient.' (Jane probably had a tiny rectangular, spotty mirror, propped up on a packing-case, Nicola thought angrily.) 'There is a small carved chair with a cane back and a rose satin seat. He even bought the curtains and some embroidered drapes for the mantelpieces. Best of all I loved a pair of china candlesticks with fat little gold cupids twining round the bases. Francis has made the little room off that bedroom, the one with the sloping ceiling, into a dressing-room for Nancy. The hooks he has put up!

'We worked on it till nearly midnight last night and Henry was not pleased. But at last it was done. It will need nothing more than dusting now till she comes. And Francis picked up the candle—and we began to go out of the room—and in the doorway we paused and looked back at the room. The moon was shining through the dormer window. It is very beautiful. I have never seen a more beautiful room. We stood there in silence for quite a few moments, then Francis said, quite roughly, "Let's get downstairs. We won't be fit for work tomorrow." Almost as if I had persuaded him to work on. I couldn't understand it.

'When we went down, Henry said, very shortly: "And not before time," and then he turned to me and said: "Jane, Francis is going to sell us the Koromiko Block. I'd have preferred to go further north, but he wants company—yours—for his wife. We'll put a three-roomed shack to begin with, then I'll build you a fine homestead later. I'll continue to work here while I'm stocking the run. You can help Mrs Westerfield for a few weeks, then she ought to be able to manage alone, just as you have done." '

From then on the entries were shorter. ' Francis left today to go down to Christchurch. I wish he had left himself more time. He would have to ride hard. But he had no wish, he said, to spend too long in the city. Sometimes the ships are so late. We have had very strong nor'westers and back in the mountains the snow is melting and the rivers rising. I wish they had been married in Christchurch instead of waiting till the Bishop comes here. It would be over and done with then.'

Another entry, a significant one. ' She is very beautiful and stylish. Even bedraggled and wet you could see that. The dray struck a rock in the Waipuku and tipped over. But what had humiliated her most was that Francis turned up in town riding a bullock. His horse went lame in the last stage, and it was all he could get. I would not have cared. Crinolines are going out, she says, and it's mostly bustles now. Her hair is pure copper. She is appalled at the standard of life here. I expect it does seem raw to her. Yet I love it. Perhaps she will in time grow to love it too. The freedom, the beauty, the foothills and mountains are so close here. How could one help loving it? And there are such chances for men to make good. Back Home Henry would never have had the chance to become his own master.'

'Francis is very quiet. He had no appetite tonight. I'd made his favourite steamed pudding. Nancy just pecked at hers.'

'Nancy has been crying. Homesickness is a very terrible thing. That must be it. But she will get over it, poor girl. She will have to. One does get over things.' (What had Jane had to overcome? She had written that out of experience. Something much worse than homesickness.)

'Things are worse. Very strained. I feel sorry for Nancy too. Francis has lost weight. I don't think he has looked really well since we finished getting the house ready. I wonder if, even then, he was anxious about her settling. He was all anticipation till then. Then he suddenly became very irritable and moody, snapped my head off one

day when I urged him to leave earlier for Christchurch. So unlike him. The Bishop will be here in a week's time.'

There was a fortnight when there were no entries at all.

Then: ' Nancy is back in Christchurch staying with the Wrothinghams, waiting for a ship back Home. Francis is in a strange mood—as well he might be. He must be bottling up his feelings because he is acting as if it had never happened. He even whistles. I know it is to make us think it does not matter to him. It is so humiliating for a man. He has locked the door of that room.

'Henry is so worried about him he is not hurrying with the building of the shack. Says he would not leave Francis alone to brood. Henry is a good friend to Francis, for I know he is longing to take up the land at Koromiko and live there, especially now he appears to be falling in love. Mrs Mannington's sister has come here, Felicity Symonds, to help with the children. I have suggested to Francis that he ought to ride to Christchurch to see Nancy, that she has been at the Wrothinghams' two months now. That her welcome may be wearing thin and she may be missing him. He looked at me so strangely and said: " I don't want her back, Jane." It is just pride. But I dare not say so. Francis is very reserved—or has become so.'

Six months later still there was another entry. Nothing between.

'Nancy has sailed. When she delayed so long I thought she was changing her mind. It is the same ship she came out on. I should not have cared for that. Everyone will know, from the Captain down. Perhaps now she is out of New Zealand, Francis will recover.'

The next entry was seven weeks later. ' I am going to marry Francis. A young clergyman, newly arrived, is to take the wedding, not the Bishop. It is to be a double wedding. Henry is marrying Felicity

Symonds. They seem very happy. Francis needs someone to look after him. Better a half loaf than no bread.'

It sounded frozen, flat.

What kind of a wedding had that been? Had Francis been a reserved bridegroom, with Jane at his side knowing his thoughts were with Nancy? And had Francis taken her to that bedroom they had furnished together, with the furniture bought for Nancy? Jane would have been reserved too . . . Jane who could have had so much love to give . . . always afraid to show hirti how much she cared, always torturing herself with the thought that when Francis held her in his arms, when he had a man's need of her, he might be trying to imagine she was Nancy.

Daylight was breaking in the east before Nicola put the diaries down. They finished six years after the marriage. Jane and Francis had two children by then. George Henry and Felicity Anne. Anne . . . surely Francis hadn't been blind enough to call his daughter after Nancy? Nancy had been Anne. Nicola herself was Nicola Anne, after Nancy.

But those six years of diary-keeping were even more poignant than all the rest. No doubt Jane had married Francis, feeling that at least she could serve him, bear his children, help him build up a fine estate. But it hadn't been enough. She had needed the outlet of writing her diary. It had been a strain to stem the force of her love for him, something she had not reckoned on.

'I must not let it make me bitter,' she had written. 'Love should not go sour on one, must not let it make me irritable with Francis or the children. It is a good thing I am so busy, that I have so little time to think about being second-best. And Francis is so kind, so considerate, even affectionate.'

Now, nearly one hundred years later, Nicola Trenton was clenching her hands and saying: '*Affectionate!* Good of him, wasn't it? If he'd had good red blood in his veins he wouldn't have gone pining for that spoilt Nancy . . . he'd have fallen for Jane long before. He wanted a bomb under him! I expect he was the snooty, gentleman farmer type, who regarded Jane as just a peasant. Only the shortage of women made him marry her!' Many Colonial men had done just that, marrying the servant girls of sixteen or seventeen who came out as emigrants, or with their mistresses. 'I hope, oh, how I hope, that she found great joy in her children!'

Old Cousin George remembered her as laughing, gay, even in old age. How much of that had been pretence —at first at any rate—then had come to be second nature?

The last entry was the day after Felicity's second birthday. Jane had written the night before of all the preparations. Henry and his wife had come across from Koromiko Gorge and several other neighbours had driven long distances. Nicola could see it all . . . the little boys in holland and sailor suits, the little girls in white embroidered frocks with wide coloured sashes, the men correctly garbed for the occasion but drifting down to the yards to talk sheep ... the party games on the same front lawn she could look out on from the landing window; the little iced cakes, the home-made lemonade, the dishes of jelly kept firm on the marble shelves in the dairy ... the inspection of the aviary, the walk down to the river ... the *tuis* and bellbirds singing, the fan-tails flirting about in the air before them. . . .

But next afternoon Jane was writing: 'I must be tired. I've been very irritable with Francis today. And he did not answer me back, just looked at me sorrowfully and went outside. I feel ashamed. I have two bonny, loving children, a beautiful home, the finest in the district, a husband who is a good provider. I have so many *little* things to be thankful for. Only --'

And there the diary ended. No more entries. No more outpourings. An unfinished story. Nicola felt she couldn't bear not to know about the years that came after. And she wouldn't, ever. Nobody knew why Jane Temple Westerfield had stopped keeping diaries six years after she married.

Had it marked some crisis in her life ? Nicola wanted to know so badly it was almost a physical pain. And she would never know. It was like finding a library book with the last page torn out. But, in that case, you could always hunt another copy down.

Nicola knew, from her experience with Genevieve Walkington, that she held in her hands the very essence of a Centennial book that need not have been just an historical record, but a flesh-and-blood chronicle. As it was, cut short like this, and with a woman's stark pain revealed, it didn't seem cricket to use it. Jane Temple had gone to such infinite pains to keep these outpourings from anyone. She'd needed the outlet so badly she just had to write, but she had never meant them to meet other eyes.

Nicola could see her, quite vividly, writing out her moments of longing, pouring into the pages the force of feeling she dared not lavish on Francis, writing them when her children were in bed and Francis out at some meeting or working in the long South Island twilight. She would replace her secret diary under the floorboards of the old china closet and go to meet him, smiling and serene again, to a reserved, if kindly, but blind pioneer, who hadn't deserved his Jane. Nicola stood up, stiff and weary, put out her hand and caressed the book. Every word was an unshed tear. She fell asleep heavy-hearted and unrefreshed.

She woke to the sound of a tap on the door and struggled up from perplexed though deep sleep, to find Jassy coming in with a tray. She shook herself into awareness ... the sun was high, it must be late . . .it

was already hot with a dryness she was beginning to associate with Canterbury.

'Jassy, I've slept in! Why didn't someone wake me? I can't have you waiting on me like this! I read too late.'

Jassy was quite unconcerned. ' Oh, a body's entitled to breakfast in bed once in a while. I knew yon diaries would upset you. I've often thought it would have been a good deal better had she burned them, had her unhappiness died with her. I've read them myself and shed a tear or two over them. Isobel—Forbes's mother --has the right of it, and she should know. She vows that the big and sad moments of Jane's life were the ones she had to write about—that most of the time Jane would be so busy she'd be pretty content, that the others would be few and far between. That once she'd written them out she'd be herself again, the happy woman Old George remembers.'

Jassy had put the tray down on the bedside table. Nicola reached out and caught her hand. ' Oh, Jassy, that makes me feel a hundred times better. I went to bed last night with such a weight on me.'

Jassy nodded. ' Well, you've got the worst over, girl. But don't fret about it. Bit hard on you, I told them, having to read all that, knowing your own ancestor had caused Jane all that heartburning. I daresay Jane knew, in her better moments, that she made Francis a far better wife than Nancy would have.'

'Yes,' said Nicola, picking up her porridge spoon, ' I think she very likely did know that, but her tragedy was in wondering if Francis ever realized it. Well, I must snap out of this. It's foolish to be grieving over something that happened a hundred years ago.'

Nicola was just finishing her last piece of toast and marmalade when she heard the voices. Young voices . . . male voices. They floated up from the yard below.

They sounded oddly familiar. But how? She knew no one yet apart from the two homesteads. She flung back the clothes, went to the window-seat.

She looked down. About ten boys in T-shirts and khaki shorts, all with bicycles with towel-wrapped bundles tied on their handlebars and with haversacks on their backs. And in the lead, and talking nineteen to the dozen to Forbes, Ginger and Darkie!

Their voices came clearly to Nicola: ' So you see, we thought this place would make a good subject for our project. We've got to do one on sheep-runs for class. That girl—that funny girl from England—told us about the Re-enactment you're having. We wondered if we could look over the property and take some photos, Mr Westerfield?'

Nicola groaned. Forbes Westerfield would think she was the biggest nuisance they had ever entertained . . . arriving with a crippled car, a caged canary, a silly excitable little city dog, who was at that moment prancing madly round Ginger and Darkie, having recognized them. And while Jassy had not minded giving her breakfast in bed, Forbes might easily think it quite unsuitable for a woman Jassy's age to be carrying trays upstairs to a girl in her early twenties.

She could see Ginger's earnest little pink face lifted towards Forbes, and hoped the boy wasn't going to receive a smart setback. Ginger went on, 'She's beaut, isn't she? That girl that came here with the canary and the poodle? Gee, it was funny . . . her washing that dog in the horse-trough in the pound. We thought she was nuts at first. Dad told us it would be all right when she got here, that Mr Westerfield had a splendid aviary. We'd like to see it, please, but Dad said if you were busy we were not to bother you but just to have a picnic and come home.'

Nicola was relieved to see Forbes grin. ' You've picked a pretty good day. We'll show you round and give you all the dope. We were going to spend the day digging up old records anyway. There's a busy time coming up—the hay's nearly ready to cut—but we can spare you some time. You've biked a fair way, haven't you? Good for you. And mighty little on tarseal. Come on in and we'll rustle you up something to eat. You can keep your lunches for later.'

Nicola felt aghast. All those mouths to feed! This could make Jassy really mad. Men were the limit! Her tins would empty in no time. She grabbed her brunch coat and fled for the bathroom where she contented herself with a very sketchy wash, dashed back to get into a couple of brief garments and some denim jeans and shirt. She slipped her feet into thonged sandals and sped down.

She needn't have worried, Jassy was always forehanded with her cooking, and always had a reserve of ginger snaps and shortbread and fruit cake. She was cutting slices off the cake now, the boys sitting on forms at the big table the shearers ate at, in season, and already she had plates of queen cakes and Anzac biscuits piled high.

Cousin George had brought in bottles of orange cordial from the dairy and was pouring it into thick kitchen cups, and Forbes came in with a huge enamel pitcher of ice- cold water from a sort of ram-box just outside the back door that ran the most delicious water Nicola had ever drunk. Garry, at that moment, came in behind him, and paused in sheer amazement. ' What goes on here?'

Forbes chuckled. ' It seems Nicola doesn't only collect lame dogs and dying canaries. She also collects boyfriends. By the dozen.'

'There're only ten of us,' said Darkie, sturdily literal.

Forbes said: ' Look at Nicola's face!' and they all laughed.

Cousin George pushed a mug of cordial at her as she sat down, and a plate of biscuits. 'Tuck in,' he advised her.

'Cousin George, I couldn't. I've just finished the most enormous breakfast.'

He said, 'Oh, no matter. You look far too thin to me. Need more flesh on your bones.'

'She probably likes being that way,' said Ginger, as one man to another. 'Girls are funny that way. Should see my sister. She won't look a cream cake in the face. Catch me! I like eating.'

'I should think you did.' said Nicola faintly, seeing the biscuits rapidly dwindling.

But when Cousin George took it for granted she was going to accompany them on the tour of inspection, she refused. 'Definitely not. I'll wash up these things and begin to earn my keep. No, I won't change my mind. I've a certain image to establish. And it's not to be a lily of the field or a pampered guest. I'm a working member of the family.'

'She's right,' said Forbes unexpectedly. 'Leave her be, Grandfather. Come on, Garry, let's get on with it.' As they shepherded the boys out, the phone rang in the kitchen. Forbes picked it up.

Nicola could tell by the look on his face and his tone that it was Felicity. Something not quite natural . . . would-be casual, she thought. 'Think you'd better ask her another time, Fliss. Nicola's got company. Some chaps have arrived to see her. Ten of them, as a matter of fact.' He chuckled maddeningly. 'Yes, I said ten. She bowls them over like ninepins. They're a bit young for her, of course . . . mostly ten to twelve years, but still ! Two of them acted as knight-errants when she was on her way here, when she got involved

with that livestock . They think she's beaut and brought all their pals to meet her. She'll come over and see you one day next week. Plenty of time before your trip for you to get to know all you want to, anyway.'

He hung up, said to Nicola, ' Felicity wanted you to go over there and advise her what to see in London. I told her you'd go over there next week.' He dropped his voice, though only Jassy was within earshot. ' It's working, girl. She'd rather have you at Koromiko than here. She wants to keep an eye on you,' and he was gone.

It was quite a Saturday. Jassy would have cooked the boys a hot dinner, but Nicola dissuaded her. But they had their lunches at the big table and as a supplement Jassy slapped up a huge batch of scones and pikelets. Nicola couldn't think what she meant by the latter till she saw her greasing a girdle and dropping spoonfuls of batter on to it. She said, 'Oh, we call them drop scones.'

In the afternoon, when Cousin George felt they had had time to digest their meal, and had finished the tour of the wool-sheds, the dipping roundabouts, the grain- sheds and the stockyards, he took them down to the river to bathe.

'And mind,' Forbes warned, ' no fooling ... the rivers take a terrible toll of lives. One pool is very safe, no snags, no currents. A good rock for diving oft . . . but no sneaking off to any other pools.'

To Nicola's surprise Old George appeared in bathing shorts too. What a fine figure of a man he was!

'Don't you wear a bathing-cap, Nicky?' asked Garry.

'No, I can't stand the feel of them. I like the water through my hair.'

She had on a striped swim-suit with copper and black stripes, and Garry looked at her appreciatively. 'You never did send me a coloured snap of yourself. I must have preconceived ideas, because I imagined you very pink and white and sort of fragile ... my boyhood idea of an English girl. But you look as if you've always belonged here ... an outdoor type. That's a lovely tan.' He grinned. 'Or am I being naive? And is it out of a bottle? People with your colouring don't usually tan. Though you're more tawny, really.'

'Yeah. Just like a Red Indian,' said Ginger close behind them.

They heard Forbes laugh behind them. Nicola said, 'I was fortunate. Mother has a bit of this colouring, but is darker and has quite a brown skin. But the tan is the result of weeks on board ship, plus all the sunshine I experienced since from Bay of Islands to here. I soaked in it.'

The pool was beautifully deep for diving. 'Only experienced swimmers go in there,' said Forbes, 'and even then go straight through it to the shallower pool where if you get tired you can put your feet down. That's the safety rule about river bathing, and every time you come, even if you think you know the pool well enough, examine the bottom from the bank to make sure no snags have drifted down. River pools alter from one day to next.'

He turned round to see Garry taking Nicola's hand and scowled. Really, he was mad! They dived. The water was deliciously cool, taking their breath away at first. When they surfaced Nicola saw Forbes still had a line between his brows. Now why should he be displeased? He must want her to play up to no one but him, even though to Felicity he hinted that Garry had been bowled over. Perhaps since then he'd thought it would be awkward if she and Garry really did fall for each other. That wouldn't suit his purpose at all.

In fairness she had to admit he was good with the kids. He wouldn't allow too much ducking. 'That can get out of hand. Somebody gets too much water in him.' He organized water games instead to please the more exuberant spirits. Then he got Cousin George to put on a diving display. Forbes made a running commentary on the different techniques.

Something clicked in Nicola's mind. Cousin George had been a crack swimmer in his youth. Probably the silver cups in the drawing-room were evidence of that. No wonder he looked incredibly young to be the grandsire of Garry and Forbes. He'd kept himself so fit.

She said so to Forbes. He nodded. 'Yes, they use him in the Army exercises here still. They have a jungle training unit here, back in the hills among the bush that they call Little Malaya. They train our men there for jungle warfare. It's an ideal place—survival exercises and so on. Granddad is often away with them for a few days in the gorges, demonstrating swimming techniques in rough water, canoe work and so on. Well, I reckon the kids have had enough. Silly to keep on till they're tired—that's when the accidents happen.'

Nicola said: 'I can't quite understand their parents letting them take on an expedition like this, quite unsupervised, when they knew they were taking their swimming things.'

Forbes looked grim for a moment. 'I know. There are folk who take parenthood far too lightly. They seem to think it will never happen to their own youngsters . . . only to other people's children, the ones you read about in the papers.'

'It was very good of you to give them the time. There must have been something else you'd rather have been doing.'

He grinned. ' Good excuse for a day off, and it made Granddad take a break too. He's a tiger for work. We'll be flat out from next week, so I might as well.'

It had made a break for Nicola too, had put carefree hours between her and the poignancy of Jane's diaries. Their first impact had been so sharp. She must not take it to heart too much. She had work to do. She was not concerned with Jane's life only. There were many records to be gone through, living incidents to be extracted from the dry-as-dust items listed in old account books and journals, stained and dog-eared with use. Prices for crops and other produce, stock and poultry. The frozen meat trade, started so early in colonization, the depression of the mid-eighties, the stories of the big land companies, the way the huge runs gradually got broken down, the country more settled, regular coach services instituted, the incredible bravery of the early coach drivers in getting mails through, flood, earthquake, fire. Railways built, roads branching out in all directions, local shows, early electioneering. You could see the class barriers going down, a new race emerging, self- made men, worthy of the success they wrested from the soil.

At four Old George decided the boys should be on their way. Forbes said, ' I'll take them back home in the big truck. We can pile the bikes in. They'll be tired now and the nor'wester's swung round to the east. They'd buck it all the way home.'

'And I'm going to get right on with that material for the book,' said Nicola.

'You aren't, you know,' said Forbes. ' You're coming with me in the cab of the truck.'

Despite herself, Nicola's heart leapt a little. Even if he loved Felicity, it was something to know he was beginning to like her company. That once she had appeared at Marino, his prejudices had fled.

'I'd love to,' she said. He put out a hand to help her up the high step and over his shoulder, in the yard, she saw a small car, an Austin, with Felicity at the wheel.

Oh, that was the reason! To tease his former fiancée.

Nicola bit her lip. Felicity came over, a line between her brows. 'Going to be long, Forbes? Mother has been doing some belated spring-cleaning and came across some old things that belonged to Henry Temple. They're gorgeous . . . frock coats and morning coats, some sack coats buttoned really high, overcoats that look exactly like something out of Dickens . . . fairly short . . . and another top-hat. You were short on top-hats, weren't you? And a couple of nightshirts and a nightcap . . . though I don't see where you can use them.'

Forbes waved towards Garry. 'Go through them with him. He knows more about it than I do. Letty and he have had their heads together over the wardrobe, night after night. I'll see them when I get back.'

Garry said easily, 'Oh, if you'd rather stay, Forbes, I'll run the boys home and show Nicky the countryside if that's what you aim to do.'

Forbes chuckled. 'No fear ... the lady is mine. Cheerio, everybody.'

Nicola's hand itched to slap him, but she gave no outward sign. The more she opposed him, the more he'd persist. Even when Forbes said, 'Ha . . . Felicity is taking an interest in the Centennial now,' she answered nothing.

Nicola gave herself up to the enchantment of it all, especially the return journey when they were looking into the heart of the sunset. Forbes pointed out faithfully each local feature, tying up for her the past with the present.

'Has Felicity always been a family name ?' she asked him. ' I notice that Jane and Francis called their first daughter after Henry's wife. Felicity Melford would be the third, I suppose?'

'Fourth really. Granddad had a sister—dead now— called that.'

'Then the Koromiko Gorge folk and the Marino Hill folk have been very closely linked always?'

'Yes. Of course you'll have noticed from the diaries it was part of the original estate once—Koromiko. Most of the estates are smaller now, and rightly so. It's not right for one man to own so much. Land was cheap in the early days and the moneyed men—like Francis— were able to buy huge tracts. It kept the feudal system going, to a certain extent. Good thing it's gone. I expect that was another thing Jane suffered from—a sense of inferiority. Nancy had been Francis's social equal. Jane was the hired man's sister, the woman Francis married for a housekeeper, not as the woman he loved.' He folded his arms across the wheel—he had pulled up to show her a glimpse of a distant peak—and looked intently at Nicola. ' What did you think of the diaries?'

The tawny ones met the green-flecked ones candidly. ' What did you think I felt about them, Cousin Forbes?'

'Jassy said you had taken them to heart,' he said slowly. ' She rounded on us all when she came down after bringing your supper to you. She said she could see wet smudges on the pages. Did you weep over them, Nicola?'

She looked swiftly away. ' I did,' she said shortly. ' Could any woman read those entries and not feel stirred . . . even if it was because of my side of the family that she never felt loved, wanted, as a wife wants to be?'

She looked back to find Forbes's eyes very intent upon her face. He said slowly, 'I'm glad you felt that way. It's been like that with me ever since I first read them.'

'How old were you?'

'Thirteen. The school holidays. I'd just recovered from measles and they were keeping books away from me in case I hurt my eyes. I couldn't stand being without reading matter, so I sneaked out and got this stuff out of the box-room. The fact that there was no satisfactory ending to the story has always bothered me. I wonder why she stopped just there. It wasn't the end of a year. She just didn't write in that book any more.'

Nicola said, 'Perhaps she didn't need to. Perhaps she came to terms with life, accepted the fact that she was second-best and resolved to make the most of what she had. You remember how fond she was of Browning's poems. She mentioned them several times. I wonder if she ever came across that one:

The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is not to fancy what were fair in life—provided it could be;
But finding first what may be—then find how to make it fair
Up to our means ... a very different thing.'

Nicola was surprised at the expression in Forbes's eyes. It was as if he looked at her as a person in her own right for the first time, not as a kinswoman from a branch of the family he disliked.

He still spoke slowly, and, oddly, even a little breathlessly.

'Thank you, Nicola. That—somehow—makes me feel happier about her.' He gave a short laugh that just stopped short of being embarrassed. 'Perhaps you think it strange for a chap of my day and age to be so sentimental about what happened so long ago?'

