

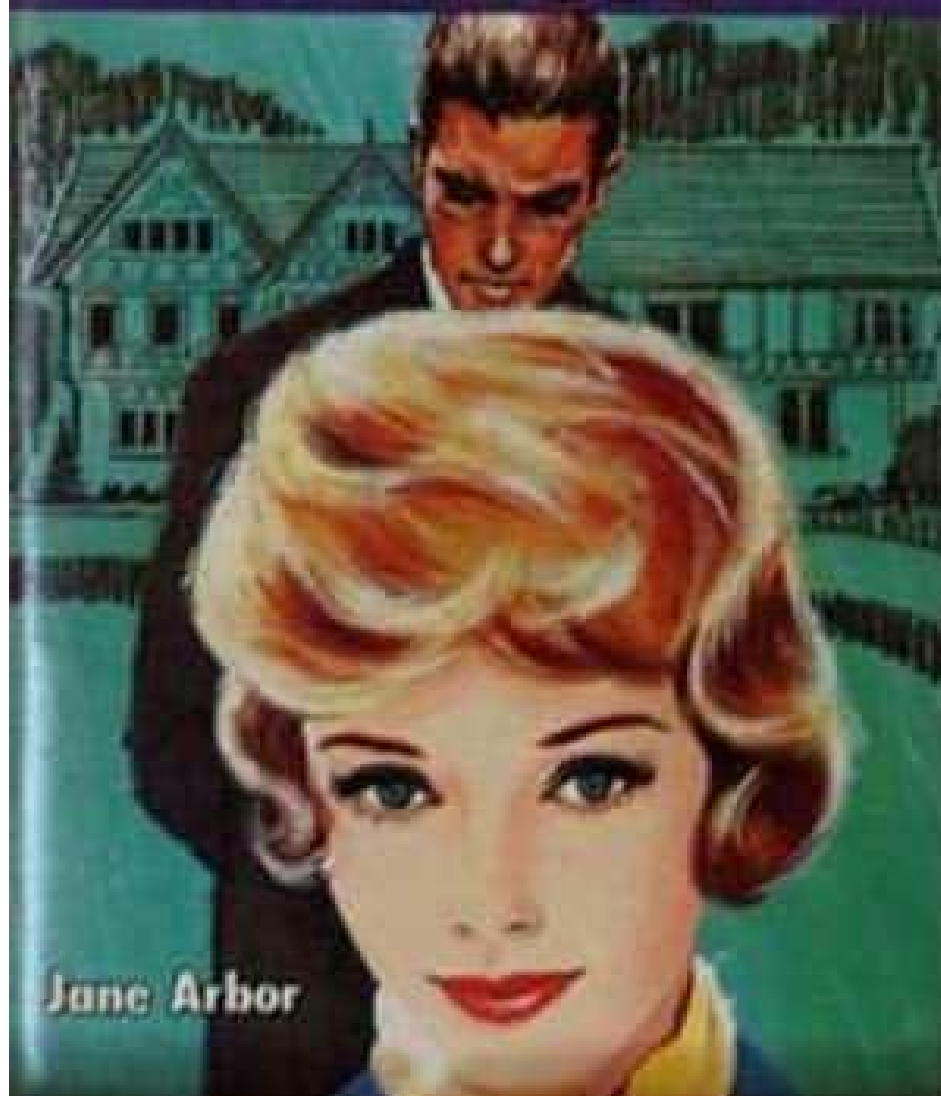


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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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YESTERDAY'S MAGIC



Jane Arbor

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Rachel was sure she was destined to remain single. She had taken it for granted for a very long time. But a visitor from her past, who brought back the nearly forgotten magic of vanished love almost made her change her mind. And Rachel found the path to true happiness somewhat rocky.

CHAPTER ONE

AT the renewed sound of churning gravel and the grinding of gears Rachel straightened and stood on tiptoe to look over the yew hedge dividing the rose-garden from the drive which led to the house.

So—a second coach-load now. There had also been a private car or two, and a walking party. That meant about sixty people. As she thrust a straying lock of dark hair behind her ears and knelt to attack the pruning of the next rose-bush on the border, Rachel was already engaged in a gratifying piece of mental arithmetic.

At that rate a twice-weekly opening of the Elizabethan wing to visitors at fifty pence each person could mean a turnover of around sixty pounds. One couldn't calculate whether wet days would be good or bad for trade. But it might be possible to hope for an average of, say, forty pounds a week.

Between that rose-bush and the next she straightened again, this time to look across at the house itself and to experience for its familiar grey stone pile an ache of fondness that was almost painful.

From here her view was of the end of one arm of the E-shape in which the original manor-house had been built among the gentle Essex uplands in the reign of the first Elizabeth. This near wing had been modernised by Rachel's grandfather, Robert Southern, and before Rachel was born her parents had lived there, as had her two aunts, Caroline and Nicola. But Falconers had seen much change since then.

Aunt Nicola had married well and had gone away; Iris, Rachel's sister, had been born three years before their parents had been killed in a skiing accident, and Grandfather Southern died in the . same year.

The burden of double death-duties had driven Aunt Caroline and the two children to less expensive quarters, and the house had been let to a succession of summer visitors—Americans, Canadians, and others

who had paid well, so that when Rachel had put forward her plans for returning there themselves, Aunt Caroline had first listened... argued ... but finally yielded.

So they had given up the house they had rented in the nearby village of Hoops Cray. Aunt Caroline had given Rachel a deadline of five years to prove her case; somehow they had weathered seven and were still at Falconers, even though the grinding ;' ordeal had taxed them all. Aunt Caroline bore her new poverty with bewildered, genteel patience; Iris, in her demanding teens, veered between an affectation of cynical resignation and fits of tempestuous rebellion. It was left always to Rachel to tot up the endless unrewarding accounts, to worry over the bills and to debate ways and means of making some of their precious capital produce the regular income which the estate must have.

She had made mistakes, of course ... She blushed as she remembered her vain hopes of selling garden produce to people who all had gardens or allotments of their own. But at least the mushroom crop in the barns, for which she employed occasional casual labour but which otherwise she tended and marketed herself, was a continuing success. And if only the latest venture went on as encouragingly as it had begun, Falconers—dear, mellow Falconers, a dream in today's May sunshine—might see a brighter future ahead.

When Rachel had first had the idea that Falconers might copy the greater 'stately homes' in offering open house to visitors at so much a head, Aunt Caroline had been rigid with disapproval and Iris had tittered maddeningly. But Aunt Caroline had been won over by the suggestion that it was being 'done' from Longleat to Knole, from Arundel to Luton Hoo. And though Iris still scoffed, she had taken gracefully to the task of showing off the house, and Rachel guessed that privately she hugely enjoyed the role of chief patroness of their modest treasures. Oddly enough, it was Rachel for whom the whole necessity of making a show-piece of Falconers sometimes appeared

as an enormity she could not forgive herself. And when she felt that, she was grateful that Iris did not mind if she played truant for a while—as she had done this afternoon, coming to weed borders and prune roses in a privacy which she felt sure would be respected by the eagerly tramping strangers on the far side of the yews.

She kicked her rubber kneeling-mat into a new position and concentrated on the needs of the next bush. Her secateurs poised, then cut cleanly, sharply, above each outward-pointing bud. 'There, my dear,' she murmured as she scrabbled the discarded cuttings into a heap. 'Drastic but necessary, and in six weeks or so you'll be glad --'

She broke off quickly as a shadow struck across the border and turning, she saw that a man, a stranger, was surveying her from the turfed path alongside. Someone, evidently, who had missed the way to the house.

She scrambled to her feet and stepped across the intervening soil. But before she could ask his business or direct him, he was saying as if the matter held mild interest for him: 'Tell me, do you address all your roses so personally? And aren't you, anyway, doing your pruning far too late?'

Rachel stared, needing to look up at him to scan the lines of his lean but intelligent dark face. Expecting the slightly apologetic 'Excuse me, but --' she was not prepared for, and rather resented, the easy patronage of his voice. She had never seen him before, and he could, she thought, have waited for her to appear to invite his comments. If people like him considered that payment of their fifty pence made them free of every kind of privacy, then perhaps throwing Falconers open hadn't been such a good idea, after all. Ignoring his first question, she answered his second with a cold: 'If you know anything about gardening, you'd know its limitations. Or had it escaped you that in April we had some Arctic frosts which made rose-pruning quite impossible?'

He smiled fleetingly. '*Touche*—but I wasn't in England in April, as it happens. Meanwhile --'

'Meanwhile,' Rachel took him up quickly, 'if you're visiting the house, you've missed the way in. Beyond the clump of beeches you should have kept straight on. There's a pointing arrow just there.'

He stood his ground. 'Yes, I saw it,' he agreed.

'I'm glad. It was put there to guide people. It's only the Elizabethan wing of the house that's on view,' Rachel pointed out.

'I see. No straying sheep allowed. "This Way. Eyes Front. Keep Off The Grass and Trespassing *Verboten*." As a matter of interest, couldn't you have thrown in a stroll round the garden too? Or would you consider that more than our fifty pence is worth?'

Beneath the banter his tone was tinged with annoyance, and Rachel felt her hostility rise to meet his. She repeated doggedly: 'It is the house that is open to the public. We've made no arrangements about the gardens, which aren't of any particular interest and which are and will remain private. So if that's clear, perhaps you don't mind --?'

He nodded, appearing to accept his dismissal. But, still watching her beneath crookedly drawn brows, he said: 'Quite clear, thanks; and of course you are entitled to your conception of "drawing the line somewhere." But isn't it a rather meanly narrow line? And if *you* don't mind, might I suggest that there's a point of view which could question whether you really ought to expect to have it both- ways?'

'*Both* ways?' flared Rachel. 'Are you suggesting that, in keeping our garden private, we're not giving you your money's worth? If so, please ask to have it returned!'

'I haven't paid it yet,' he reminded her infuriatingly.

'Then please don't think of doing so, and meanwhile, if you still feel you've been cheated, I hope you'll consider yourself free to go anywhere you wish --'

He put in quickly: Then I *may* bypass the house and explore the garden instead?'

Rachel shrugged. 'That's what I said. But there's very little to see, and beyond the far hedge there's nothing.'

'Isn't there?' He seemed surprised.

'No formal garden, I mean,' Rachel corrected herself. 'Only a path that skirts the kitchen garden and leads off through a shrubbery which, for scarcity of labour, we've had to let run wild. But if you really don't want to see the house, the path will bring you out. by the lake where people may be picknicking, and you'll be able to leave the grounds by a gate which isn't far away.'

'Thanks, I'll do that. And I re --I can visualise where the path brings me out. I came in by the lake gate, as it happens.'

'By the——? Oh, yes.' Rachel caught back her slight surprise at 'lake gate'. The boundary gate in question did not lead obviously to or from the lake, and somehow she had not expected his easy reference to it by its well-used local name. 'Then I may go?' he was asking formally.

'Of course --' But as she made to turn aside indifferently he suddenly caught at her hand, thrust something into the thick, unyielding palm of her pruning-glove and firmly folded her fingers over the object. He said: 'Just to show I don't want to bilk you --' and strode away.

Rachel paled with chagrin, knowing without looking that he had thrust upon her the ultimate humiliation of the fifty pence piece which he had claimed to think was in dispute between them. But he was gone beyond call before she had decided whether to go after him, to

hurl the offending coin in his wake or to pocket her pride and do nothing.

In the end she did nothing but continue to rage inwardly after she had rejected yet another futile gesture—that of grinding the coin into the soil of the rose bed with her heel. Instead she would keep it. And if ever that man crossed her path again, he should have it back.

It made matters worse that she had a rankling suspicion that he had not put her in the wrong entirely without reason. She *had* been over-hasty to resent his criticisms. But, on the other hand, he had presumed too much too early,—and from there their hostility had simply gone on striking spark after spark. As for the final insult of that coin --!

Though Rachel returned to her pruning, determined to concentrate on it, the golden peace had gone from the afternoon.

She worked on for a long time and until after she had heard the last of the charabancs leave the drive. That meant that Iris would be ready for a late but well-deserved cup of tea, and they could have it together before it was time to drive down to the evening train with the day's mushroom pickings.

However, from the solitary car still parked out- v side the house, it looked as if Iris had not yet despatched the last of the day's visitors. So Rachel decided to put in the time waiting for her by tackling some badly-needed weeding in the bed immediately beneath the mullioned window of the sitting-room of their quarters.

On warm days they usually had tea in the win- dow-seat there, leaving Aunt Caroline to make her own in her room after her afternoon nap. Today, as usual, the casements were wide to the sun, but, not expecting Iris to be there, Rachel did not glance into the room before she knelt to her task below. And she had worked for several

minutes before she realised that, as well as to the chink of teacups, she was listening to her sister's light, bell-like voice and to the occasional deeper tones of someone else—a man.

Rachel levered herself into a squatting position on her heels, preparatory to rising to show herself at the open window above. But the movement suddenly froze as, though unable to hear the words, she recognised in Iris's companion's tone that of her own antagonist of earlier in the afternoon. How on earth --? She had supposed he had not meant to visit the house at all! Suspicion, and even a vague fear gripped Rachel. And in Iris's reply, arch and provocative, there was still greater shock.

Iris was saying: 'Oh dear, you don't seem to be getting this. Look, I'll begin and tell you *all* about us if you like?'

To that the stranger replied with the invitation: 'Please do --' And after that there was no question of Rachel's showing herself. She was determinedly and unashamedly eavesdropping as Iris's silvery tongue proceeded to outrage, for her companion's benefit, one family intimacy after another.

On a drawled, 'W-e-ll ---' Iris began, 'there are the three of us. you see: Aunt Caroline, Rachel and me. Aunt Caroline is our guardian, though Rachel of course is long past needing one. She's quite old and spinsterish and she *moons* a lot --'

'Rachel? Or your Aunt Caroline?'

Iris tittered, 'Silly! Aunt Caroline, of course. Although --Well, anyway, she was the only one left to look after us when Grandfather Southern died. Our other aunt, Nicola, is married and lives mostly on the Riviera and we lost our own parents suddenly when I was about three. Daddy was Grandfather's only son. so this place sort of belongs to Rachel and me, though of course it will be Aunt Caroline's home as

long as she needs one. But don't think we're sitting pretty, please. For, in fact, we're quite *madly* poor.'

'But you two girls share ownership? I envy you.'

'*Envy* me?' scoffed Iris. 'My dear man, I'm living for the day I'm of age, when Rachel and I must come to some arrangement and I can take my share and be off on my own. But that's still ahead. I'm only seventeen now --As for this place, though Rachel adores it, she practically admits that we're only managing to *prop* it up. Of course the only possible solution for it all is for one of us to marry a really rich man --'

A tiny pause. Then: 'One of you? And which one —Rachel or you—has been cast for the role?'

Iris laughed, and Rachel's imagination saw the long, graceful line of her throat as she would have thrown back her head to do so. She said silkily: 'You oughtn't to expect me to answer that! It's really not quite fair.'

'Not fair? To whom?'

'Now you're being a deliberately mean man! After all, you say you've seen Rachel. You must simply ask yourself. I mean, Rachel is twenty-*eight*, and mostly she just couldn't care less what she looks like. Such a pity about Rachel, really, when taken in bits she's quite good-looking. Her figure isn't bad, and though I think most men would admit to preferring blondes, Rachel could do something with that straight dark hair if only she wouldn't wrench it back into that hideous knot. Then take the shape of her face, her skin, and her eyes --

'—respectively, oval, a kind of flushed olive, and a very dark grey --'

Another small pause. Then Iris's voice, sounding slightly taken aback: 'Quite observant, aren't you? I thought you said you were only speaking to her for a minute or two. Anyway, it proves that she has some points which a man might notice if she bothered about making herself attractive. But she doesn't, so --'

'So it may devolve upon you to save the old homestead? Would it be impertinent of me to ask if you have any particular suitor in view?'

'It would be impertinent—because you're laughing at me! So to pay you out, I shan't tell you whether I have or not. Nor, maybe, the reason why Rachel isn't interested in men. But I bet you'd like to, hear?'

'I think you'd like to tell me.'

'Yes, well—it's because she put Romance with a capital R behind her *ages* ago. About when she was seventeen or so. At that time we were too poor even to live here, so the house was let to queues of people, and Rachel and the only son of one of the families fell for each other in a big way and used to meet secretly without Aunt Caroline knowing, because she would have said Rachel was too young --'

'Then how did *you* know?'

'Silly! Of course I didn't at the time. I was just a *babe*. I heard about it since from village gossip. But it was only a sort of—of idyll really, because after this boy went back to Canada, he just sort of faded out. Some girls get themselves treated so, don't they?'

'Implying that it could be some defect in them?'

'Oh, I'm not saying that! But it must make them awfully unsure of themselves in future. That is, if it doesn't make them as hard and dried up as Rachel is. You know, it's rather funny -- When I was describing

Aunt Caroline, all I said about her being spinsterish and moony *could* apply to Rachel too— oh, heavens, now what --?'

Iris broke off with an embarrassed giggle as Rachel, her anger a coiled spring which had at last to find release in action, stood up to reveal herself to both people at the open window. For a split second the three of them stared at each other, as arrested as a cinema 'still'. Then the man rose to bow. Iris began: 'Why, Rachel! I had no idea --' and Rachel managed to swallow coldly upon the impulse to wither her sister's kittenish complacency there and then.

But a loyalty that went deeper than anger found enough dignity to keep her silent before this stranger.

She said: 'I was putting in time with some weeding because I thought there were still some visitors in the Wing. There's still a car there, anyway.'

'Mine, I'm afraid --'

She allowed her glance to slant in his direction. Her voice took an edge as she said: 'I'm sorry, I'd jumped to the conclusion that you were on foot. Also that you didn't mean to visit the house --?'

'Well, he didn't. I asked him to tea.' Iris's voice cut jerkily across the implied question. 'You see, he was down by the lake and -- But look, dear, if you haven't had tea, come in and have a cup while I tell you about it.'

'About what?'

'Oh, come in, do! This balcony-scene effect is getting me *down*!' There was no sugar-coating now to Iris's nervous irritation, and as Rachel went into the house to join them there was a grim satisfaction in knowing that during the respite the two of them were almost

certainly debating just how much she could have overheard and understood.

She took the cup of tea which Iris had poured out for her. Iris said: 'You've met each other already, haven't you? But, Rachel, this is Mr Winslow. After you had directed him to the lake he went down there, and he was just in time to haul out an infant who'd managed to get entangled in the weeds under the boathouse. He only had to make a long arm himself, but the kid was soaked, of course. So, as he had left his car there by the lake gate, he bundled the child and the mother in and drove them back here --'

Rachel said quickly: 'Is the child all right? Where are they now?'

Mr Winslow put in: 'The mother preferred not to wait. She belatedly produced a spare pair of rompers, made it clear that she thought it careless of you to leave the lake lying about, and rejoined her party.'

'So, as Mr Winslow had been so kind, I asked him to stay to tea,' Iris took up the narrative. 'I mean, *we're* awfully grateful to him, aren't we?'

'Very,' confirmed Rachel, without warmth. 'Though as the lake is small and very shallow, I'm afraid I hadn't foreseen it as a danger to anyone. Now I suppose we ought to patrol it or fence it off.'

She had addressed Iris, but it was the man who answered: 'I shouldn't worry, if I were you. The gentle shelving of the foreshore makes it an ideal paddling place for children, and all you need do is to clear a few weeds from the boathouse area—no more than a morning's work for one of your men.'

'Thanks. I'll put one on to it tomorrow,' said Rachel, hoping that he did not guess that the work would probably be done by herself and lame Tom from the village, who helped with the mushrooms.

'Yes, I should do that. And perhaps you could indicate the depth of the water at one or two points. There, I'd say, your responsibility ends.' He rose and shook his head at Iris's protest that he *must* have another cup of tea. He bowed to Rachel and Iris went to see him out. When she returned her pretty face wore a mulish look which Rachel knew well.

Iris said in explosive defence: 'There's no need to be so upstage! After he'd lugged those people up here in his car I *had* to ask him to tea, hadn't I?'

'Of course,' agreed Rachel quietly.

'And how was I to know that you'd practically slung him off the place earlier?'

'Did he suggest that I had?'

'Well, he said he'd strayed into the rose-garden and that you hadn't seemed to like it much. I suppose you were just about as short with him as you can be sometimes.'

'So you made up for it by being as expansive as possible? Iris, how *could* you confide all that cruel nonsense about—about us to a perfect stranger whom you're never likely to see again?'

Iris said sulkily: 'I might have known you'd be mean enough to listen!'

'And if I'd guessed at the beginning that you'd be mean enough to utter the things you did, there wouldn't have been anything to listen *to!*' retorted Rachel.

'Well, I had to make conversation, didn't I? And he's not so much of a stranger as you think.' With an air of pulling out a trump card Iris added: 'He's Synthics,. if you want to know!'

'Synthics? You mean that huge plant over t - there'—Rachel nodded towards the eastern horizon—'for making plastics or something? The place they haven't finished yet? And how do you mean that this man "is" it?'

'He's to be head of the English branch. You know we heard the place was built so quickly because it was being done with American dollars?'

'But he's not American, is he?'

'No, Canadian. And not a day over thirty, and owns a car like a dream. And you grudge my being friendly! Aren't I ever to meet any eligible men? And this one was *interested*,' wailed Iris.

'So interested,' commented Rachel, 'that his encouragement of your gossip about our affairs was your excuse for it. He was so interested, in fact, that I'd begun to question just *why*.'

'But there couldn't be anything phoney about him, when he's the head of Synthics!' Iris protested.

'I've only just learned of his connection there,' Rachel pointed out.

'Well, he was perfectly frank about it and told me his name at once. Winslow. David Winslow. Rather nice, really -- Why, Rachel, what's the matter now?'

Rachel steadied her teacup, which had rocked dangerously in its saucer. She said: 'Nothing. Time to take the mushrooms to the train, that's all --'

But instead of going out to the weighing-shed, she went to her room. How *could* her first hearing of that surname have missed its significance? Only, she supposed, because she had been too angry with Iris to heed it. And perhaps, too, because, though her memory

should have known it at once, it had never been to her past more than a name without benefit of a personality attached.

Just a name, and that heard only about once—

long ago. For Jon, when he spoke of him at all had usually called its owner 'D'—'a Canadian buddy of mine from high school, who's staying with us at Falconers'—briefly dismissing 'D' from their shared enchanted world. They had been in love, and for Rachel at seventeen each meeting with Jon had been the sweeter because it was stolen against the authority of Aunt Caroline who would have disapproved.

Yet she had savoured the wrenching sweetness of first love for only—how long? A month, six weeks, perhaps. More, if you counted the agony and delight of a few months of love-letters exchanged after the Sandreds, Jon's parents, had left Falconers at the end of the summer—a flow of letters which on Jon's side had at last ebbed to silence.

Jon. Jon. Odd, that his name spoken aloud after so many years should come so rustily to the tongue. Next she waited for the ache in her throat which the thought of him used to bring, and then tried to recall the near-panic with which she had first realised that she was forgetting what he looked like.

But it was all gone. Her Jon-wound had healed as the deepest of physical wounds do—slowly and painfully growing other tissue from the bottom . up—and it had taken today's happenings to shock her into probing at its scars.

The man Winslow—why had he come to Falconers, ostensibly as a stranger, when he had really been coming back?

He had deliberately concealed the fact in his approach to her, and it was only later that she recalled that he had once seemed to catch back

the word 'remember' and knew why he had been able to give the lake gate its familiar name. He had come, being frank with Iris as to his name and present circumstances, yet deceiving them both in everything j! else about him which mattered. Why?

He must have thought himself safe after nearly eleven years. But *something* had to explain his furtive return to Falconers, and if she were right, he could have come as Jon's spy.

Oh—not because she had any illusion that Jon could be hoping for a renewal of their romance. Even if Jon had not drawn the last irrevocable line beneath that possibility, she could hardly deceive herself about it in the face of the evidence of her mirror and Iris's cruel appraisal of her looks and character this afternoon. But—and some insight told her that Jon's vanity would not be above it— he could still have indulged some backward- looking, sentimental curiosity about her which he believed his friend might satisfy for him.

And if David Winslow had not come back secretly on Jon's behalf, why had he come secretly at all?

CHAPTER TWO

AT that point in her thoughts a dismayed glance at her watch told her that if the mushrooms were to catch the evening train she must leave at once for Hoops Cray station.

The ageing Land Rover tore into the station yard just as the train was rounding the last curve of the line. But Jim the porter was waiting to help her unload the mushroom chips, to write up the consignment and to make his hoary joke of: 'Sure you haven't slipped in a few toadstools, Miss Rachel?' which he repeated almost nightly.

She could afford to take the return journey more slowly, and was glad she was not driving at speed when the steering slewed out of control, warning her that she probably had a puncture. So much for her hopes of having time to snatch a bath as well as to change before the simple evening meal which Aunt Caroline insisted should be called 'dinner'! Resignedly she alighted, reached for the jack and was inserting it under the axle when another car swept up from behind.

It halted a few yards ahead, and Rachel, straightening to look at it, knew its sleek cream lines at once. It was Iris's 'car like a dream' and the driver, now walking back towards the Land Rover, was David Winslow.

Rachel stiffened, unprepared for meeting him again so unexpectedly and so soon. To gain time, she stooped once more over the jack as he asked: 'In trouble? If so, will you let me help?'

Hating the chance in a hundred which had put her under an obligation to him, Rachel hadn't much hope that he would be daunted by her rather ungracious: 'Thank you, but there's no need. Only a wheel to change, and I'm used to it --'

Nor was he daunted. He said briskly: 'Nonsense !' and as his brown hand edged hers off the lever of the jack, short of an undignified struggle she had to relinquish it to him.

He worked swiftly and in silence, leaving her nothing to do but pass him the tools he needed, and when he had finished, returning to his own car for a rag on which to wipe his hands.