Nicola pushed her bright hair back from her brow. 'No, I don't. I was so exhausted last night with my emotions, I had to tell myself not to be so foolish. But it had got me by the throat. It seemed intolerable to me that I could do nothing about it. I've never experienced anything like that before. I wanted to step back into yesterday ... to somehow make Francis realize Jane's true worth. I wanted him to even adore her, to realize his incredible luck in getting a wife like that. Forbes, do you know what made me maddest of all with Francis? —That entry when she said, "He is so kind, so considerate, even affectionate." She ought not to have been made to feel like that, like a dog grateful for a pat on the head! '

Nicola found she was clenching her hands and realized that tears were standing in her eyes. She shook her head impatiently. 'Oh, dear! This *is* foolish of me. I'm not usually so emotional. Forbes, drive on, will you? Let's get back to small talk.'

He laughed. ' No, I won't. I like you this way, Nicola . . . especially since I'd imagined you a hard-boiled lass like Nesta. I'm glad, darned glad you came to New Zealand—against my wishes.'

As he slid his arm around her shoulders, and drew her to him, Nicola was taken by surprise. The dark countenance she had thought so saturnine was close to hers and the next moment she was being kissed. It was a kiss that suited the moment, not a hard kiss, as she might have imagined from him, but a gentle, insistent kiss expressing the feelings they had both just shared with each other.

All sorts of emotions chased over Nicola, submerging her in feelings she had never experienced before. It had been so unexpected. Then, beneath the sweetness of it, the lasting of it, a dread sprang to life. She mustn't let things like this happen again. They all wanted Forbes and Felicity to make it up. She must not come between them, or the family would think it a case of history repeating itself and her own

visit would leave a nasty taste in their mouths. Nicola gently but firmly disengaged herself.

She achieved a laugh that did her credit, rubbed her chin and said, 'Never been kissed by anyone with a beard before!' Another light laugh and she managed: '*Aren't* we getting intense! *We* are kissing because we feel cheated about Francis and Jane!'

Forbes looked at her indignantly. 'Aren't you a cold-blooded, analytical little beast?' he demanded. 'Reasons should never be given for kisses. It's horrible. Kisses just happen.'

At that moment a car swept past them. An Austin. Felicity's Austin!

Forbes burst out laughing. 'Well, if Felicity copped an eyeful of that as she came over the bridge, she'll certainly think we're getting serious.' He straightened round, switched on the ignition, pressed the self-starter.

Nicola felt ice-cold anger replace the hot flush of embarrassment.

Reasons should never be given for kissing, he had said, they just happen . . . just happen! The utter hypocrite! The liar! He'd kissed her for no other reason than that, out of the tail of his eye, he'd seen Felicity's car coming up the bridge approach. Had it done what he'd hoped for? Roused Felicity to a fever-pitch of jealousy? Nicola didn't know and tried to tell herself that she didn't care, that it couldn't, wouldn't matter to her. The thing that had hurt most was that he hadn't been candid about it.

She could have forgiven him if he had said, 'Here's Felicity, let's give her something to go on with.' But no, he'd tried to deceive Nicola into thinking it a moment of genuine tenderness and attraction. She must be on guard against him and against herself, against that traitorous

and undermining force that was the love—unsought—she had found in her heart for him.

CHAPTER IX

It was a good thing that there was so much to do on the chronicle. Nicola knew she must get her mind off the relationship between Jane and Francis. This was the tale of a whole family, through a hundred years, not just of two people and their lifetime.

Old George didn't like her working away up in her room. 'Do you have to have solitude?' he demanded. 'Won't you want to ask us things constantly? Things you, as an English girl, wouldn't know about life here. Things of last century that I grew up hearing about from my father. Even, when I was tiny, from Jane herself.'

Nicola realized that to the whole family Jane *was* the past. It was most endearing. And it served Francis right that he, the first New Zealand Westerfield, was completely eclipsed in the memories of his descendants by his wife who'd not been of the same class, who had been his second-best love. Oh dear, Nicola became aware that she too was becoming obsessed with Jane.

She smiled at Cousin George. 'I could manage fine— although Mrs Walkington and I worked in her quiet study, she never shut herself away from her family and neighbours. With the result that they all appreciated it and didn't interrupt any more than they had to. Her family are married but live quite near her—except for the one in Canada—and her grandchildren always find her accessible. She used to say that if an author cut herself off from reality, her books lost something. So we got conditioned to a certain amount of noise and disciplined ourselves to pick up where we left off without having been really unsettled. I would like to be near, especially when I'm shuffling these notes and so on into sequence. But I thought I might be a nuisance—sort of disorganize the pattern of your evenings.'

They seemed genuine enough in wanting her with them. Jassy looked up from the farm socks she was darning and said, with a twinkle in

the boot-button eyes, 'They aren't just being accommodating, Nicola . . . they're being selfish. They're all so interested ... in fact daft on . . . the history, they can't any of them resist meddling. They've not got the know-how to put it together themselves, but they'll butt in all along the line!'

Garry was the first to laugh. Old George and Forbes looked slightly offended. The cap fitted too well. Garry said: 'Jassy's got it in one I Nicky, you'll just have to put up with a lot of interference. But listen, Granddad, and Forbes, let her get on with it for a bit. We'll just read and she can ask as she needs to. We're darned glad you're here, and we're ready to help when you need us, or to shut up if not. And that's that.'

Nicola beamed on him. 'Thanks, Garry. That's most understanding.'

Garry said: ' Well, I could see what it was going to be . . . Forbes wants to sit breathing down your neck and getting all his own ideas and favourite bits in. It'll be much better if someone a little distant—not so prejudiced—writes the history. Keep them away from the main thread of things, Nicola, and just appeal to us for verification of local and historical details.'

Nicola took a quick look at Forbes's face and saw he was gazing at Garry with a puzzled look, almost as if he resented Garry keeping him away from Nicola and the history. Well, she supposed that if he were trying to make Felicity jealous, he wouldn't want Garry and the cousin from England to become too obviously attracted. He'd started off himself by hinting that they were all falling for her, but it would never do, as he had realized, for Garry to monopolize her time.

Nicola shook her head as if to free herself from all such problems and said: 'That's what I'd like best, Garry. To work down here with you all at hand.'

Forbes said, ' Okay. We'll clear this desk for you.'

'It's not big enough, Forbes. I want to spread everything out and be able to leave them there so I can pick up the*work at any time. Do you ever use this extension table in the Far End for meals? It would be ideal. It gets the light from the two sets of windows, being in the corner, and it's got a wall light above it.'

'No, we hardly ever use it. Just for games when the children of the clan are staying with us. It'll be fine. Garry and I will bring everything down. By the way, Mary condensed most of Francis's shipboard diary into readable stuff . . . some of it was very stodgy . . . not an apt man with his pen, Francis, though he wrote a fine script. But at least it gives the picture of the trip.'

'One of these strong, silent heroes,' said Nicola, with a slightly acid inflection. ' I haven't got much time for them. They don't make very good husbands. Every woman needs to be told she's loved and appreciated once in a while. It keeps a marriage green.' She burst out laughing. ' That's not me, it's pure Genevieve Walkington.'

Forbes said slowly, ' Genevieve writes romance, doesn't she? Is it real, or just wish-fulfilment, airy-fairy stuff?'

Nicola looked him straight in the eye. ' Very real, Genevieve's own marriage is the happiest I know, and I'm in a position to judge. Genevieve writes of life as she sees it and experiences it. And she doesn't just write fiction . . . she does a regular marriage guidance column . . . down-to-earth stuff. She'd make far more putting all her time into fiction, but she has the idea that any gift you have, you should use for voluntary work too. She spends hours counselling. She knows what she's talking about.

'One of her theories—proved too—is that while money and in laws and sex problems can ruin marriages, a good many of them could be

saved if only some men were more articulate, if they brought more romance into their wives' lives. That the women would put up with all sorts of other difficulties if the men made it worth while for them. Lots of people as happy as Doug and Genevieve Walkington are would get wrapped up in a little selfish cocoon of happiness—instead they try to share their own contentment. He's a magistrate, and a finer one you wouldn't get.'

She stopped, blushed brightly, and said: ' Oh, dear, I'm addressing you as if you were a public meeting. Do forgive me. I hero-worship my employer.'

Cousin George was standing near her. He looked at her with sheer affection and threw an arm round her shoulders. ' It's all right, Nicola, we love it . . . and we love you. We feel as if you've always been here, part of the family.' He bent and kissed her cheek. She kissed him back, her gesture as spontaneous as his.

He pinched her chin, said, ' Bet you've never been kissed by anyone wearing a beard before!'

Nicola bent swiftly to the table, removing the centrepiece and vase, as she felt the colour creeping up her cheeks again. When she did look up again she caught Forbes's look as he stood behind his grandfather, his heavy brows arched quizzically.

She said hurriedly, ' Now, do let's get on with it . . . so much crowding in on us soon, haymaking, shearing, Christmas ... all before the Centennial. And I can't stay too long after the celebrations.'

Cousin George said swiftly: ' Why not? You can stay as long as you like. Didn't get you out here just to work, you know.'

Garry said, reasonably, ' I expect Nicola wants to be back in England when her employer gets back from Canada. That it, Nicky?'

Nicola nodded. ' Yes, it's a job that suits me perfectly. I'd never get another as good. It was just fortunate that Genevieve was taking such a long trip. That ties in with what I said about her, of course. Her daughter is having a baby and she's in an inaccessible spot where they can't get much help, so Genevieve is pitching in.'

Forbes went upstairs with her to bring down some of the records. 'I'm glad you gave that as your reason for hurrying back, Nicola. Much better than --'

"Than what?"

'Than saying you had to go back because your heart is in England—as you did before. The less that's spoken of the better. I don't want any of them, Jassy or Garry, to let -that bit of news out to Felicity. Because I believe we're having an effect on her. She hasn't come over— like she did today—for ages.' He paused and said, ' Can't understand the fellow anyway.'

Nicola paused, one hand on the banister. ' Can't understand who? Honestly, Forbes, some of the conversations in this house are beyond me. And the personal relationships, right from pioneer days on, seem very complicated. Whom can't you understand?'

Forbes's eyebrows were working overtime. ' Either you are intentionally dim or you aren't much in love. I mean this chap in England. I can't think how any chap could let a girl like you come out here for months without even the safeguard of an engagement ring. Serve him right if he lost you.'

Nicola knew conflicting emotions. There was a compliment tied up in that—but she couldn't savour any of the sweetness of it because it just didn't mean a thing. Forbes loved Felicity, but rather admired her own looks. She had to think fast. Should she tell him that he'd been mistaken in that remark of hers in the gorge? She'd meant only that

her home was in England, her roots. Forbes must never know she loved him, though, so there was safety in him thinking this.

So she said lightly, ' We hadn't reached the engagement stage, Forbes.'

He moved nearer her with one of his sudden movements, closing the small gap between them. ' Then you mean that though you admit you care for him, you're not sure of him?'

Nicola turned her head away from the disturbing proximity of him, from those compelling eyes, that ridiculous jutting beard, the aggressively male air which she found so dangerously attractive. Why couldn't he leave it alone? She'd only wanted to leave a faint impression with him that her interests lay in England and had been tempted into confirming his mistaken idea. How very foolish it was to deviate in the slightest from the truth. Your emotions certainly provided pitfalls at times.

She said, impatiently, ' Forbes, what has it to do with you? It's my affair, entirely.'

He took his time to answer, though his grip upon her arm was no less hurting. Then he smiled, his whole face softening, the eyebrows levelling out. ' Let's say I've discovered a fondness in myself for my little cousin from England.'

Nicola caught in her breath. ' You are all clannish, aren't you? I'm such a distant cousin of the family.'

A warning bell rang in her mind . . . you ought not to disclaim the relationship like that. Better for him to think any affection you may show him in an unguarded moment *is* only cousinly.

He laughed, ' Well, better any connection than none. Don't you like me being concerned about you . . . and your affairs of the heart? Like a big brother?'

She swallowed, didn't know what to say.

He laughed again. ' You just don't know what to make of me, do you? All because of that first letter I wrote, you made up your mind I was an ogre. Well, I changed my mind once I met you. Can't you change your mind about me and treat me more naturally? You're completely puzzled, aren't you? You expected to find me a real curmudgeon and instead you find me as sentimental in my own way as your precious Genevieve. I'd really like to know something about a chap who could let you leave England for months and come thirteen thousand miles away. Isn't he afraid you'll fall for someone else?'

Nicola knew she was getting in deep. ' Not really. I'm not in the least susceptible. I didn't have as much as a flutter on the boat-deck beneath the tropical moon on the way out. I just don't let my emotions run away with me.'

The moment she said it she knew-she had made a mistake, that it was too provocative, to a man of Forbes Westerfield's make-up. It did not need his derisive laugh to tell her that. He loosened his grip on her forearm merely to put his arms right round her. He said: 'You're playing with fire, Nicola Trenton. No man would stand for it.' He bent his head.

Nicola came to life. She lifted up her foot and brought her stiletto heel down on his foot with cruel aim, twisted, wrenched herself free.

'I hate this sort of tomfoolery. I'll have no more of it. Besides, I just hate the feel of that beard. It's like being kissed by a grizzly bear!'

Forbes put his head back and roared. Nicola had expected—wanted—him to be offended. She glared at him with sheer chagrin, then to her horror felt a giggle coming up and the next moment was laughing helplessly.

He sobered up first, looked at her reproachfully, then said, 'You've probably damaged my foot for life. What a spitfire!'

'Well, it serves you right. A woman has to use what weapons she can when a man uses force.'

A door below opened and Cousin George looked out. 'What's going on up there? We'd like to know the joke.'

Forbes leaned over the banister, grinning. 'You never will, Grandfather, it's entirely between Nicola and me. Come on, wench, let's get those books.'

They settled down quietly in the Far End. Nicola became engrossed in her task, looking up occasionally to ask questions.

'Cousin George, it says here—in the sixties—that wire fences were coming in. What did they use before then?'

'Gorse mostly . . . inside sod fences. I'll take you to see some along the road on our property. The pioneers brought out gorse cuttings and seeds. They were grateful at first for natural boundaries on the big blocks . . . gorges and streams and so on, but they needed smaller paddocks too, so they turned up sods. Pieces of clay turf, turning the tussock side in, and planting cuttings between the two. They built them up like brick walls to keep the stock in till such time as the gorse flourished. It did well here—grew quickly—too well. Kept trimmed, it made wonderful fences and provided shelter too, but as you can see from some of our hills, it got away and is now a noxious weed.'

'Round here, where they could fell the bush, we got a lot of split rail fences too, but where timber was scarce, like Mid-Canterbury, on the plains, you don't get any. Then round here and further south, in Otago and Southland, they put in a lot of hawthorn hedges. Blossoms here in October and November, so very few people call it may.'

It was going to be hard work. Mary McGillivray had a natural flair for putting things together, but was an atrocious speller, and that meant that every proper name and ship's name had to be checked, apart from the easily recognizable errors.

The character of Francis began to emerge from his account books. It must have been devilishly lonely at first, before the Temples arrived. His comments were terse, certainly, but perhaps all the more revealing for that. Items like 'Carriage on stuff from the *William Maine*. Among other necessities, my books, thank God.' Nicola felt she would have liked a man to whom, even in a new stark land, books were necessities.

'Word of a good man from M. who has arrived in Christchurch with a sister said to be a good cook. If suitable it may help situation when Nancy comes. Even though some time before that can happen.'

'Rode into Christchurch and purchased furniture from the Chases, who are returning. Mrs C. cannot take the life. This worries me. How will Nancy fare, then, in a place besides which Christchurch is a metropolis? Henry and Jane Temple have agreed to come. The furniture I got is very plain, but probably better than they have been used to. Must get some better stuff for Nancy. Jane seems most sensible. They had taken positions with the Moores but Henry did not want to stay in town. Sensible man. Greater opportunities away from the towns.'

'Feel more sanguine now that Nancy will like the life. Jane does. If one woman can take it, why not another? Though of course, Nancy is more gently-bred.' Nicola retorted.

Forbes looked over shoulder. 'What's wrong . . . ? Oh, I see.'

She read on: 'Cutting chaff, ploughing, fencing. Taught Jane to ride.'

Nicola wondered if he had been gentle with her. Would he lift her down? How Jane must have savoured those moments.

'Jane is an excellent housekeeper. Thrifty. Saves me money. Now she can ride she is organizing a district show, first to be held here. Prizes among the women for butter-making, fruit cakes, bread, candles, crochet-work, embroidery. Henry and I are judging the draughts, the cows, the sheep. Have got wool-classers coming. There will be shoeing, shearing and dog trials. These things, if established, may make Nancy feel we do have some social life.'

'Have written Nancy to ask her to order some novels suitable for Jane and to dispatch them immediately, unless her own passage has come to light sooner than expected when she can bring them with her. Jane is a voracious reader, surprisingly so.'

'Condescending creature!' muttered Nicola.

'Well, I don't know,' said Forbes's voice in her ear. 'You must remember those were stiff-necked days with much more class-consciousness, and not many employers would send to England for books for someone who was virtually a servant.'

'You can't resist it, can you? Just like Garry warned . . . you're breathing down my neck!'

'Well, I find these old records fascinating. And I don't want you to miss any bits that ought to go in.'

Nicola sighed, 'I bow to the inevitable. Draw up your chair. In your own way you're just as much of an autocrat as Francis. Poor Jane!'

'Oh, I expect she had her own way of dealing with him—getting her own back. I wonder if she ever ground the heel of her riding-boot into his instep!'

They were speaking in whispers in deference to the reading family, but Nicola shook her head at him. 'Forbes, don't. They'll get curious. But I hope she wasn't always a doormat.'

He shut up, but kept reading with her.

'Prices are good,' Francis went on. 'Hope to provide Nancy with some of the things to which she has been accustomed. I must not expect her to enjoy roughing it, as Jane has. Jane is as good outside as in. She will make life easier for Nancy.' (But who had made life easier for Jane?)

'Bought wall papers in Christchurch. We left the cadets on the estate and Jane rode down with us. Jane is indefatigable. I could wish that Nancy were cast in as robust a mould. Put Jane and Henry up at the hostelry. Stayed with the Wrothinghams myself. They will put Nancy up when she arrives and have asked me to stay a few days then too. It will accustom Nancy to the difference. Christchurch is very gay. There are so few women that they become exhausted at the dances, standing up for every single one. We came home with much reading matter and have spent some very pleasant evenings. Jane has a keen appreciation of *Punch*. Amazing.'

'Jane insists that we must start papering soon. I hope Nancy fits in as well to the life here. But of course Jane is phlegmatic. Nancy is a creature of very fine sensibilities.'

(Phlegmatic? Was it a phlegmatic creature who had written: 'Love should not go sour on one '?)

The entries got fewer and further between. ' Jane and I finished the room last night. It looks very elegant.'

No entries for weeks, then, ' Tomorrow I go down to await the ship. Jane thinks I ought to have left sooner. I think she will be glad now when she and Henry can live at Koromiko. She has not been like herself.'

'Brought Nancy back. River flooded. Dray overturned. Bad start.'

'Put rams out. Jane trying to initiate Nancy into mysteries of colonial housekeeping. Henry's house is taking shape. More ambitious than the shack at first planned. Jane has changed. Very eager now, I suppose, to be mistress of her own home. The colonies are a breeding-ground for independence. But she says she will give Nancy a couple of days a week for the first few months, with the rough work. Henry is quite moody.'

'Nancy very homesick. Very quiet. She dislikes the nor'westers, and the whispering. It is eerie, she says. Despite the fact that she is a good horsewoman, she does not wish to ride round the boundaries with me. She says Jane likes the life so much she finds it extremely irritating.'

(How had Jane found Nancy's attitude? But of course that wouldn't matter.)

'Prices are still rising. Prospects have never been so good. But Nancy's homesickness is not abating.' (Poor Francis, what man would

want a reluctant, unhappy bride? But I'm glad he suffered too. Not fair it should all have been on Jane's side.)

Then: 'Nancy is going Home. I am taking her to Christchurch tomorrow to stay with the Wrothinghams. It is best. And of course she will be there some time as she is to wait for the return of the *Colin Sinclair*.'

Nicola looked up. 'Forbes, why did she have to wait for the *Colin Sinclair*? It would take months and months to return. That was the ship she came out on. Other ships must have put in before then.'

Forbes nodded. ' We've never known why. It had been a terrible voyage out, even for those days. The crew almost mutinied. The provisions were shocking, the quarters damp, even verminous. But perhaps it was just as well she did. She married that officer. Made use of her trousseau, no doubt, and landed back with the status of a married woman, better able to face the wrath of her parents and the raised eyebrows of her friends. I've wondered if she really enjoyed the life in Christchurch and toyed with the idea that someone there might marry her. At least Francis was spared that.'

Nicola leafed through Jane's diaries again, found the entry about furnishing the bedroom. ' Is that furniture still here?'

Forbes nodded. ' It is. Didn't Granddad show you? Like to see it?'

Nicola rose. ' I certainly would. It sounds so elegant.'

As they reached the door, Cousin George spoke. ' To get the atmosphere right, Forbes, you ought to show it to her by candlelight.'

Jassey stood up and reached into a cupboard and took down two old pewter candlesticks, very plain ones. ' We always have them handy in case of a power failure in a heavy fall of snow.' She handed them one

each, lit them. As they went wordlessly up the stairs, Nicola felt as if she had stepped back a hundred years in time. They paused on the landing.

Forbes said, ' It was Granddad's and Grandma's bedroom, of course, but when Grandma died ten years ago, Granddad moved into another room. Then when we knew the centenary was coming up, we restored it as near as we could.'

He pushed open a door and motioned her in. It was beautiful with the soft muted colours of the long ago. There was the mahogany bed between two sets of the dormer windows that had latticed panes. On it was spread a very old crocheted spread, over lilac silk. It had a full lilac silk valance. There were crocheted shams on the pillows, threaded with lilac ribbon. The washhandstand held the violet-sprinkled bowls and ewers and snowy muslin drapes shielded the walls. Nicola found out later that Letty had made them, copying from one in the museum. The small carved chair was there, with its cane back and frayed rose-coloured satin cushion. It looked as if it would fall to pieces at a touch.

The two bow-fronted chests of drawers had brass handles and on one of them was the mirror on the swinging stand. Had Jane ever gazed searchingly at her own features? Had she ever thought fancifully that Nancy's beautiful but imperious face smiled mockingly behind her own reflection? The china candlesticks were there, but one of the cupids had a chip off his bow. On each side of the mirror hung a portrait.

Nicola, said: ' I noticed in the downstairs one that Francis's beard was a pointed one.'

Forbes grinned. ' Let yourself go, Nicola. Go on to remark that it's a much more refined one than mine. His could never be likened to a mangy alley cat. Even his sideboards are sleek, mine fuzz.'

Nicola sighed but smiled. ' I wish you'd forget that unfortunate remark of mine.' But irresistibly her eyes went to that patchy beard and she began to giggle. ' I can't help it. It really is comical.'

'Well, it just goes to show what a lovely nature I've got, going round like this for the sake of Granddad. Just you begin to appreciate me, dear cousin.'

Nicola turned to look at Jane. This was an older Jane, but not by many years, than the one downstairs. That Jane seemed a little more heavily featured. This one wasn't. Her face was more oval, more finely-drawn. This one had richly matured, had learned to dress (possibly had more money to dress on) and had a confidence, almost a queenliness, that was striking.

The artist had brought out the bones of her features more sharply—had caught the tenderness of her well- curved, passionate mouth with exquisite artistry, and a light in the eyes that made the picture live.

Nicola stood beneath it, her hands clasped under her chin, lips parted, looking up at it, quite unaware of the picture she herself made. ' Why, she's far, far more beautiful than Nancy. We have a portrait of Nancy, or at least Gran has, holding two hounds on a leash; her colouring is lovely, but for sheer personality, this beats her portrait hollow.' Then very quietly, with a note of wonder, she added: ' It's hard to believe she wasn't a perfectly happy person, looking at this.'

Forbes made no comment. Nicola continued: ' I don't want to seem too fanciful, but there's such a happy, tranquil atmosphere about this room. This room where Jane must often have fancied Nancy's ghost walked . . . for Francis. Even if it didn't... for he seemed a stolid, unimaginative man. She might still have hated this room, though, knowing it had been made ready for a bride other than herself.'

Forbes said, ' Perhaps, all through the years, other happinesses have exorcised that ghost, enriched the atmosphere. New Zealand is still a comparatively young country, but certain traditions have grown up . . . here, at any rate. It's a family tradition that all the Westerfields bring their brides here on their wedding nights. The wedding receptions are held in the homestead, but instead of bride and groom departing, the family departs. Granddad brought his bride here ... so did his father before him. So did my father, and so did Garry's mother bring her husband here.'

It swept over Nicola and chilled her ... the knowledge that this was where Forbes would bring Felicity. Because she was suddenly certain that they would make it up. The romance and sentiment of the centenary would be too much for them. Another bride would come from the Koromiko Gorge Homestead, even as Jane had come. But she would come because her bridegroom loved her, not as a second-best. A housekeeper raised to the status of a wife.

Nicola sought for something ordinary to say. ' This paper—it couldn't be *the* one, could it? But it has wreaths of roses, and true lovers' knots. Did you --'

'Yes, we managed to match it. These old papers have come back, after the era of plain ones. It's exactly the same design. Good things don't die out. They come back into fashion. We had a bit of the old as a sample. Look.' He opened a wardrobe and there was the same paper, faded, scratched, but the very same.

'And the dressing-room was turned into a bedroom for the Westerfield babies. We've brought down the old cradle, the low nursing-chair, we even found a tiny brass cot in one of the lofts.'

He opened the door into a slanting-roofed, tiny room. ' Beats me how they managed to keep children in a cot *like* that . . . any modern child would be over those low sides in a jiffy.'

He switched the light on, blew out their candles . . . and the magic was gone.

CHAPTER X

Nicola felt as if she lived in two worlds, worlds of strange dimensions. One world was of the eighteen-sixties, a world where, oddly enough, she was Jane, Forbes's ancestress, not her own. Where Jane's unrequited love was *her* unrequited love, where every word Jane had written in bitterness and longing seemed as if it came from her own bruised spirit. Nicola even found herself thinking in the more stilted phrases of a hundred years ago.

The other world was this present-day one, where she did not dare to hold Forbes's eyes for very long, lest he read in her own that which must be concealed, where everything he said and did, the sharpness of his teasing, his endearing gentleness with the animals, the disturbing timbre of his voice, the turn of his head, the sound of his step, were graven into her memory. The only things of him she would be able to carry away with her when, after the Centennial, she would put thirteen thousand miles of ocean between them again.

When she did, he and Felicity would have made up their quarrel. She kept her mind firmly away from the tantalizing chance that they might not. Even if they didn't, in time, as almost always happened in life, they would each marry someone else and be reasonably happy. But Forbes would never turn to Nicola. It would revive for Forbes's mother too much remembered anguish if Nesta's kinswoman took the place of the girl Isobel Westerfield wanted her son to marry. She would think that Nicola had come between them and the chance of a reconciliation.

Besides, they all wanted to see it made up, even Cousin George, who loved Nicola too. It would be such a perfect ending to the hundred years if Jane's descendant, Forbes, married her brother's descendant, Felicity Melford. Henry Temple must have had no sons. Felicity must be descended through his daughter.

Nicola often wondered what the quarrel had been about. It must be Felicity who was the unforgiving one. She could imagine Forbes flaring up, uttering rash things, but she couldn't imagine him sulking. And he obviously would do anything to bring her back to him. Though she couldn't admire his technique. It only irritated Felicity. Though at least she came and went quite often these days. Sometimes Nicola felt she hated Felicity for spurning that which Nicola longed for.

She wished the situation didn't exist. It made a certain barrier between her and Felicity. Given other circumstances they could have been close friends.

'And to complicate it all,' said Nicola disgustedly to her reflection in the little mirror that had once reflected Jane's eyes, 'you had to snarl things up still further, by falling in love with the king-pin himself, the older grandson! If you'd had any sense you'd have fallen for Garry, who is the nicest person anyone could meet. Why do we have to fall for the wrong men? Garry's got all the qualities for an ideal husband, yet if you never saw him again in your life it wouldn't cause you a single pang. Nicola Trenton, you're a first-class idiot!'

She turned away and picked up her notebook. She was describing the room for the history. All that crochet-work had come from Jane's clever fingers. People were going to read this history who would never see this room. They had to see it through the words she used. They had to hear the rustle of those brocade curtains as Jane had stood by the casement, watching Francis ride home to her across those paddocks where tussock had given place to long lush English grass.

They had to sit as Jane had sat on that little low chair, nursing her babies. It ought to be re-covered, the brocade was almost in ribbons. But only if something similar could be found.

She thought she would shut the window. A strong nor'wester, hot and dry and rampaging, had sprung up, and those curtains, salvaged from the box-room, wouldn't stand it.

She heard hooves and looked down to see Felicity riding into the stable-yard. As Nicola watched, Forbes came out of the stable and put out a hand to her.

Felicity's impatient voice rose. 'Forbes, you're only in my way. You above all people ought to know I need no help, dismounting.'

Forbes's voice, 'Independence in some things can be admired, Fliss, but I think women can lose out by overdoing it. You're far too self-sufficient. Women ought to like the little courtesies. If they're always brushed off, there could come a time when they aren't offered any more. And you might find yourself missing them, looking for them.'

Felicity stared. 'Good heavens, Forbes Westerfield, what's come over you?' Then she burst out laughing. 'I know what it is . . . you're so besotted with this history, you imagine you're Francis. You're talking as he would have talked. But you know it doesn't go with khaki shorts and a bare torso. You ought to be wearing riding breeches and a stock with a pearl pin in it. I can manage fine without the little touches, thank you. You won't see *me* moping round looking for them. After all, a girl who's planning to go off on a working holiday around the world, as soon as this hoo-ha over the Centennial is over, needs to be able to stand on her own feet!'

Forbes brows came down. Nicola could see them from where she stood. 'Working holiday? I haven't heard about this. I thought it was a conducted tour.'

'It was. But I've changed my mind. Women do, you know. I don't want to be tied down. And don't scowl like that, Forbes, because it has

nothing whatever to do with you. I've had enough trouble with Dad, reconciling him to the idea, without you glaring at me from under beetling brows. I've had a letter from Moira Fellowes, who's taken a job as a waitress in the Lake District. She says there'll be a job for me there for the English summer. I'm leaving at the end of April. It's all signed and sealed. Where's Nicky? I believe she once stayed at this hotel.'

The beetling brows did not lift. ' Nicola? Did *she* suggest this? And said nothing to me. If so --'

Nicola flung the window wide and leaned out. ' I did not, Forbes. It's the first I've heard of it.'

He looked up, shading his eyes, said, ' Oh, well, you can't blame me for thinking you might have done.'

Nicola was completely puzzled. ' What do you mean?'

His expression was bland, the eyebrows back in place, ' Thought perhaps you'd persuade her to go to leave you a clear field,' he said, outrageously.

Nicola slammed the window shut, uncaring that she caught a corner of a fragile curtain in it, and found she was trembling. That was too blatant. She could choke Forbes Westerfield! He was going too far. This would make Felicity hate her.

She took off, her temper carrying her downstairs in a rush.

She flung open the door and crossed the back lawn to the stable-yard. She faced Felicity and Forbes without trying to regain a trace of her lost temper.

'That's a horrible thing to say, Forbes Westerfield! You can just cut it out. Felicity and I are the best of friends. I've always got on well with my own sex. You're putting me on the level of that horrible Nesta . . . my *very* distant cousin. . . who just couldn't get on with women. I didn't come out here with the idea of attracting anyone. I didn't --'

His eyes were slits of mirth. 'Pax! Pax!' he cried, holding up his hands. ' I didn't say you came out here with that intention. But it's happened in spite of that, hasn't it ? We've all fallen for you.'

He put his head on one side, maddeningly, and regarded her. ' I didn't think rage would have suited you so well, Nicola darling. I must make you mad more often. You're even more ravishing when you lose your temper. Now, now, don't go on protesting. Even Shakespeare thought the lady overdid it.'

Nicola turned on her heel and left them. She went into the house. Felicity caught her up at the foot of the stairs, and grabbed her arm.

Nicola turned to face her, absolutely distressed.

Felicity's expression altered, she looked genuinely concerned. Her almond-shaped eyes looked into Nicola's tear-starred tawny ones, with utmost friendliness. ' Nicola, you're not to be upset by Forbes's tormenting ways. He's a devil. I wouldn't think a thing like that of you . . . I've got a bit of discrimination, even if His High-and-Mightiness doesn't think so.' She stopped and giggled. ' And I know exactly what he's up to. He's about as subtle as a steam-roller. I just wish he'd accept the situation as it is. I'm for England in April and he'll have to stop his wangling. Forbes is a born organizer, that's his trouble. I'm fed up with it. I'm only staying on for these celebrations because Uncle George will be so hurt if I don't.

'So don't upset yourself, Nicola honey. You won't be able to stop Forbes, but just take it lightly. Humour the man. And you and I will share a few inner laughs over it.'

Nicola felt a wave of relief go over her that left her weak.

'I was terrified you might think it true, Felicity.'

Felicity shook her head. 'Not me. He's been so blatant. Even Garry noticed it, and he's as blind as a bat mostly. He actually called in about it before he left for Christchurch and said he'd just like me to know he'd seen through Forbes's antics and I was to understand he was having nothing to do with it. I quite appreciated that. Garry's the one person in the whole darned crew who accepts the fact that it will never be made up.'

There was an edge to Felicity's tone that bewildered Nicola. Really, the relationships in this place got her bewildered.

Nicola decided on candour. 'Felicity, this has put me in a peculiar position. Forbes didn't want me here to start with. You'll have known about my father's cousin Nesta who made the trouble between Forbes's father and mother, won't you? Well, it suited me to come out here—my mother was marrying again, and I wanted her to go to Hong Kong without worrying about me being left alone, so I came out here. Forbes was hostile and has only come round because he feels he can use me. He asked my co-operation in this. He told me how set on the match his mother and yours are, and so I consented to help things along, by seeming to be attracted because I thought if I did, it might sort of cancel out the mischief Nesta did.'

Felicity bent over the newel-post, tracing its acorn with her index finger, her dark, glossy hair, so like Jane's, falling over her face.

'Forbes's mother is a darling. Perhaps because her own life was far from smooth. But one doesn't marry to suit other people. I told Forbes in no uncertain terms what I thought of him, before I came after you. That he's wasting his time.'

Nicola looked unhappy. 'Felicity, are you sure? I mean --'

'None whatever. I have no intention of ever laying myself open to being so hurt again. The things he said ! That I was selfish, and thought only of myself. That I didn't know the meaning of love.'

'But those things would only be said in anger.' Nicola had to plead Forbes's cause, because she loved him. Because even though she was furious with him and his ways of getting—or trying to get what he wanted—she still wanted him to have his heart's desire.

Felicity turned away and for the first time there was real feeling in her voice. 'That was the trouble, Nicola. We've fought all our lives . . . royally, with nothing but the heat of the moment behind our rages . . . but those things we said in cold blood, in deadly earnest. And meant them. It's a mistake to fall in love with someone you've known all your life—or so I've found. There are other things in life—and I'm off to find them.'

Nicola had to let it go. There was a finality in Felicity's voice that brooked no more. Suddenly she looked scared.

'Felicity, if Forbes knew I'd blown the gaff to you, he'd be furious with me. It would put paid to my chance, ever, of healing the breach between the two families.'

Felicity nodded. 'It would. It puts you in an awful position.' Her eyes lit up, a dimple popped out. 'Why should we let him know we've had a heart-to-heart? Let him go on. I'm human enough to enjoy seeing him make a fool of himself. Aunt Isobel will think what a sweet girl you

are for trying—Forbes will think you most co-operative and it will save you from having the mantle of his displeasure fall upon you. Heaven save us, I'm talking like Francis and Jane now. Or like Jane Austen.

'It's the ideal solution, Nicky. It will keep Forbes busy trying to think up new ways of making me jealous of you. He thinks now that your rage has probably made me even more suspicious that there's something going on. Heaven forbid he should try anything else. If the whole family can't accept the fact soon that the whole affair is washed up, I'll go mad. Look, half the trouble is that at first I just didn't come over here. Even lately, I've not been over as much as I used to be. If I start coming more and more, at first Forbes will think his plan is working, that will keep *him* quiet, then—then perhaps the others will realize I just don't care a tuppenny damn.'

Nicola felt much happier; it saved her from the prospect of a grade A row with Forbes, that would have been inevitable had he discovered she had admitted the plot to Felicity.

It worked. Felicity stayed at Marino all day. When she had gone Forbes said in the most satisfied, not to say smug, tone, 'Gosh, I thought I'd gone too far, but I think it's shaken her just the same. Staying here all day and whipping up enthusiasm about the doings. And I caught her watching you surreptitiously once or twice. She's suddenly caught on . . . thinks you *are* a danger.'

Nicola smiled demurely, 'Perhaps even my outburst did some good.'

'Yes, you sure put on a good show.'

Nicola relaxed.

The atmosphere was much more pleasant. Felicity came and went, and Cousin George was happy over it. Only Jassy sniffed doubtfully, and in private, to Nicola.

'That girl will go too far yet, mark my words. I know fine what's the matter with her. It was a schoolboy and schoolgirl affair right from the start. It drifted into an engagement, I doubt myself that he ever actually proposed. And now she's got the daft idea that if she puts herself out of reach for a bit, he'll have to woo her all over again, much more romantically, this time. But I've never known that work yet. With the menfolk, it's out of sight, out of mind. What's that bit about men dying and worms eating them, but not for love? It's true. Once you leave them they up and off—and marry someone else. Just to spite you. Or to suit their own convenience.'

'Jassy!' Nicola was horrified. 'Humphrey waited more than a dozen years for my mother. And he's most attractive.'

'Well, that's the exception that proves the rule!' Jassy always had an answer. She banged a pot down on the stove. 'Nicola, melt some butter and sugar for my lemon pie, there's a good lass, and dinna fash yourself about the doings of those two. If Felicity wants to put a trip overseas before her chances of getting married, then she's more money nor sense. She'll finish up an old maid like me. It was pride that put me on the shelf. And it's a cold bedfellow.'

One thing was right for Nicola, gloriously right— her mother's marriage to Humphrey. Their letters (Humphrey always wrote too) were full of the sheer joy of living.

Forbes came in one day, binoculars in hand, to see Nicola poring over a letter. He hung up the glasses. 'Thought I saw a couple of deer in a basin just below Devil's Crag, but it's a couple of the rodeo horses . . . they've been running wild up there for months.' He stopped, aggrieved. 'I don't believe you heard a word I said.'

She looked up at him. ' No, sorry. But this is from Humphrey.'

His voice sounded rough. ' Oh, I see . . . English mail day, is it? No wonder you're looking all starry- eyed.'

'Not English mail day, Sir Omniscient . . . this happens to be from the Far East.'

There was a glint in his eye. ' Oh, I see . . . more than one string to your bow, is there?'

She stared, then chuckled, her eyes losing nothing of their light. ' How absurd you are, my dear cousin. You're getting so into the way of playing my devoted squire that even when Felicity isn't around, you put on lordly airs. Well, I hand it to you that you're nothing if not thorough. Humphrey is my stepfather.'

'Oh, it's from Hong Kong? Naturally that'd be still the Far East to you. Here in New Zealand, now, we think of it as the Near North. It sort of makes us more aware of our responsibilities towards Asia. They're our neighbours and very much in need of our aid in development.'

Nicola said softly, ' Forbes, don't be so aggressive. In England we're aware of our world responsibilities too. That's why Humphrey is there, working among refugees in a clinic.'

He smiled, his face softening. ' Sorry. I was feeling disgruntled. You must be very fond of your stepfather if you can look like that over a letter from him.'

'Oh, I am, it's the most perfect romance you could have. Which reminds me, I must tell Jassy about this letter. She thinks women shouldn't let men out of their sight, that it's foolish for a girl to --' Nicola came to a sudden stop, aware that she was speaking thoughts aloud that would be better unuttered.

There was a spark in the Westerfield eye. 'Go on . . . this is getting interesting. What occasioned this remark?'

Nicola floundered. 'Oh, nothing. Just a general sort of conversation.'

'It was nothing of the kind,' said Jassy, from behind her, marching through the kitchen with a vase of faded flowers. 'I don't hold with Felicity going off to England. It's silly and dramatic and unnecessary.'

'Don't worry, Jassy,' said Forbes calmly. (Really he was the most amazing man, who took umbrage at things you'd never dream would flick him on the raw, and let others pass that he'd be justified in resenting.) 'Don't worry. She won't get away to England. At least not alone. If she ever gets away on an overseas trip, it will be on a honeymoon, mark my words.'

Jassy disappeared, snorting, and Nicola tried to retain the glow in case Forbes wondered what had quenched it.

He returned to the topic that had been interrupted. 'What were you going to tell Jassy about?'

'About this letter. You see when Jassy said that, I told her about the way Humphrey waited for my mother, since I was quite a small girl. Mother had a thing about stepfathers, because of a very possessive man a friend of hers married who hated the children of her first marriage. Humphrey simply went back to the East and kept on with his work. When I was twenty-one he came back. That's why I leapt at the chance of coming out here. Mother was so windy about leaving her one ewe lamb alone in London and Humphrey was considering taking a practice in Suffolk.

'So when Cousin George's letter came I saw in it the ideal solution. I'd desert Mother, instead of her thinking *she* was deserting me. I asked Humphrey about the situation. He's a darling. This letter is

marvellous. That was why I faced up to your opposition about my coming, Forbes. Listen . . . ' Bless you, Nicola, for taking off when you did. Your mother feels so happy about you having this wonderful opportunity to travel that she seems to have found a new world. And I'll admit I've enjoyed having her to myself, for a few months, just as any husband appreciates the first year or so as a twosome. It's more than made up for the years we wasted. So you must never have any regrets about that, Nicola. We've each more to give the other now, Jean and I, and I've always liked the autumn better than the spring. And we're fixing up a room for you. We'll give you a wonderful time in Hong Kong when you're on your way back, and if you'd like to stay, I could use you in this work." Isn't that a wonderful letter,--Forbes, for a stepfather to write?'

Forbes came across to her as she sat perched on the table.

He put an arm lightly across her shoulders, the warmth from his bare brown skin giving her a sensation she instantly repressed. The dark face smiled. ' I think it's even more wonderful for a man to have a stepdaughter in whom he had enough confidence to say just that to.' He drew in a deep breath. 'Had you told Humphrey your plans after you got Grandfather's letter, but before you got mine?'

Nicola nodded. ' Yes, that's really why I wouldn't draw back, otherwise I would have.'

His teeth were very white in his dark face. ' I'm very glad you didn't, Nicola.'

Nicola wished he wasn't so close. Love had a constricting effect on one's breathing as it was. And she was very conscious of a pulse beating at the base of her throat. These things could give you away. He only meant because she was helping him (as he thought) win Felicity back.

The audacious look was back in his eyes. She felt his hand tighten on her far shoulder. She put up a hand against his bare chest. It was like trying to push Gibraltar into the sea with a bulldozer. She turned her head away and said stiffly, 'Forbes, I wish you'd stop this silly nonsense. Felicity isn't about at the moment. It's so unnecessary.'

'That's quite true, O Philosopher,' he laughed, 'but many things are not necessary . . . but they're to be enjoyed just the same.' He kissed her lightly, teasingly, brushing his lips back and forward.

She drew away, put a hand up in a childish scrubbing gesture across her lips.

He chuckled. 'Oh, that beard! You do hate it, don't you? Yet you always kiss Grandfather goodnight . . . beard and all.'

Nicola's voice was a little too vehement. ' Well, *they* are just brief, grandfatherly kisses.'

His laughter always held a maddening quality. ' Yes . . . mine could hardly be termed grandfatherly, eh? Though that one just now was pretty brief, I thought.'

'It seemed long enough to me,' said Nicola untruthfully.

He shook his head over her. ' For an only child you certainly seem to have acquired the art of backchat. You give no quarter, Nicola Trenton.'

Her eyes met his levelly. ' I've acquired that only since coming here. You seem to arouse something in me . . . an antagonism.'

The crows' feet at the corners of his eyes deepened with his smile. 'The psychologists have another name for it. Just the old battle of the sexes, you know. It's your way of resisting male attraction!'

Nicola managed to pretend to suppress a yawn. 'I've always agreed with those who think psychology is an overdone subject.'

He didn't answer. He said in a different tone, 'Did you know that Jassy came back with fresh flowers at just that moment?'

Alarmed, Nicola said: 'What moment?'

'The psychological one . . . when I was kissing you. But don't worry. She tactfully withdrew and used the side verandah.'

Nicola gave a sigh of complete exasperation. 'I could choke you—cheerfully! This embarrasses me and probably embarrassed Jassy.'

'No fear, not Jassy. She wouldn't turn a hair. But she wouldn't interrupt either. Jassy's got her money on you!'

'You're quite, quite mad.' She heaved another sigh. 'You know what? Sometimes I think I liked you better as the Bushranger. He was more chivalrous. He said he wouldn't kiss a woman against her will. But you have, more than once.'

He laughed. 'Well, the age of chivalry is supposed to be dead. And anyway, it makes life much more interesting for you, doesn't it?'

Nicola got off the table. 'Your vanity passes all bounds. I must get back to my typing. I've wasted enough time. Letty is coming today and she and I and Grandfather are going to clear out the old wattle-and-daub 'shed and start assembling all the pioneer bits and pieces that will be of interest to the menfolk but which would be out of place in the house.'

Forbes nodded. 'You've certainly done a great job there, unearthing a lot of stuff, you and Letty. Half of it I'd have turfed out as junk. All

those old bottles, for instance, the patent medicines and so on. Incredible that they've lasted so long.'

Nicola said dreamily, her mood changing, 'To me those little things, the recipe books and home-made remedies, the plasters and poultices, the bits of harness, the discarded horseshoes and so on, are just as important as the treasures ... the chairs and tables, the candelabra, the silver. They were the things Jane wove her life of . . . the little everyday things she handled and used. In the history of Puke-o-Marino they're just as valuable as those early editions of Browning and Dickens.'

Forbes looked down on her curiously. 'You really have identified yourself with Jane, haven't you? As if you were a descendant of hers yourself. Yet you're Nancy's descendant. Have you ever caught yourself wondering how the family history would have gone had *she* stayed? Had she ever got over her homesickness and buckled to, as so many pioneer women had to do?'

Nicola shook her head. 'No. I think Jane was meant for Francis, meant to be the matriarch of the New Zealand branch. Francis may never have known it, but she matched him in spirit—in intellect too—even if her education hadn't been of the standard of his.

'I think they probably had far more kinship than ever he and Nancy would have known. Look how Jane loved the beauty of this place, the gorges, the rivers, the mountains . . . yet to Nancy they spelt only isolation and a raw, new world.

'It does happen sometimes, Forbes, that a man sets his heart on a girl—perhaps because of her outward attractions—can't get her and marries what he thinks is second-best—and finds he has far more in common with his second choice than his first.'

Nicola was swept with a sudden bitter realization that in spite of the fact that Felicity was a lovely girl, she, Nicola, had more in common with Forbes than had this girl whom he had known—and loved—all his life. Felicity cared nothing for old historical things, for old traditions; she wanted new places, new faces.

The moment passed.

Forbes nodded. ' Yes, I've always thought it as well that things happened as they did. For instance, I'm not at all keen on the idea of cousins marrying. Perhaps it's to do with the fact that we breed stud stock here.' He grimaced. ' You may think it a cold-blooded way of looking at things, but I've always felt very strongly about this.' He paused, then said, ' What on earth are you looking at me like that for?'

Nicola was completely bewildered. ' But isn't Felicity a cousin to the Westerfields? Through Henry, Jane's brother. Isn't she called after Henry's wife?'

It was Forbes's turn to be surprised. ' Henry and his wife never had any children. They sold out to a younger couple eventually and retired in Christchurch. But the first Mrs Melford at Koromiko looked on Felicity Temple almost as a mother and the name persisted. Oh, Felicity does call Granddad Uncle George, but it's just a courtesy title. The two estates have always been closely associated, that's all.'

That night Nicola faced up to it. Even if Felicity did not relent, even if she went off to England and married someone else, Forbes Westerfield would never look his Cousin Nicola's way. It wasn't a close relationship, but he didn't believe in cousins marrying. Nicola knew now that, despite everything, her heart had clung to the frail chance that if Felicity remained adamant Forbes might, as Francis had done to Jane, have turned to her. She had despised herself for

thinking it, but it had remained in her subconscious, nurtured by the fact that Felicity herself seemed completely certain that she and Forbes were parted for good.

Nicola went to bed with a heavy heart. This was worse than anything Jane had ever faced. There had been no bar to *her* marriage with Francis. Indeed Francis himself must have thought distant cousinship no**b&frier*, when he'd intended to marry Nancy. But she must accept the fact that Forbes did, and when a man held those views, there was nothing to be done about it. Well, what a ridiculous thing to be thinking . . . Forbes didn't want to do anything about it. He was in love with Felicity. The possibility of falling in love with Nicola had never entered his head. Never would.

A thought struck her. He must never have expounded his views about cousins marrying to Felicity, or he'd never have tried to make her jealous by paying court to his cousin from England. How odd. But *was* it so odd? After all, since Felicity—lucky girl—was no kin to the Westerfields, the subject would never have been broached.