As he left her Rachel said stiffly: 'Thank you very much. I'm grateful,' and would have let him go. But he strolled back again and stood between her and her own driver's seat as he said, watching her: 'I daresay your sister will have told you more about me than my name. That I'm connected with the new plastics plant that's to be opened shortly, for instance? And I've been wondering if you're likely to have any difficulty in clearing that weed from your lake, whether you'd allow me to send a couple of men down from the plant to help you. You understand, up at Synthics we've got a dozen landscape men laying out our grounds, and to divert one or two to Falconers for a day couldn't matter less.'

Rachel drew a deep breath. She had had to accept his help in changing her wheel. But this! Patronage. Deception. Pity. For heaven's sake, how much more did he hope to get away with in one afternoon --!

She said sharply: 'Please don't trouble. I told you I should be putting a man on to the work tomorrow, and we can manage.'

'Can you? I thought you might have some difficulty about that.'

'Why should I?'

'Just something'—he offered cigarettes which she refused—'just something you'd said about having to let the shrubbery go for want of labour.'

'The word I used,' she reminded him, 'was "scarcity", not "want". They needn't mean the same thing at all, you know.'

'Needn't,' he agreed evenly. 'And I'm happy for you if they don't. Equally, I should be sorry if they did and I could have helped, and didn't. That was why I offered the men.'

Rachel bit her lip. She wondered whether she had ever meant to part from him a second time without expressing all the seething resentment in her heart. Now she knew she did not. Now he should hear what she had to say to him—*all* of it!

'I think you know quite well,' she said, 'that your offer arose from nothing I said to you myself, but from what my sister told you about circumstances at Falconers which aren't conceivably any business of yours.'

His glance slid momentarily away from hers. Then: 'How much of that did you overhear?' he asked.

'All that was said,' she told him mercilessly, almost enjoying the moment.

'I see.' His eyes met hers again unflinchingly as he added: 'I'm afraid I hadn't hoped otherwise. Also I suppose that you would regard an apology as so many empty words?'

'I think I should,' Rachel nodded. 'And the usual quip about eavesdroppers doesn't apply, because in addition to hearing "no good" of myself, I learnt a great deal of value besides.'

'Such as --?'

'As for' instance'—Rachel poised for the kill— 'that though you purported to be a complete stranger, you were not above allowing Iris

to recount with relish a good many facts which you had known before.'

'So you knew? Would it be too much to ask— when?'

'Not at once. And I admit I don't yet know why. I only know that you let me suppose, and gave Iris to believe, that you'd never been to Falconers before. But you had. You'd stayed in the house as a guest eleven years ago and Jonathan Sandred was your friend.'

'Not "was". "Is",' he corrected gravely.

'I think I'd guessed that too,' Rachel told him. 'After all, it's the most likely fact to account for the otherwise entirely unnecessary secrecy you wrapped about your return.'

'What do you mean?'

'That you came,' she said, facing the bitterness of it for the second time, 'simply to spy for Jon. To satisfy some urge of his about me that could either be curiosity or even a niggling guilt. It's the only explanation that seems to serve.'

'Except that it's crassly wrong!' For the first time anger snapped in David Winslow's eyes. 'Whether you find it acceptable or not, I must ask you to believe that I came back to Falconers today on an impulse of my own. Jon had no idea that I meant to revisit it at all.'

'I'll accept that if you say I must. But why, then, the "thief-in-the-night" approach?'

'Partly it was thrust on me. When I came on you in the rose-garden you weren't exactly welcoming and I missed my cue to tell you. And later, after your eavesdropping as you call it, there wasn't any cue I could honestly take.'

'No, I see that,' Rachel allowed. 'But—"partly"? If you had any other reason for secrecy, don't you owe me that too?'

'Equally, I daresay,' he parried, 'with your owing to me to tell me how you knew who I was. I didn't realise that Jon had ever spoken to you of me.'

'Well he did, though not—importantly, and usually as "D".'

'Yes, I've always been "D" to him. Bad luck for me then, as I was caught out, that you should remember that, wasn't it?'

'You haven't,' she reminded him, 'told me why it should matter that I did remember it?'

'No --' He paused as if considering his answer.

But instead, his tone suddenly harsh, he went on to ask abruptly: 'Are you still in love with Jon?'

It was a question to which she had no doubt of the answer. But, taken off guard by its seeming irrelevance and resenting it for a red herring across the trail of her question to him, she said coldly: 'If you don't mind. I'd rather not discuss my feelings for Jon. And whatever they are, it would be difficult to pretend, wouldn't it, that they could have any possible bearing on your own inexplicable behaviour today?'

There was a tiny silence. Then: 'Yes, perhaps,' he agreed. 'Say, then, that I came back to Falconers on a kind of nostalgic pilgrimage, revisiting a place I'd grown to love very much while I was there.'

'You'd—loved Falconers? But if you'd told me you wanted to explore --!'

He shook his head. 'No. You didn't make it easy for me, but that wasn't all. I really wanted to see the place again—without witnesses,

and your opening of the place to visitors offered a chance which I took.'

'I see.' It was an explanation she must accept, though she still felt vaguely that it was not the whole truth. She went on: 'And Synthics? Your present association with Jon? Hadn't you better put me wholly in the picture now?'

'Yes, of course. You knew Sandred Senior was a kind of plastics king in the United States? Well, he set up a branch plant in Quebec, my hometown, and put Jon in charge of it when he was r through college. I went into it too—from the bottom up, and now I've been given the English branch. Production hasn't started yet, but I've already got a full office staff at work. And by the way, may I assure you that the site for the plant, within a mile or two of Falconers, was chosen for its suitability only, and is emphatically *not* the spy headquarters you might suppose?'

At the oblique rebuke of that Rachel reddened with chagrin.

She heard herself saying: 'I'm sorry. When I accused you of spying for Jon, I considered you'd got through my defences unfairly.'

David Winslow said gently: 'You hated what Jon did to you and you made me the scapegoat for him. Wasn't that how it added up?'

'No. I don't know --That is, I've never hated *Jon* --'

'I didn't suggest you did, my dear. Only that you'd be hardly human, and certainly not a woman, if you hadn't hated with all your heart what he did to you when he dropped out of your life as he did, without a word. And when he got engaged --'

'By that time,' said Rachel steadily, 'I'd already accepted that the end was not likely to come in any other way. And I certainly didn't hate Jon for it. In fact I think I hadn't much emotion to spare when I'd done

with despising the anonymous sender of a newspaper cutting announcing his engagement. That was a mean triumph I'm never likely to forgive.'

'You had no idea who the sender was?'

Rachel shrugged. 'None. It occurred to me that it could have been Jon, taking the easy way out. But I didn't think so, because by then he must have known that I'd realised it was all over. No, it was far more probably a malicious woman's trick. Someone who'd known about me and was glad Jon wasn't marrying me. I hoped it wasn't his mother, and I didn't want to think it was his wife-to-be. But to go on guessing was futile, and somehow it was easier to hate an anonymous coward than someone to whom I could put a name.'

David Winslow threw down his cigarette and ground it under his heel. 'I suppose,' he asked, 'you hadn't thought that the sender's concern could have been only for you?'

'So concerned for me that she or he made their condolences anonymous?' Rachel's lips curled scornfully. 'Somehow I don't think so. Do you?'

For a moment there was silence. Then: 'I don't have to speculate about it,' he said quietly. 'I know. For I sent that cutting to you myself.'

'*You* sent it?' Rachel stared at him, incredulous that she should have been on the point of forgiving him today's hostilities, only to find that her years-old unknown enemy had taken his shape. At the time she had fastened on the canker of her resentment, knowing that indulging it was saving her from hating Jon. And though she had grown out and away from it since, she was appalled to find that it was still there and that the man facing her was its cause.

By the time he nodded and began: 'I did it because I saw it as a duty that was due to you. But I'd never met you and you'd have rightly

resented a letter --' she was past the ability to listen to explanations or even to give him credit for a confession he need not have made.

She cut him short: 'All right. You did it. But that was a long time ago, and I'm not asking you to elaborate your reasons now. It explains a great deal and it's evident, anyway, that on the subject of cowardice you and I don't speak the same language, which leaves no more to be said.'

As she took her seat in the Land Rover, brushing him aside, she saw his jaw tense and his eyes go cold. But as she had indeed no more to say to him she drove away.

It helped the riot of her anger to force her mind into the simple, mechanical duties of driving, of remembering to stop off at Tom's cottage to ask him to help her with the lake weed the next day, of putting away the car and unloading the returned- empty chips before going in to face Aunt Caroline's plaintive annoyance that she was late for dinner and that she hadn't even changed.

'Sorry, Aunt Caroline,' smiled Rachel. 'I was late getting away and I had a puncture coming back. Can you persuade Mrs Sweet to hold back dinner ten minutes while I wash and get out of this grubby shirt?'

But as she made to run upstairs, Aunt Caroline asked: 'By the way, what's this about a young man —someone who came to view the Wing this afternoon, I understand—whom Iris insists we must know? You met him too, I think?'

Over her shoulder Rachel said: 'Yes. His name is Winslow, and he's to be head of Synthics when it opens.'

'Synthics? You mean that factory that's gone up almost overnight and isn't as much of an eyesore as we feared, with bits of it that could

almost be mistaken for the Festival Hall? Well, Iris seems quite taken with this Mr Winslow. But is he quite *suitable*, Rachel dear?

'Quite suitable, I'd say,' Rachel's tone was dry.

'Then I must ask him. To cocktails, Iris thought -- Oh dear, Iris says it's so nineteen-twenty of me to say cocktails when nowadays everyone says "drinks"! I'd have said a small dinner party would be nicer, but of course inviting him at all must depend on Mrs Sweet.'

'If you think Mrs Sweet is likely to make trouble, I shouldn't ask him to either,' advised Rachel. 'Because, as a matter of fact, I don't think he'll come.'

Aunt Caroline fretted: 'Oh, why not? I must *ask* him; Iris will be so disappointed if I don't -- Yes, yes, Mrs Sweet, I'm quite ready now --' And she scuttled towards the dining-room ahead of her housekeeper without waiting for Rachel's reply.

Upstairs, knowing that it was only 'cold' for dinner and that Mrs Sweet had bullied Aunt Caroline without cause, Rachel did not fulfil her promise to hurry. Instead, seated before her dressing-table, she took time out to debate Iris's probable reaction to hearing that she, Rachel, would be no party to any invitation going out from Falconers to David Winslow and that it was far from likely he would accept any which did.

Iris would protest and sulk, and perhaps accuse Rachel of being jealous of her own easy success with men. She had done it before now in temper, never able to see Rachel's argument that their differences in age, temperament and looks made rivalry between them unthinkable.

And how unlike they were! Iris, very fair, dainty, blue-eyed; she, dark, long-limbed and— better to face Iris's appraisal honestly! —*plain*.

Chin in hand, she raised critical eyes to the reflection in her mirror. Plain?—of the girl who, for Jon long ago, had been his 'lovely elf-faced gipsy'? But Iris's faint praise was a nearer, more damning memory, and another echo—that man's cool analysis of her face, feature by feature—did not help.

And Iris had said, and he had listened to those other things which hurt more, much more.

'Some girls get themselves treated that way ... Awfully unsure in future ... Or hard and dried-up like Rachel ...' And then the final cruelty—*'As spinsterish as Aunt Caroline ...!'*

Spinsterish—said of her to the man who had seen to it that she should learn just when Jon, the only person she had ever wanted to marry, had gone out of her reach. What a triumph the despatch of that news-cutting must have been for David Winslow if he had never wanted Jon to marry her !

And yet ... and yet—she had wanted so much to believe him when he had said that it was love of Falconers which had brought him back to the place.

But that moment had passed, would not come again. With a supreme effort she shrugged off the memory of what had followed and belatedly set about changing for dinner.

It was as she pulled off her shirt that something fell from the breast pocket to roll away across the floor. She went to pick it up, handling it distastefully when she saw what it was.

David Winslow's tip, which she had meant to return to him if they ever met again!

She looked at the coin in her palm, closing her fingers over it as he had closed them for her. And then, upon an impulse she did not

understand, she unlocked the empty trinket box upon her dressing-table, dropped the coin on to the velvet within and turned the key upon it. There would be a time for returning it, she felt.

From her glance round the toolshed the next morning she concluded that Tom had collected the gear they would need for clearing the lake. But when she arrived she was unprepared to find that two men she did not recognise were there also with Tom.

Granted that the mounting pile of water-darkened weed and sludge behind the boathouse evidenced that between them they had nearly finished the work, Rachel was none too pleased with Tom's enlistment of mates without her knowledge and whom she would have to pay.

She accosted Tom: 'We could have done this between us, Tom. We didn't need help. Who are these men?'

Tom glanced in their direction. 'Said they'd been sent, so I brought 'em on --'

'Sent?'

'Yup. By their boss, who got it from a Mr Winslow. Up at the new factory, that is. Why, Miss Rachel, didn't I do right to take 'em on when they offered?'

'N -- Yes, I remember now, there was some arrangement with Mr Winslow, so you were quite right.' Seething as Rachel was, there was no profit in revealing her chagrin to Tom, not even in highhandedly ordering the men to stop work. *Her* quarrel was with David Winslow. How had he dared to humiliate her? After the bitter causes of their parting last night, *how had he dared --!*

She looked at the lake water now rippling cleanly against the boathouse piles. 'You must nearly have finished?' she asked.

Tom drew in the last of the floating weed between the tines of his hayfork. 'That's right, Miss Rachel. No need for you to wait if you don't want.'

'I won't, then. Afterwards, go up to the house and ask Mrs Sweet for beer for all of you, will you?' And with a few words of thanks to the other men, Rachel swung away, rehearsing the acrimony of her coming exchange with David Winslow as soon as she could get to a telephone.

With her withering opening words ready on her lips as she rang the Synthics number, it was galling to be forced to approach him through at least three people at the other end of the line. And when his voice, taut and detached, said: 'Yes. Winslow here. But I'm sorry, Miss Southern—my secretary should have told you I was engaged,' Rachel heard the click of his replaced receiver before she had uttered a word.

Quivering with frustration, she rang back at a once. But she did not get any further than his secretary, a pleasant-voiced woman who took the blame politely enough for the rebuff Rachel had had. She said: 'I oughtn't to have put you through when I knew Mr Winslow was in conference. You see. Miss Southern, although we're not in production yet, he'll be terribly busy until we are, and every moment has to count.'

Rachel said coolly: 'I should have occupied very few of his "moments".'

'Yes, well—that's why I put you through, because I thought it was a personal call he might want to take. But since you first rang, he has asked me to say he's sorry he couldn't speak to you, but that as soon as possible he'll get in touch with you himself.'

With that, though she felt he had deliberately wrested the initiative from her, Rachel had to be content. Telling Aunt Caroline that if a telephone call came for her she would like to be fetched, she went down to the mushroom houses to do the morning spraying.

She checked the temperature, opened up the ventilators and noted that, for all yesterday's heavy crop, the powder-fine tilth of the long beds was again satisfactorily pricked over with creamy pin-heads and buttons, coming through singly and in rosettes. There would not be a crop ready for market tonight, but tomorrow she and Tom could gather heavily again.

She fixed the hose at a stand-pipe, tested the fineness of the spray and then, in order to achieve the right humidity of atmosphere, turned the gentle ain on to the walls and floor as much as on to the beds themselves. She worked through the first two of the three houses and was fixing the hose in the last one when she sensed that the open doorway behind her was being darkened by someone standing there.

She turned quickly, prepared for her summons to the telephone. But it was David Winslow himself in the doorway, and though the dimness with-l in gave her a momentary advantage over him, something about his purposeful stride towards her warned her that it might be the last she would get.

He said without warmth: 'Good morning. After your summary dismissal of me last night, I hardly expected to hear from you today. At the house I was told I should find you here. You had something to say to me?'

'Yes—about the men you sent over this morning, after I'd told you definitely that we had no need of their-help.'

'Men? I sent no men to Falconers!'

'Then why should two have reported, claiming that their orders came from you?'

'I've no idea. Wait, though --' He threw back his head and bit his lip. 'Yes, it's possible that I'm to blame.'

'Then you did send them?' pounced Rachel. 'How dared you ignore my refusal and send them just the same?'

He cut icily across that: 'Kindly don't jump to conclusions. I've said that it was my fault they arrived, but when they did so it was against my order, not on it. I'd given one, admittedly --'

'Why?'

'Because as I thought you might accept the gesture with grace, I had given the order before we met on the Hoops Cray road. My countermand this morning must have gone astray if they turned up. Would you like me to call them off? Or have you done that?'

Rachel said loftily: 'I thought it better to let them finish the work they'd already begun.'

The crooked brows drew together. 'That was— handsome of you. Or was it, I wonder, that you didn't care that they and your own man should witness an exhibition of false pride which you preferred to save up for me?'

Rachel protested: 'That's not fair! You know perfectly well why—why I couldn't accept!'

He nodded. 'Yes. Originally your reason was a rather petty show of independence. Later it was because you wouldn't allow yourself to take anything at the hands of a man you had already prejudged as—how did you put it?—as an "anonymous coward".'

'Anonymity for that kind of end *is* cowardly,' said Rachel in a low voice.

He turned on her roughly. 'Look here, let's face it. This isn't a quarrel about whether my men or yours should clear your lake of weeds. It's really about a kind of dead man's gulch of prejudice that's yawning between us over an action which you see as a piece of gratuitous malice, but which I believed was the kindest thing I could do for you at the time.'

At Rachel's impatient turn of her head he laid a hand quite gently on her forearm. 'Yes, I know,' he said. ' "For the best" and "For your own good" are pretty hard medicines to take. But listen --'

When Jon got engaged to Julie Latour, I didn't know but that you were still hoping that you and he would marry some day. So I told him in no mean I fashion that he ought to tell you. He wouldn't, for j fear of hurting you, he said --'

'Hurting me!' rejected Rachel violently.

David Winslow's eyes narrowed compassionately. 'Yes, I thought it odd myself that he could delude himself into believing that the news of his engagement could be more wounding than the fact. So I chose—that way of telling you myself.'

'A letter would have been kinder,' murmured ' Rachel.

'No. I couldn't have written without offering you—well, call it sympathy—and you could have 1 resented that. You claim to have seen that news-cutting as a morbid triumph over your loss of Jon to Julie Latour. But really I sent it in order to cut you clear of Jon and of any hopes of him you might] still have. And though you won't take this, I dare- j say it was my tribute to the sort of courage I judged 1 you had from all I knew of you.'

Rachel echoed shakily: 'From all you knew of I me? You mean—what Jon may have told you?'

'Yes, that.' He added thoughtfully: 'But more I still, perhaps, for what I'd learnt for myself between the lines of your letters to him.'

Rachel jerked back from him, her face white. 'You *read* my letters to Jon? But they—they were love-letters! How *could* you have let him show them to you? Or did you have a kind of barter system about it? *You* bandied your own love-letters with *him*?' As she broke off, Rachel's disillusionment with Jon was final, complete. But with the passing of her last regret for Jon her instinctive recoil was from the man who had shared her letters with Jon and seemingly expected her not to care...

But the look he turned on her shamed her contempt. He said levelly: 'On my side there weren't any love-letters to share.' Then they were at a deadlock of silence until he asked: 'Well, have we cleared our decks, if only slightly, you and I?'

'I suppose so.'

He seemed to accept the grudging tone of that. But all he said was: 'You know, I think your sister was right about you. You haven't let sentiment or any of the softer emotions help you at all through eleven hard years.'

She was grateful to him for toning down Iris's actual words. 'How could I?' she asked. 'It's too easy for the softer emotions, as you call them, to slip into self-pity, and by the time I'd lost Jon, Falconers was offering enough problems of its own.'

'Problems you had to shoulder alone?'

'Who else? Iris was too young. Aunt Caroline's generation had never had them to face. Besides, solving some of them was a challenge, and I've been happy, in my fashion.'

'Have you? I'm glad.' A pause. Then: 'Do you realise, I wonder, that that's a question you haven't asked me about Jon?'

'About whether he has been happy too? But is that something you wouldn't know?'

'I do know, as it happens. I could have spared earning your contempt by sending you that cutting. Jon's marriage never came off.'

'He—didn't marry? He isn't married now?'

'No. Julie jilted him for a glamour match with a racing-driver named Gil Benson, making the excuse' she knew Jon was still in love with some English girl he'd loved long before they met. For . "English girl" read you, of course.'

Rachel shook her head. 'She couldn't have meant me.'

'Between you and Julie I happen to know there was no one else for Jon. But to finish the story as far as it has gone—Gil Benson was killed later; Julie, whose home was originally in Quebec, has gone back there, but there's been no contact since ' between her and Jon. They don't move in the same circles.'

Groping towards something which had eluded her until then, Rachel asked slowly: 'Is that really why you came to Falconers yesterday—to tell me this?'

His glance was steady but unreadable. He said: 'I've told you why I came—to find out whether the place still held some of the magic it had for me eleven years ago. I came selfishly, not for Jon. And I

calculated of course that, if you were still here, you would learn this news of him sooner or later in any case.'

'Why should I?'

'Why not?' he countered.

He left her then, before she could tell him that, J for her now, Jon was a stranger whom she had I known briefly long ago and that almost certainly he had by now no lingering passion for her.

Jon was in her past, and more sharply defined in the present was David Winslow himself. Yesterday he had roused all her hostility. Yet today, somehow, he had earned her reluctant respect.

CHAPTER THREE

As Rachel had expected, and while Aunt Caroline had fluttered ineptly on the fringe of the argument, there had been a dinner-table scene with Iris over the projected invitation to David Winslow.

Iris had pouted: 'It isn't as if you wanted him for yourself, when you never bother to attract any man. It's simply that you're being dog-in-the-manger because he showed a bit of interest in me!'

From Aunt Caroline: 'Dear, how can you say such things to Rachel? Besides, she has already told me that she doesn't think the young man would accept.'

'But of course he'd accept! If he didn't, it would only be because of the deadpan welcome he got from her when he *was* here. Why on earth shouldn't he want to come?'

'Because,' Rachel had told her icily, 'he's had even less of a welcome from me since.'

'Since? How? When?'

'I met him again on my way out from Hoops Cray, and I left him in no doubt of what I thought of his pretence of never having been to Falconers before, when I knew for a fact that he had.'

'How could you know?'

'I happened to have remembered his name as a •guest to—one lot of the people who leased the house while we weren't in it.'

Iris pretended admiration. 'Some memory, you must have! You don't say? *Which* lot of people?'

Rachel met her eyes. 'You wouldn't remember them—People named Sandred. About the last tenants who had the house before we took it back.'

Iris looked thoughtful. '*Sandred?* So --'

Which told Rachel Iris not only had heard the gossip she had claimed to David Winslow, but also knew names and dates never yet discussed between Rachel and herself.

But she asked no more questions then, and though Rachel expected her to return to the attack, a few days later she was full enough of another prospect for it to be possible to suppose she had already lost interest in the whole affair.

She looked up from the letter she was reading at breakfast as Rachel came into the room.

'Aunt Nicola is coming over from Cannes for some shopping in London,' she announced. 'She wants me to go up to meet her and stay at the Queensway for four—no, five nights next week. Golly, what a *thing* I've got about wanting to get away from here even for so long!'

'Lovely for you,' commented Rachel, pouring her own coffee. 'Which days will you be away?'

'Well—over Wednesday *and* Saturday, I'm afraid. But you can manage, can't you?'

'Yes, I daresay.' Saturdays and Wednesdays were both 'open' days for visitors, but it was not fair to deprive Iris of a rare treat on that score. Rachel, her mind already busy with ways and means, added: 'On the Wednesday Tom and I can get the mushrooms done before breakfast. And on Saturday, as Glenda doesn't go up to town that day, she would probably come up and give me a hand.'

Glenda Moore had been widowed young, but now at nearly forty she owned a tiny modernised cottage in Hoops Cray, from which she travelled up each day to the West End dress salon which she had created by her own effort during a widowhood that had never become embittered. Petite, poised and shrewd, she had many friends, and could have married again a dozen times if she hadn't, as she claimed, valued her freedom too much. Meanwhile her life was an unending round of the *haute couture* shows, of buying, of designing her own models and of alighting at Hoops Cray each night and at week-ends for the unspoiled peace she found there.

Iris agreed eagerly: 'Oh, I'm sure Glenda would!' then added diffidently: 'Talking of Glenda. I haven't a thing fit to wear for meeting Aunt Nicola. And I can't afford anything either. This quarter's allowance seems to have *melted* away.'

'Then what was the significance of your "Talking of Glenda --"?' put in Rachel. 'You couldn't afford Glenda's prices at any time, allowance or no.'

'No, but——' Iris shifted a piece or two of table silver with a nervous hand. 'Well, I was wondering whether I could get something from her on credit; whether you would ask her about it for me?'

'I would not,' said Rachel decisively.

'Oh, Rachel, you might --!'

'No.'

'Just because you don't care what you look like yourself, you think it doesn't matter to me either!'

'I know it matters to you. Look, how much would you have to spend for something you could bear to appear in when you meet Aunt Nicola?'

'What's the use of saying?' sulked Iris. 'At that new little boutique in Chelmsford, up to fifteen pounds, I suppose.'

'Well, try the new little boutique in Chelmsford.'

Iris sprang up, frown and pout wiped from her doll-like face. 'Rachel—you'll actually *lend* me fifteen pounds?'

'No, but I'll pay for whatever you choose in Chelmsford. You don't have to spend fifteen pounds.'

'Oh, I won't if I needn't! But I'll dash straight over there today. Rachel, you really are rather a *special* person when you like. Sometimes I wish --'

'Wish what?'

'Well, that we were—sort of closer. That we talked more—about clothes and make-up and— and men.'

'About your clothes and your men?' queried Rachel, touched.

'I suppose that's what it would amount to,' twinkled Iris. 'After all, you don't care about either, do you? Oh dear, do you think I'll be lucky enough to meet anyone terribly super at the Queensway this time?'

'Perhaps,' teased Rachel, 'it depends on what the Chelmsford boutique can produce! I'd better give you a cheque.'

'Thanks awfully. I promise not to spend too much. Tell Aunt Caroline I shan't be in to lunch, will you, there's a dear?' And with a lightly-blown kiss in Rachel's direction she was gone.

Before she left the house it was arranged that when Rachel took in the mushrooms that evening she should pick up Iris at Hoops Cray station and drive her back. But the Chelmsford train came in without Iris, and

when Rachel arrived home, she was already there. She had changed into a becoming summer two-piece in a shadowed lime and grey check, and at once demanded Rachel's approval of it and of her business acumen in keeping well within Rachel's cheque for its costs.

Rachel praised: 'Very chic. Extremely Queens-way, in fact. But how did you get back? I thought there was no bus on Fridays?'

'There isn't. Rachel, would you say the hem is quite straight at the back?'

'Perfect. But how did you --?'

Iris, fronting the mirror, glanced over her shoulder with a slightly defiant: 'How? Oh—David Winslow drove me. He said he had had to go to the County Council offices about some permits. I met him accidentally in the High Street; he gave me' some tea and offered to bring me home. And as you had to go in to the station anyway, I knew it wouldn't matter if I didn't come off the train.'

'Of course it didn't,' Rachel assured her quickly. 'But if he was kind enough to drive you all the way home, didn't you ask him in?'

'I did, but he wouldn't stay.'

'Why not?'

'How should I know? Except'—Iris's glance beneath her lashes was slyly goading—'that, though I told him you probably weren't in, he could have been afraid of meeting you.'

'Why should he be afraid?'

'Well, say as determined as you are not to meet him. Anyway, though he was perfectly sweet with me, he lost no time in shaking the dust of

Falconers off his car wheels, and he must have" had some reason for that—I say, you do really think this thing suits me, don't you?"

'Yes, I do.' Rachel was thinking. *She must know his reason. Of course he talked, and of course she listened. And though we agreed that we had 'cleared our decks,' as he put it, he probably did refuse to come in this evening because he didn't want to see me.* The thought struck coldly, she did not know why.

Iris was saying: 'I'm glad, because I adored it at first sight. And when I opened the box and allowed him a peep at it, David agreed that at least the colour was absolutely me.'

'*David?*' Surprise jerked the echo from Rachel's lips.

'Rachel *dear*, you don't suppose that in this day and age one has to stay at the "Miss Southern", "Mr Winslow" stage for ever? When you're attracted to a man and in not much doubt that he means to see you again, what on earth is the sense of keeping him at arm's length until he has lost interest in getting any nearer?'

Rachel said drily: 'I wouldn't know. It's a technique I'm not very well up in.'

'You're not really, are you?' dimpled Iris. 'And as for my seeing David, however unwelcome he may be here, there *are* other places than Falconers, you know!'

'But there's no question of his not being welcome—now. Surely, while you were with him, he told you that I had apologised since for misjudging his motives that day he came here first?'

'No, he didn't. And I shouldn't think that by now he could care less about the petty little mystery you've made of behaving as you did.'

'But --'

'My pet,' put in Iris sweetly, 'here's another pointer for that "technique" of yours that you say has gone rusty on you! David Winslow and I didn't discuss you at all this afternoon, if you must know. And that was because when a man has begun to get interested in one girl, he's not going to be fool enough to waste his time with her by talking about another!'

'No, I suppose not. Anyway, it's of no significance now, and when you get back from Town we'll ask Aunt Caroline to invite him over for drinks.'

'Please yourselves about it.'

It was not difficult to discern that Iris's indifference and her dismissal of the 'petty little mystery' was her way of crying 'sour grapes'. But as Rachel returned to her room she wished she did not find as unwelcome as it was odd the fact that, over that cosy tea in Chelmsford and on the drive home, David Winslow had not so much as mentioned her own name ...

On the morning of Iris's departure for London Rachel drove Aunt Caroline in to Hoops Cray, parking the Land Rover beneath the plane trees lining the High Street while they separated for their errands.

At the bank Rachel was delayed longer than she expected. When she came out, from some yards down, the street she saw that her aunt was already .binding beside the car and that with her, surprisingly. was David Winslow. It was Aunt Caroline who had directed him to the mushroom houses on that second visit of his to Falconers, and later that morning Rachel had identified him for her as the subject of the dinner-table argument with Iris.

On that occasion Aunt Caroline had murmured: He seemed a very well-bred young man to me. I can't think What you have against him. And though you said he wouldn't want to come here again, he seems

to have done so quite soon --' But she had not brought up his name again, and Rachel would have said that, meeting him casually, her natural reserve alone would have prompted her merely to bow and pass on.

Yet here they were, chatting like old friends. And on Rachel's approach Aunt Caroline said quite gaily: 'Dear, Mr Winslow has been so kind. Coming across from Peacey's, the wind took off my hat and would have whipped it down the street if he hadn't caught it just in time. And as you came along I had just told him that, though Iris will be away until next week, he must really come over to Falconers one evening --'

'And I was telling Miss Southern,' put in David Winslow, 'that, much as I'd like to accept, I have to be in London for some time from tomorrow onwards and can't say just when I may be back.'

Reflecting that she would have wagered he would not come, Rachel began a formal, 'I'm sorry. We'd have liked to see you --' Just as Aunt Caroline gave a start and began to peer about her.

'Dear, what's the matter?' Rachel asked.

'Well, I don't quite know. But the haddock for luncheon—I don't seem to have it, you see!'

'Did you buy it?'

'Oh, yes. Mr Mills recommended it particularly, and I had it at Peacey's, I know, for the string of the parcel was cutting my finger. Ah yes, that was why I put it down while I gave the grocery order, so it must still be there.'

'Let me --' offered David Winslow.

'No, indeed. I remember where I left it quite well. I'll go myself.'

As Aunt Caroline hurried back across the street, David Winslow said: 'You know, though I think I only saw Miss Southern about once that other time I was here, I'd say she has altered hardly at all in these eleven years.'

'You met her, then?' asked Rachel, surprised.

'No. Only had her pointed out to me. I never spoke to her, any more than I ever spoke to you.'

'You remember seeing me, though we didn't meet?'

He nodded. 'Yes, I remember.'

'I don't remember you. Ever seeing you, I mean. Either with—with Jon or not. I should have thought— --'

'What?' he challenged. 'That you'd have been aware of anyone at all who stood in the long shadow Jon cast for you?'

'I meant that I wish --' She caught that back.

'I mean, I'd have expected Jon to talk about you sometimes to me.'

'I don't know why you should. People who are intent on the business of falling in love don't use their time together to discuss even their best friends,' he reminded her.

'No, I suppose not.' (Hadn't Iris said the same thing in different words?)

But there was something to be asked of him while they were alone. At sight of Aunt Caroline already emerging from the grocer's, Rachel said urgently: 'Before my aunt comes back—she doesn't know about Jon. So, if you can help it, don't mention him, please.'

'You mean she didn't know—then?'

'Not then. Nor since. And unless your connection with Jon has to arise I'd rather it wasn't brought up now. I'll tell Iris about it myself some time. But there isn't any reason why Aunt Caroline should ever know.'

As she made to get into the car he opened the door for her. But he stood blocking it and looking down at her after she had taken the driving seat. He said very quietly: 'That's not going to be too easy, I'm afraid. You see, Jon plans to come over to England when we open for production at the plant. It opens in three weeks' time, and he'll be flying over just before that. He's a free agent, and I don't know how long he will stay. But if it were only overnight do you think it likely that you and he wouldn't meet?'

'Not of my planning!'

'But almost certainly of his.'

'You've no right to speak for Jon!'

'Not for him in particular. Only out of knowing for myself that a man never forgets his first love, never runs away from the chance to see her again, and whoever else he loves or marries, never wholly escapes from her all his life.'

'It's not like that for a woman. Once she *has* broken away, she's free. Do you --' she despised the catch in her breath—'do you suppose I need to face Jon in order to know how much or how little I still care?'

'One way or the other,' he said steadily, 'I think you've got to be sure. So I believe you'd go to a meeting with him, if only for the sake of that proof.'

Rachel said slowly: 'I'd go, I think, for pride's sake. Not for proof of something I know --'

She saw a pulse throb once in his temple. But as Aunt Caroline trotted up, all he said was. 'After all this time even Jon couldn't ask more.'

Rachel knew that Aunt Caroline was hoping that her sister Nicola would return with Iris to spend a few days at Falconers before going back to the Riviera, where her husband, Maxwell Curry, had interests in a line of English hotels.

B u t on the evening before Iris was due back Aunt Caroline came from the telephone to tell Rachel that Nicola would not be coming, after all.

At sight of the disappointment in Aunt Caroline's face Rachel protested: 'But she didn't come the last time she was in England! Couldn't she even manage *one* night?'

'I don't know, dear. She said not, and I didn't press her, because I felt she didn't want to come very much. You see, with all the gaiety she is used to, she is bound to find us very dull.'

'She could still conceal her boredom with us for twenty-four hours or so, I should think,' retorted Rachel crisply. 'Is Iris coming back tomorrow anyway?'

'Oh, yes.' Aunt Caroline appeared to be glad to change the subject. 'And Nicola says of her that 'now she has lost her puppy fat she is becoming quite a beauty, and so tempting to dress.'" Though of course that makes me hope she hasn't overloaded Iris with clothes which are quite unsuitable for wearing down here.'

But though Aunt Nicola had done just that, her indulgence did not prevent Iris's grumbling to Rachel: 'It was too bad of Aunt Nicola promising to phone Aunt Caroline that *she* approved of David for me, and then not doing it --'

'*David?*' Momentarily Rachel had fumbled the deft folding of a mushroom carton from a pile of cardboard 'flats'. 'Do you mean David Winslow?'

'Of course. And Aunt Nicola did *promise*. But if David so much as rings me up before she gets around to it, can't you see Aunt Caroline digging in her heels against him?'

Rachel said slowly: 'I shouldn't think Aunt Caroline will be difficult. She has met him twice now, and likes him herself. What I don't understand is how Aunt Nicola can approve or disapprove of any man for you whom she hasn't even met.'

Iris's silvery laugh tinkled. 'Not met him? But of course she has!'

'How? When?'

'The first time—over drinks at the Queensway, the night after I went up to Town. And if you were going to say "What a coincidence!" of course it wasn't one. On the drive back from Chelmsford I'd told him where I'd be staying, and when he said he might have to be in Town himself, it was a pretty sure bet he would turn up. Anyway, you knew he was in London; he says he met you and Aunt Caroline in Hoops Cray and told you so himself.'

'Yes, though not that he'd be seeing you.'

Iris giggled complacently. 'Perhaps he didn't want to admit to himself that he wouldn't be able to keep away! More likely, though, don't you think, that he didn't consider it to be *really* your affair? Anyway, he made a fourth in our theatre party that night; I lunched with him the

next day, and on my last night he dined Aunt Nicola and me, and afterwards he and I went on to the Circle and danced. So it was rather tiresome of her not to warn Aunt Caroline, don't you think?

'I gathered,' said Rachel, 'that Aunt Nicola didn't want to think there was anything serious in it for either of you.'

'But their generation never does! They seem to grudge people being in love. Even you --! For pity's sake, Rachel, can't even you remember what it is to feel you know—oh, just by the very way he looks at you—that a man is meaning whole worlds more than he says?'

Rachel said: 'Yes, I remember --' (*that I thought I knew, and was wrong!*) Aloud she added: 'I'm sorry, chicken. And as I've told you, I don't [think Aunt Caroline will put difficulties in your way when you want to see—David again.'

'That's the first time you've called him David, except in a shocked echo after me! For now, though, he's got to be in London. But when his opposite number comes over from Canada for the opening of Synthics, there's to be one whale of a reception, to I which we shall be invited, of course.'

'I haven't heard anything about it.'

'Well, neither had David until his partner cabled, I demanding that it should be laid on. The invitations will be terribly formal, but naturally David took it for granted that I should accept, and even that you would too. And though I told him you hardly ever went anywhere, he said quite maddeningly, "This time I think she will. She'll have her reasons --" You see? Knowing something about you that I don't. Or is it something you know about *him*?''

'Didn't he tell you?'

'I tried to tease it out of him. but he said you'd asked him not to. As if I shouldn't have to know sooner or later, if he and I --

'Yes, of course. And I told him I'd tell you myself. Not that it's anything personal against him— now.'

'Then *what* is it?'

On a long-drawn breath Rachel said: 'Well --'

and told her all she did not know already about Jon.

At the end, Iris said in grudging wonder: 'I can't think why I didn't jump to it. That first night I thought it might actually have been David, until I realised that in that case you'd have known each other at once, however much *you* might have changed.'

'In eleven years he would have changed too,' Rachel pointed out drily.

'But not as m --I mean,' Iris corrected her *gaffe* hastily, 'men don't change as women do. Why, before I know it, I shall be nearly thirty—and what sort of a hag shall I be then?'

Feeling the question required no answer, Rachel offered none. And after a moment Iris went on: 'No wonder David could be so sure that you'd accept this invitation. You've "got your reasons"—and how!'

'What do you mean?'

'Dear—no more and no less than *he* meant! Look , at the facts. Jon Sandred is still free. You've never looked at a man since. He's coming back to England at last. And he's the son of a millionaire.'

'For all that, he's nothing to me now. Nor I to him.' Rachel's tone was sharp with conviction.

'Silly! You were in love with him once, so how can you know? Odd, isn't it, that when I cracked that one to David about one of us having to marry money, I didn't really mean you? But you'll go to the Synthics reception—I *think!*' insinuated Iris as she pirouetted out of the room.

The next day, when Glenda Moore rang from London to ask Rachel to take pot luck with her for dinner that evening, Rachel accepted gladly.

'Pot luck' with Glenda meant that there would Be a beautifully cooked meal and afterwards they would relax with coffee and cigarettes in the soft lamplight of Glenda's sitting-room, where talk and laughter would alternate with friendly silences and even their fiercest arguments would end in a 'Let's agree to differ' truce.

Besides, tonight she badly needed to ask Glenda's advice ...

Her opportunity came as Glenda poured coffee into Chinese lacquer cups, her expressive artist's hands making of the task a rite to be watched with pleasure. Knowing that her friend could look beneath a compliment to the question it posed, Rachel said: 'It's good to be merely with you, Glenda. Everything about you is so all of a piece with the rest. Your looks and your clothes, your voice and the way you move amount to a kind of—rhythm.'

Glenda's tawny gold eyes glinted with amusement. 'Thanks for saying I "got rhythm"! I know what you mean, though. And of course I do work at grooming and dress, because it's expected of me, and it's part of my job. But your "rhythm"—that's an outcropping from the natural grace that, blessedly, every woman is born with, And you, I'd say, with more than your share.'

'I, *graceful*? Why, at home I'm supposed to be about as graceful as an elephant and considerably less well groomed!'

Glenda pursued imperturbably: 'That's nonsense—on both counts. You groom as suitably for work as I do. I've never known you to put a foot wrong over things like tweeds or working kit. And whoever said you hadn't natural poise can never have watched you walk or noticed the carriage of your head or even seen you sit—quite, quite still, as few women can.'

Rachel blinked and began a little shakily: 'That's a new picture of myself that I can't quite --'

Glenda retorted. 'Because you've lived for too long with the other one. You've made the slacks- and-shirt set-up a uniform *and* an ingrowing attitude of mind, and I've despaired for you long enough to be-afraid that when this did happen, it might be too late.'

'When what happened? What do you mean?'

'The "something",' said Glenda shrewdly, 'which has suddenly made you wonder about the relation between looks and poise. My hitherto complacent ugly duckling is actually craving the sprouting of swan pinions—why?'

'Nothing really.'

'Nothing?'

'Well—simply that for a quite silly reason and possibly for only one night of my life I wanted to be —a swan.'

'And the silly reason—that one man should see —a swan.'

Rachel said: 'Yes. One man --'

CHAPTER FOUR

GLENDa queried calmly: 'Could there be a better reason than to want to appear lovely for just one man?'

Colour flooded up from Rachel's throat. 'But it's not like that! It's just a string tied to a very old story, that's all --' And as detachedly as she knew how she told Glenda about Jon, only to find that, like Iris, Glenda knew the local version of the affair already.

Rachel puzzled: 'You've never asked me about it.'

'Well, you see, I knew it hadn't had a happy ending for you, and I didn't know how much it might still hurt. But now you say it hasn't hurt for years, and that you want to appear at your very best at this reception purely as a gesture of pride? You want to *flaunt* a little before him. Isn't that it?'

Rachel murmured: 'Put like that, it sounds merely—*cheap!*'

'Not at all. Just the excusable running-up of a flag that could have tattered—and hasn't. How much time have we before this enchanted evening?'

'Till the twenty-fourth. But, Glenda—imagine the absurdity of *my* craving glamour for—for any reason at all! Not to mention the impossibility of doing anything about it!'

Glenda smiled: 'You underrate me! I've told you, there's an attainable "you" simply waiting to be brought out, though of course you'll have to put yourself completely in my hands. Let's see—the twenty-fourth. Why, that's Midsummer Night, and the very gift of a title for your gown! But it's less than three weeks. You'll have to give me two fittings at least; then there'll be manicure, the toning of your make-up, matching accessories and your hair has to be styled. Where's my diary? Now, when --?'

Rachel protested: 'Glenda, you're not proposing to *design* a dress for me?'

Glenda cocked an eye over the rim of her reading glasses. 'You weren't expecting,' she asked mildly, 'to get a Glenda Moore model off the peg?'

'But I can't afford a Glenda Moore gown, in order to create any impression in the world!'

'Who mentioned affording? You'll be modelling for me my creation "Midsummer Night"! In peacock, I think -- Yes, very subtle shades of blue-cum-green which, with your colouring, you'd never dare to buy for yourself. Perhaps amber somewhere for a touch of warmth -- -- Yes, it's taking shape already.'

'Glenda, you're evading the issue, and you know it!'

'I know nothing of the sort. I'm no designer if my signature isn't written all over Midsummer Night for any fashion-conscious woman at that reception to * read! And the Glenda Moore salon won't exactly suffer from *that*. So now it's settled, what about a first fitting next week?'

Rachel was worried enough to take to Aunt Caroline the problem of the obligation Glenda's kindness had thrust upon her. But to her relief Aunt Caroline thought she could accept, pointing out that no doubt Glenda was taking pleasure in playing fairy god-mother for a night and so must not be rebuffed.

But Iris could not resist playing down Glenda's gesture.

Wasn't peacock a very *odd* choice for Rachel's olive skin? And the hair style suggested by Glenda— surely it was unwise to choose a

special occasion like the reception for wearing it for the first time? And though of course Rachel had to pretend she was merely pandering to a joke of Glenda's, it was obvious she was hoping for a miracle when she came face to face with Jonathan Sandred, and that made David so *right* --

Meanwhile Glenda was high-handedly busy on Rachel's behalf.

Rachel was allowed to see the uncut material for her dress, but thereafter was fitted only by *toile* in Glenda's work-rooms; Glenda superintended her choice of evening sandals and accessories; she was swept to Glenda's own hairdresser, and Glenda personally experimented in artificial light to match make-up tones to her colouring. Glenda's final despotism was her insistence that Rachel must dress at I her house. David Winslow, who would be driving both girls to the reception, must call for Rachel there. And on the evening itself Glenda's enthusiasm for the facade she had created for Rachel was far too infectious to resist.

At last—'*Et viola, madame!*' With a studiedly professional gesture Glenda swung a long mirror towards Rachel for her first head-to-foot view of herself since the blue-green shaded gown had slid over her i head with its rich, important whisper of falling silk.

Rachel gasped. She had expected to look different, but she was not prepared for an emergence of a Rachel Southern who looked like this.

Glenda had agreed that the simplicity of her usual straight-drawn hairline suited her. But her twisted knot had been dispensed with; shaped and lightly curled, the whole of her back hair was piled high and fastened, not now by combs, but to a half-hoop of amber velvet flowers which exactly took up the tone of her amber earrings. Her skin had a warmly golden glow and her eyes, their lids dramatically shadowed, appeared enormous. Above the softly draped bodice of her gown a filmy stole framed her shoulders, and about her

amber-sandalled feet the rustling skirts were now blue, now green, according to each facet of light they took. The mirror's reflection was of a girl made beautiful by Glenda's art. But that it was also herself was something Rachel could hardly believe.

'Well?' smiled Glenda. 'You look as if you were thinking, "This is not I!", like Marguerite in *Faust*!'

'Yes—yes, I was! I'm so grateful to you, Glenda. But how am I to live up to all this, even for a few hours?'

. 'Any woman,' ruled Glenda crisply, 'should be sufficient actress to live up to an effect—for a night. There's your escort-man's car now. You'll be able to use *his* reaction as a kind of try-out, don't you see?'

(A try-out for meeting Jon? No. It was the moment immediately ahead which held for her an importance that had nothing to do with Jon. And, face to face with it, her courage failed.)

She pleaded to Glenda: 'You'll come down with me? I—I don't know David Winslow terribly well. He could think I'd gone suddenly mad!'

But Glenda shook her head. 'No, I'll bring up the rear with your gloves and your cloak. Just play the thing lightly, that's all you have to do. And, believe me, your effect even on this David Winslow, who means nothing to you, is something you're going to *enjoy*!' And gently propelling her towards the staircase, Glenda left her to descend it alone.

From the top and from behind a four-square king-post which hid her from his view, Rachel could see David Winslow standing by the flower-decked fire-place of Glenda's entrance lounge. But at the rustle of her dress he turned, and as his glance narrowed upon her she met it anxiously, wondering whether it had held something unguardedly before it masked | into a polite acceptance of her appearance for which she was not prepared.

But what response *had* she expected from him? They were no longer open enemies. But that did not make them friends. And since he had been attracted to Iris, he had seen to it that they had scarcely met.

That alone made nonsense of her hopes for this moment, and sheer madness of the need behind the hope—the need to be lovely to-night, as Glenda had put it, 'for one man.' For one man who certainly was not Jon ... Meanwhile the evening still lay i ahead of her, and she must play it as lightly as Glenda had advised, pretending that she wanted nothing of it but that little salving of her pride at Jon's expense. Wanted nothing, in fact, at the hands of David Winslow. Nothing at all --

When he came across to her she offered him her hand across the baluster. They said the stereotyped politenesses, and then Glenda joined them, was introduced and was offering drinks before they left for Falconers to pick up Iris.

When David went out to start the car, Glenda held Rachel back. 'Well?' she queried again.

Rachel smiled faintly. 'Either he didn't notice, or else he was making a silent comment of "The less said, the better"!'.

'All the same, over his sherry he was watching you most of the time.'

'But not with admiration!'

Glenda pursed her lips. 'A bit inscrutably, I admit. Puzzled? Disapproving of the change? N-o-o— neither, quite. Almost as if he were regretting something.'

'Pitying me for—for trying, you mean?'

'Just let him dare! No, rather as though he suddenly had found he didn't really know you and— minded against his will. Aren't men

odd? They run after and claim to be intrigued by the unknown. But with any woman they care about they've *got* to feel secure --'

'Not,' put in Rachel, 'that that could apply between David Winslow and me.'

Glenda looked at her sharply. 'No. No, of course not. Practically strangers, you say? But you must go, dear. He's opening the car door for you. Good luck. Let me know what happens. And remember—with Jonathan Sandred *keep it light!*'

The Synthics reception was to be held in the huge assembly hall which occupied a large area of the ground floor of the plant's executive block.

When David Winslow drove up, the entrance drive was thick with cars on their way in. But after a moment's survey of their own position he said: Luckily, we can bypass this,' and backed towards a side door to enable Rachel and Iris to alight.

He went in with them in order to direct them to the cloakroom. But allowing Iris to go ahead, he touched Rachel's arm to hold her back.

'Jon flew in this afternoon,' he told her. 'He only had time to snatch an early dinner in Town and to drive down in the car I've laid on for him while he is in England. He'll probably be in the hall, doing the honours, by now. But I can contact him, and if you'd rather, you could meet him alone in my bachelor hideout on the fourth floor:'

Rachel shook her head. It had become important to her that he should not think she regarded this meeting with Jon very seriously, and she urged flippancy into her tone as she echoed: 'Meet Jon alone? What awfully heavy weather to make of saying "Hullo" to each other after

all this time! And poor Jon—supposing he had to admit that he barely remembers me, if at all!

David Winslow said levelly: 'You can't believe that's possible. So why pretend you do?'

On the threshold of the toilet-room she paused in search of Iris. But she was not to be seen in the packed, clamorous crowd of women. Rachel had ! gained a seat at the line of back-to-back mirrors before she heard Iris's voice raised on the far side of them.

Iris was talking to an acquaintance of theirs from the other side of the country, praising the other girl's appearance and modestly belittling her own. Actually, in lemon-and-white organza,' she was as freshly ; pretty as a daffodil and could hardly fail to know it.

'Sweet of you to say so, Tricia,' she was purring. 'Yes, rather madly expensive, how right! But just wait till you've seen Rachel. *My --!*'

'Rachel? But she isn't --? Well, I mean, I thought she never did?'

'She has, this time. No less, in fact, than a Glenda Moore model, and all the trimmings to match.'

'Not a pukka Glenda Moore? I say, that's *something!* How come?'

'Don't ask me. At least, I do know really. She's around somewhere, but when you meet, for pity's sake don't look too stunned.'

'D'you think I'm entirely devoid of manners, young Iris?'

'No, but you could be *paralysed* by what she's done in the way of glamour. Quite a million dollars' worth. But too, too wistful, really --'

'What do you mean? Not a man? Not for *Rachel?*'

'But indeed for Rachel! And not just a man. *The* man of the evening—this Jonathan Sandred, no less. Ready now? If so, let's get out of here and I'll Tell All while we wait for her to gang up.'

Rachel crouched forward to her mirror and let them go. Of course she had already guessed that Iris believed she had designs on Jon's renewed interest and it had not greatly mattered. But how her sister could make a barb of even an innocent word like 'wistful'! And if she said much the same to David Winslow, did she invite it as his opinion too?