If Felicity didn't make it up with Forbes, she would go off to England, perhaps marry there. Forbes would turn to someone else here, after his Cousin Nicola had gone back Home. A brief visit and it would be over for her. She wouldn't even stay in their memories as had Nancy. Nancy had come out here and turned Francis's life upside down. She, Nicola, would be remembered as just a visiting connection, no more than a ripple on the surface of their lives.

It seemed so strange that Forbes himself seemed unaware of any tension. Felicity didn't come over that day, so he remained just Nicola's cousin, assisting her with the records, digging up information for her about the cartage of the wool bales, the disastrous introduction of rabbits, the price of cheese. The fact that he had kissed her teasingly—when Felicity hadn't been about to provoke—meant nothing. He was missing Felicity's kisses, that was all.

Cousin George was a happy man these days. He smiled on them both. 'She was just the one for the job, Forbes, wasn't she? We needed someone who not only knew how to write, but got caught up with the thrill of it all besides. The only thing I had doubts about was that you'd find it hard to enter into the spirit of things, Nicola.'

'Most girls of your generation—born in New Zealand—have grown up, naturally, with the history of colonization here. I say naturally because our history is so recent as to be able to meet up with people, still, who can remember the pioneers. Like myself being able to remember my grandmother Jane. So it makes it vivid. But I thought an English girl might not be able to sense that. We, of course, are brought up on English history, but you won't go into New Zealand history, in English schools, in any great detail, I daresay. But when you told us you'd swotted up all that New Zealand stuff on the ship, I knew you had what it takes. And you've so identified yourself with the history and the family that I feel in a very real way you're one of us. You could be a colonial, born and bred.'

One of us. Through ties of blood. It turned the knife. Nicola's face felt stiff and unnatural as she tried to look as pleased as Cousin George would expect her to be.

Cousin George went on: 'Even Forbes here feels that way now. It's okay to tell you this now, lassie, but he was very dubious at first about my inviting you, because of Nancy and Nesta. Tried to put me off. Good job I took no notice of you, eh, Forbes?'

It was the first time Nicola had ever seen Forbes look disconcerted. She supposed he felt a hypocrite, knowing his grandfather had no idea that he *had* expressed that disapproval directly to Nicola herself by letter.

Cousin George chuckled, his blue eyes gleaming with mischief.

'Look at him . . . takes something to make that one look ashamed of himself! Well, I can understand it and all. . . makes you feel a chump to be so antagonistic about anyone coming out and then to fall so heavily for them when they come, doesn't it, lad?'

Forbes recovered himself and grinned. 'Come off it, Granddad, you win, I admit it. She's more than we deserved.'

Nicola's thoughts she kept to herself. Yes, Forbes had discovered in himself a fondness for his cousin. Nothing more. But Cousin George's attitude was strange. Had he now accepted the fact that it was unlikely Felicity and Forbes would make it up, and he felt Nicola might do instead? Presumably, then, he did not share his grandson's views on marriage between cousins. And she had no idea that Felicity's earlier lack of interest in the Centennial had disillusioned Cousin George.

This could make things awkward. Forbes's mother and sister were coming, after all, to the Celebrations. Forbes had seen to that. But if Isobel Westerfield noticed that Cousin George favoured Nicola, she would be instantly prejudiced against her. Above all things, Nicola wanted Isobel to like her for her own sake. Nicola knew she was committed more than ever to trying to reconcile Forbes and Felicity.

So she smiled on Cousin George and said: 'You're going too fast, Cousin George. I love New Zealand, yes, and it's sure that I'll miss it when I go Home ... I love the spaciousness and the nearness of the mountains, most of all I love Marino Homestead and its links with the past, but I've got certain—er—ties back Home. Certain loyalties that --' she stopped, not wanting to involve herself too deeply.

Forbes finished it for her. 'She means she has a romantic attachment back Home, Grandfather. Apart from that, she could have stayed on, I imagine, for with her mother and stepfather in Hong Kong, it's nearer

to them here than England. But because of this man, our Nicola will never become a New Zealander, unless she brings him out here.'

He said it so casually it was evident he regarded their relationship as purely family. Nicola swallowed.

Cousin George looked horribly disappointed, then brightened. 'Think you might? Bring him out here? What does he do? Is he interested in farming? Because if he is we could --'

Nicola got in quickly. 'He's anything but interested in farming. He wouldn't know a sheep from a goat. He's in stocks and shares. There'd be no opening for him here.'

Old George stared. 'Hey, what's this? Time we got you a bit further afield, I'd say . . . though dammit, you saw some of our cities on the way down. There's every chance for a young man in every walk of life in New Zealand. You amaze me—why --'

Forbes held up his hand. 'I'm crying pax for Nicola. Lay off her, will you? Don't you see that she's trying not to hurt your feelings? She loves New Zealand, but England is her home. You've just got to accept that, Granddad.'

Nicola's heart felt like lead. Her eyes swept to the window, to the bush-clad hills and snowy peaks. To smiling paddocks, golden-tawny, purple shadows in dimpled valleys, places where she knew the sweet water tumbled through the passes, a cliff where, for some, a *tui's* voice echoed back, promising heart's desire within a year. Something she would never hear. Yet this land would always be the home of her heart.

She said briskly, 'Just the same, Grandfather is right. I've never even been to Christchurch yet. But Garry asked me to give him a ring and find out when he's got some free time. He said he could arrange for

me to stay with some friends of his—or are they friends of Letty's? I'll ring him later today.'

Forbes started to say something, checked himself, got up and walked out to the verandah to put on his boots. In a few seconds she saw him striding down to the sheep- pens.

CHAPTER XI

Felicity rode over that evening with the excuse of bringing a recipe for Jassy. Nicola was sure that Felicity was mischievously aware that every time she came, Forbes would be more sure his plan was working.

That probably added up to the conclusion that her heart was *not* involved. Not any more. But that was no comfort to Nicola now.

Forbes said, as he glimpsed her from the window, ' Ah, here she is again.'

Nicola moved to the window and Forbes casually draped an arm about her shoulders and said, ' Don't move till she spots us.'

Nicola looked up at him. ' I take it that Felicity doesn't know you have a thing about even distant cousins marrying?'

Forbes looked horrified. ' I should say not, and for Pete's sake don't mention it. That would really scotch things.'

Felicity had seen them all right. It had deepened both her twinkle and her dimple.

She said, in teasing disapproval, ' It's a wonder Nicky ever gets on with that history at all . . . don't you find Forbes distracting, Nicky?'

Nicola played up to it. ' I certainly do.' She managed a real warmth in her tones which pleased Forbes. He thought she was playing her part well. He said, ' It's nothing to how distracting *we* find Nicola. Even Grandfather is so besotted he can't dip a pen of sheep without her sitting on the rails watching. She'll be right in the thick of it when the shearers arrive, mark my words. I'll have to tell them to watch their language. Nicola, I think you'd better postpone those few days in

Christchurch with Garry, the shearers will arrive any day now. We don't always get much warning.'

All done to make Felicity think he was jealous of the time spent away from him! A perverseness rose up on Nicola. ' Well, you can jolly well do without me at the shearing. I'm ringing Garry tonight.'

'But you'll love it. It will give you a great insight into how it's done.'

'That's not necessary. It's not the sort of experience likely to be needed by anyone likely to spend the rest of her life in the heart of London, Forbes.'

He put back his head and laughed, the fuzzy beard sticking out. ' Like to take a bet on that, Nicola? Do you think New Zealand will really let you go?'

What an actor he was! (Nicola Trenton, stop thinking: Oh, if only it were true, you idiot!)

He continued, ' Besides, in the history you're writing of shearing, you ought to be able to do it authentically. Nothing like first-hand experience.'

'That's ridiculous. There's all the difference between shearing a hundred years ago—and now.'

'Only in the different breeds we run.'

Nicola was scornful. ' They didn't have electricity in those days. So --'

'We don't shear by electricity at Marino. We did for years, but we're back to blades. We don't have as many losses, we find.'

Nicola looked disconcerted. She turned to Felicity. ' He's got an odious habit of nearly always being right, hasn't he?'

'He sure has. It's not a bit endearing.' Felicity looked up at Forbes, laughing so naturally, Nicola had to admire her, ' You've got an awful lot to learn about women, Forbes. If you're seriously courting Nicola, you'd better realize that often pretty speeches go further than arguing and imposing your will on women.'

Forbes grinned. ' *I'm* serious . . . but so far the lady isn't. And I've got an awful lot of competition. Never mind, it makes the chase more exciting.'

Felicity's tone was a little sharp. Nicola's keen ears detected it. (Did she care, just a little, after all?)

'Well, if you have got competition, you ought to adopt a more gentle technique. Watch your step, don't go on bulldozing your way. The Westerfield men are inclined to think themselves the lords of creation, Nicky, and cocksure that this sort of existence is the only one. Farming, farming, farming!' Colour surged up into Felicity's cheeks, embarrassing her. She stopped, changed the subject. ' How strange that after all these weeks you've never dropped into calling her Nicky, Forbes.'

'I don't care for Nicky,' said Forbes deliberately. ' It's a man's nickname, and Nicola is all woman, every inch of her.'

This time Nicola's colour rose and both the others laughed.

Nicola turned abruptly. ' I must ring Garry. I promised I would.'

Ten minutes later she came back. 'All fixed,' she said lightly. ' It's Letty's aunt I'm staying with. Letty will come down with me. We want some information from the Museum. Garry's got it all worked out. He says I can come with him on his trips round some of the mid-Canterbury farms. Letty wants to do some wardrobe sewing down there. We'll take my car.'

Forbes scowled. ' If the shearers are here Jassy will need help. Not everyone gets on with Jassy as you do.'

Felicity said lightly, ' I'm one of the few. I'll help Jassy. That will leave Nicky free. You can't order her about all the time, Forbes. I can do the scones and pikelets for the morning and afternoon teas and do the running up and down to the shed in the wee old truck. If Nicola hadn't been here you would have had to do without her.'

Forbes's brows had drawn together in that sinister fashion that went so oddly with the patchy beard that Nicola wanted to laugh. It ought to have been a black, silky pointed beard . . . what did they call them in the old days? A stiletto beard.

He said to Felicity, ' What's this sudden enthusiasm for farm existence? ... I didn't know you were so enamoured of it. Thought you hated life revolving round crutching and dipping and mustering. You said so!'

Felicity's eyes were guileless. ' Well, I thought Nicola was getting run off her feet and that she deserves a few days in town. You and Uncle George seem to expect her to be as thrilled with everything round here as you are. No doubt it's been a novelty—but it will wear off. You can't expect her to be a maid-of-all-work, writing the history, running after shearers, carting great heavy baskets and billies of tea . . . you even take her on the minor musters.'

Forbes's eyes had narrowed. He gave a calculating whistle. ' The ivory tower is cracking a bit, isn't it, Fliss? Afraid, aren't you? Yes, afraid that the girl from London, the city that's the hub of the world, is going to prove better able to take the isolated life than you are—who were born and bred to it!'

Nicola held her breath . . . were the barriers going down? What was it Cousin George had said that first night? 'They're both . . . er . . .

tempestuous. I thought it wouldn't last, that they wouldn't be able to resist clashing. But they've been too polite with each other. I'd like to see a flare-up.' Or something like that.

It was true, of course, that many an estrangement had ended suddenly when the strain became unbearable and restraint and discipline gave way. Was it coming?

She saw Felicity's nostrils tighten and whiten, glanced down to see her fingers clench.

Felicity said: 'Forbes Westerfield, will you leave well alone? *I'm perfectly happy with things as they are.* What I do and what I decide doesn't concern you in the slightest. Anybody would think you thought yourself omnipotent . . . able to read other people's hearts better than they can themselves. I know what I want. And it's a life completely different from this ... I want to travel, see the world.

'What happens to most farmers? They can never get away. Not for more than a week between the small seeds and the harvest ... at some potty little seaside resort or something. Says to a girl if she has itchy feet, "Well, we'll see after we've been married for a while," knowing full well that by that time there'll be a couple of babies around and after that schooling that can't be interrupted for years and years ... so he promises her a trip when they retire, and they wait till they're practically doddering and off they go, too old to enjoy it, exhausting themselves in the process and arriving home saying there's no place like it. Bah!'

Felicity's cheeks were flying rags of real rage, she was well away to it.

'Why should it always have to be the woman who has to do the giving-in? I was willing to compromise to a certain extent. Gosh, it's still a man's world in spite of our supposed emancipation. But did I

get met halfway? No! Why shouldn't a girl want a change from something she's always known? It's much, much better for me to have had the courage to say I just couldn't take it, the same thing year in year out, than meekly submit and always be conscious of frustration. If you think *that* has any chance of adding up to an ideal marriage, I haven't. Let me tell you, Forbes Westerfield, I'm sick and tired of both families trying to get us to make it up. I know what's best for me. I can't stand any more of it, and next --'

But Nicola didn't wait to hear any more. They'd do better without her. She slipped away, unnoticed. Now was the moment, if only Forbes had the wit to realize it. To take Felicity in his arms, meet her halfway, promise her that honeymoon trip he'd talked of to Nicola, to say those things Jassy thought he had never said.

Jassy was pretty shrewd, so it was probably true enough. Felicity's craving for travel was probably a substitute for the romance and excitement she had felt was lacking in her engagement. If Forbes's courtship of her had been as casual as Jassy suspected, naturally the girl would feel she had missed something vital in life.

Something Nicola had read long ago in a magazine came to her mind. About how pathetic it is that some women, in all their married life, have never heard those three magic words: I love you, have never had a proposal.

Men shouldn't be as sure of women as that. Nicola supposed that, incredible as it seemed, some men were quite capable of saying: 'Well, isn't it about time we got married? Say before the autumn muster?'

What utter fools they were. When, given the compensating and matchless tenderness of a little romance, women would follow them anywhere.

All the time Nicola was saddling Rowan her thoughts were busy. Then, with her hand on the pommel, ready to swing herself up into the saddle, she paused, staring into space.

But was Forbes Westerfield really that kind of fool?

He was almost *too* quick with his tongue. Ready to taunt, to tease. You'd expect a man like that to understand women, to sense a mood, a need. Look at the way he'd burned with indignation over Francis's treatment of Jane.

Nicola swung into the saddle and was off. Of course she only knew Forbes as he was now. Perhaps he had been a casual sort, only now wakened up to the fierceness of his feelings when he had lost his Felicity.

Nicola knew a desolate feeling at the thought that they hadn't even noticed her going. Certainly she had gone stealthily enough, but they had been so intent upon each other, if she had fallen over the fire-irons they wouldn't have noticed it.

The evening breeze lifted back the tawny-red hair from her temples, cooled her throat in its open-necked green silk shirt. Rowan's hide was warm against her bare ankles. She had only thonged sandals on her feet below the cotton pique trews. She would ride and ride and ride and not come back till those two had sorted their differences. She hoped no one would interrupt them. At least that was what she ought to hope.

Nicola turned into the gorge, gashed between the hills, with only the narrow track by the water's edge. It went some "distance, then the river widened and the track went uphill high above the gorge, then dipped into the dim green bush where the light, filtered through thousands of leaves, had a grotto-like, underwater quality that was half enchantment and half eeriness.

Nicola let Rowan pick her way carefully and was glad when before her she could see the sunset light again. She reined the mare in as she came up on to the grassy shoulder above the chasm, and gave an involuntary cry of sheer delight that blotted out, temporarily, her unhappiness.

Twilight had folded the foothills in a purple duskiness, but beyond them the Alps were etched in shining silver splendour against a sunset sky of such magnificence that only a Turner could have done it justice.

Across the Tasman Sea, in Australia, they were having dust-storms and this was the result. Strange that something as ugly and unpleasant could add to the brilliancy of a sunset thirteen hundred miles away. But one didn't analyse sunsets any more than one analysed or evaluated love.

The nor'west curtain was amethyst tonight, with a sea-green sky between it and the tops, and behind the curtain the sun had lit the edges with fiery colours so that it looked like a shot silk lining of coral, flame, and orange. One star glimmered out in the green.

Even the birds, that had been so vocal in their evening chorus as Nicola came through the bush, suddenly became quiet, as if in homage to such beauty. Nicola knew she would remember this night all her life . . . the poignancy of it, to see such beauty when your heart was like lead. To have no one to share it with. To know that in the homestead, far below, a place that had somehow become a very part of you, the man you loved was finding reconciliation with someone else. And that in the years to come, you could have no part in his life.

The stilled wind sprang up again, and into the silence came the whispering from the mountain. At that moment, from a mighty beech on the fringe of the bush, a *tui* began to sing. Its song rose and fell with a range of notes that was unbelievable. Happy, chuckling notes

that died to a plaintive murmur, started, stopped. Chiming notes, like a bell cast of silver, then the twang of the bushland harp.

Nicola knew by now that that this was the end of the song . . . but not tonight. For across the water, sounding back from Puketui Point, came the echo from the Sounding Cliff, fainter, sweeter, but unmistakably the *tui's* song.

Nicola and her mount were carved as one figure, dark against the sunset sky. And once again the *tui* sang; once again it echoed back. This time Nicola could hear it winging back and blending with it in between the runs of every trill.

A moment to remember always . . . yes, but this time the legend was out of gear, because this would be the year when she would leave her happiness behind, here in this small island of the Pacific, an island that was a world in itself. She felt the slow tears running down her face.

Then behind her a voice spoke. Forbes's voice. It said: ' So this is where you are. I've been looking for you. Nicola, you've heard it . . . the echo of the legend.'

Not turning her head, Nicola said: ' Yes, I heard it.' Even to herself her voice sounded strange.

Forbes said, rather roughly, ' Don't you know it's dangerous to ride alone so late in the day—without telling anyone where you were going? Foolhardy.'

Nicola said chokingly: ' I wanted to get away from you all. Whoever named this place the Hill of Peace must have had a wry sense of humour. It's full of discord. It applies only to the beauty of the surroundings. Its history has never been peaceful, contented. I don't want to come back yet. I want to be alone.'

She dug her heels into Rowan, turning her head to the right, away from the edge of the gorge, uphill further still.

The tears she didn't want Forbes to see were spilling over and blurring her vision. She didn't see the clump of spear-grass she headed the mare into. As the sharp spikes tore into Rowan's forelegs, the mare reared up on the steep incline and began to slip. As Rowan threw herself sideways in a desperate effort to regain her footing, Nicola lost a stirrup and sailed into the air and over the edge.

If she had been six feet further up nothing could have saved her, for the gorge was sheer there, but here a track cut into the slope and Nicola struck the edge of it and rolled down the incline, tossed and tumbled from side to side. She rolled down on to the huge boulders at the foot and felt the foaming, leaping water come smotheringly over her face.

It seemed only the next moment that Forbes was dragging her out and swearing madly.

She opened her eyes, said, between gasps, ' Stop it, Forbes. There's—no need—for that.'

He stopped swearing, kneeling above her. ' *No need* ! I thought you were out to it!'

He was moving her arms, her legs. ' You *must* be injured. Lie quite still and let me find out where.'

The water was still spraying on her. He'd done no more than get her to the edge, afraid of hurting her still more.

She managed a grin. It was crooked and fleeting but still a grin. ' I'm all right, Forbes, truly. I didn't get knocked out even for a moment. I'm only winded and a bit shaky.'

'*Shaky!* Well, how the hell do you think I feel?'

Nicola couldn't help it. She began to laugh, but very weakly. 'You're so funny, Forbes . . . I'll have to get away from here . . . it's far too late in the day for a continuous cold shower!'

He looked down on her, tried to grin back, and his face changed. 'Oh, Nicola!' he said, and something in his voice almost broke Nicola's control. She was too limp to do anything to stop him. He gathered her up against him and she was aware that he was trembling. She could feel the quick, hard thudding of his heart against his chest-wall.

'I hope I never have to live through a moment like that again for the whole of my life,' he said. 'You can't even begin to think what I felt like when I saw you flying through the air towards Parehuia's Leap. It could have been so different—a few feet further on and you might have been lying there broken—oh, it doesn't bear thinking about. Oh, I shouldn't be talking like this, it won't do a thing to help you, but --' words failed him and he kissed her, hard.

There was nothing of passion in that kiss, nothing of desire. Just an immense relief, Nicola told herself, an outlet for overcharged feelings. She let herself be kissed, even kissed him back and told herself it was the effect of the fall that was turning her bones to water.

He lifted his head and smiled down on her, for the moment no hostility or misunderstanding between them. His mouth quirked under the corner of the bushy beard. 'It's taken the wind out of you in more ways than one, my girl. That's the first time I've kissed you that you've not bawled me out the moment after—or held a postmortem on it.'

Nicola pulled herself together. 'I've not had time to get my breath back.' She smiled at him quite nicely. 'But I won't take you to task

this time. That was purely a cousinly kiss, the kind no one could resent.'

He stared blankly, then said, ' Are you sure you aren't hurt? I mean, you sound a bit dazed.' He helped her up.

She rather despised herself for clinging to him, but she couldn't seem to help it. She began to laugh weakly.

'I thought my last day had come. I'd no idea how near that cliff was, only that I was flying towards the edge. I do hope Rowan is all right. It was spear-grass, wasn't it? Her legs must be --'

'She'll be all right. But I'm afraid you're going to be a mass of bruises tomorrow. But I hand it to you, you certainly know how to fall. You sort of rolled into a ball and kept supple.'

Nicola laughed. 'I was that sort of kid. Yet I never broke a bone or had a stitch put in.'

'Well, don't try your luck too far here, Stranger-from- over-the-sea. Imagine what your mother would say if we let you injure yourself while you were here. To say nothing of what Grandfather would do to me if I let anything happen to the apple of his eye! And surely Felicity and I didn't upset you as much as all that—why, Fliss and I have had these slanging matches all our lives.'

Nicola didn't feel equal to taking it up with him. What .a blind bat of a man. Would he never learn? One of these days she'd have to endure the poignancy of having to tell the man she loved how to woo another woman . He'd have to try to see Felicity as a woman, not as the tomboy he'd grown up with.

She shivered. The sun was dropping behind the ranges and with its passing the temperature was much cooler. And she was soaked to the skin.

Forbes looked down on her and for a moment she was acutely conscious of the way her things were clinging to her. He peeled off the V-necked cricketing pullover he'd put on after tea and said, 'Here, put this on. You could be suffering from a certain amount of shock, in spite of trying to appear such an Amazon.'

She pulled it down, grateful for its warm bagginess.

'And you're coming up before me on Dirk. I'm not trusting you on Rowan again tonight.'

'Oh, Forbes, she's a lamb. You couldn't blame any horse for rearing up after being forced into spear-grass. I'll be fine.'

His grip tightened. 'You're coming up before me. Rowan will follow. I'm taking no chances of you tumbling off in a faint. And that's that.'

It was. Nicola was privately of the view that the ride home was much too short. But very sweet. . . Forbes's shoulders above hers, her head was resting back on his breast, every movement of the horse beneath them swaying them backwards and forwards together, his free hand clasped round her waist, holding her, his warmth seeping through her back.

He walked his mount very slowly through the deepening shadows of the bush and through the scented paddocks of the homestead.

He laughed as he neared the stables. 'Hark at D'Arcy! I collared him and shut him in my room when I followed you. Just as well. He'd have hurled himself after you down that track. The lap-dog with the heart of a lion!'

There was a smile in Nicola's voice. ' You've grown quite fond of my once despised canine midget.'

'I have, lass. Sure, even a tough old bushranger can have a vulnerable spot. And it's sure I am, since you came to Marino, Nicola Trenton, that first impressions need to be revised and all. I'm much less self-sufficient since you came here, mavourneen.' Nicola wouldn't let herself be moved by this blarney. She said, to cover up, ' How is it that you slip so easily into the Irish brogue of the Bushranger, Forbes? Have you practised it a lot?'

'No, picked it up from my Irish granny. On my mother's side, of course.'

'Why of course? I mean why couldn't your father's mother have been Irish?'

'No reason at all. I only meant that of course even Dad couldn't remember his mother.'

Nicola hadn't thought Cousin George's wife had died as long ago as that. She must have picked up a quite erroneous impression somewhere.

Jassy bound up Nicola's scratches, scolding Forbes madly all the time, but she was very little the worse for it.

Forbes thought she ought not to go down to Christchurch.

'Utter rubbish,' said Nicola. ' Besides, isn't it a good idea? Felicity will be over here, taking her place as a granddaughter-to-be, and finding there are compensations in it.'

'I suppose it may work. Though I have my doubts. Fliss is very stubborn and she's certainly set on this trip to Britain.'

It had to be said, though Nicola found it hard to utter. 'Perhaps there has to be a certain amount of giving-in on each side, Forbes. That—that honeymoon trip might be an idea. Felicity would get the travel-bug out of her system then. Most people love settling again.'

'You could be right. I'll mention it. With what appears to be a rival in the offing, plus absence making the heart grow fonder—well, we'll see.'

Nicola and Letty went to Christchurch. Before she left Nicola made herself say: 'By the way, Forbes, if you're trying any further reconciliation schemes, I think a change of technique might be advisable. You didn't have much success the other night arguing. Felicity has always been used to straight talk from you. It just puts her back up. Try a few sweet speeches. I mean that—think it over.' She waved and was away. She was picking Letty up five miles on.

Christchurch enchanted her, perhaps because in reading up the early history of the province of Canterbury, she had formed an idea of what it must look like from the earliest surveying days and the reproductions of old paintings and sketches she had pored over.

But though the layout of the actual town within its square mile of avenues seemed familiar, when she looked at the buildings, tall and crowded, it seemed impossible all this could have risen in a hundred years.

Letty's aunt proved a kindred spirit, steeped in the early history, as well she might be, living close to the museum, in one of the first houses built, beautifully preserved. It would have been too large for a widow, with her only son in Singapore in the Diplomatic Service and a daughter in New Zealand House in London, but she had turned it

into a private hostel for Colombo Plan students, managing with no help other than a cook, because all the students pulled their weights. There were students from Korea, Malaya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Thailand.

'Then I found it wasn't, after all, the ideal, having just Asian students,' she told Nicola. 'They were forming a sort of East Asian Club. So I got in five New Zealanders, two Maori, and three *pakeha*. We've got it balanced now and it's good for everybody. I don't pretend it's always sweet harmony, but in the student world they soon find out they're sisters under the skin.'

Phoebe Dinnington was a fine-looking woman with the most contented face Nicola had ever seen.

She said so, to Letty. 'Even her name suits her perfectly. Just right for a house like this, full of old colonial treasures, within a stone's-throw of Canterbury College with its cloisters and quadrangles. Yet so many women with all members of the family overseas would be sunk in self-pity.'

'Yes. With her background you would expect her to be ultra-conservative, but she's so adaptable. She's been so grateful for the fact that overseas people have been hospitable to her own that she pays her debt in making a home here for students who could otherwise feel so lonely and bewildered by our strange customs and meals, our casual-to-a-fault behaviour, our differing codes, not all of them admirable.'

Letty stopped and laughed. 'Listen to me! I sound like one of the lecturers at Varsity. But I'm getting into the way of even thinking like that, with reading so many diaries and letters of the early days. It's a good thing Dan's the same. Some of the chaps of our age would think me clean crazy. But he's mad on historical stuff too, naturally enough, with his job.'

Nicola liked Dan. She had expected him to be stooped and bookish. Not so—he was red-headed and freckled, a Rugby forward in winter and a surf-champion in summer.

With Garry they made a happy foursome and enjoyed each other's company so much that Nicola decided to stay a week. She rang to tell Cousin George.

'Letty and I are at the Colonists' Gallery every day and Letty's Aunt Phoebe has the most amazing collection of ancient garments in her attic. Letty is a wizard at altering them. And, Cousin George, the Asian girls here are so keen on the whole thing they'd like to be present at the Re-enactment. May they? Oh, bless you, I knew you'd invite them.

'Dan said if it was okay he'd hire a mini-bus and bring them up just for the day. What did you say? The dance at night? Oh, they'd love it all right, but have you room? Yes, they all have sleeping-bags. Most of them go hitch-hiking during the vacations so they can see the country as cheaply as possible, you see. Oh, thank you, Cousin George, I do love you. No, thanks, I don't want to speak to Forbes. There's no need. The shearing's nearly finished? Good. And I expect Felicity has been a tower of strength. Oh, how has D'Arcy behaved himself? Has he --'

But she was interrupted, and it was Forbes's voice that answered that one. 'D'Arcy has been a model . . . for the last twenty-four hours. He's a much subdued little dog. He has at last learned that he is not and never will be a sheepdog. The shearers cured him. He had to learn it the hard way. He twice got out of his collar and the minute he heard us sing out " Wayleggo " he was off too. He got mixed up with the sheep and the men vowed one of them would accidentally shear him.

'Then a big ram took to him. D'Arcy got in behind this ram like a streak of lightning and nipped its heels in the approved manner. That

ram lifted him clean over the pens, and all we saw, after D'Arcy came down to earth, was a white flash making for the house and Jassy.

'I don't know whether it was you or D'Arcy got under Jassy's armour. She's never allowed dogs in the house before. I arrived in the other day to find Border Bill occupying the rag mat with him. I pretended to be shocked and Jassy said, "Well, when two creatures— animals or humans—settle their differences the way those two did, they deserve a bit of spoiling." I can tell you, Nicola, you have a way with you.'

Nicola said suspiciously, 'I take it Felicity is within hearing distance?'

'What makes you say that?'

'Hearing such pretty speeches from you.'

'That's a dirty crack. She's gone over to Koromiko. You aren't given to pretty speeches yourself. And anyway, what's the matter with me? I've never known me give you a compliment yet but what you ungraciously get a dig in.'

Nicola said firmly: 'The trouble with you, Forbes, is that you miss your cue every time. You make your pretty speeches to the wrong person.'

'Good grief!' He sounded genuinely injured. 'Who were you expecting me to make pretty speeches to? If I tried it out on Letty she'd think I was trying to cut Dan out. That only leaves Felicity and Jassy—apart from you.'

'I wouldn't expect you to go round telling Jassy she looked ravishing, but it could do something for Felicity.'

'Felicity! That'll be the day. Someone I've known all my life. I know what it is—you're sorry for her. I even believe you're on her side in

this quarrel. Well, watch your step, Nicola, or you'll get in deep waters. I may be as fond as the dickens of her, but there's a large lump of selfishness she needs to get rid of.'

Nicola swallowed. He was hopeless! Self-satisfied and sure the giving-in must be all on Felicity's side. She said: 'How's this week gone as far as she's concerned? Has it made any difference?'

'Not a scrap. If anyone had told me years ago that she could have been so adamant and unforgiving, I wouldn't have believed them. When we were kids, it was a case of a flare-up with her, you know . . . the word, the blow, and then a quick sorry and it was all over. What were you telling Granddad? Aren't you coming home for the weekend?'

'No. Dan's been awfully good to us and Letty wants me round to assist with these costumes. We can do it better her—there aren't so many distractions. Letty says Christmas will be on us soon and we must get as much done as possible. And we spend hours at the museum.'

'Don't you mind playing gooseberry?'

'Well, they can hardly hold hands at the museum, and at night there are the four of us.'

'You mean Garry?'

'Of course. Who else? Anyway, we're having a day off tomorrow. Letty's visiting friends and I'm going round Mid-Canterbury with Garry.'

A pause. Then, 'Nicola, don't singe your fingers, will you?'

Nicola took him up sharply. 'What can you mean?'

'Well, it would be disastrous if you really fell for him, wouldn't it, ditching this chap at Home.'

Disastrous. What a flattering word to use. But he meant, of course, that he didn't approve of cousins marrying and it would make trouble. Nicola told herself to keep a rein on her temper.

She said coldly, ' You know, Forbes, Felicity was right when she said you were too organizing by far. I'll manage my own affairs, thank you. I might even be better at it than you seem to be with your own. I know exactly how far to go with Garry. We were pen-friends long ago and we have quite an affection for each other. It's kept well within bounds. Don't worry, Forbes, I'll make no complications within the family. I *want* to go back to England. I like Englishmen far, far better than any New Zealander I've met so far—except for Cousin George. New Zealand men don't mean a thing to me. Goodnight.' And she hung up.

CHAPTER XII

She found she was shaking. It made her warmer in her manner to Garry the next day. She was determined to stop drawing comparisons. It wasn't fair to Garry. He didn't have the personality of Forbes, but he was a darned sight easier to get on with. And so kind. Nicola told herself she was an ingrate to feel, when they came back to the city, glad that Garry had reports to make out and couldn't spend the evening with her.

She enjoyed the next day, Saturday, however. Perhaps because they were again a foursome and Dan was such fun. It was hard to believe this was a December day, that in a fortnight it would be Christmas Eve. The temperature climbed almost immediately into the eighties and the sky was a hot, cloudless blue bowl inverted over the shimmering plains.

They took the road through the tunnel in the Port Hills to Lyttelton to show Nicola where, on December the sixteenth in 1850, the first ship had come to harbour with settlers on board. The officials who had come to prepare the new colony for them were already there . . . barracks and V-huts and tents were everywhere, and though only the Bridle Path could be used to gain access to the plains, they were already cutting their way round the hill to Sumner for a road that could take wheeled traffic.

'In all the years,' said Dan, ' the Bridle Path has remained just that. . . too steep for anything but a foot- track zigzagging its way over.'

'Lovely to find something still unchanged,' said Nicola.

But they didn't only do historical research; the heat drove them to bathe at one of the bays round the Peninsula. They had tea at Governor's Bay, then, in the long twilight, came back to the old colonial house in Rolleston Avenue. After they had had some coffee,

Dan said to Letty, ' Come on round to the museum with me, Letty, I've got a key. There are some things I'd like to go over with you.'

Nicola looked up from an old album of Phoebe Dinnington's she was studying and saw a conspiratorial grin pass between Dan and Garry.

Garry said lazily, ' Don't ask us to go with you—I've had too much sun and too much sea. Nicola, don't you dare say you'd like to go or I'll feel in duty bound to escort you.'

When they had gone, Nicola said: ' Keen on his work, isn't he? Or is it work he's thinking of tonight? I caught that look.'

Garry burst out laughing. ' I hope Letty didn't! It seems she's taking that affair at a much slower pace than Dan. He's very sure of himself. He says she's so taken up with this Centennial she'll talk of nothing else.'

Nicola heaved a sigh of exasperation. ' So like a great ninny he carts her off to a *museum* to pop the question!' She got up and strode to the window, half screened over by a vine planted a century before, and waved her hand at the scene outside.

'Just imagine ... look at this enchanted garden. It has a lily-pond, it has a hydrangea walk ... it has a little statue of Eros in the sunken garden ... he could have taken her down where the silver birches grow . . . and he takes her to a place full of dry bones and preserved mummies! Men! Still, perhaps it isn't as bad as if he'd taken her to the Barbadoes street cemetery and proposed leaning on a tombstone!

'No wonder girls here go off to England to find romance . . . and probably find it too . . . on board ship! Nothing like moonlight on the Pacific to make a girl feel she's really seeing life! Honestly, I think the whole lot of you need bombs under you. Look at Francis Westerfield, even. We blame Nancy for turning tail and going back to England,

but how are we to know she didn't find Francis too changed from the man he'd been in England? The life here might have changed him to a tongue-tied rustic. I presume that in England, where he had courted his cousin, he'd known how to make a woman feel beautiful and beloved. How are we to know she didn't feel life was going to be too drab lived on his terms? After all, he couldn't even make Jane happy—

Jane who so deserved it. Men have *got* to make life worth while for women. They'll put up with anything, even an existence they'd never have picked for themselves, if the men would make it seem gloriously worth while, instead of taking their women's participation in their lives for granted!

'No wonder Felicity is going off to England. She's only got one life to lead. She wants a bit of romance. I've told Forbes there's something to be said for pretty speeches and now I'm telling you. *Museums!* Really, there's not one of the three of you worth the flutter of a girl's heart!'

Garry rose with a swift movement quite untypical of him, tossed his cigarette into a plant-pot, crossed the room with a couple of strides. He towered above her, laughing, but with some purpose in his eyes she could not fathom.

His grip hurt. He put one foot up on the window-seat. ' My dear cousin Nicola! What a termagant! You're really something when roused, aren't you? But you haven't been in the country long enough to make such sweeping statements about colonial men ... *and get away with it!* It rouses our male pride. And you're way off beam. Dan told me he wanted Letty to himself tonight. The museum was just an excuse . He's taking her on the Avon in a canoe . . . the boatshed's just round the corner from here . . . moonlight canoeing is about as romantic as you can get. But he didn't dare mention it to Letty or she'd

have insisted on a foursome, would have wanted you to share it too. So Dan told me to head you off if you wanted to accompany them.'

Nicola felt a burning wave of real chagrin sweep over her.

'Oh,' she said flatly. 'That does make me feel a gooseberry. I expect I've been in the way all week, had I but known it.'

Garry's face was very close to hers. 'You certainly don't-^have to feel like that, Nicola. I was most happy for Dan and Letty to leave us alone.' He bent his head and kissed her, taking her completely by surprise.

At that moment a voice from above floated down to them. A student's voice. One of the Maori girls. 'Just look what's coming up our path ... the biggest he-man you ever saw, with the smallest white poodle!' The last word was cut off as if the speaker realized she was beside an open window and would be heard.

Panicking, Nicola put a hand on Garry's shoulder and tried to push him away. She turned her head, looking straight out of the open casement, and there stood Forbes, halted dead in his tracks. His brows were meeting above his eyes, his lips were a straight line.

And Garry laughed.

He let go of Nicola, lifted the handle of the window and swung it wider, leaning out. 'It's quite all right, Forbes, come in by the verandah door. I admit you could have picked a better time to appear, but I have a lovely nature ... far better than the one Nicola gives me credit for. She's just been telling me how unpolished we colonials are. So, despite the fact that at the moment I ought to be wishing you at the bottom of the sea, I'm about to show her that one Antipodean, at least, can face embarrassment with perfect aplomb.'

Nicola pulled herself together. After all, what did it matter? Forbes ought to realize there was nothing in it. No more than in any of the kisses he had taken from her. In fact his had had the same reason behind them, as Garry's had. A sort of reflex action born of masculine perversity.

But Forbes was in the room and looking like a thundercloud. How dare he! She supposed he was cross because of the relationship. But if it didn't upset Garry, why should it upset Forbes? Garry could please himself.

His voice was cutting. 'Your embarrassment *or* Nicola's doesn't concern me in the slightest. I'd have given both of you credit for more sense, the situation being what it is.'

Good heavens, the man was going to play the heavy father . . . heavy cousin . . . bring up the relationship.

So Nicola said very quickly, 'Forbes, you're being quite absurd. There was nothing in that. You take things far too seriously. Now take that look off your face and let's know what brings you here, what gives us the pleasure of your company.'

Forbes said: 'There's been a bit of an accident at Koromiko.' Then he said quickly and strangely, 'No, not—not any of the Gorge folk, it was to Jassy. She fainted with the heat—first time in all her stoical life—but she was at the head of the stairs. She fell all the way, gave Aunt Lucy a terrible fright, but she only broke her collar-bone.

'The doctor's set it and Aunt Lucy wouldn't let her come home, but you know what Jassy is, thinks Marino will fall apart without her at the helm. She's bound to come back tomorrow, so I want you, Nicola. She won't be able to do a thing, much less dress herself.'

Gany's jaw had a pugnacious thrust to it. Nicola was surprised.

'Why can't Felicity take over?' he demanded.

Forbes's brows came down. ' In the circumstances, I happen to prefer Nicola.'

Nicola couldn't resist it. ' And you'll know, from long experience, Garry, that what Forbes wants, he gets.'

'Not always,' said Forbes quietly.

Nicola felt a heel.

'Besides,' Forbes continued, ' Felicity did offer, but quite frankly, Jassy wanted Nicola.'

Garry said, ' Not very tactful, was it?'

Forbes made an impatient movement. ' She didn't say it in front of Felicity. Give Jassy credit for some feelings. She whispered it to me, privately. She said that knowing how Felicity feels about farm tasks, she'd rather have Nicola who seemed to find it great fun.'

Nicola snorted. ' That makes me sound a paragon. If I had done it all my life, perhaps I'd want a change too. 'Right, Forbes, I'll come. Garry, it sounds as if Dan and Letty won't be back for ages and won't want a reception committee when they do come—so I'll just go pack my things and leave a note on Letty's pillow.'

To Forbes's look she said, 'Dan's taken Letty off canoeing by moonlight. But he did it under pretext of carrying her off to the museum on business. Which I, dimwit that I am, believed! Garry enlightened me. I still didn't get it and was horrified at the thought of anyone proposing in a museum!'

Garry chuckled. ' So I put her right. In any case, my darling dill, even if he had chosen that venue, it wasn't to say he'd propose in the

shadow of the skeleton of a whale or a hippo. He might have taken her inside that hansom cab he's so attached to, in the early Colonial section. I can't think it much less romantic than a canoe. And safer too, come to think of it. So I was putting Nicola right when you discovered us in that clinch!

Laughing, and rather glad to see Forbes still looking annoyed, and uncertain, Nicola ran up to fling her things in her case and leave the note.

She didn't know if it was Forbes's custom to drive in silence through traffic, but anyway he didn't speak till they were well past Belfast.

'I told you to watch your step with Garry, Nicola.'

She drew in a tense breath, leashing her anger, then she managed to say coolly, mockingly, 'And of course you expect me to do exactly as you advised? What do you think you are, Forbes? The family Solomon?'

She saw the bearded mouth twist. 'If I'd had as much to do with women as Solomon had, perhaps I'd know how to deal with this. I'm very disappointed in you.'

She bit her lip, but answered gamely enough, 'Forbes, have you really any right to interfere in Garry's affairs? He's not far off your age, is he?'

'Twenty-six to my twenty-nine, if you want to know. I'm not just wanting to throw my weight about. But you've got me puzzled.'

'Meaning?'

'Well, you don't mean to stay here . . . and you have someone in England. Nesta was the same. She was here such a short time, yet you're snarling our lives up as much as she did, nearly.'

It hurt so much, Nicola could find no ready answer.

Then she said, chokingly, 'Forbes, it seems to me as if it's extremely hard not to get caught up in all the currents and cross-currents at Marino. I hoped just to come out here to do a job, and after a happy time with my New Zealand cousins, go back with pleasant memories. But it's not as easy as that. *You* asked me to help in a certain sticky situation and I tried. It's your fault if I seem to have made it worse still.'

He didn't answer for a few moments. 'When I asked you, I thought you would play fair. I thought I'd read you right. But now—tonight—I feel bewildered and disgusted. Jassy and Granddad think the world of you. You've done a wonderful job on the history so far.

Garry --' his voice took on a note she couldn't analyse —' Garry seems to find you irresistibly attractive, and...'

Nicola couldn't help it. She prompted him. 'And you --?'

'Me? Oh, I'm just a crass fool, that's all.'

Nicola waited, but he said no more. As they passed over the Waimakiriri, she said, 'I don't know why I tried to patch things up in this family at all. I *thought* I knew why. My sole idea was that if I entered into this conspiracy with you, it might compensate to your mother—who so wants the match—for what Nesta did to her long ago.'

The profile above the driving wheel was unyielding, craggy.

'That sounds very fair and commendable. That's what I had come to believe in. And if you had even gone as far in playing up to Garry tonight, when Felicity was about—well, I'd have backed you up. But catching you out like that was—a very different thing.'

Nicola said in a hard tone, ' I see. The trouble with you,. Forbes Westerfield, is that you have no endearing human traits. You have everything sewn up into neat little compartments, emotionally—and you can't understand that just sometimes things go a little differently from how they're planned. That one's emotions are not always under control. This absolutely finishes it as far as I'm concerned. With Garry, I mean. I'll play up to you a little bit—if necessary—when Felicity is about, if you can still manage to do it with someone you so despise, but I refuse to be rude to Garry. I just won't encourage him, that's all.'

His hands tightened on the wheel. ' I'm experiencing a few emotions right now that threaten to spill over. So you do admit that at the moment I came upon you, emotions *were* getting out of hand. That Garry was— rather serious?'

'Well, all right. Perhaps he was more serious than I was about it.'

'I could shake you till your teeth rattled. Beats me what satisfaction you got out of it. Any wonder it made me think of Nesta? She couldn't bear any man to look at another woman, and tried to attract him by foul means if fair means didn't do it.'

Nicola couldn't take any more. ' Look, Forbes, the river is in sight, which means we're almost home. Jassy has been injured and from tomorrow I'll be keeping house. No doubt when we get home, Cousin George will be waiting up for us. I'd rather he didn't know we've quarrelled. He's distressed enough as it is, about the other bust-up. It's not so long now till the Re-enactment. Let's just play it along till then. I'll be off soon after.'

'Going to drop your bundle? Leave the history half finished ?'

'No. Why should I?'

'This will be a setback, nursing Jassy and keeping house. You'll need to stay on longer to make up the time.'

'Well, if I can't manage to finish it a few days after the Centennial, I'll take it to Hong Kong with me and finish it there.'

'A very good idea,' said Forbes.

It left Nicola with the taste of ashes in her mouth.

CHAPTER XIII

Life became very hectic. It was just as well Forbes and Cousin George had decided that sheep could carry the estate finance this year and had cut out harvest. They'd sown no grain at all. The haymaking was finished by Christmas and got in in perfect weather with never a shower to slow up their schedule.

Jassy fretted at her inactivity. Nicola felt the days were not half long enough. It was a big house and she was determined to see it was kept as before. Felicity was a great help.

Finally she said: 'Nicky, you're going too hard. I reckon Letty won't need to let out Nancy's travelling dress at all if you lose more weight. Look, I'll take over the top floor, you do downstairs and the meals. That would give you time to get on with the chronicle.'

Nicola said: 'But, Felicity, it's not the sort of work you like, is it? I appreciate your offer all the more because of that, but I feel --'

'Oh, I don't mind housework, or even farm routine if it comes to that, as long as people aren't too one-eyed about it and think there's nothing else in life. I want a bit of variety before I settle down, that's all. I'll come over at eight-thirty every morning. I'd like the afternoons free because I'm doing all my own dressmaking for this trip, to save money.'

'Better stay over here, Fliss,' said Forbes's voice behind them. 'Save an awful lot of time. And there's the little sewing room upstairs.'

Felicity said, 'Oh, Letty needs to use that when she's up here working on the costumes.'

Forbes laughed. ' She's now more keen on doing it in town. I believe they're announcing the engagement next week. She'd like to be near Dan.'

'Oh, good show. But I thought she preferred to work up here. She seemed to be up most weekends.'

'Oh, well, till Letty fell in love with Dan, I think the attraction was Garry. You thought they were attracted, didn't you, Nicola?'

Nicola, with that faint air of reserve she used towards Forbes now, said, ' I believe I did, but only on the first night.'

Felicity said indifferently, ' Oh, well, it looks as if the best man won. Okay, I'll stay here till Jassy's fully right. It must be frustrating for the poor pet. If it had been her ankle even she could have done lots of things sitting down. I'm afraid with all this heat the fruit is going to come in early. We'll have to get the preserving done somehow.'

Nicola wondered how she was going to bear it . . . sometimes she felt intensely irritated with Felicity, so casual and uncaring about Forbes's love for her.

Cousin George had no idea that she intended leaving soon after the celebrations. He said to her, ' Don't try to pack too much in on the history. You'll get more done after the big day. You'll be able to do more at night when the days draw in. No temptation then to linger outside. The men are in earlier for their evening meal then.'

Nicola had a vision of those evenings . . . Forbes, clean-shaven, something she had never seen, smoking his pipe by the fire, reading, D'Arcy's curly white head on his slipper . . . Forbes mending fishing rods, cleaning his guns, polishing harness. Forbes busy with the farm accounts. He was a strange mixture, almost as keen on figures as he was on farming.

Cousin George was proud of this. 'I could never stand the book work myself. But of course Forbes's father lived and breathed figures. That's why I sent him to Varsity instead of Lincoln College. Great mistake for a man to think his son must follow in his footsteps.'

Nicola said, 'I admire that sort of thinking, Cousin George. It must be terrible to be pushed into doing something you don't want to do. Though I guess that in the case of a farmer, it's just that much harder. Naturally, he wants the place carried on in the family.'

'Aye, it is harder, but many a man has lost his son, as far as kinship of spirit is concerned, by forcing him to stay on the farm. And if a thing is done merely out of gratitude, or a sense of duty, it's apt to turn sour. Even where there are generations of farming ancestors, it's not wise to expect an unbroken line.'

'No. There's always the chance of a throwback to some forebear who was a sailor or a soldier or—as in this case—to a man of figures. What does Forbes's father do? I've forgotten.'

'Bank manager, and a darned good one too. He'll be down a few days before the centenary. He loves the farm life for a holiday, and can shear a sheep with the best of them, out of practice and all as he is. Very like Forbes to look at.'

'Wasn't it grand for you that Forbes wanted this life?'

'It was. He never wanted aught else. Went to Lincoln College. To Christ's College first. We kept him there as long as possible, in case he might find an aptitude for something else. But it wasn't likely. Forbes knows what he wants and goes after it.. He never gives up.'

If that were true in all things, then Forbes would get Felicity. He'd probably take her to Europe for a trip, then return with her to the Hill of Peace.

Christmas, with all its strangeness, celebrating it in temperatures soaring into the nineties, fell behind them. The early peaches and plums were bottled, the two girls doing them under Jassy's supervision.