The evening's guests, Rachel was to find, were mainly top-ranking business people with varying close or remote interests in the plastics industry. But she knew certain of the country folk, and she spoke to one or two on her way towards the hall. There Iris was not to be seen, and Rachel stood alone until a hand went beneath her elbow and David was again at her side.

'You haven't seen Jon yet?'

'No. And Iris --'

'Never mind Iris. She can meet Jon later. I've parked her with sherry and a surge of admirers. And as I've managed to get Jon temporarily roped off, so to speak, will you come?'

After that there was the minute or two they took to cross the crowded floor and then the uncharted moment of her first glimpse of Jon, mature, urbane, and except for the turn of his slightly weak jaw and the ruffled line of fair hair along his brow, without visible trace of the boy in his twenties whom she had loved once.

He had stepped forward and, with both her hands, caught between his, he was dropping the lightest of kisses upon her cheek. Holding her off from him and swinging her hands, he said on a long breath:

Rachel, my *queen*! How utterly wonderful you look! Tell me, where *have* you been lurking all the years of my life since we last met?

At seventeen she would have glowed to the stately-phrased compliment and she would have answered it with innocent gravity. But now she must take it at its face value, and David Winslow, at her shoulder, should see how she handled an admiration which he believed she had deliberately sought.

'Where do you think?' she laughed, flicking her hands free of Jon's clasp, 'but here in Hoops Cray, where I was always to be found?'

'I don't believe it!'

'True, I assure you.'

'There! No wonder I couldn't push along the High Street for traffic. The total male population queueing up, I suppose. And to think I allowed old D. here to come over and find you! How long is it, by the way?'

'You surely don't expect me to admit I remember?' she quipped.

'Then I'll tell you. For me, aeons and a lot too long. For you, yesterday. At most, the day before.'

'Yesterday?'

'But of course. Are you any older now than by twenty-four hours or so? Deny it if you can!'

It was a vein of flirtatious banter which she had never tapped before. But exploring it was easy and even stimulating, now that time with him was no longer precious, as it had been in the old days.

It became easier still over a couple of champagne 'cocktails taken in the company of Iris and David, and she did not even wince when she heard Jon describing her (in a theatrical falsetto) as his 'long- lost boyhood's sweetheart' to a group of strangers I 'whose names she never learned.

That group broke up and she was swept into brother. There were more drinks and a great deal of laughter, and when the floor was cleared for dancing. Jon was there, claiming her for a dance as soon as he was free of his obligations to his 'duty' guests.

As they danced, nodding across the room, he asked: 'By the way—sister Iris, dancing now with D.—where was she in those days ? Our days, I mean ?'

Rachel, following his glance, was in time to see Iris laughing provocatively up at her partner before the swirl of dancers hid them again. She said : 'Iris? She was still in the nursery. She was—six.'

Jon's eyes widened. 'Oh, no, I protest! There can't be so much difference between you two. Better count again.'

'I don't have to,' she assured him drily. 'Iris is inly seventeen now.'

'Seventeen—and all that witchery and eyelash fluttering perfected already? Oh, well, she's quite a, honey, and I suppose some of 'em are born knowing ill the tricks. Not much doubt, either, that old D. is falling for them fast, eh?'

'Yes. I think he was attracted by her as soon as they met. Or has he told you as much?'

'My dear, he doesn't need to. And though I've never seen him so taken before, I can't accuse *him* of cradle-snatching. He's the type, don't you see, who couldn't kiss a girl goodnight without presenting his

honourable "intentions" at the same time. Tell me though—how do you get on with friend D.?’

Rachel thought carefully: 'We're just friends. Through you. Through Iris --'

'And you like him? You can face the idea of him as a brother-in-law, I mean?'

'If he's going to marry Iris I—shouldn't have much choice, should I?' It was with an effort that she forced the words past the tight, dry constriction of her throat.

'You're so right, at that,' Jon confirmed with a grin. (And how could he guess that the possibility they had agreed upon so equably had lacerated something in her heart?)

They danced on, talking of other things. But afterwards, when Jon claimed that, with more duty contracts before him, he must have some more champagne, she excused herself from sharing 'the other half with him. Her head begun to ache a little, and when he drank to her, saying 'The night is yet young!' she could have wished that it was older than it was.

However, she whipped up enough gaiety to respond in kind to the attentions and easy flattery of the men Jon brought to be introduced. She soon learned to keep the ball of conversational banter in the air and toss it back as lightly as it was thrown. It all meant very little, but she could feel she was being a success, and was even surprised at the speed with which the later part of the evening passed.

She did not dance with David until past midnight, and when, twice during a quickstep, she missed her step and stumbled, he brought her to a halt.

He said quietly: 'You're tired. Why didn't you say you'd rather not dance again?' But before she could reply or laugh off her maladroitness she was horrified to realise that his face was blurring out of focus, and though colour had flooded into her cheeks it had receded again in a great wave of chill which enveloped her whole body.

The ultimate humiliation—she was going to faint! She would have fallen, she thought, if his arm had not still been about her. Then they were in a cool corridor where, by contrast, the air was like vine, and she felt better already.

Outside the automatic lift to which he led her she protested: 'I'm so sorry. But I'm all right now. Please --' only to be overruled by his: 'No. I'm taking you up to my rooms. It's quiet and cool up here, and you can rest as long as you like.'

As the lift slid upward he told her that his suite on the fourth floor had 'the essentials' to his bachelor needs, but that he was not occupying it yet. While Jon was in England they were staying together at the nearby Country Club. Later, when the plant was in full production, he planned to move in to the suite and employ a daily man for the chores.

In the lounge which was partly study he drew a tweed-upholstered chair over to the open window for Rachel and half-sat, half-leaned on another near by.

Watching her, he asked: How do you feel now?'

'Much better, thanks. But if I could, I'd rather like to stay here until Iris is ready to go home. I needn't keep you, though, need I? Do go back.'

'Not for the moment. I'll go presently.' He paused before adding: 'Are you going to think me brutal if I don't offer you a drink?'

Rachel almost shuddered. 'Heavens, no! I don't want to look at another drink tonight.'

'Good. Wise of you to know when you've had enough.'

Was there implied criticism in his tone? In case there was, she claimed quickly: 'It was simply the heat that made me feel faint. I certainly haven't had too much champagne!'

'I didn't suggest you had. I was only congratulating you on realising that alcohol at least has its limitations as a frontage for something which isn't there.'

Rachel stiffened defensively. 'What do you mean by that?' she asked.

'Well, it isn't, is it? If you felt you must create a false effect—all right. But I was merely agreeing with you that there's a point beyond which even just one more drink doesn't aid any performance.'

'My "performance", as you call it, didn't depend on drink at any time!'

'But it *was* an act? My dear—why?'

Feeling trapped, she fell back upon half-truth. She said: 'I told you—I needed to bring a lot of pride to this meeting with Jon.'

'Yes, I know. But wasn't all this'—with his hand he sketched a silent description of her appearance —'enough to serve your purpose with him? Did you have to assume the cheap, brittle party spirit too?'

'You don't understand. My pride simply wouldn't risk Jon's thinking that I'd been languishing all this time in self-pity and regrets. It helped—giving him the impression, just for an evening, that I hadn't let my looks go altogether and that I could still be gay. But I didn't want him to recognise in me the—the girl I was then.'

'I see. You want the clean cut, the fresh start?'

'Yes. We could start again as friends. In fact I think we have started. But we're two different people now. Jon is different. So am I.'

With unexpected suddenness David Winslow levered himself from the ease of his position, straightened and stood over her at his full height. As she looked up he set a finger and thumb at the point of her chin, tilting it upward. He queried cryptically: 'Are you so different, I wonder?'

A moment later he was across the room, snapping out the main light, leaving her in the softer rays of the reading lamp behind her chair. Over his shoulder he said: 'You'll stay and rest, won't you?'

'I'll send Iris to you, or bring her up myself.' Then the door closed behind him and she heard his footsteps echoing down the corridor towards the lift.

CHAPTER FIVE

A QUARTER of an hour later it was Jon who came to find her, saying that he would drive her home, while David would despatch the last of their guests and would bring Iris home when he was free to leave himself.

When Rachel admired the sleek lines of his car Jon said: 'What make do you drive?'

'Just a Land Rover.'

'But isn't that,' he frowned, 'a kind of estate wagon? I really meant the private one you would use for parties and shopping and whatever makes up your social round? What *do* you do, by the way? Do you hunt in the season? Go racing? Paint the town? I suppose, round about in the country, you're one of the leaders of your set? Tell me.'

'There's nothing like that to tell, Jon. Falconers won't run to any car but the Land Rover, and I haven't got a social round. As a matter of fact I grow mushrooms for Covent Garden, and this summer we've begun to show the Elizabethan wing of the house to visitors at fifty pence a head!'

He threw her a quick, incredulous glance. 'But *not* can't be that poor! D. never gave me a hint of how you were placed. Or doesn't he know either?'

'Yes, he knows. In fact he first met Iris when he paid his fee to visit Falconers like anybody else. But later, when he told me you were coming over to England, I think he understood how I felt about meeting you again. So he probably didn't pass on to you anything about my circumstances now which I mightn't have wanted you to know.'

Jon protested: 'Hang it, Rachel, things didn't work out for us. and I realise we've been as good as grangers since. But, once we'd met again, how did you hope to keep from me anything about you which everybody else knew?'

'I think,' she said slowly, 'I didn't look beyond a first meeting which needn't be followed by others if the first was more difficult than it has actually proved. And I argued that as you would be going back to Canada, one meeting with you would be enough to—to --'

'To get me finally out of your hair, so to speak?' Jon grinned ruefully. 'Well, that's frank, at any rate, and I'll confess that I was also a bit cagey with myself about looking beyond a kind of "Hail and Farewell" to you which could have embarrassed us both. But as soon as I set eyes on you I knew it wasn't going to be like that. D. had told me, of course, that you weren't married, and my imagination had ranged between finding you a rather dreary spinster or so high-hat that you'd have nothing to say to me; Instead you were so radiant and glamorous and— well, *generous*—that I told myself it was odds-on that you were well in the thick of a love affair which was making you happy and was likely to turn out better for you than ours did. I noticed later that you weren't wearing a ring, but since we are in this laudable mood of confession with each other, how right was I about that?'

'Not right at all, Jon. My "glamour" was only a very special effort—Cinderella stuff which I couldn't repeat.'

'No Prince Charming yet?'

'No Prince Charming.'

'So I was wrong. But tell me the rest, won't you? Things aren't too easy with you? Why?'

'They're no harder, really,' she told him, 'than for a lot of people in England who possess houses they love but can't afford to keep up.'

'So it's Falconers which is the white elephant, eh? But couldn't you sell it? Rent it out again? Let it off in apartments?'

Rachel shook her head. 'It's too big and inconvenient for most people, and it would-break Aunt Caroline's heart to see it carved up. Besides, it's her home, Iris's and mine.'

'But when you marry, what then?'

'It's a question which hasn't arisen so far.'

'But when it does --'

'I'm already twenty-eight, Jon.'

'What of it? Don't interrupt. What it amounts to is that the ideal would be for you to fall in love with someone who cared almost as much for Falconers as he did for you, so that he'd take its cause to his heart as willingly as he was taking you. D'you know any possibles who qualify?'

'I'm afraid I don't.' There was nothing in the Tightness of the reply to reveal that the memory of David Winslow's—*Say then that I came back on a kind of pilgrimage to a place I'd grown to love*—had stabbed momentarily but cruelly across Rachel's mind.

'Well then,' pursued Jon, 'what about a marriage of convenience to a chap who mightn't care a fig for he place, but who had enough money to tolerate it as a kind of poor relation that he could afford to support out of his petty cash, so to speak? Less romantic, of course. But at least a solution. How does it appeal?'

She wondered if he came near to guessing what Falconers really meant to her. But still matching her flippancy to his, she smiled; 'It doesn't appeal at all, even though Iris does sometimes claim that it's the only solution there is.'

'Does she indeed?'

'Well, only in joke, of course, and neither Aunt Caroline nor I could bear to see her marry except for love.'

'Which,' shrugged Jon, 'it looks as if D. would infinitely prefer, too. But was this hypothetical discussion about Iris at all? I thought it was about you?'

'Making it even more hypothetical still! But look, Jon, we're just on to the turn in to the drive -- Ahead on the right, do you remember?, Yes, here --'

When they drew up at the house, Rachel said there would be a tray of sandwiches and iced coffee awaiting them, and though Jon demurred that he knew she was tired and could not want to invite him in, he agreed without much persuasion to stay until the other two returned.

Coffee glass in hand, he moved about the room, putting disjointed questions about the estate. Then: 'You haven't asked anything about Julie, Rachel,' he said. 'Aren't you at all curious about the I next girl I chose after you? And she was the only "next", you know.'

'Thank you, Jon. But I thought you might not want to talk about Julie now.'

He shrugged. 'It doesn't matter, and you've been frank with me. But maybe I flatter myself that you care at all what she was to me?'

'Of course I care. It's just that I didn't know how to say I was sorry it hadn't lasted for you. Was she- like me, Jon?'

'Not a bit.' He smiled down at her. 'There just I weren't any copies made of you at seventeen, my sweet! No, Julie was tiny, vivacious, a redhead; French-Canadian on one side, a touch of Indian blood on the

other. She lived at about twice the rate of other people and she wasn't afraid of anyone or anything.'

'She married and is a widow now, David said. Do you think she will marry again?'

'I wouldn't know. But I shall know when she does. I She has always made the local gossip-columns as news, and she will then.'

'But you, Jon—you'll marry?'

One shoulder jerked upward in a shrug. 'I'm in the market, I suppose,' he said indifferently. Then he looked at his watch, asked: 'Do you realise what j time it is? No good waiting for the love-birds any longer—I'd better say goodnight. But I may come again?'

'Yes, of course.'

He was offering her both his hands. But when he took hers and drew her to her feet he did not release her at once. He repeated: 'In the market—yes, I'm afraid that just about sums up my present attitude to marriage now. And I can say so to you, because I m pretty certain you're not shopping my way any more, are you?'

Rachel shook her head. 'Not any longer.'

He nodded agreement, not looking at her. but down at their linked hands. He said slowly: 'All the same, there's a future. And, for you, the problem of Falconers, which isn't likely to improve. So, provided we accepted that it was on undemanding terms on both sides, might there still be some sort of tolerable future in marriage for you and me?'

'Oh, *no* --!'

Rachel stiffened in a recoil which he could hardly mistake. And before she could find words with which to turn the edge of her refusal, he said with a rueful *mile: 'All right, you don't have to amplify that! As an idea, it probably wasn't so hot. So forget it, will you? I promise not to mention it again.'

'Thank you, Jon. You do see,' she pleaded, 'that, not loving you and knowing you don't love me, I *couldn't* marry you for—for --'

'For the sake of turning your liabilities to this place over to my petty cash account?' he prompted. 'No, I see you couldn't, and I should have known better than to ask. Meanwhile—bless you for being frank and kind and as lovely—only differently—as you were at seventeen --'

As he spoke he slid his hands to her upper arms and drew her to him, putting his lips to hers in a gentle kiss so entirely without passion that she saw no reason to resist it. She returned its friendliness without embarrassment,, and slipped from the embrace when she saw that he was looking beyond her shoulder to the door which stood ajar to the lighted hall.

'What is it?' she asked, turning.

'Iris and D.—they're back at last.'

'I didn't hear the car.'

'Nor I. I only glimpsed a flutter of Iris's dress in the hall and heard her laugh.'

'But why haven't they come in?'

'Arriving at the moment they did, they could have imagined we didn't want to be disturbed,' Jon grinned.

Her throat tightened oddly. 'They couldn't have!' she protested.

'Well then, they wanted privacy for their own sweet partings. Where else could they go to enjoy them?'

'There's the little breakfast-room across the hall --'

'Well, if its door is shut I certainly shan't wait for D., and if *you're* tactful, honey, you'll take yourself off to bed! See me away first, though?'

The hall was empty and silent, but behind the door of the breakfast-room, which was fast shut, there was a low murmur of voices and, again, Iris's laugh. Jon chuckled. 'You see?'

'The next morning Iris did not appear at breakfast. But when Rachel went down Aunt Caroline was already at the table, pouring their coffee and eagerly awaiting news of the party.

'We've been unfair to you, dear,' she worried. 'We've loaded every detail of our worries on to you, and I've believed you too easily when you've claimed not to care much for going about. Last night, when you quite outdid Iris in-that lovely gown Glenda designed for you, I realised that since you were little more than a child, you've hardly had a chance to be *young*.'

'Last night was only a rule-proving exception!' smiled Rachel. 'Just try persuading me that I'm dispensable, and see what will happen if you do!'

'Dear, of course we couldn't do without you; that's why I'm afraid we've imposed on you. However—you enjoyed this party, and it mustn't be the last. In fact, I've been wondering whether perhaps we ought to try to give one here for you.'

'Aunt Caroline, I'm *not* a debutante, and you're not to worry about parties for me. But I would rather like you to ask Jonathan Sandred over—say for luncheon or for drinks. He drove me home last night, and he said he would like to come over again.'

'Jonathan Sandred. Oh, yes—he's the Canadian partner in Synthics, isn't he? Now was it you or Iris or Mr Winslow who reminded me that his people had rented the house during that time we were letting it? Anyway, if you remember him dear, yes, do ask him whenever you like.'

'Or when Mrs Sweet likes?' teased Rachel.

'Oh dear, yes, I suppose so. Tch—that reminds me! Tom's grandson came up to leave a message with Mrs Sweet for you, to say that Tom has his lumbago again and won't be at the mushrooms today.'

'Tom won't? Heavens!—and we haven't gathered for two days, which means there'll be the father and the mother of a crop this morning!' Rachel glanced at her watch and sprang up from the table in dismay.

'Well, I can't help you to gather, dear. But I can fold cartons or check for you when you weigh up,' offered Aunt Caroline. 'Meanwhile, Iris must help you to gather for once. I'll go and call her myself now.'

'Well, tell her to dispense with her nylons and not to come at all if she's going to grumble that her head is spinning before she has gathered half a pound,' Rachel advised crisply. 'I'm off now to get the spraying done first, and don't expect to see me before lunch.'

In contrast to the heat outside, the mushroom houses were cool and smelt richly of moist earth and lush growth. This morning all the long beds were covered with a carpet of smooth white domes pressing cheek to cheek. With Iris's amateurish and possibly unwilling aid, Rachel doubted whether the crop could possibly be cleared and

despatched in time to save the loss of the best market price if many of the ideal 'cups' and 'buttons' must be left to overblow.

Meanwhile she was glad of the need to concentrate on familiar, routine tasks. It blunted the edge of the thrust of pain beneath the surface of her mind. ... She sprayed, ventilated, fetched stacks of chips -and punnets from the store and had filled several baskets before Iris appeared nearly an hour later.

Iris grumbled: 'Well, of all the wretched jobs to be expected to face on a morning after! What d'you want me to do?'

'Gather like mad. If possible, I want to clear the whole lot today.'

'Today? But Rachel, you can't! It's nearly eleven already, and David and Jon Sandred are coming to lunch. And if you imagine I'm going to sweat at picking beastly mushrooms without even time to change, you can jolly well think again! Besides, there's an idea that they should drive us over to the coast this afternoon for a swim.'

Rachel said: 'You won't be swimming this afternoon, and neither shall I. And I don't see how they can be coming to luncheon. Because, though I told Aunt Caroline I'd like her to ask Jon, she knew quite well we'd got to work here all day.'

'Oh, she didn't ask them! I asked David last night, and we agreed there wasn't any doubt Jon would want to come too. Aunt Caroline is choosing to fuss, because she considers any invitation should be by R.S.V.P. card sent three weeks in advance. And I suppose,' provoked Iris meaningly, '*you're* fussed lest the impression you were making on Jon last night mightn't be quite the same today! I mean, dungarees, no make-up and mushrooms for market *are* a bit of a far cry from glamour and model gowns.'

Rachel bit her lip. 'Jon knows all about the mushrooms, for I told him. And I'm "fussed", as you call it, because I haven't any intention of

missing the market with this crop. You can't put Jon and David off now. I see that. But I shall have to come back as soon as possible after lunch, and I hope you'll explain to David and come too.'

'And miss driving to the coast on this glorious day? You are the limit, Rachel! Sometimes I believe you don't even *want* me to have any fun --Oh, bother these wretched things! Why won't they come up when they're pulled without bringing half the bed as well?'

'They will if you twist them. Look --' As Rachel went to kneel beside her sister, she wondered whether Iris knew that a pout and a childish show of helplessness would always evoke her help. Certainly it was an appeal she had never failed to answer. Probably she never would.

They worked for an hour. Then Iris cast frequent meaning glances at her watch, and at last Rachel said: 'All right, chicken, cut along. But don't take so long to change that the men arrive and Aunt Caroline has to cope with them alone. You know how shy she is, and she hasn't ever met Jon.'

Eager for release, Iris sprang to her feet. 'I know,' she agreed. 'But Rachel, if she never had so much as a *gleam* about you and him before, isn't Jon going to be rather difficult to explain to her now?'

'Not particularly. I had wondered whether I would tell her. But it seemed rather pointless to worry her with that old story after all this time.'

'Then how, with her notions of propriety, d'you expect her to take the idea that, if you are practically strangers, you and Jon have become *like that*'—Iris linked her forefingers in a graphic gesture—'overnight?'

'But Jon and I aren't "like that", so there's nothing for Aunt Caroline to take. Or'—Rachel paused as a thought struck her—'are you jumping to conclusions? Did you see him kissing me last night?'

'Of course. You shouldn't leave doors ajar on your love scenes, dear!'

'It wasn't a love scene. It was the merest of friendly goodnights. In that spirit, I kissed him back.'

'You're telling *me!*' Iris tittered. 'And I thought that if you and Jon went enthusiastically on from here today, Aunt Caroline most certainly wouldn't approve.'

Rachel repeated a little wearily: 'I've told you— there's nothing between Jon and me to cause her any concern. As a matter of fact, although he practically denied it, I got the impression he may still be in love with the girl who jilted him.'

Iris shook her head. 'David says not.'

'David could be wrong. Has *been* wrong, in fact. He once hinted that he believed Jon might still be in love with me,' said Rachel drily.

'And he really isn't, after all?' Without perceptible cause there was a tiny inflection of relief in Iris's tone. She went on: 'Well, if I'd known that, I'd have *made* David agree to surprise you in Jon's arms, for a joke. But when I said, "Oh look! " and "Let's --" he said "*No*" in a hard sort of voice, as if, even by snooping accidentally, we were stealing something from you. Then he literally swept me away across the hall --'

'—into the breakfast-room, where *you* didn't leave the door ajar.'

Iris giggled. 'One up to you! And of course we shut the door. You weren't the only girl to be kissed, my pet. The difference was, though, that *David* wasn't merely wishing me goodnight --' A shaft of sunlight from the doorway dusted her bright hair momentarily before she was gone with a patter of heelless sandals across the yard.

Rachel worked on, wondering a little at the detachment with which her eye continued to select and I her hands to move as quickly and deftly while the I rest of her mind was facing squarely at last the truth ; she had desperately thrust aside until now.

Here it was then—the thing which, between Iris and herself, she had believed could never happen because they would never want the same gifts from life, never share the same desires. But it had happened. Jealousy was an ugly word. But if wanting what Iris wanted, aching for the lack of the love which Iris had was jealousy, then she was jealous. And jealous—the irony of it!—for the love of the man who turned from being her own imaginary enemy into someone who would never know the extent to which his very smile or frown could light her world or leave it dark ...

At luncheon Jon was at his gayest, flattering both girls equally and setting himself to win his hostess, by relating some of the more hilarious escapades he and David had shared during that long-ago summer j at Falconers. It was when Jon remarked that he planned to lengthen his stay in England by regarding it partly as a vacation, that Aunt Caroline turned to him to ask: 'You are alone, Mr Sandred? I don't think I have heard whether you are married or not?'

'I'm not married,' he told her.

'Oh --Dear me, forgive me, won't you? You are a widower? You have lost your wife?'

There was a tiny pause. Then Jon said: 'No. I'm just—not married, that's all.'

Lest Mrs Sweet should regard the making of after-luncheon coffee as an imposition not to be borne, Rachel went to prepare it herself. When she returned with it she found that Iris was encouraging the

suggestion of the drive to the coast as if the unfinished work on the mushrooms did not exist, leaving Rachel to explain why they could not go.

'So what?' grinned Jon. 'Where's your worry? Isn't tomorrow another day?'

Rachel pointed out: 'But it will be Saturday, and we show the Wing. And I mustn't miss the week-end market with the crop. Now we've begun to gather, it must go off tonight.'

'Well, couldn't we help you with the gathering, and still go?' It was David's voice which intervened. 'Even if it takes a lot of skill, Jon and I could probably learn. And if it's merely a matter of hands, aren't four pairs better than two?'

'Well——' Rachel hesitated. But with pleasure for them all at stake it seemed churlish not to agree that the work could certainly be halved and that, once the crop was despatched, probably they could still drive over to the coast to swim.

When Jon acclaimed the idea as if it were his own, Iris, who liked always to run with the crowd, accepted the compromise with good grace.

To the accompaniment of a good deal of laughter and quips from Jon that he had never expected to meet a mushroom on any other social plane than with kidneys and bacon in a mixed grill, the men were instructed and set to work. And when, at the end of an hour, they were already gathering in the third of the houses, Rachel calculated that even the weighing and checking could be completed in another hour.

But Iris's forced interest was on the wane. She stopped gathering altogether, accepted Jon's offer of a cigarette, and strolled up and down between the beds, sighing at intervals and pointedly suppressing small yawns.

At last Rachel took pity on her to suggest that she should go across to the store for the last supply of chips they were likely to need.

'All right.' Iris ground out her cigarette on the stone floor and paused midway between the kneeling figures of David and Jon. 'Who's coming with me?' she invited impartially.

David glanced over his shoulder to ask: 'Must someone? Can't you manage them alone?' But Jon stood up, grimacing and flexing his knees. 'Could do with a leg-stretch,' he remarked. 'I'll come.'