Jassy wanted more than ever done this year, because bottled fruit would be easy to feed the multitude with. They even peeled and stewed all the early windfall apples, with Cousin George and Forbes pitching in to help at night. Even though there would be plenty of apples on the trees then, it would be wonderful to have them done in jars just ready for the pies.

'I'm beginning to agree with that saying that women's work is never done,' said Forbes one night. 'Look, do we really have to do this last bucket? They're woefully small. At the moment I could heave them through this window and not care tuppence that it's shut.'

'You deserve to want,' said Jassy severely. 'That sort of waste has never been practised at Marino. That's how we weathered the depression.'

He scowled horribly. 'I expect you'd rather we all had breakdowns than not use up every jot and tittle.'

Felicity, a familiar edge to her voice, said: 'It's a pity we don't have Centennials more often if it makes you realize why women get fed up about certain things— why they want something different to sweeten the plain boiled rice diet of everyday existence.'

Cousin George looked at her with an expression on his face Nicola had never seen there before. 'Felicity, you were never like this, I think you're putting it on. You had the chance of going teaching—or nursing—or taking up office work. Your mother saw to that. But all you wanted to do was to take a course in home science. You overdo all this. It's probably a cover-up for what you really quarrelled about.'

No one who thinks housework is drudgery goes in voluntarily for a home science course.

'I've said to Lucy and Jack that it'll be the best thing for you to go overseas. It may help you get things in their right perspective. It could be a case of: "What can they know of England who only England know?" in reverse. By the time you've been less than a year away you might think any life was the best life if only your true mate was at your side. Go by all means if it's the only way you can find it out. We're getting a bit tired of you dramatizing yourself.'

Felicity stared as if a turtle-dove had suddenly bitten her, then she stood up, pushed her bowl of apples away from her and rushed out of the room, but not before she had burst into tears in front of everyone.

There was the most appalled silence with everyone looking uncomfortable except Cousin George, who went on placidly quartering apples with the incredibly thin, sharp knife with a horn handle that Jane had peeled her potatoes with.

'What's gotten into you?' asked Jassy, who read so many Westerns, she occasionally used their expressions. 'You're usually all for peace.'

His blue eyes were twinkling now. 'I'm the onlooker that sees most of the game. It's not farm life that's upset Felicity. She's using that as an excuse. It's time she did get upset. This has gone on far too long.'

Nicola dared not look at Forbes. She hadn't wanted to see his face whiten and his mouth set in a thin, hard line. Really, he was as blind as a bat! This was the tide to be taken at the flood. He ought to have rushed after her and caught her with all defences down. Nicola knew better than to suggest it in front of everybody. No man would take it.

Jassy said fiercely, 'And we're all getting tired and irritable. Why I was such a ninny as to fall downstairs at my age is beyond me! It's put more work on to everyone and held up yon history to boot.'

Nicola said quickly, ' That doesn't matter. I've got to where Cousin George was ten years old. That's the hardest part behind me. There's not so much looking up now. Cousin George can tell me anything I want to know. It's much easier to do it from living memory. I've been terrified I'd made some frightful bloomer- having them use machinery not invented then, or some expression not used till the twenties! And yet for popular reading it had to be done in natural story form. I'll get through the rest of it fairly quickly after the Re-enactment, when the shouting and the tumult has died away.'

Cousin George beamed. ' Not too quickly. We'd like you to stay on as long as possible.'

Not if I know it, thought Nicola. She'd been wrong in thinking Cousin George would not have minded had Forbes turned from Felicity to herself. He'd used, about Forbes and Felicity, the term ' true mates '.

George said: ' Now's the moment to tell you some- thing j decided on some time ago. I say decided, not something I'm proposing. It's all settled. I know the women of the district are going to pitch in and help with home-grown or hunted meat and so on, but you're all going to be fairly free on the day itself. I want the womenfolk to enjoy it too. I've booked a firm of caterers from Christchurch to do the serving. And they're going to provide the stuff that doesn't need to be home-made —jellies, salads and trifles and so on. I won't have you worn to a frazzle and too tired to enjoy yourselves. And that's that. There, that's the last apple. Now, for goodness' sake let's stew the damn things and get them into bottles and have some supper and off to bed. Forbes, you'd better be the one to take Felicity a cup of tea. If she won't open the door to you just leave it outside. Don't pander her.'

Forbes was back in a matter of seconds and simply said in an expressionless tone, ' She took it . . . but that's all.'

Nicola was surprised he had reported on it at all. She said nothing because she simply didn't know what to say.

By common consent the whole incident was ignored next day. It was as if the approaching celebration was the only important thing, as if there was no time for personal matters.

Nicola said one day, ' You know, when I was in Christchurch I felt quite strange being surrounded by clean-shaven men. With all your neighbours too, growing beards for the crowd scenes, I've lost a lot of my dislike for beards.'

Forbes's hand caressed his. ' I haven't. I can hardly wait for it to be all over. I just hate washing my face with all this on it. And yesterday, when we'd yarded the rams and gone over them for fly strike, they kicked up so much dust, my beard was grey and it felt like sandpaper. The only thing is I've got into such a habit of stroking it—it's a great aid to thinking long, long thoughts, I find—that it's going to look quaint afterwards when I start absent-mindedly feeling for what isn't there.'

Nicola giggled, tossing back her red locks. ' Tell me, Forbes, have you ever found the ideal thing to do with it in bed? I never saw anything so funny as that first night I was here, you not knowing whether to push it under the sheets or let it stick out over the top!'

They all stared at her. Forbes burst out laughing. ' It's all right,' he said. ' Nicola heard D'Arcy barking and came down to shut him up in case he disturbed the household. By that time I'd got him cuddled down on my bed. That's all.' He cocked an eye at Nicola. 'But for

heaven's sake, don't reminisce like that at the festivities or we'll cause a first-class family scandal.'

The laughter somehow cleared the air.

Forbes said, ' And I daily get more fond of that bullock. He's got a beautiful nature. I'm thinking of using him as a spare hack. There's one thing, I'll get that part over long before, as Francis, I meet Nancy and tip her in the river. Come on, Nicola, we can't postpone it any longer. Granddad wants us to try that scene over today. The river's about right. It's got to be done fairly naturally . . . which won't be easy. I mean I can't exactly shove you in . . . it's got to look accidental. That scene is to be one of the highlights for the television programme.'

Nicola's tawny eyes opened wide. 'Television? Forbes! Cousin George, you don't mean I'm going to be tipped off into a river in front of thousands of T.V. viewers?'

'What else?' asked Forbes. 'If there's one thing I'm going to enjoy, it's that bit.'

Cousin George said, ' Better get into your bathing- costume for the try-out, Nicola. And twist your hair on top. It's got beautifully long . . . you must have very healthy hair to grow so quickly.'

It certainly was a tough proposition. Nicola protested at so many rehearsals. She seemed to spend her days being tossed into the river. They finally found that a huge boulder, hauled into the river and sticking up enough for Forbes to be sure not to miss it, was the solution. By driving so hard at it that one wheel ran up on it . . . something that demanded fair skill . . . it tilted Nicola up against him and threw her across him. Forbe managed to master the art of assisting her on her way in a manner that looked as if he were only trying to save her.

'It's because he enjoys it so much that he's getting it practically perfect,' complained Nicola, squeezing out her hair for the fifth time. She'd given up wearing a bathing-cap; there was so much of her hair now, it felt horrible, stuffed up inside.

'Odd you should have been red-headed like Nancy, when Granddad vows you're exactly like your grandmother, who wasn't a descendant of hers,' said Forbes.

'Oh, I suppose it's just a minor coincidence. But Gran's eyes are green, not reddish-brown like mine. I think my grandmother is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. It's only my hair I get from her. She's tiny, and her complexion is exquisite and she's got high cheekbones, and while she never tries to look young, people have often taken her for my mother.'

Cousin George came up the bank towards them. 'That's how I imagine her. I'm glad the years were kind to her.' He smiled at his young kinswoman from England. 'You're a great sport, Nicola. That's not an easy part to take. You must be tired of being drenched.'

Forbes said, unexpectedly, 'Indeed, she *is* a sport. *She* wouldn't have run out on Francis.'

Nicola crimsoned with pleasure. Cousin George moved to the head of the horse in the dray shafts as it started to move. 'Whoa there, Clytie!'

Nicola said: 'Then I take it I'm forgiven for—er—the incident with Garry?' She kept her voice low.

The dark eyes with the green flecks, as inscrutable as ever, looked down into hers. 'I don't know. It really hurt that you would do such a thing, knowing how I—how we all—feel. But—well, I'm learning to be more tolerant, I think. Relationships can be very awkward,

situations can get out of hand so easily ... as I ought to know. I've blundered from the word go with you, haven't I?'

Nicola knew a warmth that wasn't just sun on her skin. Forbes was so close to her that she could see his heart beating. He was in his bathing-trunks too, and had stopped rubbing himself down.

She said slowly, her eyes on the ends of her hair as she rubbed it dry, 'It was very difficult for us both. Too many cross-currents, too many old confused threads. And this broken engagement didn't make it any easier. But I give you my word, I'd like nothing better than to see it resumed. And I hope that nothing I ever say or do, purposely or inadvertently, lessens the chance of having it made up.'

Just as their eyes met, George's voice came to them. 'Clytie's impatient to be going. I can't hold him back much longer. Are you two getting in the back or not?'

'We'll get in. Nicola forgot her sandals. Coming, Granddad.'

George Westerfield came up over the wheel. Forbes hoisted Nicola over the tailboard and they plodded up from the river-bed, swaying with the motion, Nicola sitting on a bag of chaff.

That night Cousin George announced that he was going to Christchurch. 'I've a bit of business to see to at the National Mortgage Company. I'll have a couple of nights there at least.'

Nicola said swiftly, 'Any chance of my coming? Letty's Aunt Phoebe would put me up. There are a lot of notes I'd like to check with Dan at the museum.'

Felicity was keen for her to have the chance. She must be mellowing. A few weeks ago, any suggestion that she might stay on in the house with just Forbes and Jassy—the men had their own quarters—would

have resulted in her bolting back to Koromiko. Nicola gave herself no time to think about it, but just went upstairs and packed.

Nicola felt numb all the way down in the Austin Cambridge. It was such a lovely evening. Mount Gray was a purple triangle, slightly irregular, on the horizon, birds were whistling as if they wanted the magic twilight to last for ever, the road was bordered with hawthorn hedges past their blossoming and tall poplars and willows. Sunset had gilded the Waimakiriri till it was a river of gold, molten and flowing swiftly. The Christchurch streets were a blaze of flowers. They seemed to have all the space they needed, here on the great plain, and many houses had flower-pots outside the fences, bright with petunias and marigolds and nasturtiums, and half of the footpaths were green, shaven turf.

There were ducks on the Avon, weeping willows trailing green fingers in its shallow waters, and college crews dipping their oars. In the Square, surrounded by the buildings of commerce, the Cathedral sat in its own splendid lawns and ancient trees.

Mrs Dinnington wouldn't hear of Cousin George going to an hotel and he was a great success with the Colombo Plan students. They made him promise they'd be allowed to help if they came up for the big day.

Cousin George spent some time with a vicar at one of the suburban churches who was a direct descendant of the young curate who had married Jane and Francis. Nicola accompanied him to most things. It kept her mind from dwelling on the fact that Forbes and Felicity—as she had planned—would be left alone together a lot of the time.

They never had been, all the time she had been there. Jassy had been going earlier to bed since her fall. Nicola could imagine it all.

They would settle down in the Far End, Forbes with his book and pipe, Felicity with her sewing. Perhaps the silence would do for them what speech had not. They would look up silently and simultaneously, their eyes would meet, look away, be irresistibly drawn back . . . and they would realize how foolish they had been. Forbes would put his book down, thrust his pipe into the rack Francis had carved so long ago ... it had a fretted silhouette of horses ploughing . . . and he would cross the room, symbolically cancelling the distance between them . . .

After the Centennial, they would take that honeymoon trip to England. They'd probably hope to see her there. But if Genevieve could spare her as long as that—she was already talking of staying longer in Canada—Nicola would prolong her own stay in Hong Kong. Better for her peace of mind if she never saw Forbes again when she left New Zealand.

One afternoon when Cousin George was out at his stock and station agents, he rang Nicola. ' Nicola, I wonder if you'd take the Austin back home later on? I won't be home for ten days or so, after all.'

'Ten days? Why, Cousin George, I thought you'd be going home tomorrow. Look, I'll go home by bus. You'll need the car.'

He chuckled. ' Not where I'm going. Something's cropped up, Nicola, and I'm off for Australia, at seven tonight. I was lucky enough to get a cancelled passage.'

Nicola gulped. ' I shall never get used to you casual New Zealanders. How sudden! And so soon before the centenary.'

He laughed. ' Oh, it's far enough away really, and the preparations are in good hands—yours and Forbes. Just tell Forbes I'll cable him from Sydney when I'm coming home and that I'll see to that business about the merino rams while I'm there. He'll know where to contact me if he

needs to. Same place I always stay at. I'll be back for my grip this afternoon, but you're going to Lyttelton on the train, aren't you? I'll leave the car keys on your dressing-table. Would you get the car serviced before you go home? Okay. Goodbye and God bless.'

Forbes was even more astonished than Nicola. 'Fancy the old boy going off like that! Oh, he's paid several business visits, but always with more warning. I wouldn't have thought anything over there could be urgent—unless he heard something from the stock firm that he was interested in. Oh, well, he'll likely drop us a line.'

'I was flummoxed. It wasn't till I was in the train that I realized I should have given him my grandmother's hotel address.

'She's buying early colonial stuff there. It's tantalizing to think they'll be in the same city—and knew each other all those years ago. But he was in such a hurry my mind went blank. The local records I was looking up in Lyttelton took me so long that even if I'd taken a taxi to Harewood I wouldn't have got to the airport in time.'

'I know what, Nicola. I'll cable him her address.'

Nicola said doubtfully, 'If you think that would be all right. I wouldn't have minded asking him personally if he thought he'd have time to look her up, but you can't say much in a cable and I don't want to make such a point of it that he feels he must.'

'Oh, cables are quite cheap to there—and at deferred rates, which means they get there the day after, cheaper still. I'll say "We're sending Nicola's grandmother's address in case you have time to renew old acquaintance." Where have you got the address?'

'In my case. I got her last letter just before we went to Christchurch and took it down to answer.' She rummaged. 'Must have left it at Phoebe's. But her earlier one is upstairs. Just a moment.'

Forbes phoned the cable through.

Even to Nicola's searching eyes and straining ears there was no difference in Forbes's and Felicity's attitude towards each other. It hadn't worked.

Preparations became more urgent. Felicity and Nicola polished up ancient pieces of saddlery the men unearthed. Forbes and his men spent hours getting the blacksmith's shop restored to its former glory. It was used so seldom these days, just when a piece of machinery had to be mended or improvised, or an old man came out from Oxford to shoe the horses. They had arranged for him to give a demonstration of shoeing at the Centennial. Jassy was fit again and raring to go.

The whole wool shed was scrubbed out for the ball that would take place on the Saturday night. 'We call them wool-shed hops where you would call them barn-dances,' said Forbes to Nicola. 'But this will be more formal than most. By the way, Nicola, I know Felicity can't, but any chance you can do the Lancers?'

'No. I can waltz, my grandmother saw to that. She's not enamoured of present-day twisting and stomping. Says they lack romance. And once in a school play, I took part in a minuet, but the Lancers—no.'

'Granddad is determined to have them. Mum and Dad can, and, oddly enough, so can I. We've got a beach house up in the Kenepuru Sounds at the top of the South Island. They still do the Lancers in some places in the Sounds. I think we'll practise—and delight Granddad, to say nothing of surprising him—by getting quite a few of the young fry round here fairly proficient.'

For Nicola there was a bitter-sweet flavour to all they did. The days were slipping by now like jewels on a string, soon to be remembered only as something lovely and lost.

There came the day when Felicity brought in a large box from the mail-box at the gate. She wrinkled her nose over it. 'It's for both of us. Do you think it's from Uncle George?'

Nicola shook her head. 'Couldn't be. The postmark says Christchurch. That's Dan's wonderful script. He uses it for exhibit cards for the museum. I wonder what it can be?'

'Best way to find out,' said Forbes sarcastically, from behind his paper, 'would be to open it.'

They cut the string to find two boxes, striped in pale blue and gold, huge boxes, tied with lavender ribbon. One was marked Felicity, one Nicola.

The girls, mystified, but smiling, began carefully untying the ribbons. Then, as they pushed masses of tissue aside, they gasped.

Two period gowns. But new. One, Felicity's, was as rosy pink as a sunrise cloud, with a low neckline looped with black lace and elbow sleeves with black lace frills.

Nicola's was in apricot taffeta with a small, high-waisted bodice cut into a deep square neckline, laced with brown velvet ribbons. It had a bustled back and rippling flounces, each edged with brown velvet, cascaded in a redingote effect, from waist to hem. On top of Felicity's was a black velvet throat band with a pearl pin. On top of Nicola's was a heavy, intricately chased gold locket, threaded on a piece of the brown ribbon. Trembling, she tried to open it.

Forbes was smiling. 'I strongly suspect it's a miniature of Jane, or one of her children. There's a row of miniatures in Jane and Francis's bedroom, remember. Perhaps one is missing. I knew Grandfather was planning the dresses for you both—Letty gave a firm in town your measurements—he wants you to wear these to the ball as the old ones

just wouldn't stand the strain, specially as they're a bit tight on the two of you. He said he was getting you each a piece of antique jewellery to mark the occasion. Here, give it to me, you'll never get that open.'

He managed it. It flew open. A dark head and a coppery head craned over Forbes's shoulders. Forbes said, 'It isn't Jane. Must be Nancy. Red hair. But I don't—no, it can't be. It's not old-fashioned enough. But it isn't quite modern either. Yet you certainly couldn't call it antique.'

'I should hope *not!*' said George Westerfield's voice from the open door.

Nicola was trying to get something out, but it got lost as they all three swung round. She had the locket in her hand and an incredulous look on her face. They all stared and fell silent.

Nicola blinked. It *was* Cousin George's voice, but not his face. Or was it? Yes . . . only minus his beard. But she had no doubts at all about the other person.

She came to life before either Forbes or Felicity and positively leapt across the room at Cousin George's companion. Someone who had coppery hair streaked with silver, dancing green eyes . . . someone petite and elegant and . . .

'*Gran!*' she said, and folded her close in her strong young arms.

George Westerfield watched the little scene with a look that was a blend of triumph and tenderness.

Forbes found his voice. 'Well, it looks as if you got our cable all right, sir.'

Nicola's grandmother, struggling to free herself from an embrace that had squeezed the breath out of her, exchanged a look, brimful with laughter and mischief, with Cousin George.

Forbes said, 'How very nice for Nicola to have someone of her very own here.'

Nicola drew her grandmother forward, full of pride in her, as well she might be, and said, 'Felicity . . . Forbes . . . this is my grandmother, Mrs Trenton.'

The side of Cousin George's mouth quirked up. He shook his head. 'Allow me to correct that, Nicola. I present to all of you—my bride, Mrs George Westerfield!'

'Grandfather . . . you old goer! I must congratulate you on your choice . . . and your timing. But would you mind if we young ones sit down and get our breath back? You go too fast for us.'

Nicola looked down dazedly at the locket in her hand. She felt she had to solve the mystery of that first. Then she would be able to take in the rest.

She held it out to George. 'Cousin George, how did you get hold of this, in the short time—I'm sure Gran doesn't travel round with miniatures of herself?'

His blue eyes looked unbelievably youthful as they laughed into hers. 'I've had it in my safe-deposit box in the Bank of New Zealand in Christchurch for more than forty years.'

Forbes was sitting on the arm of Nicola's chair. His hand gripped her shoulder, enjoining silence. But George had looked across at Jocelyn Westerfield to continue.

She said very simply, with only her hands to show by their shaking that she was nervous, ' We met, as you may know, at Brockenhurst near the end of World War One. I visited him because I was engaged to his distant cousin. Vincent wrote from the unit he was with in France, asking me to. We --' she stopped.

Forbes said softly in a tone that surprised Nicola, it was so understanding and encouraging, ' And you fell in love with each other, but --'

Jocelyn gave him a grateful look. ' It was a big but. I got to the stage where I felt I couldn't go on, it wouldn't be honest. But he was at war—Vincent, I mean. You couldn't do that to anyone. We resolved to wait till the war was over and he was safely back home. I prayed that he too might have changed towards me. Then, the day before the Armistice was signed, Vincent was wounded. He lost a leg. So we never told him. That's all. Except that I hope no one will be upset by this sudden marriage. Only George wouldn't wait till after the centenary.'

Forbes was off his perch in a trice. He bent above his grandfather's wife, put his arm about her and kissed her. He turned round and held out a hand to Nicola. ' Come on, girl, this is no time for tears—though I believe they're tears of joy—and kiss your grandfather. You can't possibly go on calling him Cousin after this. Ma'am, I never knew my own grandmother, but I'm sure tickled pink to have you!'

Felicity added her good wishes, there were torrents of questions and explanations. Niebla said: ' But how you could part with your beard after those months of growing it, Cous—I mean Grandfather—I don't know."

He grinned. ' Well, I felt the years had done enough to me without crossing the Tasman and presenting myself to Jocelyn like that . . . when she remembered me as a young soldier. Not even for the

centenary would I do that.' He turned to Forbes. ' You and your cable with the address! I didn't need it. That was why I went. I'd filched the letter from Nicola, with the address. I couldn't bear the thought of her being so near.'

Jocelyn said: ' It's been such fun, Nicola. We were in Christchurch yesterday—isn't it a dream of a city?— and Letty had the gowns ready to post. She knows, of course, about us. We decided we'd try to arrive on the heels of the parcel. George said the mail always arrives at four. We had a hired car. We hid it in the trees at the foot of the drive, waited till Felicity collected the mail, and then crept up on foot. It went off better than we dared hope.'

Felicity rushed off to make a cup of tea for them. Nicola said, ' Jassy's over at Melfords'.'

Forbes said, 'I'll go down and bring up the car and the luggage. I'll send Campbell back to Christchurch with it. He'll jump at the chance.'

Nicola was still in a daze. She felt as if she were seeing the story of the Westerfields unfolding on a stage or a film-set.

She took her grandmother upstairs, George treading close upon their heels.

Jocelyn Westerfield, connoisseur of antique furniture, gazed round with delight. ' It's so perfect, not a jarring note.'

George said, ' Forbes and Nicola have spent hours restoring the polish of the furniture. Nicola made the darning of that crocheted spread a work of art.'

'I should hope she would,' said his wife. ' She learned that art under me.'

George led her away to show her the rest of the top floor.

Nicola stood beneath Jane's portrait, her hands clasped beneath her chin. She said to it, in a whisper, ' I'm glad my grandmother and Forbes's grandfather had a happy ending, Jane. But I wish you had had . . . and I wish I had. And I suppose I wish for Felicity and Forbes to have one too. But I've got to realize we can't all have story-book endings.'

She and Forbes even shared grandparents now. It would emphasize their relationship still more. But what did that matter?

Not to Forbes, anyway.

She heard them coming back. She said to her grandmother, picking up the little rose satin chair, 'I'll take this into the sewing-room. Now the room will be occupied we must get on and re-cover it. We were re-covering some cushions the other day—they had worn-out modern covers on—and we discovered underneath some of this stuff, well protected and preserved.'

Her grandmother examined it. ' It won't be an easy job, Nicola, but if anyone could do it, you could.'

Nothing but trivialities for me, thought Nicola, carrying it away. I'm like Jane. What was it that Jane had written in her diary, the thing that Forbes resented most of all? 'I must be more content. I have so many *little* things to be thankful for.'

Because the big things had failed them . . .

* * *

Marino Homestead was a happier place for Jocelyn's coming. Her happiness and George's seemed to spill over like sunshine. Even Jassy had nothing but good to say. Nicola was relieved.

But, as Jassy said to Nicola, 'Your grandmother is a real lady. Knows I have my domain and doesn't trespass. She sought me out, told me her story, said she and Old George will be taking a trip Home to settle up things there. He's always wanted to go back. He ought to have long ago, but he never would. And when they come back, if Forbes is married by that time—because you never know—they'll buy a house in Christchurch. I hope Forbes is, I've told him many a time that he'll miss out yet and turn into a crabbed old bachelor.'

Even Isobel, Forbes's mother, wrote a charming letter of welcome to Jocelyn. Forbes had probably asked her to. Isobel had postponed her trip to Australia. 'She's only got to see you to love you,' George said sentimentally to Nicola.

She hugged him. 'That's sweet of you, Grandfather, but men are a bit blind, you know. I'm a reminder of Nesta.'

'Time will take care of that. It always does.'