The other two, with the full length of the central bed between them, worked on in silence until they drew near enough to talk without raising their voices. Then David asked questions about the cultivation of the crop, listening with interest as Rachel recounted for him the rhythm of the whole process, from the autumn enriching of the compost and the spring renewal of the beds, to the rewarding point •where the new season's first pinheads were seen to be pricking through.

After the stark avowal to which she had forced her heart that morning, Rachel had not expected to experience anything but a dull pain in David's presence again. Instead, she was surprised by the quality of her ease with him when they were alone. Strangely, there was contentment in the very feel of working beside him while they talked of impersonal things. And though with one corner of her mind she was aware of the length of time Jon and Iris had been gone, she was not over-anxious for their return.

But as last David sat back on his heels to announce that he needed more chips. As if the absence of the others had just struck him, he added curiously: 'By the way, where *is* this store?'

Rachel smiled: 'Only across the yard. They could have made a gross of chips in the time. I'll go and see --'

But she got no further than a few steps outside the mushroom house where she came upon a stack of baskets placed conspicuously in her path, with a note in Iris's writing twisted about the top handle of the pile.

The scribbled message said,

'Jon has admitted to being, like me, the teeniest bit weary of mushrooms. So we're being naughty. We're going to play truant and skip on ahead in Jon's car. So long, honeys. You'll probably be able to catch us up somewhere, anyway.

'P.S.—If David is hurt at my running away, you may kiss him—just once—for me, if you like.'

Frowning with annoyance as much at the airy nonchalance of the note as at the petty meanness of Iris's defection, Rachel snatched up the pile of chips and went back to David.

She paused in the doorway and said in a blank voice which cracked with irritation: 'They've gone!'

'Gone? Gone where?'

'Without us, to the sea. Iris left me a note. Look --'

Coming in out of the sunlight, she could not at once focus on the half-light within, and he had taken from her the scrap of paper she handed vaguely in his direction before, remembering the postscript, she wished she had read it to him instead.

He scanned it and crumpled it. His voice was as expressionless as the outline of his face was dim to her vision as he said: 'I can't imagine that you want to, do you?'

'Want to—what?' But she knew, and the angry colour had surged into her cheeks as she spoke.

'Kiss me, as Iris suggests—for her. Kiss anyone, for that matter, at the moment. I gather you are far too annoyed?'

'Well, it is too bad of her, and I am annoyed.'

'You're determined to blame Iris, not Jon?'

'Naturally. Jon couldn't know how much more work there was left for the two of us to do, but she had a very good idea. Besides, as you saw, she was pretty bored already. She must have persuaded Jon --

'If you say so.' With a shrug and no more comment than that, David went on with his work, leaving Rachel to wonder whether he saw the slight to himself in Iris's action and to feel that, subtly, they had become ranged on opposite sides—he on Iris's, she on Jon's.

In the end they had not finished weighing, checking and loading of the big consignment until five o'clock. As it still had to be taken to the station, Rachel suggested, rather wearily and with a sense of anti-climax, that it was certainly not worth while to attempt to drive over to the sea then.

'But please don't trouble about me, if you want to go'

But David cut short her directions to the quiet beach they had meant to visit by saying: 'No, I agree it's too late, and there's no point in my going without you. Do you know, I've a strong feeling that it's up to us to make some kind of gesture of our own?'

'A gesture?'

'In the game of General Post that's been rather thrust upon us, I mean.' His eyes narrowed upon her quizzically. 'So—purely in the spirit of game, of course—will you retaliate by dining with me?'

Rachel thought swiftly, Retaliate? Retaliate upon Iris, of course --So he did feel it and he *was* hurt!

But though her pride ought to resent his use of her company merely as a weapon against Iris's shabby little disloyalty to him, she knew that she was going to say 'Yes.'

CHAPTER SIX

LEAVING the choice of where they should dine to David, Rachel was not surprised when he suggested the Country Club. She believed she foresaw that he calculated upon Iris's and Jon's return there during the evening and he was intent on savouring his 'retaliation' against Iris to the full.

The arrangement made, he had offered, if she would trust him with the Land Rover, to drive its load to the station, giving her time to rest and dress before he called for her at half-past seven.

It was while she was changing that she had afterthoughts about the invitation. Somehow she wanted —and would have expected—him to forgive more willingly Iris's silly impulse to run away from him with Jon. Rachel thought illogically, I love him, so I'm entitled to be on the defensive *for* him. But if he really loves Iris, he should make allowances for her. He ought to be above the obvious retort of taking out someone else.

When David came he suggested that Rachel should bring a swimsuit. There was a pool at the Club and they could swim either before they dined or afterwards, when the moon would be rising. At the Club they agreed to have dinner first, and when they were having a drink in the lounge, Glenda Moore came in with a man and woman Rachel did not know.

Glenda met her eyes across the room, waved gaily and presently came over. With a twinkle at Rachel she said she wanted to hear about the previous evening's 'success' and would they, perhaps, care to join up with her party for dinner?

Rachel hesitated: 'Well, we are rather expecting to be joined ourselves by Iris and Jonathan Sandred --' But her glance at David

received no confirmation of this. His cool, 'Are we?' which puzzled her was at once taken by Glenda as acceptance of her invitation.

Though her brows had lifted in a momentary question at the linking of Iris's name with Jon's she immediately swept the other two away for introduction to her guests.

They were husband and wife and were French. Monsieur Mauren spoke English more perfectly than Madame, who was middle-aged and *jolie laide* —ugly in an attractive way, and beneath a French elegance which she carried easily she seemed wise and kind.

It emerged at dinner that she and her husband had a dress salon in Paris and that Glenda was planning a partnership with them. Glenda appeared very happy at the prospect and shook her head in laughing denial when Monsieur Mauren hinted with rather heavy gallantry that, with her attraction, they might not keep her for a partner very long.

Glenda said: 'Don't worry. I enjoy my lone-wolf existence. I shan't marry again.'

'Ah, you may have been able to say "no" in London. In Paris it will not be so easy to continue to say "*Non*"!' he teased her.

'You underrate my strength of will.' Glenda appealed to Rachel: 'Tell him, won't you, the extent to which we career girls aren't dependent on the male animal at all!'

But before Rachel could reply he was scolding: 'You must not involve Mademoiselle Rachel in your feminist argument against her will! And you, *monsieur*'—he turned to David—'having gained her favour so far, you cannot tolerate, can you, that she should be snatched away from under your very nose. You will fight for such ground as you have gained with her?'

David twirled the stem of his glass. 'For a woman, I'd always fight. But in my own time. And after my own fashion.'

'Ah—in your own time? In dealing with a woman, *monsieur*, a man should be' warned that *his* ripe time may prove to be too late!

David shrugged. 'Perhaps. But there are circumstances where that may have to be risked.' He had not glanced towards Rachel throughout the exchange.

Laughing, Monsieur Mauren translated what had been said for the benefit of his wife, who smiled, nodded and tapped the back of Rachel's hand. In rapid French, of which Rachel was able to catch the gist, but which she fervently hoped David did not understand, Madame said: '*Alors*, your man is one of the proud ones; one of the stiffnecks of his sex. But if you decide to take him in *your* good time, *mademoiselle*, I think you may be very happy!'

Rachel began: 'Oh, but I—that is --' and was only saved from complete confusion by the fact that Glenda was making a move towards adjourning to the lounge for coffee. The party broke up soon afterwards, as Monsieur and Madame Mauren were driving back to London that night. Glenda left with them, and Rachel found herself wondering in what tactful form David would make it easy for her to suggest they should soon go too.

He glanced out of the window. 'It's hardly dark, but the moon is coming up behind the willows. Shall we give ourselves a little longer to digest our meal before we go for our swim?'

'Yes, let's. You—you're sure you want to swim?'

'I thought we'd arranged to? Don't you want to now?'

'Yes, of course. I love swimming after dark. But —Jon and Iris?'

'What about them?' he retorted, with an odd air of rounding upon her for mentioning them.

'Well, for one thing—where are they? They must have left the coast hours ago. For another, I was surprised when you denied to Glenda that we were expecting them.'

'But were we?'

'Weren't *you*?''

'I wasn't counting on it as a probability. As they're not here, they'll have returned to Falconers or stopped off for dinner somewhere on the road. Would you like another cigarette, or shall we have one down at the pool before we go in?'

There was an enchanting half-light abroad when they strolled across the sloping lawns which led down to the willow-fringed pool where the addition of diving staging and crazy-paved terraces had adapted the flow of an old millstream for the pleasure of the Club's members. As David had said, the moon was showing behind the lace of the trees on the far side of the pool, and the lawn there was dark by contrast with the lighted terrace and dressing cabins ranged behind the diving stages.

There were a few swimmers there before them; laughter floated intermittently over the water which settled, smooth and almost unruffled, soon after each dive or curvet of limbs had cleaved its surface. The night air was warm and very still.

When they had changed, by tacit consent they sat on the lawn side by side, hugging their knees-and watching the other swimmers dive and turn and dare each other to feats. But one by one the small parties broke up; then the shouts and laughter were only from cabin to cabin or from people on their way back to the Club buildings, and the dark water was really at rest.

David stood up, held out both hands to Rachel. 'Did you bring a robe?' he asked.

'I thought we shouldn't linger, so I didn't.'

'I did. If it's warm enough to laze afterwards, I'll get it for you. By the way, the water temperature still reads nearly seventy. Pleasant enough --Will you dive first or shall I?'

'I will.' Rachel chose the middle board. A little nervous of his watching eye, she poised, plunged and enjoyed a split second of satisfaction that she was going to strike cleanly and go deep. She came up in time to see David in mid swallow-flight. Then he came up beside her, laughing and thrusting back wet hair.

Rachel said: 'After the first shock, the water is like silk. Swimming after dark, I always feel a little guilty about disturbing water when it's earned a right to a night's peace.'

Lazily floating, David murmured to the sky: 'The nicer-natured pools don't mind. It lets them know they're alive. Let's moon, shall we? Or do you want to dive again?'

They 'mooned', talking a little, treading water, floating and sometimes taking the length or breadth of the pool side by side at an easy lope. One of these journeys brought them to the lawn fronting the willow trees, and Rachel reluctantly climbed out.

'Have you had enough?' David was standing beside her.

'Not really. But it's getting late. We ought to go.'

'Could you bear to stay for a last cigarette if I fetched your towel and my robe?'

'You smoke. I won't. And I'm not cold.'

'You may be.' He flashed back across the pool and ran back again, dry towels and his robe over his arm.

Rachel dried her legs, arms and hair, but said she would only sit on the wrap until or if she felt cold. David reached for his cigarettes and lighter from its pocket and lay beside her, his chin propped on his hand.

Their talk was fitful, question and answer emerging from and dropping back into silence. David asked: 'You know this pool, you say?'

'Yes. Iris and I are non-resident members of the Club. But I don't often find time to come.'

'When you do, d'you come alone?'

'Sometimes. Occasionally on Sundays with Glenda. But this is the first time this summer.'

Pause. Then: 'I suppose you wanted to dine with her and her guests this evening?'

Rachel denied: 'I didn't. But when you queried that we were expecting Jon and Iris, I thought you meant --'

'Well, I didn't. I was merely accommodating you. Incidentally, I'm sorry anything I said at dinner as a generalisation should have been so misread by Madame Mauren. I didn't mean you to be embarrassed by it.'

Rachel's breath caught. 'How—did you know I was embarrassed?'

'You blushed and kept what she said to yourself. You didn't repeat it or comment on it "in clear".'

'But *you'd* understood it?'

He reminded her obliquely: 'I've lived for—how many years now?—in Quebec, where, with ninety per cent of the population French, understanding the language is a necessity.'

'Oh -- But you didn't correct Madame Mauren?'

'I hadn't corrected Monsieur Mauren, who had been assuming much the same thing, and it meant retracing the argument right back to its false start. That would have made heavy weather of it, which would have embarrassed you still more. Besides, I thought it lent some much-needed colour to our game of General Post.'

'But how could it help, to give complete strangers an impression of us which wasn't true? Glenda, for instance, will surely have corrected it by now.'

'I'm afraid I hadn't taken into account the extent to which Mrs Moore might be in your confidence. Also I thought it wasn't probable we should meet her guests again, and that made it permissible to play our harmless game wholeheartedly. But you don't agree?'

'No, I don't. But it doesn't matter.' With an effort Rachel looked at the argument from his angle and saw that her objections were indeed making something ponderous of his 'harmless game'. Changing the subject, she went on: 'Tell me about Quebec, won't you? All I know about it came from *The Seats of the Mighty* which Jon lent me to read years ago.'

David stirred, then settled himself more easily on his back, fingers linked at his nape. Not looking at her, he said: 'Well, Gilbert Parker was as good an historical introduction as any. It's a lovely city and not industrial at all. The only way to make your first approach to it is from the sea --' He talked to her silence for some time, and then in

mid-sentence he sat up. 'That's enough for now. You're cold,' he accused.

Though she denied that she had shivered, he was tugging at the bathing wrap, forcing her to get to her feet. Standing himself, he was a pace above her on the slope, looking full down upon her upturned face as he threw the robe round her, tied the neckcord.

'Thank you.' But as she made to step back she found herself pinned where she stood by the weight of his hands upon her shoulders. 'Please --'

Warned by instinct, she jerked her head aside so that, as he caught her to him, his lips brushed the length of her cheek before they found her mouth.

For a moment she was still, compelled as much by an ache of longing to allow her body to curve willingly into his hold as by the arrogant mastery of a kiss which she dared not believe held any meaning for her. Then she thrust free, and he made no effort against letting her go.

Panting, she faced him, hungry to hear him say that he had meant it, but guessing that he could not even defend an impulse which, so far as she was concerned, threatened to put them on the brink of near-enmity again. But the same instinct which had sought to avoid his kiss warned her against letting him suspect that it had troubled her to deep hurt or real anger. Guarding her voice from tremor, she accused him lightly: 'You certainly enter into the spirit of our game more thoroughly than I'm prepared to. Perhaps it's understandable, since you invented it. But at dinner you took it further than I had bargained for, and now --'

'—And now—still further, and against your will? Is that what you mean? If so, I'm deeply sorry.'

She managed to shrug. 'If it was merely an idea to make the "General Post" more realistic, it isn't worth an apology.'

His jaw set. 'I see. You acquit me of intending offence. But you still take it?'

'No. I was only reminding you that even female self-conceit is entitled to draw the line at being kissed against her will and in—in default of someone else. At this point and these circumstances you'd have kissed Iris, I suppose?'

By some trick of the glancing moonlight his eyes were without expression, glassily cold. 'Probably, yes,' he confirmed.

In Rachel's heart a knife stabbed, turned. And he could not know he had used it upon her! As she began to walk away down the slope: 'With happier results, it's to be hoped?' she asked.

He caught her up. His hand behind her elbow was the most impersonal of supports. He said: 'Shall we say—more evenly shared, and leave it at that?'

They parted at their cabins, and their talk in the car on Rachel's way home was a small tide of commonplaces, unimportant, infinitely safe.

There was a message from Mrs Sweet on the telephone pad. 'Miss Iris rang up. She was having dinner with Mr Sandred in Colchester.'

But no one heard Iris come in that night and though Rachel was not present, Aunt Caroline took Iris to task, both for deserting on the mushroom gathering and for staying out until the small hours.

At luncheon Iris varied sulkiness with a manner too studiously polite. And, knowing her signs of storm, Rachel was almost prepared for the outburst when Iris joined her at the entrance to the Wing to await their first visitors of the afternoon.

Iris poked irritably at the pile of small silver which formed their float of change. 'You'd think,' she raged, 'that I'd committed a crime. And it wasn't just a pi-jaw about being out late. We were both later the night before last, goodness knows. But according to Aunt Caroline that was quite all right, because it was a party we'd been invited to "properly". What do you think of that for an attitude too utterly nineteen-thirty? I was on the mat for—let's see—one for leaving David in the lurch --'

'Well, you did, didn't you?'

'How were Jon and I to know you wouldn't play up and come along? But count number two was that I'd put *you* in a false position with regard to David by forcing you to rely solely on the help of a man for whom apparently you don't care at all. Aunt C's exact words!'

Rachel said rather wearily: 'What I don't get is why, if you wanted to skip the rest of the mushroom job, you didn't take off with David, not Jon.'

'Jon offered. David didn't. Anyway, I'm getting the slightest bit browned off with David. Of course he's still as attentive as I could ask and he never fails to kiss me when I want him to. But what does all that add up to, if he still doesn't come to the point?'

' "The point" being a proposal of marriage, I suppose? And you've known him for something under seven weeks!'

'So what? He's free, white and over twenty-one, isn't he?' demanded Iris pertly. 'If he means to ask me, what's he dawdling for?'

'And if he asked you, you'd accept?'

Iris shrugged. 'I'm not telling you Yes or No. And I'd probably keep him guessing for a bit first.' Oblivious of Rachel's flinch of distaste, she went on: 'Anyway, you didn't suppose, did you, that I was going

to let Jon conclude that everything was all signed, sealed and delivered between David and me?'

"Why should it matter what Jon's conclusions about you are?"

'But don't you see that it would write me off for good in his eyes?'

A little wearily Rachel said: 'Look, I realised yesterday that you went off with him because you were bored with work and probably he was too. Also, since, I've suspected that you weren't averse to making David a bit jealous of Jon. But --'

'But'—put in Iris sulkily—'you didn't then, and you don't want to now,, believe that Jon Sandred could possibly be seriously interested in me? Well, this is rather where we came in, isn't it? Supposing, though, I could make him serious? Supposing, after yesterday, he could be so taken with me that I've an idea I need hardly *try*?''

'Supposing—supposing' on a rising cadence in Iris's voice usually meant that she was inviting a 'dare' which she did not expect to be taken up. Suspecting that she would be relieved if this one were not, Rachel ignored it.

It was only later—and too late—that she was to realise it had been a gage flung down, a challenge hung about with consequences at which even Iris herself could not have guessed.

So far as Rachel knew, Iris did not see David throughout the next week. He might have rung up, but he did not come over to Falconers, and Iris was evasive to Aunt Caroline's suggestions that, he should be invited to dinner or lunch. Aunt Caroline worried to Rachel about what she called their 'lover's quarrel', but Iris did not appear at all upset by their apparent rift. She spent her time in a great deal of busy letter-writing, and at the end of the week the result emerged. She was

going, she said, to spend a fortnight or three weeks with Aunt Nicola and Uncle Maxwell, and her manner of announcing the invitation to her aunt and to Rachel had an air of daring them to put difficulties in her way.

She dealt swiftly and summarily with Aunt Caroline's mild objections. 'Yes, I realise it will mean extra work for Rachel, showing the Wing. But when I come back I'll do double duty while she goes off if she likes.' And: 'Of *course* I can travel alone! It's simply a direct flight, and they're paying for everything.' And to Rachel's blunt question: 'Yes, David knows I'm going. I've told him that if he's good he may drive me up to the airport.'

As the quarrel was evidently made up, Rachel supposed she must get used to the thought of David and Iris together, greeting, parting on the promise of meeting again ... making love. But as yet she had too vivid a memory of his head bent above her own in the moonlight while he sought her uplifted mouth in an invitation without meaning from him to her.

On the day of Iris's departure Rachel said her farewells and good wishes for the journey and contrived to be out when Iris left with David for the airport. David rang Aunt Caroline later in the day to say that he had seen Iris safely aboard her plane; a couple of days later there followed a picture postcard each for Rachel and her aunt. Iris had arrived safely and on 'marvellous' time; Cannes was 'marvellous'; so was the weather; she was having *the* most marvellous holiday and (in a cramped postscript) were they both all right?

Aunt Caroline replied by letter giving their own small news, and Rachel sent love. But after that, for more than the time they had expected Iris to be away/there was silence from Cannes—a silence which was broken explosively when one morning David rang Rachel on a personal call.

Surprised, she took the receiver handed to her by Mrs Sweet and while the Exchange confirmed the contact, had time to puzzle why he should have made an importance of only speaking to her. When he came on the line his, 'Rachel?' was so urgent a question that she could not keep apprehension from her tone as she replied: 'Yes. What is it? Is anything wrong? Why --?'

He cut across her questions. 'I must see you, and I don't want to come over to Falconers. Can you, instead, manage to come to the plant? My secretary will expect you and we can adjourn to my quarters to talk. How soon can you get here if you'll come?'

Rachel made a swift calculation and told him how soon. But she could not leave the mystery there. 'What is it all about?' she begged.

He cut across that too. 'Jon has left the telling to my discretion, and I happen to feel strongly that you should hear it first.'

'Jon?' Her deepening perplexity caught at the name. 'I don't understand. If it's Jon's news and he is there with you, why doesn't he tell me himself?'

David said, his tone brittle: 'Jon isn't here with me. You should know that.'

Irritated now by their cross-purposes, Rachel bit back the impulse to retort that she was not Jon's keeper. She said: 'Well, I didn't know, and I'd have expected you'd be together at the plant. But if he isn't there, where is he?'

David said: 'I can hardly credit that you don't know. But if you really don't—he's in Cannes. For the rest, he and Iris are engaged. I'd rather you hadn't made me tell you over the phone. So will you come?'

The receiver clicked as he rang off.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AS RACHEL drove the Land Rover fast towards her appointment with David the echo of Iris's *supposing I could make Jon serious* rang ceaselessly in her head.

With every turn of the car's wheels she was agonising towards her meeting with David and at the same time dreading his rebuff of her sympathy. That night a month ago he had not betrayed Iris with a word of reproach for her defection with Jon. An outsider-might not have guessed he had felt the slight, at all, and today on the telephone he had sounded equally negative and withdrawn.

When she arrived at Synthics she was shown into his office. He greeted her formally as 'Miss Southern', told her that Jon's letter was in his quarters and after a word or two on a business matter with his secretary, he took her up in the lift.

Her first glance at his face had confirmed that sympathising with him would not be easy. There was over-tenseness and strain about the set of his jaw; his eyes were guarded and watchful of her and there was a new tension in the way he held his shoulders. He gave her a chair, offered cigarettes and remained standing, an elbow on the mantelshelf, when he had dropped the opened letter into her lap, advising that she should read it for herself.

But Rachel rejected it, shaking her head. 'I'd rather you gave me the bare facts of how and why,' she said.

David's lids momentarily shadowed his eyes. 'As you please. In fact, Jon writes sincerely enough to convince me that, difficult as it is to take, Iris's impact on him was as inevitable as tomorrow's sunrise, and one knows these things happen quite unbidden. But if you'd rather not read it, the bare facts are that he flew to Paris, taking his car by air

ferry a day or two after I saw Iris off to Cannes. Shortly afterwards he drove south by road, and the next address I had for him was Cannes.'

'But,' frowned Rachel, 'as soon as you knew he was there didn't it say anything to you? Didn't you *wonder* --?'

'Wonder what? Cannes isn't a walled city; there isn't *purdah* for women in the West, and why shouldn't they both fetch up in the same Riviera resort? Perhaps you consider that I ought to have cabled an urgent warning that if they so much as met for drinks, they were infringing certain rights back here? Heavens! how wary of their sex must women be if they have to fear and suspect to much so early?'

Seeing his irritable flick of ash from his cigarette and hearing the rasp of cynicism in his tone, Rachel thought *I suppose he needs to lash out, not realising that "he needn't conceal his hurt from me. But if only he had less courage! Just the little less that would put him in need of some comfort of mine --*

Aloud she said: 'That's unfair. We don't suspect without reason. But I've realised now that if I had known they were together in Cannes, I should have had cause enough.'

'Well, I hadn't,' he said shortly. 'And what cause had you?'

'Just that some time before Iris mooted the Cannes visit—in fact, after the night when --'

'When you and I dined and swam by moonlight at the Club?' he dropped into her pause.

'Yes, the day after. Iris hinted then that if she wanted to, she was confident she could attract Jon whenever she pleased. I didn't believe then that she meant to try, or that she would succeed if she did. But evidently the plan to wangle an invitation to Cannes and to suggest to

Jon that he went there too was her way of arranging other meetings. That done, she seems to have found the rest—easy.'

David said quietly: 'How determined you are to blame Iris as the prime mover towards this engagement! Surely, in the very nature of things, she could hardly have achieved it without Jon's consent? You only destroy sympathy by not being fair.'

Rachel said grimly: 'I'm being fair. You may know one Iris. I know another—the one who usually finds conquests easy and who is piqued by those which aren't, or are forbidden ground. She couldn't have had more than a passing interest in Jon at first. Then she imagined she'd been challenged to a flirtation with him and she set out to arrange it. Since then she has seen the advantages in being married to him and has managed to entrap him in earnest, without caring whose happiness she wrecks in the process.'

'Entrap is a very strong word.'

'Not too strong. I don't believe she could claim she loves Jon. What's more'—she turned on Davis —'are *you* prepared to accept it without a fight?'

'There's nothing either of us have a right to fight,' he advised. 'Besides, where do you this interference would get you? Do you imagine Jon would thank you? Or that Iris would ever forgive you? Hasn't life taught you anything, girl, if you haven't learned never to come between two people in love?'

'These two *aren't* in love! How can *you*, of all people, claim to believe they are?'

He said on a short sigh: 'Let's agree that I've learned the futility of making a passion of wishful thinking—about anything at all.'

Rachel supposed wearily that he was refusing to share the struggle with her because, loving Iris still, he could not bring himself to blame her for anything she did against him. But as a last effort in his cause she muttered: 'There's still one thing. Iris is under age and Aunt Caroline would have to consent to her marrying Jon.'

'Would she withhold consent? Jon is eminently —eligible.'

'There's also the frightful difference in their ages,' said Rachel, before she remembered that Jon and David were much of an age and that Aunt Caroline had been happy enough about Iris and David.

Without pointing out the weakness of that argument, he agreed: 'Yes. But Iris isn't a childish seventeen, nor Jon a particularly *sober* thirty-four ---' He paused, gathered the sheets of Jon's letter and tore them across. 'Meanwhile,' he said then, 'there's the news to be told to Miss Southern before Jon brings Iris home tonight, and I'm hoping you won't refuse to help me with that?'

'I wondered whether Jon would have put that task on you too. I must say he expects a good deal of our friendship for him!'

David shrugged and looked at her oddly. 'In its time it has withstood more—and managed to survive,' he said drily.

More than that, having lost your girl to him, you should be left to pick up the pieces, to tie up all the Graying ends? queried Rachel in silent amazement.

Equally with the fact of the engagement, Rachel thought that Aunt Caroline would resent having been kept completely in the dark about the affair until then. But after her first hurt dismay she thanked David for giving her the news and did not question the affront of having to hear it from him instead of from Iris or Jon or from her own sister.

Feeling for her, Rachel assured her: 'You mustn't think, Aunt Caroline, that I had any inkling which I've kept from you. Neither had David until this letter from Jon. And before she went away Iris wasn't even interested in Jon.'

'No.' Aunt Caroline's glance slid to David and she sighed. But she did not attempt to put her sympathy for him into words. She thanked him again for his trouble, adding: 'Would it be expecting too much to ask that you should dine with us all tonight, I wonder. You said, I think, that we may expect the others around seven or so?'

David said: 'Yes, I've checked the time of their arrival by the air car ferry. And if you'll have me, I'd like to dine.'

When David had gone Aunt Caroline said: 'How well he takes it! And before she went to France I was so happy in believing that he and Iris were on the point of becoming engaged! Do you suppose, Rachel, that even then this plan to meet Jonathan Sandred in Cannes was already in the child's mind?'

'There's no doubt in mine now,' said Rachel drily, 'that she went to Cannes solely with that idea. If Jon hadn't been interested in a casual suggestion, that he should go down there too, it could appear that she had merely invited herself for a holiday with Aunt Nicola. When he was interested, she must have felt safer altogether in Cannes. She could guess what I would say about her throwing over David as she has done. Not, I daresay, that she would have jilted him altogether for anything short of a firm engagement to Jon, who happens to be the better match.'

'Dear, isn't that rather bitter?' Aunt Caroline sighed again. 'But perhaps you feel you know Iris better than I do. I must say I've never known quite how to handle her, and as she knows only too well that she, not you, has always been Nicola's favourite, I'm afraid she had traded on that. But I do think Nicola should have warned me what

was going on. It wasn't kind of her not to. It wasn't kind at all!' .. At the sight of her aunt's quivering lip Rachel saw with dismay that not the least of Iris's mischief might be the driving of a wedge of offence between the two sisters. And that must not happen. So she said gently: 'Aunt Caroline, you shouldn't blame Aunt Nicola, I think. She had met David in London, but she may not have known that Iris had encouraged him and had gone on seeing him. As she sees kite affair, Jon must appear an excellent match for Iris. So perhaps she told you nothing until it was settled because she wanted it to be a happy surprise.'

'It could be that, I suppose,' murmured Aunt Caroline. 'You think that Nicola may really have believed she was acting for the best?'

'I'm sure she did.' As if almost against her own will, Rachel went on: 'Perhaps we haven't the right to judge Iris over all this. I have been blaming her, you know. But if she really didn't love David, it's a good job she found out in time. And Jon may be genuinely in love with her.'

After luncheon she persuaded Aunt Caroline to go to rest as usual while she herself arranged a welcoming bowl of flowers for Iris's room and helped Mrs Sweet with the early preparations for dinner. During the afternoon the telephone rang with a telegraphed message from Iris which she decided Aunt Caroline need not be disturbed to hear. 'Darlings,' it ran, 'forgive big news breaking via David. Thought better that way, as wee bit nervous w:old disapproval in home. Deliriously happy. Ring jungle diamond, whopper. Expect us sevenish by car.'

But seven o'clock came and went without sign of them, and when David arrived between half-past seven and eight, Rachel was pouring a drink for him h hen the telephone rang again.

'That'll be to say they're held up somewhere,' she forecast as she left the room to answer it. But it was neither Iris's nor Jon's voice on the

line. It was a stranger's, putting a terse question as to her identity and squandering no unnecessary words about the news it had to give.

As she listened the blood seemed to drain from Rachel's heart, and it was with a stern effort of will that she steadied herself to put her own questions, to acknowledge the answers. At last she said: 'Thank you. Yes, someone will be coming over. At once --' and replaced the receiver.

In the pleasant sitting-room David and Aunt Caroline had stopped talking and were watching the door for her return. But at the sight of her their expectancy seemed to freeze, and as David rose and came over to her, it was as if what she had to tell them had already stalked before her.

She said: 'It wasn't Jon and Iris, but—about them. They've had an accident. On the way down --'

David snatched quickly at her hand and she read his muttered: 'Steady!' as a warning to be gentle with Aunt Caroline. He asked: 'Are they hurt? Where are they? And who rang?'

'They're in Colchester Memorial Hospital,' she told him. 'They crashed nearby, it seems. Jon took the worst of it, and his condition is critical, the hospital says. Iris may be only shocked, but they can't be sure yet. They're both being detained, of course. I said we'd go over. But they insist that Jon's condition makes it advisable for his next-of-kin to be told at once.'

David said: 'Yes, his father. If we get a cable off, he could fly over tomorrow, if necessary.'

Aunt Caroline said: 'Then cable him from here, please. Rachel, we must go to Iris --'

But as she caught at the arm of her chair in order to rise, David's hand on her shoulder gently pressed her back. 'When I've cabled Mr Sandred, would you let me drive Rachel to Colchester?' he asked. 'Almost certainly Iris wouldn't be allowed to come back, and if she may not even be seen, you'd have had the journey for nothing. May I persuade you not to go, Miss Southern?'

Aunt Caroline glanced undecidedly from him to Rachel.

'What do you think, dear? Ought I to go?'

But Rachel added her advice to David's, and when Aunt Caroline gave in on the understanding Rachel should ring back as soon as she had news, David cabled Mr Sandred and he and Rachel set out on the twenty miles' drive to Colchester.

At the hospital a Ward Sister came to them in the waiting-room.

'You are relatives?' she asked, and on hearing who they were she told them that Iris was in a private room attached to one of the women's wards and that Rachel could get permission to see her before they left. She was bruised and shocked, but no more, it was thought now, than that. Jon had been brought unconscious to the Sister's own ward. His chest was crushed and one arm was broken; he had needed a blood transfusion at once and he was still on the operating table. His condition was very grave indeed. 'But what happened Sister?' asked David. 'We've had no details, you know.'

She shook her head. 'The police are puzzled. Miss Southern's account is rather confused, I understand. It seems that the car just slewed at speed across a completely clear road, hit a wall on the wrong side, and half overturned across it.'

'A burst tyre?' suggested David.

'Apparently not. I hear that Miss Southern claims she spoke to Mr Sandred just before; he made no reply, and the next she knew was that the car was piling up on the wall and Mr Sandred was slumped across the steering wheel. Fortunately she didn't realise that he'd been crushed helplessly on to the steering column, and help was quickly at hand. But it looks like an accident without cause unless --'

'Unless?' prompted David as she paused.

'Well, I may be exceeding my office by telling you this. But Mr Sandred's failure to answer Miss Southern could point to his needing to give all his attention to controlling the car even then. Or to his having lost control of it because he was unconscious *before* the crash --'

Rachel breathed: 'You mean, Sister, a kind of— of stroke?'

'Yes. But I've only told you because you asked, and it could have been something less serious—even a momentary cramp. Anyway, Miss Southern may be able to give more help when she is less shocked than she is. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do for Mr Sandred tonight. But would you like me to ring through to see if you can have a few minutes with Miss Southern before you go?'

Rachel went alone to see Iris. She was lying with her head turned from the door and one bandaged arm was outflung across the coverlet. There was a damp ball of handkerchief between her fingers, and though she sat up and tried to smile at Rachel, her eyes filled again with weak tears.

'Dear—how are you?' Rachel's hand smoothed her bright hair. 'We came over as soon as we got the message you were here.'

'Aunt Caroline too?' gulped Iris.

'No. David brought me.'

'Oh—David.' Iris paused blankly.

'He was at Falconers, you see, because he was going to dine with us when you and Jon came home.'

'Did—did he mind much? About Jon and me, I mean?'

Rachel said guardedly: 'He didn't reveal what he felt, but I'm sure he wants you to be happy.' Changing the subject, she touched the bandaged arm. 'What's the matter here?'

'Oh, it's badly grazed somehow. I'm a mass of bruises everywhere else too. And my neck is so stiff --'

As she rubbed at it ruefully the big diamond on her hand winked and flashed and Rachel pointed to it with a smile. 'Jon's ring? May I see?'

'Oh, yes.' Iris spread her fingers in a gesture of display and said with vague pride: 'It cost the earth in France, and Jon wouldn't tell me what he had to pay the Customs to let me bring it in.' Then abruptly she drew her hand away and raised frightened eyes to Rachel's.

'Have you seen him?' she asked.

'No, he was still being examined in the operating theatre. There are some complications about his condition, we gathered. But you mustn't worry that he isn't going to be all right.'

Iris faltered: 'I'd—I'd try not to, if it had been— well, just a car crash. But it wasn't, you know. It was something that happened to Jon, so that he just let the car go. I heard them saying—the doctor and the police—that if he hadn't been helpless beforehand he could have braced himself against being as badly hurt as he was. They meant that he was kind of paralysed at the time we crashed, and that's a *horrible* thing to believe of anyone as fit and young as Jon.'

'Anybody is liable to be taken suddenly ill at the wheel of a car,' Rachel pointed out.

'Yes, but -- Well, if it was something wrong with his heart or his brain, it could happen again, or even never get better this time! Why, he might become an invalid—and we've only just got engaged! Oh, it's not fair; it's just not *fair* --' And Iris burst into a storm of weeping which brought a nurse hurrying into her room.

After a sedative which gradually quietened her to drowsiness she fell asleep. And upon the nurse's promise that when she woke there would probably be some news about Jon, Rachel left. She telephoned to Aunt Caroline and went out to David, waiting for her in the car.

David said: 'I've seen the surgeon who will operate on Jon. They hope to know the result in an hour, and they'll telephone Falconers as soon as they do. How did you find Iris?'

'Asleep now, but she was very overwrought. They haven't told her much about Jon's immediate danger, I gather. But she's torturing herself over the implications of his collapse before they crashed.'

'Poor child! And I'm afraid they've decided he did have some paralysing seizure. But while he was unconscious from his other injuries, they couldn't gauge the extent of it, of course.'

At Rachel's quick sigh of dismay David laid a hand on her knee. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'I'd no right to forget what all this means to you as well. You've had about as much as you can stand. If I drive slowly, will you try to doze on the way back?'

To satisfy him, Rachel closed her eyes and tried. But presently the very rhythm of the engine had taken up the beat of Iris's unguarded cry—'*It's not fair*. It's just not fair!'

Not fair to Jon? Or not fair to the promise of Iris's brilliant engagement which Jon's seizure had spoiled? Rachel could not forgive herself for her rankling doubt.

On receipt of David's cable Mr Sandred senior took air passage at once from Quebec. But it was to be several anxious days before Jon's name was removed from the hospital danger list, and three weeks before he was allowed to be moved to a small but exclusive nursing home near the Country Club where his I father was staying with David.

Meanwhile, Iris had not been detained in hospital, though she had been allowed to see Jon before Rachel had gone over to bring her home.

By that time Rachel knew the worst that was feared for Jon. His stamina had pulled him through the very serious operation on his ribs and chest. But the crippling spinal seizure which had led to the accident would lift only by degrees and might persist in a modified form for an indefinite time.

At that stage his surgeon-specialists were not to be committed to any promise for him. On the other hand, there was hope that he might recover suddenly or that the superlatives of modern surgery would achieve the same result. But his present prospects were for nothing but a very quiet convalescence and the most gradual return to normal life. It was agreed that he could marry, but real normality for him was still a long way off.

Not knowing how much Iris had been told or had guessed, Rachel had respected her frozen silence on the drive back to Falconers. Iris would need and seek very soon all the sympathy and reassurance they could give her, she believed. But throughout the days which followed Iris

had continued to rebuff to the¹ point of rudeness even her future father-in-law's. attempts to comfort her.

Mr Sandred was a spare, shrewd-eyed man of sixty who had created a huge industrial empire within the span of his working lifetime. He wasted few words and his manner was austere abrupt. But he could be gentle, and it was patent that for many years all his affection and indulgence had been centred upon Jon.

When Jon could be seen regularly Mr Sandred put a car and chauffeur at Iris's disposal, so that she could visit the nursing home every day. He was unselfish enough to allow her to go alone, and Iris went on her daily errand with a lack of either undue eagerness or reluctance which, Aunt Caroline confided to Rachel, was unnatural and which disturbed her profoundly.

Aunt Caroline worried: 'She isn't behaving like herself at all. Always before, she has brimmed over with everything, good or bad, concerning her own affairs. But now what do we ever wring from her but "Jon was too tired to talk" or "He was a little better and managed to pour a cup of tea with his left hand"? Surely she shouldn't bottle everything up like that? She ought to know she needn't keep all that must be worrying her from *us*.'

But Rachel, who had begun to feel a new respect for Iris, advised against forcing her confidence. Rachel thought, I believe she is finding that it helps her courage to bottle up. She hates accepting that if Jon is out of action for a long time, they aren't going to have either the kind of engagement or even the marriage they planned. But I think she's begun to face it. She's stopped crying, 'It's not fair ...'

Then one day Iris surprised her by asking her to visit Jon, who was still allowed only one visitor at a time.

'He'd rather see you, surely?' smiled Rachel.

'He sees me every day. He said he wanted you and that he'd hardly exchanged a word with you since our engagement. I said you'd go.'

'Of course I'll go.' How short a time had elapsed since the very thought of Jon had been a challenge! But now even the reproach she had felt against him for David's sake had drained away, turned to the cool kindness of pity instead.

She found him cheerful and full of the small prides of the invalid. He had done this; he had been promised that; soon he would be allowed to attempt the other—pathetic achievements in themselves, but infinitely satisfying to anyone who had to count one step at a time.

She had brought him a box of his favourite handmade cigarettes, and she shared his pleasure when he opened it and lit up unaided and then showed her some of the many tasks he could do for himself with his one good hand. He had little feeling on the other side of his body, but fortunately his speech was not affected at all.

Presently he said: 'Do you realise that I don't know for sure whether I've got your blessing on the engagement? And, of any, yours happens to be the one I crave. D. was the first to tell you, I suppose? What *did* you think about it when you heard?'

'It was—a great surprise.'

Jon's eyes narrowed. 'Oh, dear—you're hedging. Why?'

'No. I'm happy for you, if *you* are.' By now, quite sincerely she was. 'But I'll be truthful. It was less of a surprise than a shock. Because of David himself.'

'Because of him and Iris? She wasn't in love with him, though, you know.'

'I can believe that.'

'You mustn't be hard on the kid. Even I have got to face the fact that she attracts men as a candle lures moths. And though there seemed to be something between them at first, I'm quite willing to take her word for it that there was nothing serious. Why, if there had been, wouldn't old D. have called at once for pistols for two?'

The flippancy jarred newly on Rachel. 'Being David—would he? Remember, you are his best friend.'

Jon shook his head. 'Sorry, Rachel. D. and I are buddies all right. But even our friendship wouldn't go that far.'

'Don't you believe that love might?'

'You mean—that once D. realised that Iris loved me, he might sacrifice himself to the idea that her happiness lay with me and not with him?'

'Something like that.'

'Well, it's something that a chap like D. would never admit to, and it's not a subject I'd care to tackle him about. Men don't conduct post-mortems on love affairs, you know. It's probably out of sympathy for the amount of face they know a chap's pride can lose when he's been turned down. But I suppose that sounds hard to you?'

'Hard—but perhaps you see it as salt to a wound.'

'Yes. And anyway, when a girl has made her choice, she can't be handed back like a parcel to a man she doesn't want, however much he may want her. And Iris *has* chosen me. bless her. I've better proof of that than the next chap could possibly have, haven't I? I mean'—Jon's grimace went meaningly to his inert right side—'whatever hope the medicos hold out for the future, I'm a pretty poor bet at present for any girl.'

'Not for any girl who really loves you.' Rachel paused before adding: 'When we talked on the night of the Synthics party you didn't try to hide that, after parting from Julie, you were drifting and feeling cynical about your future. If Iris has really changed all that for you, I'm awfully glad. But—forgive me for bringing this up—I thought that it was a terrible tragedy, Julie's throwing you over, because I got the impression then that you were still in love with her.'

'So I was! So I am.'

'Oh, Jon --!'

'Don't mistake me. I'm not cheating Iris of anything. But the way I loved Julie happens for a chap once and for ever. Even you, Rachel dear, were only a kind of overture to Julie. But though a part of me will love and remember her till I die, all the rest is going to enjoy loving Iris and shielding her as she deserves. Yes, I know I'm nearly seventeen years older than she is. But when a girl like Iris loves a man who ckn see his forties looming, she renews his youth for him. For me she was suddenly *there*, like a new candle flame. And the way she has taken all this wretched business proves that she must care. There's the difference, you see, which in time may turn Julie into a mere frail ghost, She let me down, and Iris., babe as she is, is going to stand by.'

Jon paused and grinned: 'Heavens, what a speech! How come, anyway, that I have to explain myself to you? Wasn't even our brief trip a head- over-heels affair while it lasted? In other words— when I go, I *go*!'

Rachel nodded and smiled. 'I know, Jon. You're awfully—wholesale. But seeing you so happy about Iris makes me *really* glad.'

She meant it. And when she left him that day it was indeed as if she had shed misgiving like dropped cloak.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a week or two later that Aunt Caroline came to Rachel with a tentative suggestion. Mr Sandred, whose stay in England with Jon "was likely to be prolonged indefinitely, was forced by pressure of business to bring over his elderly personal secretary to cope with the work which was piling up. Unfortunately the Country Club could not accommodate another guest for a time, and there was no hotel in Hoops Cray.

'So I wondered,' wavered Aunt Caroline, 'whether we might put this Mr Blake up here for a while. It would be courteous to offer, don't you think? But of course there's Mrs Sweet. She is sure to grumble about the additional work he would make for her.'

Rachel said: 'I don't think we need make a problem of Mrs Sweet. I'm having a good mushroom season and the Wing is doing well too. So we can afford some extra help in the kitchen, and old Sam's granddaughter actually wants to go into service. We could soften the impact of Mr Blake on Mrs Sweet by letting her have this girl to train at once.'

"The offer made, it was accepted gratefully by Mr Sandred, and a few days later his secretary arrived to fit himself into the Falconers household with surprising tact and ease.

He was a stout little-man with the bucolic appearance of a prosperous farmer,, and for all his highly- paid clerical ability, he had all sorts of practical skills at his fingertips too. He would turn his hand to anything from washing-up to relieving Rachel or Iris of their duty in the Wing; he might be working on papers for Mr Sandred until midnight but would still be up in time to put in an hour's gardening before breakfast. And when Aunt Caroline fluttered in dismay over the failure of any mechanism in the house or grounds his 'Don't worry, ma'am—I'll fix *that*' was a promise he always fulfilled.

Aunt Caroline murmured of him to Rachel: 'I confess I wasn't looking forward to having a man about the house. But now I believe I shall quite miss Andrew Blake when he goes. So many little things one can *lean* on him for, don't you feel?'

'He's a treasure,' agreed Rachel warmly. 'But you're a step ahead of me in his confidence, Aunt Caroline. I didn't know his Christian name!'

Aunt Caroline's blush was the faintest of pinks. 'Didn't you, dear? Oh well, he just happened to mention that his initials A.M. stand for Andrew Macfayden at the same time he told me that he comes of generations of Scottish farmer's. He told me his age, too, quite frankly. Though he doesn't look anywhere near it, he is sixty this year, and he plans to retire from Mr Sandred's service this Michaelmas or as soon after as he can be replaced.'

'Michaelmas?' queried Rachel. 'That's an oddly countrified date to choose!'

'Yes, isn't it? But An—Mr Blake—says that his father always measured time by that kind of season and so does he. And as, when he retires, he means to take a small farm, it's not a habit he needs to unlearn now.'

'I didn't know North America ran much to *small* farms?'

'But he doesn't plan to farm in North America, dear. When he retires he is coming back to look for a little place here. He'll finally settle in Scotland, I expect. But he says he needn't regard himself as tied to that side of the Border, and with persuasion he might decide on something much further south.' v 'Whose persuasion, I wonder?'

'Oh, I don't think he would have meant any *one's*, would he? He hasn't any near relatives living, and he isn't married, you see. At least, he was, but his wife died at childbirth and the baby died too. So he v

must have meant he'd be persuaded, by pressure of circumstances, mustn't he? For instance, finding that the farm he liked best happened to be in England. Just something like that --'

But that he had not meant 'something like that', Rachel was to learn from Mr Blake himself. One day he asked abruptly: 'Tell me, will you, what plans Miss Southern has for the time when you and your sister are married?'

'Plans? I'm afraid it hadn't occurred to me that she need have any. Iris's marriage won't make any difference, and the question of my marrying hasn't arisen,' Rachel pointed out.

'But when it does?'

'I don't think it will. But if it did, and whatever the circumstances, Aunt Caroline would still have rights here at Falconers which wouldn't be infringed.'

'You mean she could stay on or leave as she chose?'

'Of course.' As a thought occurred to her Rachel added: 'Are you telling me that my aunt has given you reason to think she's worried about her future? She hasn't the slightest need, you know. So if she confides in you again --'

'Confide in me?' Andrew Blake's smile was comically rueful. 'I only wish she thought enough of A.M.B. for that! No, my dear, it's just my own ideas about her that go round and round like a kitten chasing its tail, till I was forced to come to you to get them straight.'

'Was it so important then that you should?' smiled Rachel.

'Important to me. Not to beat about bushes, Miss Rachel. What hope would you say I'd have if I told Miss Southern that I love her and want her to marry me?'

'To *marry* you?' Surprise alone shot the echo from Rachel's lips. But she saw him flinch, and when she made matters worse by faltering: 'I'm sorry, Mr Blake. I didn't mean --' He cut across that with: 'Well, there's my snub! All right, don't enlarge on it or excuse it, my dear. I should know better, at my age. That's what you thought, wasn't it, but didn't quite know how to say?'

It had indeed been so nearly her first reaction that Rachel blushed. A moment earlier -he had appeared as just a likeable elderly man and Aunt Caroline as a respected and loved permanency in her own life. Yet here was Andrew Blake splintering into confusion all such preconceived notions, and Aunt Caroline --Oh, yes, now Rachel thought of it, *Aunt Caroline too!*

It was that thought which emboldened her to ignore Andrew Blake's question by putting one of her own. Beginning to enjoy herself, she said: 'Do you know, I'm wondering whether, having got to the point of asking Aunt Caroline to marry you, you really still call her "Miss Southern" to yourself?'

As she had meant it to, the sheer inconsequence of the question took him aback. He said: 'Why, no. That is—well, as I'm in love with her, of course she is Caroline to me. But why do you ask? And if I've got to be prepared to be turned down, what does it signify, anyway, *what* I call her to myself?'

'But wouldn't you like her to know?' Rachel pressed. 'Especially'—and she allowed a tiny pause to drive the point home—'when I happen to know that you're already Andrew to her?'

There was ample reward in his little yelp of disbelief. Then: 'D'you mean you've heard her call me Andrew—just like that? But where does that get me, for goodness' sake?'

'Why not,' suggested Rachel sensibly, 'to the point where you can call her Caroline to her face and see what happens then?'

'Yes, yes, I suppose it does. And I'd like to believe you wouldn't encourage me if you thought I hadn't a chance. What makes you think so—if you do?'

'Because I know she has come to depend on you already,' Rachel told him. 'Because she seeks excuses for talking about you—and not quite calling you Andrew when she does! Because I believe she remembers every detail you tell her about yourself.'

And you? When you told her you might be persuaded to farm in England, whose persuasion had you in mind?'

'Why, hers, of course! The only hint I've dared to give her, and I might have spared my breath. It went straight over her gentle head!'

'Ah, but did it? I believe she hopes you meant what you did, but is afraid you didn't! Why not try again—less obliquely this time? What about telling her you won't return to England at all if it means your having to set up house alone?'

'And you know what she'll say? "Dear me, Mr Blake! In that case then we must find a housekeeper for you"!''

'Then don't hedge at all. Say "I've fallen in love with you, Caroline", and see what happens then.'

He stared at Rachel, savouring that. Then: 'Hang it, I will! Where could I find her, do you think?'

'In the garden, gathering flowers for the house.'

'Then I'm for the garden too, while I've got my courage up.'

He was already out of the room, and a minute or two later Rachel saw his rotund little figure almost trotting towards an archway in the yews. But behind her as she stood at the window Aunt Caroline's gentle voice was inquiring: 'Now where can Mr Blake be going to in such a hurry?'

Rachel turned, took scissors, gloves and flower jug from her, said: 'To find you, Aunt Caroline. To find you --' And, opening the french window, she thrust Aunt Caroline firmly across its sill before locking it again with a click. Andrew Blake, she noticed, was already loping urgently back...

Afterwards Rachel looked back on that day as the last to be uncluttered by the tangle of bewilderments which followed. Aunt Caroline, and Andrew Blake remained in the garden for a long time, and when they reappeared they did so sheepishly and hand-in-hand.

Aunt Caroline's answer to Rachel's kiss and murmur of 'Now how did you guess?' was a deliciously naive apology for not having guessed either, but how could anyone suppose that a dear capable man like Andrew could possibly want to marry a shy, feckless old thing like herself?

And Andrew Blake said, leave him out of guessing games. All he knew was that it had suddenly come to him when he was seeing to the bathroom fuse that she was the one woman in the world for him. It was a conviction which had strengthened while he had re-hung the coalshed door, treated an antique cabinet for worm, repaired a chiming clock. And from the moment when she had mutely offered him for repairs the halves of a Royal Worcester plate which had 'come apart' in Mrs Sweet's hands, he was utterly and completely lost --

The next day Rachel was in the breakfast-room, deep in calculation of the mushroom accounts, when Iris came in, slamming the door behind her. . 'Rachel, I've got to talk to you!'