But there wasn't going to be time. Isobel would go back to the North Island as soon as the celebrations were over, and, as soon as decently possible, Nicola was for Hong Kong.

The days sped by. They had some bad moments when the good weather broke and day after day was wet. Inches of rain up in the hills made the Waipuku a muddy torrent for nearly a week. The Re-enactment certainly couldn't have been done under such conditions.

Then Forbes, with whom forecasts were almost an obsession, joyfully announced from the weather-map that an anti-cyclone was coming

across the Tasman and was expected to remain stationary for several days.

There was to be the main parade of characters at nine in the morning, with Forbes riding his bullock, among many other incidents portraying the history of the district before even the first Westerfield came to it. It was to be held in the huge paddock that had always been a picnic ground for such things.

Then at high noon, Forbes, with the bushy beard of the Bushranger trimmed by a barber from Christchurch to the smoother elegance of Francis's beard, and in the narrow trousers and short topcoat of the period, was to pick Nicola up in the dray at a farmer's the other side of the river, where the dray would be stationed, and bring her to the crossing.

Nicola had to school herself not to feel any pangs of jealousy that Felicity, with her black hair and vivid good looks, was later, last, to play the part of Jane. Nicola would have loved to have identified herself with Jane in that last scene of all, with Francis and the children—borrowed from neighbours, in their button boots and sailor suits and blue-sashed frocks, gathered on the verandah. It would have been make-believe, but sweet, that hour to remember and be happy in, all one's life.

Forbes was in high fettle, despite having a thousand things to see to . . . staging for the T.V. cameras, high above the river, a dozen phone-calls in an hour sometimes, seeing to megaphones, putting final touches on the resurrected traps and phaetons, and seeing the sheep were not neglected. With it all, he never once lost his -temper and she had never seen him so amiable with Felicity, or she with him. Were they slipping back into the old relationship?

It was the day, almost over, before the eve of the centenary. Felicity had gone home. They were sitting in the Far End, quietly satisfied that everything was under control, and happy about the weather.

Nicola got up. Cousin George said, ' No more chores. You have the last big day of preparation coming up tomorrow and I want you dewy-fresh, not hollow-eyed, on Saturday.'

She said, untruthfully, ' I'm just going to have a rest in my room.' He looked surprised but approving.

She hoped they wouldn't come seeking her till she got that chair re-covered. Nicola had made the cover two days ago but had never found the time to attach it. She -was just going to stitch it over the other cover—no time for anything else.

Pity it wasn't better padded. Still, no one would sit on it, she hoped. It was too fragile. There was no give in this stuffing at all. She turned it over; perhaps she could slit the under-part and work the padding in the middle to the edges. She inserted the point of her scissors and ripped.

The next moment she was staring fascinated at what had dropped out, along with a very tiny quantity of -stuffing.

It was a fat black diary. Not a locked one.

No! Not *another* diary of Jane Temple's. Please! She couldn't bear it. She didn't want any more poignant entries to make her sad for an unrequited love of a century ago. She'd put it aside till after the Big Day. Jane *had* kept on pouring out after all, then. The space under the boards downstairs must have been filled up and she'd had to find another place for it. Nicola looked down at it. She was very tempted to open it. She could understand Pandora now. Curiosity was an

unbearable thing. When, as a child, you first read that legend, you thought how foolish Pandora had been to open that casket.

Well, perhaps there'd be no harm in looking at the back, just to see what date it ended. But that was all till later.

Nicola opened the back page. No entry. She began leafing through backwards. The book was only half full. She came to the last entry Jane had made.

'I'm afraid I'm not a good diary-keeper any more. I used to need the outlet for my feelings. But not now. Not since that terrible, wonderful night I lost my temper with Francis. What a good thing God knows how to answer our prayers. I prayed so often for control. He knew I needed to lose it. How I berated my poor beloved Francis that night. You don't need to write when you are happy. How true it is as someone once said—I don't know who—that the nation without a history is a happy nation.'

Nicola felt her heart beginning to thump. She stood up, turned to the first page, read three more, then started for the door, running. This had to be shared. This was too good to keep to herself, she wanted to shout it from the roof-tops.

Three steps from the Far End door she cannoned into Forbes.

'Here, what's this?' he demanded, clutching her. 'I was just coming in search of you, I was mighty sure you weren't resting. House on fire or something?'

Nicola was clutching at his thin, white terylene shirt. 'Forbes, Forbes, I've found it! Look . . . Jane's happy ending! It was stuffed into the little pink chair. Just imagine if it had never been found . . . Forbes, it's perfect. Francis loved her the best. He told her so. Come on, Forbes!'

He caught her against him, a strange look on his face. 'Nicola, let's go back into your room. Let's sort it out together, quietly.'

She shook her head. 'No, I want to share it with everyone. Come on, I can't bear to read it aloud twice ... we must all know at once.' She pulled him by the hand.

Laughing, but with a ruefulness she could not understand, he followed her.

The whole family looked up as she erupted in, Grandfather, Grandmother, Jassy.

Her words tumbled over each other. Forbes had to put a word in here and there for coherency.

Then she began to read to them. She said, 'Remember that last entry . . . Jane was feeling tired and irritable. And it broke off. This one is dated the next day. She said: " I am beginning a new book because it is a new era in our lives. I am writing at sunset. Someone called Francis out. This has been the most wonderful day of my life. Or was yesterday that? Yesterday when I rose with so heavy a heart, when I felt so irritable?

"Yesterday, when I felt I could bear no longer the knowledge that I would never be any more than Francis's second-best, I fell to praying I would be kept from losing my temper with him, from saying bitter useless things. I'd got through that most difficult time—dinnertime, when the children are tired and so am I, when tempers are most easily lost. I got George and Felicity to bed. So I relaxed my guard and suddenly, out of the blue, I snapped at Francis. He looked amazed and his amazement maddened me. I ought to be ashamed, now, at the torrent of words that poured out of me, the reproaches, the complaints.

"Then he said, so sorrowfully, 'Jane, what is it makes you speak like that?'

" I told him he wouldn't know. That he knew nothing about women, nothing about me. That as long as they were to fulfil his needs, whatever they were, that was all he cared. That I wished he'd married his Nancy, that she'd have led him a pretty dance, that I ought never to have married a man for whom I was only second-best. I went on for longer than I care to remember, bruising his spirit with words.

" And when it was all over and no words left within me, only tears and sobbing, the strangest look came over his face and he came to me with a light in his eyes that I had never seen there—a light I had dreamed of seeing, but thought it would never glow for me. I couldn't take in what he was saying at first.

" And when I did, I thought that for the first time in my life I was going to swoon. The realization was so great, the truth so opposite to all I had believed.

" He told me that he had a great shock the night we finished preparing that bedroom for Nancy, that he had suddenly realized that it was me he loved, not the maid he had waited three years for. That he wasn't even the same man who had left England. That he just couldn't imagine sharing Puke-o-Marino with anyone else. But he would have to.

" There was nothing he could do. No man could be caddish enough to bring a woman from England and then not marry her. He nearly went out of his mind. He even tried to tell himself it would be different when he saw Nancy again, that he must put out of his mind what he regarded as a betrayal. That I would marry someone else and find happiness.

" Then Nancy came and he almost hated himself for the hope that sprang up in his heart when she was so homesick, thinking she might herself call it off. He said: ' And you were so sweet, Jane, so magnificent in your efforts to make her see the best of things, to make her love this land . . . how could I dream you loved me? It was torment.'

" Then he told me that one day Nancy sought him out and told him the truth. That she had fallen in love with one of the ship's officers on the way out, a love that superseded far any lukewarm affection she had known for him. He said; ' She was nearly distraught, not knowing, at first, how I would take it. But the last few weeks, she had come to believe that I would not be broken-hearted. I think it must have been because for the first time she herself had experienced real love, Jane, that she sensed what I felt for you, even though I had striven to hide it.

" 'Then, Jane, there were all those weary months when you kept begging me to go down to visit her, in case, while waiting, she had changed her mind, had become used to the rougher colonial ways. I told myself you could have no feelings at all for me to plead another woman's cause.'

"Francis said, 'Do you remember the time, Jane, just after Nancy sailed, when I was going down to Christchurch and you wanted to come and I wouldn't take you? Do you want to know my real reason, Jane? —Because there was such a shortage of women I was terrified you'd fall in love with someone before I had a chance to woo you. So I waited.

" ' You were so cool. I thought you had married me—a man who had been jilted—out of pity, and partly because your brother was marrying and you didn't fancy handing over the reins to another woman. I was so afraid to show my real feelings. I thought you knew so little about men—you were hardly more than a child when you came out—very little about marriage. I made myself content with

what you could give me.' He stopped short there and said: ' And you accuse *me* of giving *you* second-best. Oh, Jane, Jane, you don't know what you've done to me all these years with your cool, disciplined affection!'

'Jane continued to write: "I didn't know how I could, tear the sudden joy of it. It broke over me like a wave. All the jealousy I'd nurtured of Nancy fled for ever. I could only thank her in my heart for having had the courage to do what she had had to do. My crown of happiness is completed. Not only have I Puke-o- Mariner and the children, but Francis too, in a way I never thought to have him." '

Nicola stopped, and saw in the rapt faces in front of her the same sort of starry-eyed wonder she knew was in hers. Even Jassy's little boot-button eyes were bright with tears.

Nicola added: ' There are other entries after that. . . but not many. But all exuding happiness. No wonder in that portrait of her upstairs she looks so happy. It will make a wonderful ending to the chronicle, won't it? I'll have to re-write some of the earlier parts, though, using more of Jane's diary. It will be all right to do it now, won't it, Grandfather? And these records must be preserved always so there's never a cynical doubt, in future years, thinking we added local colour to add romance. I mean, it could be considered fiction . . . and it isn't . . . it's living fact, recorded here in this old diary.'

She paused, then added, ' It's like reading a meaningless letter, then dropping your eyes to the postscript and finding there what the writer wanted to say all the time.'

Forbes nodded. He smiled. ' Yes, a postscript to yesterday.'

Happy, they went to bed.

Everything seemed to go right the next day, which was the one they had rather dreaded, because so much had to be crammed into it. Forbes's father and mother and his sister flew down from the North Island. The Melfords went down to Harewood for them. They were being put up at Koromiko. Of course Felicity's mother and Forbes's mother were girlhood friends. Nicola hoped that was the only reason for them not staying at Marino.

Just after dinner they rang, and Forbes promised he'd run his grandfather and Nicola and her grandmother over for a few minutes later on.

It was a still, beautiful evening with a red sky. ' " Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning," ' said Jocelyn Westerfield, ' "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight." Does that apply in the Antipodes too, George?'

'It does, Jocelyn. I think all is set fair. And the Waipuku is running freely, enough to cushion Nicola's tumble into it, but not likely to increase.'

Nicola looked at the pair of them with love. They were so supremely happy. She found herself trembling for them. If Isobel hadn't wanted the reminder of Nesta at the homestead—in the shape of Nicola—now that she was faced with a permanent one, in the person of her father-in-law's new wife, she might not be very cordial.

She could just imagine Forbes's mother, tall, slim, cool, with reserved eyes. She would be faultless in her manner to these interlopers from over the sea—as witness her well-expressed letter to Gran on hearing of the marriage—but there would be no real warmth in it. Nicola clenched her fists as she sat by Forbes in the front seat. It didn't matter how Forbes's mother treated her, but just let the woman do anything—anything at all—to dim that light in Gran's eyes,

something Nicola had never seen there till now, and she'd have Nicola to deal with!

They rattled over the cattle-stops and Koromiko Gorge homestead was glimpsed on the rise above the magnificent avenue that ran like a variegated green ribbon between gleamingly white rail fences. It was a fair distance from the road, built, as so many farms were here, back from the dust of the road.

In the last few yards Forbes slowed to let Jocelyn have a glimpse of the rolling hills on the right where the Koromiko Creek rose and where he had promised to take her to see the lilliputian waterfalls in the miniature gorge some day.

He was just about to increase speed again when he turned his head, listened, then said: 'I thought so. I'd know Mother's giggle anywhere!'

Giggle? Nicola hadn't associated his mother with anything as de-starching as a giggle. Forbes went on a few yards, then swung the car into an opening in the chestnuts, and stopped.

There, along the track, came his mother and Felicity's mother. They were absolutely doubled up, and even as the carload watched them, Mrs. Melford took a firm hold of a splintery macrocarpa post and clung to it for support.

Forbes's voice was mock disgusted. 'Look at them! Think they were about fifteen! They're always the same when they get together. Indulging in teenage reminiscences, I'd say. Well, Granddad, it looks as if your festivities are off to a merry start.'

Forbes got out, opened the back door for Jocelyn, found Nicola had got out herself, and they all advanced towards the unsuspecting pair.

The two women, mopping at their eyes, looked up and saw a party of people bearing down on them. Isobel Westerfield stopped staggering about and tried, without success, to look normal and dignified. Lucy Melford didn't even attempt it.

Forbes said helplessly, 'Blest if I'll attempt formal introductions in a situation like this, Mum!'

He went forward and enveloped her in a bear-hug. 'Pull yourself together, my girl. You're about to meet your new mother-in-law. And your --' he stopped, grinning. 'Well, I'm darned if I know what relation Nicola will be to you now. We'll let that one go.'

Isobel Westerfield wiped her eyes, bit her lip in an endeavour to become serious, then kissed both Jocelyn and Nicola. 'Oh dear, and I'd meant to be so dignified. Do forgive us. It was just that --' and laughter threatened her again.

Forbes took up the conversation, 'Just that you and Aunt Lucy revert to type the moment you see each other. I suppose you've just recalled some hideous exploit of your schooldays.'

Lucy and Isobel exchanged glances that no one could read and then Isobel said, 'No, it wasn't that, but never mind. Come on, let's get up to the house.' She glanced behind her with what Nicola thought was nervousness, which was ridiculous. Sheer imagination.

It had broken the ice with a vengeance. Isobel actually contrived things so that she fell back with Nicola.

'Nicola, I'm so pleased to meet you—which amazes me really. You know how things were once—of course you will—well, I'll admit I wasn't a bit pleased when I knew someone was coming from England again. Which was stupid of me—no one can help their relations.'

'But with all Forbes has told me, and Jassy's letters—Jassy is never deceived by anyone—I realized you weren't Nesta's type at all. And when Forbes told me how sporting you had been about trying to patch up this quarrel, I knew I'd like you. Don't worry that it didn't succeed. We'll take the will for the deed. I imagined Forbes would blunder. His heart's in the right place, but he's got no finesse for things like that. It takes women for that.'

At which moment Lucy Melford began to laugh again. It became infectious.

They didn't stay long at Koromiko, everyone wanted an earlyish night.

Forbes's father was extremely like him, eyebrows and all, but of course without the beard. He'd felt it wouldn't have gone with banking. Just before they left, Forbes said: 'Where's Felicity in all this? I've just realized she's not here.' (What a feeble lie!)

There was a significant silence. Then Felicity's father said: 'Yes, where is she?'

Isobel Westerfield said firmly: 'Felicity isn't available just now, I'm afraid. You'll have to wait till tomorrow, Forbes.'

Forbes cast a sharp and suspicious glance at his mother and said, in an extremely off-hand tone, 'Oh, it's not important.'

CHAPTER XIV

But it must have been important, because he was up and away over to Koromiko before the rest of them were out of bed, even though it was certainly a case of early rising for everyone.

Nicola, awake since four, had been sitting at her window for nearly an hour, drinking in from the beauty and undisturbed peace of the scene below her little dormer window, strength and serenity for the long day ahead.

She was going to school herself to enjoy it all for Cousin George's sake. No regrets must mar his happiness.

Then she saw Forbes come out from the house and cross to the paddock by the stables. Rory came to him. Forbes didn't even bother to saddle up. All he wore was a light pair of drill trousers and a white singlet. He was a magnificent rider, saddle or not.

When he turned to the track that led down to the short-cut Nicola had taken that first day with such disastrous results, she knew he was going to Felicity.

Would Felicity find that romantic enough? Coming to her at the break of day that was to celebrate a hundred years for the Marino and Koromiko people? Would he serenade her—not in song but whistling—to bring her to her window and beckon her down?

Or would Felicity still be impatient of a man who came wooing her in a garb like that, smacking of the farm, when—stupid wretch that he was—he could have waited till the ball when he would be in the Victorian dress of a gentleman of that day, and Felicity would be ravishingly lovely in her rose-coloured gown, with all the dark, glowing beauty of Jane Temple, even if she wasn't descended from her.

Nicola wouldn't have cared, if only she could have seen Forbes riding towards *her*, with love in his heart. She wouldn't have minded had he come in the sweaty, ragged garb of the Bushranger!

Nicola couldn't take her eyes off Cousin George at the breakfast-table. Having Jocelyn at his side gave him a lift to his head, inches to his height.

'I hope Jenny and Alan get here promptly. They ought to have come straight here instead of stopping overnight at Cheviot. Jenny thought it would be just that much less hectic that way for us. She'll stay on afterwards, of course. And where the devil is Garry?'

(Nicola knew that Jenny was Garry's mother and George's daughter.)

Forbes said, 'Oh, he's at Melford's too.'

His grandfather said, looking at him sharply: 'He wasn't last night and they said nothing about expecting him. How did you know? Have you been ringing them?'

'I rode over at five.' He added, lamely, Nicola thought, 'I wanted to see Mother about something.'

Jocelyn laughed. 'I hope you got a warm welcome . . . not a good hour for visiting, Forbes.'

He grinned, 'A mother ought to be pleased to see her son at any time, Gran.'

'Maybe ... in theory, yes, but after a big day travelling it might be hard to enthusiastic and affectionate about anyone at that hour.'

They were very good friends, her grandmother and Forbes, always teasing, and it hurt Nicola—almost. It would have been so ideal if—she tore her mind away from that tantalizing thought. It was good

they got on so well. They were going to see a good deal of each other in the years ahead when Nicola was back in England.

Forbes went outside and began scooping up handfuls of dust-and mixing it in a bucket of water, then started to smear himself with it in preparation for the Bushranger's ride.

His friend Hal Macpherson would arrive soon and take him and the bullock to a side road a short distance away, where Forbes would mount him and ride back through the ford. They had it perfectly timed by now and as long as the bullock didn't make a fuss about getting into the horse-float, all would be well.

Then Hal was going to scoot back here and get into the ceremonial Maori dress that *his* great-grandfather had worn at an historic meeting of the early days at Puke-o- Marino.

There were to be just half a dozen carefully acted scenes, though scores of people would be in period costume, and it would end with the dinner, in the early afternoon, just after the last two scenes, the wedding of Francis and Jane and the old-time birthday party, with their children about them, Forbes and Felicity in the chief roles.

For the rest, the crowds were to be entertained in the early colonial manner, races, a lolly scramble, weight- guessing, a grand parade of animals, rowing trips on the miniature lake. The dinner, which Jocelyn called a luncheon, was to be served in huge marquees . . . what a blessing no nor'wester was blowing . . . there would be the demonstration of shoeing, shearing, a parade of ancient traction engines and harvesters, and the children were to be given rides in the repaired basket phaeton in which Jane had taken her children to picnics, re-caned and re-lined at considerable expense.

Ginger and Darkie and their friends were to be there, of course, by special invitation from Cousin George.

Until the moment Nicola had to don Nancy's green moire travelling dress, she was in contemporary garb, trows and loose top, and had simply tied back the curls she had had in curling rags the night before into a pony- tail.

She'd had much practice in dressing it in a Victorian mode, for days, and with Letty's help, hoped to do it in half the time today.

Nicola ran downstairs to ask Jassy something and almost cannoned into two people hurrying in. No need to ask who they were, Jenny was so like Garry and Cousin George.

'You must be Nicola,' she said, taking both Nicola's hands. ' I'm so glad to meet you, and so excited. Thank you for all you did. The engagement is on again. We called in at Melfords' first. We went to see Garry, and we got the news. Isn't it wonderful?'

'Isn't it?' Nicola managed.

Well, it was the only solution. She ought to be happy for Forbes's sake. Perhaps she would achieve that in time. But at the moment she just felt desolate.

No doubt the engagement—or rather the resuming of it—would be celebrated tonight. Cousin George appeared in the doorway. Jenny flew at him. ' Oh, Dad, isn't it marvellous . . . everything, positively everything's ideal now. The weather, your own happiness . . .oh, thank you for writing me so fully about it . . . and those stupid kids finally making it up. Oh, don't you know? Didn't Forbes tell you? He was over there at daybreak, I believe.'

Nicola couldn't bear it. She slipped upstairs to her own room. She mustn't even shed a tear, it would show. She knelt by her bed. Maybe Jane had sometimes knelt there, praying for control. She said simply: ' Help me get over it, God. Help me not to let it show. Thanks.'

Then she went downstairs again. Nothing must be allowed to dim Cousin George's happiness. She stayed with Jassy for a while. There was something so comfortingly prosaic about Jassy. *She d* only want to get on with the job in hand.

Nicola began organizing Ginger, Darkie and Co. into taking out from the dairy, where they had been stored on the cold stone floor all night, because even their huge fridge couldn't cope with that quantity, the big stone pitchers of delicious home-made squash and ginger beer that Jassy had insisted were the correct drinks for the children, just as they had been a century ago.

Nicola went on filling wide-mouthed flasks, borrowed from all over the district, with ice-cubes to be added to the drinks. The caterers would attend to the rest.

Cousin George appeared, his grandfather's big gold hunter's watch in his hand. ' You aren't going to spend another moment in this kitchen. Forbes will be appearing any moment now on the bullock. You're to come down with us. Jassy, put that ham down and take your pinny off.'

Nicola felt she moved mechanically through it all, conscious only that she must appear to be enjoying herself, for Grandfather's sake. She realized, with a pang, that at last she was beginning to think of him as that.

All North Canterbury seemed to be here, and it was amazing how many genuine old costumes had been brought out, altered, and worn. Women in poke bonnets, some almost unrecognizable as neighbours, strolled about, unfeignedly glad of the shade of frilly parasols. Children wore wide leghorn and panama hats, and white embroidered pinafores and black laced dancing pumps. Small boys had been coaxed, some forced, into sailor suits, men looked uncomfortable in

high winged collars. Some wore tall hats. The whole scene had a kaleidoscopic quality, glittering and gay.

Forbes's father took her under his wing. ' Just call me George,' he advised her. ' You must be dizzy trying to work out all these relationships.'

He'd donned false sideboards, and in a frock coat, old-fashioned and wide-skirted, with a grey topper and cane, he looked very handsome. He caught her studying him furtively and laughed. ' Are you trying to imagine if Forbes—less his face fungus—will look like this?'

Nicola crimsoned, then admitted it. He patted her hand.

A murmur rose up from the crowd. Forbes and the bullock had crested the rise. The morning flew on.

Nicola slipped away to dress. One last fling with Forbes. There was a bitter-sweet tang to it now. Hal Macpherson, in all the splendour of his flax skirt and kiwi feather cloak, with tattooing painted on, was sitting in his Pontiac, ready to drive Forbes and Nicola by a side entrance to Marino, to, where, in an old shed on a farm beyond the river-ford, the dray awaited.

Only the caterers were in the house, besides Letty and Hal—who'd come in to hurry them—and the barber who was trimming, with great haste, Forbes's beard, and dyeing it all over black with some preparation that was speedy but wouldn't last.

Nicola felt a calmness come over her. The clothes did that for her. Anyway, Nancy had had a heart as heavy as hers. Even the long frilled petticoat made her feel she belonged to another, a more dignified, age. The sweeping, braided skirt gave her height, the high-rearing collar and nipped-in waist bestowed on her an hour-glass figure. Letty was an adept at make-up. Nicola's hair was

parted in the middle, smoothed down, the side curls pinned back and caught together at the back of her head, and fell in a cascade to her collar. Letty tied the enchanting bonnet on.

The make-up, the hair-do, the bonnet made her face look completely heart-shaped. Letty clasped her hands together in triumph and satisfaction and pushed Nicola ahead of her to go down the stairs just as Forbes emerged from his room at the end of the passage.

On the bottom stair she stopped and looked at him, smilingly confident, mistress of her deepest feelings.

Behind Forbes the barber gave a wolf-whistle. ' Well, if Nancy looked like that, it's a wonder Francis ever let her get away!'

'Yes,' said Forbes, in a tight, strange voice.

Nicola laughed, ' Fine feathers make fine birds,' she quoted. - ' Which goes for you too, Francis ... the male fashions of that day had something to be said for them.'

The outfit was just a copy . . . the men of yesteryear had been cast in slighter moulds than Forbes, but they had been very successful in their hunt for material.

He had a frilled shirt, with a black stock and a pearl pin, elegant grey trousers, a waisted coat with smoked pearl buttons and his beard was trimmed to an elegant point and its patchiness transformed into sleek ebony. He looked every inch a Victorian. Francis might have ridden up the streets of Christchurch on a bullock to collect, his Nancy, but he had carried his best clothes in hfs pack.

It seemed natural and fitting that he should come forward and take her hand. His closed over hers with that indefinable quality of comfort

that only a male hand can give. Vitality, of which Forbes had a superabundance, flowed from him to her.

It certainly wasn't the moment, with the barber and Henare there, to offer congratulations. Besides, a re-engagement was much more embarrassing than a newly announced one. Hal was at the side door. He had sandals on his feet as an aid to driving and football shorts under his flax skirt.

He smiled. ' I feel I ought to bow and kiss your hand, Nicky, but if I did, some of my tattooing might come off on it. Forbes, you and Nicola get in the back and Letty can come in the front with me.'

Nicola gathered up her trailing skirt and, not without difficulty, managed to get her ostrich-plumed bonnet into the car undamaged.

Letty and Hal got them settled in the dray, then went off to give warning they'd be at the ford very soon.

Nicola looked up at Forbes as he gathered up the reins and urged slow old Clytie to move.

'It *must* be you in that rig,' she said, ' but suddenly I feel I *am* Nancy and you *are* Francis.'

(True enough ... the pair that *didn't* marry each other.)

'That's the spirit,' said Forbes. ' You look the part to the life.'

They were surrounded by bandboxes and tin trunks and a big brass-bound cabin trunk. ' Don't forget, Nicola, that we must appear completely unaware of the crowds on the bank and the television cameras on bank and bridge.

'You must get that Centennial sparkle out of your eye and look as dejected and forlorn as possible. Then of course, as rehearsed,

flaming mad when I tip you in the river. I'll have to resist the temptation to look up too, because tipping over depends so much on striking and running up that rock. Thank heaven the water's so clear I should be able to see it.'

They were to be holding a conversation. They were silent shots for television, but the conversation would make it look authentic.

They turned the bend, came up the approach to the ford, Nicola, sitting with hanging head, could hear the murmur but not see the people.

Forbes was saying, as Francis, ' But, Nancy, there's just been a little fresh in the river, nothing like some of the floods we have sometimes—this is never a dangerous stream, it's just running a little higher than usual, that's all.'

They entered the river, the dray rocked a little on some larger stones Forbes had put there. Nicola grabbed the side of the dray, clung with her other hand to Francis's arm, being careful, though not obvious, not to deflect his rein guidance.

Forbes admonished her, tried to shake off her clinging hand, drove hard at the rock, felt the wheel run up it and the dray tilt. Nicola managed her clutch at him perfectly, he feigned loss of balance and she pitched neatly in, with a flying mass of skirts. There was a satisfying splash.

A roar of laughter went up from the crowds, then, as a tribute to what they knew had been a difficult scene, a great clapping arose, spontaneously done.

Francis—at least Forbes—leapt into the water after her, grabbed her and pulled her to her feet, the water swirling against their knees.

Nicola staggered, no shamming needed, and was caught and held, just as Francis would have held his Nancy.

The bonnet had fallen back, only its strings holding it against her throat, the brave, once curling plumes now bedraggled and stringy, the green watered silk costume clinging to her.

Nicola, as coached, stamped her foot, beat her fists upon Forbes's chest, broke into a tirade. Cameras clicked, clapping continued, laughter broke and swelled.

Forbes caught her pounding fists, also to order, began to plead with her to stop her ranting . . . then his expression changed. Nicola saw a light flash into his eyes.

He laughed, that devil-may-care laugh she had come to know and distrust. ' You vixen!' he said. ' That's what Francis ought to have called his Nancy, and *this* is how he ought to have treated her!'

She was snatched against him and ruthlessly kissed.

Nicola was appalled. She struggled. This time, in real fury, getting one hand up, she beat upon his chest, flung her head back to get her lips free and said furiously but in a low hiss: ' Forbes, you fool, this wasn't in the scene. You'll spoil --'

He was laughing, though their faces were so close no one would see it. ' No, it can't spoil things, Francis *could* have done exactly that.'

Tears of real rage were standing in the tawny eyes. ' Forbes, how could you, with Felicity there? She knows that wasn't in the rehearsals . . . was there ever a bigger idiot than you? You're going to have some explaining to do to her tonight. Oh, I could choke you!'

And up came her hand to strike him across the cheek.

Forbes imprisoned it while she strove to free herself. She might just as well have tried to loosen iron chains. She went limp. She was vaguely aware that the crowd had cheered at the slap. They'd think her a splendid actress.

Forbes gave her a furious shake, and said, real astonishment in his tones, 'Explain to Felicity? Explain what? What the devil are you talking about? What's it got to do with *her*?'

The tears of rage were spilling down her cheeks. She said, between her teeth, 'Because you happen to be engaged to her, that's why . . . because you only made it up at five this morning. You're the most --'

Forbes gave a great shout, then dropped his voice to the same intense whisper she was using and positively hissed at her: 'Have you gone mad? What *are* you talking about? *Me* make it up with Felicity? You must be off your rocker. She was engaged to *Garry*. But you know . . . we've talked about it over and over again.

'You must be stark, staring mad. Hell, what a time to pick! It's Garry she's engaged to, you bird-brained ridiculous—oh, heck! Mum and Aunt Lucy did it. They locked them up in an old hut in the Gorge last night. That's what they were giggling about.'

He stopped, said, 'Look, keep on struggling a bit, would you? I'll explain before we get out of this river if I have to duck you again to get some sense into your head. Surely *somebody* said Garry and Felicity and not Forbes and Felicity? Why else do you think I was so insanely jealous that night I found Garry kissing you? Jealous and disillusioned. Thought you'd promised to help reconcile them, then were flirting with him. But it was mostly jealousy.'

Nicola's face froze into disbelief. 'Jealous? But— but how could you be? *You'd* never look *my* way! I'm related to you. You don't believe in cousins marrying— however distant.' She pulled herself together. '

Forbes, let's finish this. You're supposed to pick me up, urge the horse on, stagger out of the river with me. This is a Re-enactment. We can talk later.'

'No, you don't. This is a moment of complete honesty. I'm not having you get back into that shell of yours again—this is as near alone as we'll be till the small hours of tomorrow morning when the ball is over, my girl. They can damn well think we're prolonging the fight. Those T.V. men are having a wonderful time. Nicola, listen. If you don't listen . . . and take it in . . . I'll shout it so everyone can hear. *I am not your cousin*. You must have missed out on a great slice of family history. Oh, you hadn't got that far, had you, with Jassy's accident. *Dad is adopted*. Granddad never had a son, just a daughter, Jenny, Garry's mother. Dad's mother and father were the married couple on the estate. They were drowned, fishing, in a boat at the mouth of the Waimakiriri. So Granddad and his first wife adopted him. I even told you once I never knew my own grandmother. I meant my real grandmother. How could you—never mind. Oh, my love, what a moment to pick!'

Happiness was breaking over Nicola like a wave. All the explanations had to wait . . . there would be so many. But they must get on with this scene. She said, breathlessly, her eyes meeting his in a gloriously dizzy moment, 'Forbes, *don't*. You *mustn't* kiss me again. Not here. That really would be overdoing it.'

'All right, I won't, but one thing I must say. Nancy had the courage to do it, you've got to, too.'

Her face went completely blank. 'Do what?'

He had a grim twist to his mouth. 'Break it off with this chap in England. Serves him right for not sending you out here with a ring on your finger. You've got to tell him that you and I were meant for each other. I absolutely refuse to allow you --'

Nicola said, 'There isn't a chap in England. I made him up for pride's sake. So you wouldn't guess I loved you. Forbes, keep back! You are *not* to kiss me!'

She bent down, gathered up her wet skirts, heavy and hampering, and turned from him just as Nancy might have done.

He swooped on her, scooped her up, one hand under her knees, one under her shoulders, and began to wade through the river with her, with a word of command to the dray-horse.

Nicola closed her eyes against the blazing brightness of the sky, against the almost unbearable bliss that was pervading her. She couldn't look up at Forbes and maintain a look of hatred. She could hear birds singing, people talking, the drag of the dray wheels on the river- shingle.

They were almost at the edge when Forbes, stepping on to bigger boulders, missed his footing and, to the delight of the spectators, after a moment or two of cutting all sorts of capers to regain his balance, fell heavily into the water. The crowds roared, the television cameras clicked, Forbes and Nicola gave up the Re-enactment and joined in the helpless laughter.

They scrambled out, came up to the official dais that had been erected on the bank and held the family and the clergy, the local Member of Parliament, and the Melfords.

Dripping wet, hand in hand, and laughing, Forbes and Nicola ran up to the group. Forbes bowed deeply, a hand on his heart. Nicola sank into a sodden curtsy.

Then, accompanied by Hal and Letty, they made their way up to the house, enduring a great deal of chaffing about the unrehearsed ducking.

Henare said: ' I reckon that'll be the best shot of all.' He turned to Nicola. ' That made my day. I didn't see why you should get completely immersed and this boulder here only a splashing.'

Forbes changed quickly and emerged in even greater sartorial splendour, this time to be Jane's—Felicity's—

bridegroom. Nicola had found the rehearsals for this almost unbearable, but now it didn't matter. She had only to look at Forbes, see the eyebrows she had once thought sinister quirk at her, to know reassurance.

Now she could savour every moment of this day . . . not just as something she had wanted to remember, to set apart, as a treasured memory of an impossible dream, but as a blending, a day that would set its seal upon her continuing happiness here at Puke-o-Marino, truly the Hill of Peace.

It would be heavenly with Gran and Grandfather retired in Christchurch, so short a distance away . . . Humphrey and her mother able to come on frequent furloughs . . . Jassy at the housekeeping helm, treading, all of them, in the traditions of Jane and Francis, bringing up their children among these smiling paddocks and bush-clad hills. . .

The descendant of the curate who had married Jane and Francis called them to stand and sing grace. It swelled out over the smiling countryside.

'Be present at our table, Lord,
Be here and everywhere adored . . .'

The great tables were set with snowy cloths, the food was piled high.

Letty had managed to dry Nicola's hair fairly well and redress it and garb her in the white muslin gown that felt so cool and summery. How delightful to belong for twenty-four magic hours to another more gracious, more leisurely generation.

Forbes, mightily reassured that his beard was staying uniformly black, was still in his wedding clothes. Jocelyn Westerfield looked charming in a dowager gown of grey spotted silk, Garry's mother was handsome in a flowered blue, Isabel in maroon and buff stripes, and Lucy Melford in lavender taffeta.

What a young-hearted pair those last two were. Forbes leaned across Nicola to say to his mother and Felicity's, ' If you don't tell us soon how you managed it, I'll die of curiosity. It was dirt mean holding out on me this morning—just saying smugly you'd fixed it up.

How could you manage to get those two into the hut in the first place, and lock them in?'

Isobel waved an airy hand. ' It was nothing to us. We're most resourceful. We were all out for a walk and Felicity and Garry were being so beastly polite to each other we could have screamed.

'We pretended we could smell smoke coming from that old shack with the hay in it. We all belted along to it. Naturally Felicity and Garry got there ahead of us, so we slammed the bolt home. You ought to have heard them! They were at least united in their condemnation of our childish manoeuvres. Felicity was yelling: " I wouldn't marry him if I was shut up with him here till Domesday," and Garry that he'd sooner be shut up with a man-eating tigress—then we knew it was going to be all right. Though we didn't know about the rats.'

'Rats?' asked Forbes.

Lucy nodded. ' Felicity's terrified of rats. I'd quite forgotten.'

Her expression was guileless, but it didn't deceive Forbes. She had to add: ' Well, all right, we pretended we'd forgotten. But it worked. It took Garry exactly an hour to get out of that shed. He had to prise the boards off. When we beamed on them—they came in hand-in-hand and looking sheepish—and said didn't they think it a splendid idea, they admitted it was and Felicity said: 'I'd have fallen into the arms of the King of the Cannibal Islands himself, when I saw those horrible red eyes looking out at me in the darkness.' And then Garry had taken her up to the Falls and made her an honest-to-goodness proposal.

'They're going to get a double berth on the ship Felicity was booked on and have a year in England. Garry said he knew of a farm in Marlborough, and would that be different enough for her, and that contrary lass of mine said no, she'd like to come back here since he was willing to have the trip. A perfect ending.'

Forbes leaded back and said quietly to Nicola: ' Aren't you glad we settled our own differences? Those two are so pleased with their efforts, they'd probably have started in on us next. You might not have had privacy for your proposal, darling, but at least you didn't have rats.' He felt for her hand. ' Sweetheart, you can eat that with just a fork, a la American. Nicola, how *could* you get so mixed up? Can I pass you the salt, Aunt Jenny?'

Nicola, in a low tone that matched his and shut them into a little world of their own from which they emerged now and then for common courtesy's sake, said, ' Everything added up to it. That first night Grandfather mentioned the quarrel, he said, " my grandson." Jassy said the same. You were the grandson working Marino for him. I never thought of Garry. There *were* things that puzzled me. That time you kissed me in the truck, when we took the boys back, it was such a heavenly moment—' her colour deepened—' then the next moment you dashed me to the ground by saying if Felicity had seen it, she'd begin to wonder. So I thought you'd done it purposely, that you'd seen her coming over the bridge.

'When I think of the things I said to you, Forbes . . . advising you to make pretty speeches to Felicity, telling you I didn't think much of your technique, I'm aghast. —Would you like some spiced beetroot, Gran? It's delicious. Yes, isn't it tender, the lamb? And that turkey . . . Forbes, this is dreadful, it will take us years to sort it out. Now, I just can't understand why I didn't tumble to things. Though worst of all was thinking that even if you and Felicity didn't make it up, you wouldn't look at me because I thought we were cousins . . . Yes, doesn't Felicity's little niece look sweet in that white frock and blue sash? Really, I can't imagine why that fashion ever went out for little girls. Nothing quite as sweet as spotted muslin, is there? Yes, I might have felt very different about the ducking, Mrs Melford, if the river had been colder. Forbes, at times I came very near the truth. I remember feeling vaguely puzzled when you said even your father couldn't remember his mother. I'd a faint idea at the back of my mind that Grandfather's first wife hadn't been dead as long as that. But I never followed it up. There were so many other things on my mind. And it was really rather a shock to me, when I realized—the first morning we all went out riding—that I'd fallen in love with you. I bet you didn't fall in love with me as early in the piece as that!'

'That's where you're wrong.' Forbes's voice was most emphatic. 'I fell in love with you as soon as you scrambled up from under that car, trying not to show too much leg . . . and were so horrified when you saw what kind of a creature had come to your aid. You were dirty and tousled and completely exasperated and just a little bit frightened, and somehow something happened to me. Now, don't argue with me . . . it did. It sort of put me on my guard with you. I felt, seeing you were a relation of Nesta's, let down by my own feelings. Oh, blast, that aunt of Felicity's is trying to speak to you again.'

Nicola felt delirious with happiness. 'No, no more cream, thank you. This waist doesn't allow for excesses, believe me. No wonder people in those days had birdlike appetites! Yes, it's true. There *are* chestnuts in the stuffing. Jassy would let you have the recipe, I'm sure. It was

made from Jane's recipe. Jassy has it in Jane's own writing.' She cast up her eyes as she turned back to him, 'Forbes, we're trying to sort out our misunderstandings and I have to keep burbling on about turkey stuffing!'

Forbes was looking down on her with tenderness in his eyes. How could she ever have thought them hard, derisive, mocking? Her eyes dropped to the dyed beard. I don't even know what kind of chin he's got, she thought dazedly, and I'm going to marry him.

Forbes continued: 'I wasn't going to let you go, you know. I was going to get this Centennial hoo-ha over and then ask you straight out if you were really in love with this chap in England. The fact that Nancy had had the courage to break things off with Francis was the most encouraging thing in that diary for me. It made me absolutely sure that the only thing to do was to tell you that you had to have her courage. I was going to impress upon you that honesty before a mistaken loyalty was a tradition in both our families. Not that mine is really this family, even if I bear the name of Westerfield. Dad's name was Forbes. But when he was twenty-one, off his own bat, he changed it to Westerfield, as a gesture of gratitude and love to Granddad . . . Oh, thanks. I'll have tea, not coffee; celebrating a hundred years is thirsty work and it's more fitting to take tea just as the pilgrim fathers did. Nicola, you've given me some very bad moments. Are you going to make up for them tonight? And I promise to try to count up every bad moment *I've* given you, and cancel them out. Every last one. You'd better write and tell your mother and Humphrey tomorrow, and tell them to let us know just when they can get over, and how soon, and we'll get married.' His voice changed, held a note of laughter. 'I say, Nicola, look at Mother and Aunt Lucy and Aunt Jenny . . . look at the look on their faces. They've twigged what has happened to us. Trust them!'

All three were staring. As well they might, with Forbes using one hand, and his left one at that, to scoop up his food. Forbes leaned

forward, ' Hold it, you three, or I'll shut you up in a rat-infested barn! This is Grandfather's Big Day. *He*, as head of the family, must know first. But this isn't the moment. Later on.'

The three women fell into excited whispering. The last shadow lifted from Nicola's heart. They were all wholeheartedly glad about it.

The rest of the day passed in a dream, with perhaps the most moving moment for nearly everyone the one when the open-air church service was begun. To know that they were repeating the service that was the first held in Lyttelton after the arrival of the first four ships.

The vicar described it . . . the tussocky hills with just a few houses for the officials, two unpretentious hotels, a few odd shops, the barracks for the colonists, about sixty huts and a fairly substantial jetty.

And the men and women in their Bond Street finery and Savile Row suits, emerging from their crude shelters and going to the first church service, in a windowless loft over a warehouse on the quay.

Forbes read the lesson that had been read that day: ' And there He setteth the hungry that they may find them a city to dwell in; that they may sow their land and plant vineyards and yield them fruits of increase. He blesseth them so that they multiply exceedingly and suffereth not their cattle to decrease.'

Forbes resumed his seat by Nicola and under cover of the next hymn said: ' We'll ask our vicar if this chap could be asked to assist at our wedding, eh?'

Then they began to sing Jane Temple's favourite hymn, ' Oh God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be Thou our guard while troubles last and our eternal home.'

Coping with meeting so many people, talking to newspaper reporters, trying to remember names, losing sight of Forbes sometimes, then suddenly finding him at her side again, his fingers feeling for hers, was both tantalizing and yet delicious fun.

After tea there was a lull in the programme, to prepare for the ball.

'None of this nonsense about drifting in to the dancing at ten o'clock with the night half gone,' Grandfather had decreed. ' It starts at eight-thirty, with the Grand Parade, led off by Jocelyn and myself for those in costume, so I want everyone down here in the drawing-room, ready assembled, at eight.'

Forbes disappeared at seven. He whispered to Nicola that he had something important to do and that she was not to come down till the tick of eight.

Letty dressed in Nicola's room, a vision in primrose gauze with an underdress of white lace peeping from under the side panniers. She piled Nicola's hair high on her head this time, caught it securely with a comb studded with brilliants, coaxed two coppery curls to fall over her left shoulder. She tied the brown velvet ribbon on which the miniature of her grandmother was threaded, above the low-cut bodice, gave Nicola her long white gloves and painted ivory fan.

Letty heaved a huge sigh. ' I don't suppose we'll ever wear such glamorous gowns again. Nicola, that bustle makes your waist look twice as small. But for heaven's sake let's remember to lift up our skirts for going downstairs. Nicola, did you ever see anything so funny as my Dan, with that bright ginger hair of his, and his freckled ears, sticking up above that white satin stock and high collar? Dan, despite his love of ancient things, is so undisguisedly a twentieth-century bloke! But I wouldn't tell him so for anything, poor lamb!'

The house had been so busy all day it was lovely to look down and find the hall deserted. From the drawing-room came the sound of the piano being played. Nicola paused on the stairs to listen, a little smile playing round her mouth.

Forbes had a very fine baritone voice, and he was to sing tonight the song Francis had often sung for Jane— as she had recorded in that last diary of all.

His voice could be heard now . . .

'O, believe me if all those endearing young charms
Which I gaze on so fondly today,
Were to change by tomorrow and fleet in my arms
Like fairy gifts fading away,
Thou wouldst still be adored as this moment thou art,
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still.'

The door opened and Dan stood there, a contradiction in time, just as Letty had said. He smiled, beckoned them down.

The company was standing as Nicola entered. She smiled at them a little self-consciously, and hesitated in the doorway. It looked like a celebration . . . there was a big bowl of fruit punch on a table, and glasses set out.

Grandfather and Grandmother were on the hearthrug, the other members of the family circle, plus the Melfords, and, of course, Felicity and Garry, grouped about them.

Nicola's eyes went round the room in search of Forbes and failed to find him. Naturally she'd thought to find him on the piano stool, as the song wasn't ended though the music had stopped.

But £ stranger sat there. It must be some connection she'd not met yet, because there was a strong likeness to someone she knew. Black hair, close-set ears, strong profile with a very angular jaw . . . rather pale ... he had long sideboards and his attire was the fashionable evening dress of that day and age . . .

He ran his fingers lightly over the keys and played that last line again. Nicola gave a little cry. It *was* Forbes . . . Forbes with his beard shaved off, pale where it had been. That ridiculous alley-cat, piebald beard had gone! He got up from the piano-stool, held out his hand to her. 'Come, my love,' he said. 'They're waiting to toast us.'

'I believe,' said Old George, 'that the question was actually popped when they were in the river this morning. It seems Nicola was all mixed up. And it took a ducking to sort it out. I wonder how many couples could display a photograph of the actual proposal ?'

They drank the toast, received their good wishes.

'It would be very interesting to know,' said Forbes's father, his arm round his daughter-to-be, his eyes holding his son's, 'exactly at what moment the declaration took place. Did that kiss sign and seal it? If so, it's a wonder you could bring yourself to smack his face with so much gusto, Nicola, my dear!'

There was a lot to be said for fans. Nicola brought hers up to conceal her instantly hot cheeks. Then her tawny eyes began to dance above the painted sticks.

'No, we were still fighting madly at that moment with none of our misunderstandings ironed out,' she said. 'So this engagement has been announced *before* it's been signed and sealed!'

Forbes swooped down on her, seized her hand and swept her out of the room. He looked back on the laughing company from the door

and said firmly: ' There aren't going to be any eye-witnesses to this one!' and the next minute he was rushing her, protesting laughingly, upstairs.

Jane and Francis's room was as perfect as it had been that morning, ready for the visitors' inspection. The little mirror was swung on its stand, the lilac spread under the white crocheting looked cool and fresh as if it hadn't known anything like one hundred years of wear. The fat cupids clung lovingly to the candlesticks, the roses and mignonette with which Jocelyn Westerfield had filled the vases dowered the air with fragrance. Jane's portrait and Francis's smiled down on them. The little chair, in its new covering, stood by the bed, the row of miniatures, Jane, Francis, and all their four children, looked down in a slanting row from the far wall.

Smiling, Forbes drew Nicola in. Her bosom in its low- cut gown was rising and falling more quickly than usual. She let go the bunch of skirts she had gathered up hastily in the mad rush up the stairs.

He put his hand in his pocket, and when he withdrew it, there was something in his palm. ' It may not fit,' he said, ' but Grandfather wanted you to have it tonight. Jane's ring.'

He held it out for her to examine. A simple affair of turquoises and pearls.

It fitted perfectly. 'A good omen,' said Forbes. ' The omens were good all the way, but we're too modern to believe them. Even the fact that we heard the echo of the *tui* that night was blotted out for us by the toss you took a moment after. I still have nightmares about that, Nicola. Did you know that Grandfather heard it too . . . from the stable-yard, very faintly? Yes, I know it's sheer coincidence, but very satisfying, don't you think?'

He smiled. 'What are we waiting for? They'll be singing out for us any moment. Let's get on with that signing and sealing.'

Nicola's eyes danced. 'You said no eye-witnesses. I'm waiting for you to remove the same.'

He followed her pointing finger. There against the lacy shams on the pillows it lay ... a small, angelic- looking white poodle!

'Good grief!' said Forbes. 'That ubiquitous dog . . . I thought it was one of those ridiculous doggy nightdress cases. It did cross my mind it was an incongruously modern note here.'

D'Arcy opened his pink mouth and stretched it in the widest of possible yawns.

'Oh, leave him be,' said Forbes, 'he's not in the least interested, and besides, he's not a witness, he's a mascot. At our first meeting . . . didn't I tell you then that when you were in your sweet eighties, milady, you would be telling your grandchildren with pride that you were once *nearly* kissed by the Bushranger. I'll amend that. You'll be telling *our* grandchildren!'

He grinned. 'You'll like it better without the beard, Nicola, my love,' and he held out his arms. As she came into them, as his mouth came down to hers, he murmured, 'Here's to our next hundred years.'