Not glancing up, Rachel murmured: 'Yes, just a minute'—only to be shocked into startled awareness as Iris sprang forward to sweep her papers from under her hand.

'Rachel, listen! This can't wait for your silly sums. You must help me—*must*, do you hear? Because I—well, I just can't go on, that's all!'

Rachel abandoned her pen and swivelled her chair. 'Jon?' she asked quietly. 'Dear, you can't afford to lose hope at this stage, you know.'

Iris's crow of laughter was without mirth. 'Lose hope—assuming there ever was any? And who wouldn't lose it, after all this time?'

'Well, Jon hasn't, for one, and we've admired you for being brave about it too. Besides, it's not been so long, as these things go. Just a few weeks, and he *has* improved --'

'No. That's what everyone pretends. But he hasn't changed at all—only taught himself to do more. It gets me down, the way you're all so determinedly *bright*. The nurses, David, Aunt Caroline, you—even Jon himself, though he must know he can't buoy me up for ever with hope which isn't there.'

'Iris dear, it *is* there. No one is deliberately deceiving either you or Jon, and he wouldn't be as happy as he is if you hadn't done some buoying yourself, keeping him going, standing by --'

Iris muttered: 'That was at first. It was easier then, when it was almost—exciting.'

'*Exciting?* what a strange word to use!'

'I meant critical, not day-to-day dull, as it's been | since. Sitting at Jon's bedside, helping him to do the simplest things, being patient with him: *pitying* him --I've know for ages now that I just can't take it. Well, now I've cracked, and today I haven't been to see him, if you must know. When I got to the nursing home I sent the car away and went for a walk instead. The car came back for me at the usual time and I was ready for it when it did.'

'But, Iris, how *could* you disappoint Jon so? Besides --'

Iris snapped: 'Oh, don't nag me! Haven't I got enough to put up with, without that? And I know what you were going to say—that it's only a matter of minutes before Jon gets them to ring up to see why I haven't been over. Well, do you think I don't realise that? I told you, didn't I, that it was urgent, that it couldn't wait?'

'Yes, you did. But let's get this straight. You've been patient and good, but you can't bear to see Jon as he is and you've panicked suddenly.'

'Not suddenly.'

'Panic *is* sudden. You can't tell me you were unkind enough actually to plan not to visit Jon today ----'

'But I did,' said Iris deliberately. 'As I don't mean to see him ever again if I can help it, there had to be a first time when I stayed away. And today was it.'

Rachel stood up. Facing Iris, her greater height dominated the girl's. She said icily: 'I've misunderstood, I'm afraid. Have' you really come to me to help you after you've run out on Jon, not just today but for good?'

'Well, I can't face him to tell him, so somebody must.'

Rachel lashed: '*You* can't face him! You could deliberately set out to attract him, and when he fell in love with you, you could take his ring. And when he was hurt you could stand by him as long as there was enough crisis to mean some reflected importance for you. But when he really needs you and believes in you and banks on you—then, I suppose, you've the right, not only to let him down, but to thrust on to someone else the task of telling him so?'

Iris muttered: 'He can have his ring back. I hate the sight of it. It stands for being tied to him as he is now, and I've finished with that. He promised me fun and sport and travel and clothes, and I can't just turn myself into a sick-nurse instead.'

'Jon can afford nurses, and you could have your clothes if they matter to you so much. You talk as if he had wantonly cheated you. But those promises were for himself as much as for you. Jon loves pleasure too, and he wanted to share with you all the things he promised you. You haven't the imagination, I suppose, to realise that if he is ever to achieve them again, he may be going to need—badly—someone who cares for him enough to encourage him endlessly to believe that he will? He thinks you are that "someone". But it seems you're not.'

'Well, I can't help it, can I, if I don't love him as he is?'

'If you had ever loved him, you couldn't have changed so soon. But you threw over David for him. Why?'

'I wasn't engaged to David. He'd never asked me to marry him.'

'He couldn't have understood that you expected pace in courtship! And when Jon did ask you, I suppose his ring was a concrete proposition you couldn't afford to miss?'

At bay at last, Iris began to whimper. 'Rachel, you're hard! But of course you always have been. You don't understand—I did think I

was in love with Jon. I—I wouldn't have tried so hard for him if I hadn't. The difference is that I didn't try particularly for David, so that I didn't appreciate him enough. But probably I've loved him really, all along --'

'No!' The protest was wrung from the very depths of Rachel's revulsion.

In weak defiance, Iris retorted: 'He might be very glad to take me back!'

'Well, you aren't going to take a single step to encourage him,' Rachel told her grimly. 'In three months or so you've done enough harm. And not to one man, but to two. David may love you enough to forgive you in time. But you're going to give him time, *and* be prepared to take it on the chin if he finds he can't. Meanwhile, there's Jon --'

'But you'll help me? You can't believe, that I ought to marry him, not loving him at all?'

'If you don't, no. That's a cruelty you've stopped short of, thank God. But help you? All I'll do is to ring the nursing home and to say you'll go over before the day is out. That will give you time to prepare what you're going to say to Jon. Beyond that, no one can help you. After all, you're not leaving him much except the right to hear it from you.'

'But he's trusted me right up till now! I can't tell him—I *can't* --'

Craverlly Iris sank on to Rachel's chair and hid her face in her hands, while Rachel stood by, not forgiving her yet, but less ruthless already towards a quality of weakness she would never understand.

Iris looked up, her blue eyes brimming. 'You will tell him for me?'

'No. You must see him—you owe him that. But I'll do more than I said just now. Before you meet, I'll see that it's already been broken to him.'

'Oh, yes, Rachel—do that. Could David tell him, do you think?'

'David? No, you've already used him as a pawn too often. I was thinking of Jon's father, really.'

'Mr Sandred? Oh, dear,' cried Iris in fresh panic; 'I don't know *what* he'll say! And he's expecting me too—I was supposed to go on to see him after I left Jon.'

'Then I'll go instead. Where were you to see him? At the Country Club or at the Synthics plant?'

'He had to be at the plant, he said. You—you don't want me to come too?'

'No, I don't,' Rachel told her. 'I'd rather handle this end of it alone.'

At the plant she was shown into David's office, which I was empty until Mr Sandred came through from the secretary's room beyond.

He greeted her with pleasure, adding: 'I was really expecting my girl Iris on her way back from seeing Jon. Good of you to look in on me, Rachel, if you'd arranged to meet her here. She should have arrived by now, though.' He looked at his watch. 'However, she's probably on her way --'

'No, she isn't, Mr Sandred. And I wasn't to meet her here.'

'Not? But she has been to Jon, hasn't she? It's their usual time.'

'She hasn't been yet, though she will. And it was you I came to see, Mr Sandred. *For* Iris, and before she has to see Jon again.'

For all her guarded introduction of her errand, Rachel saw alarm spark in the eyes which were so like Jon's. Jon's father echoed: 'Before she *has* to see him? What's this, Rachel? Something the child has been up to? Or Jon has, upsetting her in one of his fits of depression?'

Rachel said: 'It's not a mere lover's quarrel. And Jon is ignorant as well as innocent as yet --' She broke off to glance towards the connecting door still ajar to the inner room. But when she hesitated: 'It—it's rather private,' Mr Sandred cut in impatiently: 'There's no one in there, child. Winslow is out, and his secretary is doing a errand for me. Be frank with me, please, Rachel. Tell me everything you think I should know.'

Rachel told him.

When she had finished the only sound in the sunny room was the beat of Mr Sandred's fingertips on the leather-topped desk at which he sat. At last, not looking at her, he accused: 'I don't understand this. You two girls—sisters. Living together. There must have been some degree of confidence you shared? Could you really not have warned me before this?'

'But I assure you that I had no idea of it,' pleaded Rachel. 'At home Iris has been subdued and reserved about Jon. But I've thought that was her way of fighting her disappointment that, for the present at least, she wasn't getting all she had hoped for from her engagement.'

Mr Sandred's mouth twisted. '*She* wasn't? What about Jon?'

'Well, that they both weren't, perhaps. I don't think she consciously deceived you either. Or if she did, she deceived herself too, up to the point where even that was impossible. Besides, Jon's belief and happiness in her would always have allayed any doubts I might have had.'

'Yes, his trust was indeed something to have seen --' Mr Sandred's fist struck the desk in anger. 'Has the girl any conception at all, I wonder, of what her betrayal of him may do to my boy?'

Had Iris? Wondering herself; Rachel did not reply.

Mr Sandred went on grimly: 'You must forgive me for being concerned for Jon. If she could be persuaded of what she is doing to him, she might think again.'

Rachel shook her head. 'But could you honestly hope for that for Jon, Mr Sandred? You couldn't ask her to live in a continual lie for his sake. And surely Jon shouldn't be allowed to build a moment longer than necessary on foundations which aren't really there?'

Jon's father said reluctantly: 'That may be wisdom. You are telling me in effect that the engagement has been a fool's paradise for Jon all along? That, whatever it costs him, it's better it were ended here and now?. If so --'

He broke off as the telephone rang in the secretary's room. But before his finger went to the switch of the extension on the desk, someone entered the other office from the corridor and answered the call. It was David, and a moment later he came to the cross door between the two rooms. He looked surprised to see Rachel, but he smiled a greeting to her before addressing his employer.

'It's Quebec on the phone, Chief.'

'Yes, yes. They must call back!'

David's brows went up. 'It's Leroy, sir. About the Galloid merger. Weren't you expecting --?'

'Yes, of course. But I can't attend to anything now. Where's Blake? Get him to deal with it, can't you?'

David still hesitated. 'It was Jon's pet project and Leroy seems to think you meant to handle it yourself. In fact he rang to find out when to expect you over.'

'I shan't be going, tell him. No, ring off and book a call in an hour's time from this end. And then, Winslow, come back here.'

When David returned Mr Sandred said bluntly: 'Rachel has brought shocking news. Iris is breaking off her engagement to Jon!'

'Breaking her engagement! How can she be? Why, I've just looked in on Jon, and he didn't mention a thing!' David's look and tone were blank.

Mr Sandred said heavily: 'He doesn't know yet. It rests with me to have to break it to him, just as Rachel had the distasteful task of telling me.'

'*Rachel* had?' David swung round on her, his eyes searching her face.

Mr Sandred went on: 'Yes, and I've been glad to treat with her, rather than with Iris herself. I doubt if I could have been tolerant enough of the girl's motives to hear her out with patience. As it is, Rachel has almost convinced me that, once Iris's decision has been broken to Jon, there's nothing to be gained from attempting to patch things up for them. So far as he is concerned, then, the whole structure of his faith in her will be down.'

David nodded. 'Yes, it will be too late then. But what desperate hurry to convey the news to Jon? Isn't there a possibility it's a panic decision arising from a very natural but passing self-distrust on Iris's part?'

(As if Iris had ever distrusted herself in her life!) Aloud Rachel protested: 'How can it be kept from Jon? She refuses to see him again until he has been told. And it's no panic decision. She has known for a long time that she doesn't love Jon "enough". And once "not enough"

becomes "not at all" --! No, I'm afraid I know quite certainly that the greatest disservice she could do Jon would be to marry him with *that* doubt in her heart.'

Mr Sandred said wearily: 'You see, Winslow? Once the canker is there --No, I can't afford to risk it for Jon. I'd rather face him with the clean cut here and now. When all is said, he'll have other loyalties to help him. Sturdier ones, thank God. Yours. Mine --'

David turned back to him urgently. 'But sir, you can't mean to accept the evidence of Iris's motives at secondhand only? At *Rachel's* hands? You'll see Iris, surely? Talk to her? Give her a hearing on her own case?'

'Yes, naturally I'll see her. But you shouldn't underestimate Rachel's difficult part in all this, you know.'

'I don't,' David rapped out. 'But you will see Iris —alone—before you go to Jon?'

'Certainly. I hope to insist that she comes with me to Jon. Rachel, may I give you a lift back to Falconers?'

'I drove myself—in the Land Rover, Mr Sandred.'

'Oh, then in that case I'll follow you later if I may. But thank you, my dear. Winslow, you'll see Rachel out?'

'Of course.' David stood aside for her at the door. But his glance at her was unsmiling and he did not speak as they walked down the corridor together. They were out of earshot of the office when, tight-lipped, he halted and turned to face her.

He said: 'Well, nausea on my part is uncalled-for, I gather? I should have known, shouldn't I? You always meant to fight Iris over this! And you have. And what's more, *not even with clean hands!*'

Rachel stared at him, then shook her head as if warding off an invisible blow. 'What are you accusing me of?' she faltered. 'What are you implying I've done?'

His hostile eyes met and locked with hers. 'You know, I think. Don't forget that you didn't attempt to conceal from me your hatred and resentment of their engagement!'

'Of course I resented the sheer disloyalty of it, *and* the way they went about it and announced it. You should know why. Besides, I thought it was a mistake as far as they themselves were concerned. And it seems now that I've been proved right.'

'You've *seen* to it that you should be proved right, surely?' he accused. 'How long did it take you, and how Subtly did you have to work, I wonder, to convince Iris that she's not, and never was, the right wife for Jon?'

Rachel drew a breath which seemed to take for ever. 'You really think I did—*that*?'

'On the evidence—yes,' he flung at her. 'You accused Iris of having "entrapped" Jon. And whether or not you manoeuvred this, you can't but be glad it has happened.'

Rachel flashed: ' "Glad"? That's an odd word to choose. But if it's the best you can do—all right, I *am* glad it has happened in time—before their marriage instead of after. Meanwhile, if you really think I swayed Iris to it, you've still time to accuse me to Mr Sandred!'

She felt almost spent with the vehemence of her defence. Surely David must believe her at last? But it seemed that the anger which had sparked off her own had only banked into a sullen fire when he replied quietly: 'No. That's something I can't do.'

'I thought you would hardly dare!' She could not resist the petty triumph of that.

His face masked oddly. 'Don't mistake me,' he advised, his tone like ice. 'If it's to be proved that you persuaded Iris to this, it will be done. But not by me --'

'Why not by you? You are my sole accuser, aren't you?'

She was not prepared for the sudden grip of his hands upon her upper arms before they slid down to imprison her own hands compellingly. The pressure of his thumbs on her bones of her wrists was near torture as he said: 'Because, Rachel Southern, anything which you want *so* badly, I shall always want for you. You must fight, and you've shown you are capable of fighting alone. But, heaven help me, though I may loathe your methods, I've got to be on your side. So that's why *I* can't be the one to raise a finger which might cheat you of Jon!'

He dropped her hands with an air of flinging them back into her keeping; turned on his heel and went back by the way they had come.

'Cheat *me* of Jon? What --? David—don't go!'

Her strangled echo and her calling of his name must have reached him, Rachel knew. But he made no sign. In empty bewilderment she watched him out of sight.

She hardly remembered going out to the car or driving home. Her mind was a turmoil of argument and counter-argument of all the things she should have said to justify herself to David, but hadn't. And when, treadmill-wise she came back and back to the cryptic insult of his parting words, always they were unanswerable because he had not stayed to listen to her answer, and mere imagination had to struggle to explain them away.

David believed she still wanted Jon enough to filch him from Iris—how had he put it?—'not even with clean hands'! Painfully she forced her mind back over any words or actions of her own which he could have misconstrued into such a belief...

It was with a sense of shock that she saw how they added up.

They had been the glamour she had craved and, with Glenda Moore's help, had even achieved for a single night. It had been for David. But seeing it, he must have thought it was directed at Jon. And that same night, if Iris were to be believed, he had seen her in Jon's arms.

Then he had witnessed her irritation—really for his sake!—when Iris had 'kidnapped' Jon for the truant afternoon at the sea. And when Iris had deserted him for Jon—yes, Rachel saw that he could have read her outraged anger as being on her own account and not, as it was, aching and impotently for him.

The need to put him right clamoured. But it had to wait on the impossibility of making such a personal issue the subject of a telephone conversation to his office. And once she reached the Falconers Iris's crises had to take a major place in everyone's thoughts.

When Mr Sandred came over, Iris was closeted in private with him and Aunt Caroline for a long time. Then he and Iris, inclined to hysteria, went over to see Jon. They had still not returned late in the evening when Rachel plucked up courage to ring David at the Country Club.

She promised herself that she would temporise by asking first whether Mr Sandred and Iris were yet back. But when she inquired for David she got only a non-committal reply, and after she had waited for a minute or two it was Andrew Blake who came to the telephone.

Andrew said: 'Ah, Rachel. Oh—*Winslow* you're wanting, my dear? Well now, I thought you'd know.'

'Know? Know what?'

'Why, that he has gone. Yes, back to Quebec. He caught the evening plane. Sudden? Oh, yes, that. But there's urgent work afoot over an important merger that's going through. The Chief couldn't go, so Winslow had to, in his place. How long? Well, that I couldn't say. Maybe some time. But if you want him, he'll be in Canada by the morning and you could reach him there.'

Rachel said: 'All right, and thank you. I didn't know. But it wasn't important really.'

She cradled the receiver, feeling defeated and strangely alone.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR the last of many times Rachel put down her pen and tore up yet another attempt at a letter to David. She had not thought it could possibly be so difficult to dispel his doubts of her on paper. Trying to write to him was like groping towards him through a fog, and all her efforts read like whines of self-excuse.

In the end she gave up and clung instead to the hope that he would feel compelled to explain sooner or later the enigma of his claim that for good or ill he must range himself on her side.

What had that meant, if anything? Already she was hoping against hope that he would want her to know. Already she was calculating the first mail which *could* bring a letter from him.

But that mail came in ... And the next after it... And the next. And as the days passed the pitiful little self-deceptions of hope thinned out to the point where she had to wonder why they had ever appeared reasonable at all.

Meanwhile the very atmosphere of Falconers was charged and sullen. The effects of Iris's final meeting with Jon and an even stormier passage with Mr Sandred were to be read in her mutinous face, and her unadorned ring finger had told its own tale. But since that climax, far from appearing to blame herself for the heartache she had caused, she had worn an air of self-pity at finding she was inescapably involved.

She spoke only when addressed, smoked much more than usual and spent a great deal of time in her room. She was like a child in mute rebellion against punishment she considered unjust, and Rachel felt Mr Sandred had measured matters aright when he had questioned whether Iris had any but a selfish conception of what she was doing in breaking faith with Jon.

Aunt Caroline, however, was more generous. 'The child appears callous, I know. And though I realise she isn't still in the nursery, I'm afraid she hasn't emerged from it as far as she would like people to think. Even David Winslow, if you remember, claimed she should be forgiven a great deal *because* she is so young.'

'There was every reason, Aunt Caroline, why he should have taken her part. He was in love with her!' Rachel's tone was sharp.

'Yes, I know, dear. I remember he admitted frankly, even when she had thrown him over for Jonathan Sandred, that he'd been taken by something I think he called her "troubling charm". Sometimes I've wondered whether men enjoy a little being disturbed and upset when they're in love. But returning to Iris, I don't know how best to treat her while it isn't easy to feel as much sympathy for her as-otte would like. Do you think, Rachel, she would care to go away again for a while? Back, for instance, to Cannes?'

But Iris, as if she sensed that her going would relax tension for everyone else, flatly refused to revisit Cannes which she claimed distantly, had 'associations' for her which she would never escape. Aunt Caroline hesitated to break her will by insisting that she went, and there matters rested uneasily until surprisingly, Glenda Moore took a hand in them.

Throughout the summer Glenda had divided every minute of her time between the Paris salon of Monsieur and Madame Mauren and her own in the West End. But now, with the partnership organised and working smoothly, she blamed herself for losing a lot of touch with Rachel and insisted they must 'pick up their threads'.

'It's been "Hail and Farewell" every time we've met for months,' she said. And later she came bluntly to the point with: 'You know, even village gossip has gone over my head! I've never really realised how Iris's engagement to Jonathan Sandred came about. It was *you* who

wanted Midsummer Night just as a gesture to throw in his face, so to speak, and at that time the grapevine was linking Iris to David Winslow, I thought. But just when everyone was expecting that engagement—Ping! —Iris was *breaking* one to his friend! Perhaps, being so full of my own affairs, I telescoped my ideas of time. But that's how it appeared to me.'

Rachel said quietly. 'It wasn't so very different either. The grapevine was right about Iris and David. That—finished when she imagined she was more attracted by Jon. Then, after his accident, she decided she'd been mistaken there too.'

'H'm—she's developed some chameleon-hued emotions for one so young, surely?' was Glenda's dry comment. 'Or were we all wrong, and the first | affair wasn't serious? I haven't been able to forget,|for instance, that when David Winslow called for] you at my house on the night of the party, he looked at *you* in the oddest way for a man who was in process of courting another girl.'

'He was only curbing his disapproval. Later that night he didn't mince his accusation that I was putting on an act for Jon.'

'But you didn't tell him it was no affair of his!' challenged Glenda. 'The very next night you were tete-a-tete with him at the Country Club. Explain that if you can!'

'That night I was merely a kind of stand-in for Iris. It was the first time she'd jilted him to go out with Jon. I think he was so sore about it that he'd have taken anyone at at all out to dinner instead. And I happened to be—handy.'

'H'm. Accommodating of you. But it explains; I suppose, why he went all non-committal and tight-lipped when Adrian Mauren claimed to think there was something serious between you and him? He couldn't deny it without appearing unchivalrous, and besides, he

probably didn't want to spoil Adrian's fun. But tell me—now Iris has backed out of the other engagement as well, isn't the situation rather delicate, with both men still on the scene? Does she see either of them now?'

"No. David Winslow has gone back to Canada as Mr Sandred's deputy to put through an important deal with another firm. And as Jon's condition was badly set back when she broke her engagement, you can understand that his father is determined they shan't meet again if he can help it. Not that Iris would care to have to face Jon again, I imagine. Meanwhile, she's being so difficult at home that Aunt Caroline thought she ought to go away. But she won't go back to Cannes because she thinks Aunt Nicola's circle will think she was jilted. And there's nowhere else to send her!"

Glenda shook a rueful head. 'Poor infant! How a bad conscience does prick, doesn't it? Or did Shakespeare express it better? But I wonder—would Iris consider Paris instead?'

'Paris? I imagine she'd jump at the idea. But Aunt Caroline certainly wouldn't let her go alone.'

'Well, by the arrangement I have in mind she wouldn't be going alone. And if I know anything of Lucie Mauren's ideas of "*comme il faut*" for a girl of Iris's age, she'd certainly be well chaperoned.'

'Madame Mauren? Oh, I liked her! Could Iris go to her?'

'That was the idea. You see, Lucie is opening an English Miss boutique as a branch of her salon, and she wants three girls of typically English style and colouring as models for it. But she insists on their being new to the work. That is, without training faults she would want them to unlearn. And for a three month's trial period on either side, she would expect them to live under her own roof. She has, by the way, a lovely villa at Vincennes. I've already found two

girls of good family for two of the vacancies. Do you think Iris would be interested in filling the third?'

'I believe she would. "Paris" and "model" are two words which have always spelt glamour for her.'

Glenda laughed. 'Under Lucie Mauren's brand of meticulous discipline she may learn they spell "hard work" as well!' she warned. 'But what about sounding Miss Southern's reactions first?'

'Yes, I'll do that. I suppose I'd better tell Aunt Caroline that if Iris weren't happy or Madame Mauren didn't find her suitable, there's nothing binding nor guaranteed?'

'Nothing. But at best there could be a wonderful career ahead of Iris, and at the worst she'll have had three months of being taken out of herself and a chance to get this summer's mistakes into some sort of proportion. You'd better send her to me to be disillusioned a little about the "glamour". But if, when I've done with her, you can persuade her to give it a try, I think three months for Iris as far away from Hoops Cray as possible would be a good thing for all concerned.'

Aunt Caroline, Rachel knew, thought so too. And Iris, consulted, needed no persuasion at all. As she went about her eager preparations for the trip her sullen air of injury lifted like a dispersing cloud. Paris—like the prospect of attracting David, like her brief savouring of engagement to Jon—was now her oyster for the opening. And that she had any misgivings about either the past or the future Rachel was not allowed to guess until the night before she was to leave for France.

Rachel was nearly asleep when there was a knock at her door and Iris, wraith-like in a shaft of moonlight, stood on the threshold.

'I'm all churned up inside about tomorrow,' she said plaintively. 'May I come and talk to you until I feel I can sleep?'

'Yes, do,' said Rachel, welcoming the overture. 'Come and get under my eiderdown, and before you go back I'll slip down and heat you some milk. You're not really worrying about tomorrow, are you?'

Iris shivered and curled up at the foot of the bed. 'Well, yes. Though once I'm on the way, I'll probably be all right.' She broke off, her face crumpling. 'Rachel, d'you know, I used to *long* not to have to obey Aunt C. as a matter of course and to be as grown-up as you. But since I have been—grownup, I mean, nothing has gone right for me and I wonder if I shall ever be happy again!'

Rachel knelt up on the bed beside her. 'Of course you will! If you determine to make the most of Paris you'll find you are happy almost without knowing it.'

'But I'm so frightened now—even of Paris! Supposing it turns out to be just one more thing I think I want and then find I don't want it at all? Rachel, if I found I absolutely hated it at the end of the three months, would you despise me terribly if I came home?'

'You know I shouldn't.' Rachel paused before adding: 'There's something else, though. You and I have got to face it that if you decide to stay and make a career for yourself in Paris, Falconers can't be "home" for us for very much longer now.'

'You mean—when Aunt Caroline marries Andrew Blake --?'

Rachel nodded. 'Yes. I hope you'd agree to sell it. It would be the wisest thing to do.'

'But it would break your heart to sell!'

'Hearts mend—given time.'

Iris drew a long breath that turned to a sigh. 'Oh, dear, that's you all over! You won't *let* yourself care. I've wondered often what made you that way. Was it hating Jon after he let you down? Just as, now, he must hate me?'

'I never really hated Jon. And you shouldn't assume that he is less generous than I am.'

Iris lowered her eyes and plucked at the silk of the eiderdown. 'I wish I needn't. But I can't forget that last scene with him. It was terrible. One thing haunts me. He said "At least Julie gave me seven months before she let me down. *You* couldn't manage even seven weeks!" He said it so bitterly that I felt he meant to hate me all his life, and I remember it all the time. And now I've got to blame myself all over again. I mean—if I had been able to go through with it, I shouldn't have needed to take up my share in Falconers, and with Jon's help you could have kept it on.'

For answer Rachel's hands closed in a hard grip upon her shoulders. 'Listen. The real wrong you did Jon was to deceive yourself and him into thinking you had ever loved him, which you hadn't. Once you knew you didn't, there was no question of "going through with it". By then, he believed in you implicitly. So of course he suffered, of course he was bitter. But if it's any consolation, I believed, and always shall, that Julie was the love of his life. He'll get over you in time as I had to get over him. Alone. What's more, there's never been any question of his charity saving Falconers for me. As a matter of fact, it's a chance I've already had and refused.'

'He offered to help, and you wouldn't let him?'

'He didn't exactly take out his cheque book. He asked me to marry him. It amounted to the same thing.'

Iris's jaw dropped. 'Jon asked you to marry him! He never told me! *When?*'

'When he brought me home after the Synthics party. But it was an offer made—and turned down—in cold blood.'

'He—he'd actually thought of marrying you before he asked me!'

'Not for the same reasons, though. Not for love.'

'No, but *still* --!' Iris slid off the bed and patted the eiderdown into position with elaborate care. As she straightened she said in a small, polite voice: 'Well, thanks for letting me talk. I hope I haven't kept you awake. I'll go back to my room now.'

'I'll get you that hot milk --'

With the same air of rather distant dignity Iris said: 'I don't need it. I feel—quite a lot better really. I think I shall be able to sleep. And don't imagine I'm not looking forward to Paris. Because I am.'

When the door had closed behind her Rachel flicked off the light and lay very still in the darkness. She had not intended to mention Jon's proposal, and she couldn't have guessed what Iris's reaction would be. But she knew now quite certainly that Iris had resented seeing herself in the role of Jon's second choice, even if she believed his first choice had been entirely without romance. Somehow, she probably reasoned, that had given the advantage to her, and in consequence she already felt able to slough off whatever remorse or guilt she had begun to feel.

Oh, well, sighed Rachel, it's something to be able I to send her off happy, I suppose. But soon all of us I will be thrust into her past—David, Jon, Aunt Caro- I line, me. She won't even be homesick for Falconers I for long. When we have to sell, she'll do her best to I pity me a little. But she won't understand.

For Iris, Rachel's insight told her, was not now merely 'looking forward' to Paris. She was confidently hopeful that she need never look backward from it again.

The next departure from Falconers was to be Andrew Blake's. He was accompanying Mr Sandred and Jon back to Quebec, but as soon as his post could be filled to his employer's satisfaction he would return to England as a retired man. He was already in process of buying a small farm in Sussex, and he and Aunt Caroline could be married before Christmas, he planned.

He was to move over to/ the Country Club from Falconers the day before leaving the country, and on the morning he was going Rachel looked in at the door of his room where Aunt Caroline was happily busy, helping him pack.

Aunt Caroline was worrying: 'Andrew dear, are you sure you have warm enough things for the flight? At that height—*how* many feet above the Atlantic?—it is bound to be so very cold!"

Andrew protested mildly: 'But the aircraft will be pressurised to an even temperature, my dear! I assure you, neither earmuffs nor fur tippets are worn!'

Aunt Caroline, however, was not to be put off by such misplaced humour. 'I was not,' she said with gentle dignity, 'suggesting that you should go to extremes. Just—just wool next the skin and a warm scarf --'

Andrew thrust aside the papers he was sorting and adroitly slipped an arm about her waist. 'My love,' he said fervently, 'for a blush like that I'll promise to wear sealskin pants and whaling boots!' As Aunt Caroline turned happily within the circle of his arms Rachel snatched up a pile of discarded newspapers from the chair near the door and

hastily retired, leaving them to the privacy of their embrace. 'Bless them,' she thought, closing the door soundlessly behind her, 'they might be renewing their teens!'

But her thoughts were to be so swiftly diverted when, at the stairhead, she paused to adjust her unwieldy bundle. It consisted, she noticed, of the previous week's English dailies and several copies of the far bulkier Quebec journal which Andrew had ordered for Jon. As she squared off the pile the top paper slipped and scattered; gathering the sheets, she checked suddenly, her eye arrested at sight of a name she knew.

She folded the sheet back into small compass and sank down on to the top stair. When she had read the short gossip paragraph a second and third time she let the paper fall into her lap.

'Mrs Gil Benson'—that was Jon's Julie!—was in London! As Jon had said, to a Canadian public her movements were 'news'. So the social editor had noted the date of her arrival in England, given the address of her West End hotel; mentioned her tragic widowhood and made an oblique reference to her earlier engagement to Jon—'the brilliant young head of the Quebec branch of Synthics, now in an Essex nursing home after a car-crash.'

Rachel looked at the paper's date and saw that it was several days old. But had this issue been passed to Jon? Would he have seen the paragraph, even if it had? Rachel rose reluctantly, replacing her pile of papers as, more than a little aghast, she looked at the plan already half-formed in her mind.

No concern of yours, said cold reason. *Every* concern, said her compassion for Jon. And even with the plan only in embryo the conflict raged on.

She despised the caution which whispered that, if she failed, perhaps no one but Julie Benson need know. If she did fail she must take whatever blame for her misguided interference there was to come. And there would be plenty ... David Winslow's not the least—*David's!* Well, this time at least she would deserve it—which would make a change!

The thought galvanised her. The gossip column had added that Mrs Benson planned to move on to the Continent after her London stay, so tomorrow might be too late. And by tomorrow, wherever Julie was', Jon would be flying West.

She dealt swiftly with the practical difficulties. It would be quicker to take the Land Rover as far as Hoops Cray station than to drive all the way up to Town. She did not mean to consult anyone's advice, but she must leave a note for Aunt Caroline, saying when she hoped to get back. Ought she to leave an 'Au Revoir' for Andrew too? No, that wasn't necessary. Aunt Caroline was to lunch and dine with him at the Country Club, but he would bring her home afterwards. And, Rachel reflected grimly, whether she had succeeded or failed with Julie, Andrew would have to be her first confessor for what she had done. Yes, she would certainly have to tell Andrew tonight.

What else? It was visitors' day for the Wing and there was no Iris now to leave in charge. But with the fading of the summer towards autumn the numbers to be expected had grown fewer. With no more than a possible handful of people to deal with, Mrs Sweet could manage, no doubt.

Consulted on the matter, Mrs Sweet agreed reluctantly that she probably could. But had Miss Rachel remembered that it was her night out? Mrs Sweet hoped firmly that nothing would interfere with *that*.

That was all: A few minutes later, with only bare time to catch the London train, Rachel was on her way.

As her taxi threaded its way through the traffic she was gripped in a panic of alternate hope and fear that when she reached Julie's hotel, Julie might not still be there. Arrived at its imposing entrance, she told herself she was on a fool's errand, if not a meddling knave's. But though it was still not too late to turn back, she knew that she could not. And while she waited at the reception desk, she realised with a kind of bleak surprise that the worst thing she could hear would be that Julie was out or had gone away.

But Julie had not gone away. She was in her suite, the reception clerk said, adding, to Rachel's surprise: 'Perhaps, madam, you are the visitor Mrs Benson is expecting to call ?'

'No, I couldn't be. Mrs Benson doesn't know me.'

The-girl smiled. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't take her message, you see, though I think one came down to the desk. But I'll ring her room, if you'll give me your name, madam ?'

'It's Southern. Say, will you please, that a Miss Rachel Southern would be grateful if Mrs Benson could spare her, say, a quarter of an hour?'

A bell-boy was called to escort her to the first floor a minute or two later, and at his knock a girl who, from Jon's description, could only be Julie, came to answer the door.

Her eyes swept Rachel without apparent question. She said almost eagerly: 'Rachel Southern? Do come in, won't you? I've always wanted to know you. Because I've heard about you, of course --'

Rachel went on, wondering a little what Jon would have told his fiancée about the girl who had been his calf love. Somehow she would have expected it to be nothing at all. Meanwhile, her second and close glance at Julie herself confirmed her first that Julie was all that Jon had said of her.

Her figure was minute, elf-like; her hair a richly glinting copper. Her eyes were a warm orange and the faint hollowing beneath her high cheekbones spoke of her Red Indian blood. Her walk and every movement of her hands or body had a kind of urgent nervous grace. Rachel remembered Jon's 'She lives at about twice the rate of other people,' and wished, for the sake of her mission, that she knew how far from Jon Julie's speed of living had carried her by now.

Julie was inviting her to sit down, was flicking a light for her cigarette. She said: 'Well, we've been introduced by repute already. I don't know how you knew where to find me, though. Our only mutual link is D.—David to you, I suppose? And he --'

Rachel took the news-cutting from her bag. 'I found you through this. It was in a Quebec paper. I came on it by chance.'

'That? Oh, yes—— All the same, I don't understand. If you took the trouble to follow that up, you must have wanted to see me quite badly?'

'I did, rather.'

'You did? Why?' Julie's luminous eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. 'Look,' she challenged, 'you are playing straight with me, aren't you? I mean, you could be a kind of spy for that sister of yours who is going to marry Jon. If so, you can tell her from me that I'd rather she had come to look for herself!'

Rachel said very quietly: 'I'm not spying for Iris. She's in Paris, and neither she nor anyone else knew that I was coming to see you. I came

on impulse, wanting to ask you something I'm going to find it difficult to say. For one thing, I thought you'd know by now that Iris isn't going to marry Jon.'

Julie's slender fingers gripped the arm of her chair until the knuckles showed white. 'She *isn't*? Then it was true --! D. said there was something, but I hardly dared believe it, and he didn't want to discuss it, I don't know why. I gather he believed someone had come maliciously between them, and perhaps he thought they'd come together again. Anyway, he didn't want me to come over. He said it was no good --But I had to come. On the faintest hope that if Jon were still free, he would care enough to want to see me again—*I had to come!*'

Rachel sat very still. Was her question, then, answered before it had been asked? At least it looked as if to ask Julie to meet Jon was no longer a favour to be begged. 'And if Jon did care enough,' she queried, 'what then?'

'If!' mocked Julie bitterly. 'If the moon were blue! No, Jon and his father can't *not* know I'm in England. Even if I weren't, they could always find me if they wanted. But Mr Sandred never liked me much, and Jon --'

'Jon is helpless, despairing and very much in need of someone else's courage as well as his own. Someone who loves him enough,' Rachel prompted gently, 'to be for him, and go on being untiringly, all that he believed for a very short while that Iris was.'

'She deceived him, you mean?'

'Herself too, I think. And he clung to her as a spar.'

'But he *loved* her?' queried Julie enviously.

'For what he saw as the best thing that had happened to him since *you* left him, yes. When he came to England he was gay on the surface and, as he put it, "in the market for" marriage. But I got the impression that, with your going, his world had broken up. And now that it has broken up still further, I'm convinced you are the only person who can set it to rights for him. So I came to ask of you, rather hopelessly, something I had no reason to think you'd be willing to give. Shall I tell you what it was?-'

'Yes, go on.'

'I wanted to say, "See Jon, if he'll see you." And, "In my bones I feel that Jon cares enough. Do you?" That was the way I rehearsed it. But I hadn't a hope really that you'd think I was anything other than meddlesome or—well, mad. Now, though --'

'Now,' Julie took her up, 'you already know what my answer is. That to be .granted a second chance with Jon is the one thing I've wanted and prayed for endlessly. Ever since, in fact, I snapped out of the madness that parted us originally.'

Rachel prompted gently, 'It was *your* madness, wasn't it?'

Julie nodded. 'All mine. I had too much money and too much leisure on my hands, and while his father was making him and D. start at the bottom of his business and work up, Gil Benson had more time to give me than Jon had. And at the height of my infatuation for him, I somehow contrived to blame Jon. I remember telling D. once that Jon was neglecting me because he was still in love with some English girl he'd known over here.'

'Some English girl? But that was --' Rachel broke off in mid-phrase as Julie's expression showed that she did not know who that English girl had been. And however inexplicable it was that she did not, there was no reason now why she should.

Julie went on: 'It wasn't true, of course. There had been someone for Jon over here, as D. knew. Jon had mentioned her to me, but I hadn't been curious. He wasn't in love with her any more. I just used her, among other things, to justify myself *to* myself, if you know what I mean? Or oughtn't I to expect you to understand anything quite as despicable as that?'

'Isn't it already so far behind you that I needn't try?' countered Rachel. 'Something I understand even less is why, knowing for a long time that you've loved him, you've never tried to approach him before?'

Julie spread expressive hands. 'Pride. The fear of being repulsed. Since his engagement, the certainty that it would be no use. *This*—coming over here on D.'s news that the engagement was off, though against his advice—was my last throw. Since then I've waited—for any message at all that would take me to Jon.'

Rachel touched the news-cutting. 'You weren't really on your way to Europe, then?'

'No. Pride again. I had to tell the reporter something, and I guessed the Sandreds would see it. If Jon wanted to see me, he should know where to find me, I argued. If he didn't, the Europe story could conceal the truth.'

'The truth being that you still couldn't sink your pride and go to him unasked?'

""They mightn't have let me see him if I had.'

'Oh, my dear, if Jon wanted to see you again, no one on earth would have dared to keep you apart! But don't you realise that he could have his pride and fear of you too? And that, if neither of you makes a move before tomorrow, for this time at least you'll have lost your chance?'

'Before tomorrow? That's their deadline over here? They're going back?'

'Yes. They're flying by the morning plane.'

Julie sprang up. 'But—but what can I do in that time?' she cried in panic. 'Jon wouldn't get a letter, would he? And I *can't* telephone in—in cold blood. How far out of town is the nursing home where he is? If I screwed enough courage, could I go there today?'

'That's rather what I hoped you might decide to do,' Rachel told her. 'It's not far from my home, you know, and we could get there in less than an hour by train.'

'You'd come with me?'

'If you want me to.'

'I would—if I'm really going.' For a moment Julie stood, hand to cheek, irresolute. Then her tiny head went up. 'I'll do it,' she said. 'I've got everything in the world to gain, and what to lose? And oh—just to *see* him again --!'

She broke off as a page knocked and entered with a florist's box. 'Flowers for me?' she puzzled. 'But who on earth --?'

The box contained a sheaf of long-stemmed red roses, so dark as to be almost black. At sight of them she blanched and snatched open the envelope which was pinned to a tissue fold. Inside was a card with a typed message which she read, then passed the card to Rachel. 'Now I *can* telephone,' she said tremulously, 'and not—not in cold blood!'

The card had been sent through the Interfloraservice of a famous Piccadilly florist's; the wired message it contained was from Jon. Rachel read: 'My lost love, Dark red roses for a dark red girl.'

Remember? And if these are too late to carry another meaning for you, just let them wish you "*Bon Voyage*".'

Rachel handed back the card. 'The telephone number is Hoops Cray 2323,' she said. But Julie was already at the extension in her bedroom. 'Yes, I know,' she called shakily. 'I've been like that queen of yours—I've had it written on my heart!'

A moment later the exchange was answering and Rachel went to close the bedroom door so that only the murmur of Julie's voice came through to her.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a very long telephone call. When Julie came back she said: 'Rachel, what do you think? I've got to pack! Jon actually booked a seat for me on his outgoing plane three days ago—on the offchance! Listen—I must tell you. He had spotted that gossip note before he passed the paper back to Andrew Blake. Andrew couldn't have seen it; anyway, he didn't mention it to Jon, and Mr Sandred didn't see the paper. That's why I'm not going down to see Jon today. Facing his father is going to be a difficult bridge for me to cross, because he's never been able to forgive any injury done to Jon.'

'No,' agreed Rachel gravely, remembering that Iris had learned that only too well. For after her broken engagement Jon's father's rejection of her had been even more final than Jon's.

Julie went on: 'Well, Jon went haywire, he said, and booked that extra seat without a clue or a hope of what I felt. When he'd done it he went as stiff with pride—and as scared!—as I've been. That "Europe" stuck in his throat, he said!' Whom was I going with? And if alone, did I plan to meet some man over there? Or was I just adventuring, drifting—fair game for anyone? He racked himself with doubts until today. Until he had the thought of sending me the roses. And—well, you know the end of *that* story!'

'The beginning, surely?' smiled Rachel.

'A new chapter, anyway! Jon says he is going to get better, and I don't care how long it takes. But now what?' Julie looked impatient. 'Oh, yes—packing next! Stay and help me, will you? Stay to tea? Have dinner with me? We'll have something terribly special, and you must drink to me and Jon in champagne.'

Together they sat about filling her several pieces of luxury air luggage while she chattered happily on. They were putting the last

things she would need for the night into her dressing-case when Rachel remembered a question she must ask.

She said, 'You know, Julie, I'd expected to have to explain quite a lot about myself to you. But I didn't even have to introduce myself. How *did* you know me by repute, as you said, if not from Jon?'

Julie, kneeling at the luggage stand, sat back on her heels. 'But until today Jon and I haven't exchanged a word on any subject for nearly three years. So how could I have heard about you from him?'

'Oh --Why, no, of course you couldn't,' Rachel agreed quickly. That confirmed it. From Jon Julie had never heard her name. But as she was on the point of asking, 'How, then --?' Julie went on:

'No, it was D., of course. Who else?'

'D.?' At the dressing-table Rachel made a business of brushing some spilled powder into the palm of her hand. 'You—you've seen him recently, in connection with Jon?'

'Yes, I told you—in Quebec, before I came over. I was frantic for news of Jon at first hand. So I rang the Sandred plant, where D. was not long back from over here. But of course it wasn't then that he told me about you. *That* was years ago. And of course I knew the English Synthics plant was somewhere near that lovely home of yours. So this time I ventured to ask him whether you were still there or whether you'd eventually married that man who had been his rival for you. He said you hadn't, but --' ^r

'*David's* rival for *me*?' Rachel cut in. 'Why, what are you suggesting he told you about me "years ago"?''

Julie looked nonplussed. 'Well, what do you think?' she asked. 'Everything, of course, a man in love is hungry to confide!'

'But you've got it all wrong! David Winslow was never in love with me. Oh I knew he stayed with the Sandreds, the summer they were at Falconers and we lived in the village. But though I may have seen him, I don't remember meeting him. At the time I was rather preoccupied with—someone else.'

'This other man whom you didn't marry after all? Did D. know about him?'

'I should think so.'

'Well, he told me he had fallen in love with you on sight. But what happened to your affair, Rachel? Don't tell me if you'd rather not.'

'It didn't last. He threw me over for another girl.'

'Does D. know that too?'

'Yes. It happened years ago, and I've got over it completely.'

'Yet D. still hasn't told you that he loves you? Or asked you to marry him?' Julie took Rachel by the shoulders and turned her about. 'If he did ask you now, would he have any hope?'

'Any hope?' Rachel's echo sprang unguardedly from the strain that was plucking intolerably at her throat.

'Then you do love him now?'

Head down, Rachel nodded. 'Yes. But he mustn't know. If he ever imagined he loved me, which I can't believe, he doesn't any longer. He thinks -- No, it doesn't matter. But we're at a pass now where we're not even friends any more.'

'That's for him to say as much as you, I should think.' Julie released her as the telephone rang.

She went to it. 'Yes, that's right. Ask him to come up, please,' she said. And then to Rachel: 'I hadn't told you. I thought I'd still need D.'s help over Jon when he came back from Quebec. He cabled yesterday that he was coming today, and that call was from Reception to say that he's here. He's on his way up, and when he comes I'm going to leave you together for a while.'

Rachel cried in panic: 'Julie, you can't! I --'

Julie shook her head. 'No. If he knows you're free of that other affair and hasn't got around to telling you that he loves you himself, then it's time you were rid of whatever cross-purposes are holding him back. I wouldn't believe that he has ever stopped loving you until *he* tells me he has. And after all these years, what is he waiting for?'

Before Rachel could protest again she went to open the outer door of her suite. David's voice said: 'Julie, my dear, how are you?' and then he was there, the mere room's length away. And Rachel's eyes were meeting and locking with his before he looked down at Julie again to put a steadying arm about her as she stood on tiptoe to touch his cheek with her lips.

'D. dear,' she whispered. 'Wonderful; wonderful news! What would you say could be the best thing to happen for me? For Jon too? No—I can't wait for you to guess. He wants me—imagine that! And when he goes home tomorrow, I'm going too!'

The effect on David must have been all she could have hoped. He took her by the shoulders and held her back from him. 'You and Jon?' he said. And again, looking beyond her to search Rachel's face:

'You and Jon --?'

'Yes. *Yes!* If you don't believe me, ask Rachel. But you'd have said, wouldn't you, that she was the last person you'd expect to find here with me?'

. 'The very last.'

'Yes, well -- Oh, dear, Rachel *you* tell him? No? Then I must. Listen, D. You see, Rachel has always believed that Jon had never really fallen out of love with me. It seems that he has talked to her about me since he has been in England. She was so convinced of it that she felt quite outraged when he got engaged to Iris. She had to accept it, but she always distrusted whatever had brought it about. And you were wrong, D.—nobody came between them. Iris went to Rachel one day and begged Rachel's help because she couldn't take it, and wanted to back out. And in spite of the shock for Jon, Rachel admits she was almost glad. Or do you know all this?'

'No, go on.'

'Well, she was glad because she felt it had spared them both—Jon particularly—a terrible mistake. But it left him so pitifully alone again, and there was nothing she could do until she came by chance on that paragraph about where I was staying which I let them put in *The Quebec Sun*. But when she did, though she hadn't any idea whether I still cared for Jon, she staked everything on coming to beg me at least to see him again. Imagine, D.!—she had *that* strength of conviction! And yet in Quebec even you believed, didn't you, that I hadn't a hope, that it was too late for Jon and me to try again?'

David said: 'In Quebec it seems that I was wrong about more than that——' And though he was looking at her no longer and the words were too few for Rachel to read his meaning, there was some quality in his tone from which she took hope that he was believing Julie where he had not believed her.

She supposed that it was all she could ask of him. In love with her? As if, supposing Julie were right, he would never have told her so, never have guessed all that he meant to her; *not have recognised the hunger of longing with which she had responded to his only kiss!* No, all she

could hope was that he should have ceased to think the very worst of her before they went their separate ways; just that he would no longer believe she had plotted and schemed her way to Jon.

» She heard him asking Julie: 'But that's not the end of the story. Rachel came to see you. What then?'

'Oh,' breathed Julie, 'that was the lovely, the magical part! With Rachel's help I'd just screwed up my courage and thrown away my pride when—*he sent me roses*'. They're here—look!' She ran gather up the sheaf and thrust Jon's card into David's hand.

He read it and smiled down into her radiant face. 'And then?' he invited again.

'That's all! There's "Now" and ahead of us, all the future!' she almost sang. And snatching at his hand and flinging out her other one to Rachel as if to draw them both into the charmed circle of her own happiness, she appealed to him: 'Thank Rachel for me, will you, D.? I can't, enough—*ever*. I know Jon approached me himself in the end. But he says he realises now that she probably *knew* all along, even when he didn't himself. So in a way it's been her faith that moved our mountains --' She broke off as the telephone rang once more. 'That'll be Jon ringing back,' she said confidently. 'We knew we were going to have heaps more to say. I'll take it on the extension --' And adroitly slipping from between the other two she left them to the handclasp she had thrust upon them and a blank of uneasy silence.

But when Rachel made to draw her hand away from his David held fast. 'No, Julie may have forced this moment of truth,' he said, 'but we couldn't have escaped it for ever. Will you tell me, Rachel? This long faith of yours about Julie and Jon—did you have to live by it entirely alone? Why was it necessary to leave to my crude guesswork all that it seems to explain now?'

'But until we last parted,' she reminded him, 'I didn't realise your guesswork *could* lead you where it did. Before that, you'd only held me off and appeared to despise me for motives you never asked me to defend.'

'So help me, I thought I didn't need them enumerated! Don't forget I had witnessed your passionate dismay over Iris's engagement to Jon. And that built later into your too-patient willingness, if no worse, that it should end. What else could I conclude but that you had stopped at nothing to keep Jon for yourself?'

'Mr Sandred could have told you differently. So could Iris. So could Jon.'

'I'd left the plant within an hour. And flew to Quebec that night. I didn't see Iris again, nor Jon. And I told you—I had no intention of bandying my accusation around.'

'You could still have waited to hear my defence to a charge you had voiced in so many words at last!'

David shook his head. 'That morning I was so angry I didn't much care whether you had a defence or not. Needless to say, that frame of mind didn't last. But by the time I did care again, your silence made it clear that any judgment of mine didn't count with you at all.'

'I telephoned you' that night, but you had already gone. And though I did try to write to you, I couldn't.'

'And so—*impasse*?'

'Not quite.' Suddenly courageous, Rachel found herself launched on the words she had rehearsed for weeks. She said: 'I've had time to realise at least why you thought I wanted Jon, and though I couldn't write it, this has to be said. I don't love him. If I'd been wavering about it, meeting him again might have been touch-and-go for me.'

But it wasn't. At first sight I knew I'd been free of him for years and that I had nothing to fear.'

David took her other hand in his. 'Was it only fear that turned you into a lovely but entirely unfamiliar butterfly overnight?'

Not looking at him, Rachel said: 'That was an impulse I didn't analyse until it was too late. It did begin as a gesture to Jon. Iris had already jerked me into realising what I'd allowed time to do to my outlook as well as my looks, and I was determined Jon shouldn't think bitterness for him had withered every attraction I'd ever had. I took the problem to Glenda Moore, who understood it so well that the idea was fully launched before I realised it was a ghastly mistake.'

'What brought it home to you that it was—if it was?'

'I think'—(But she knew)—'it was the way you looked at me as I came down Glenda's stairs.'

'But the gesture wasn't for me. Why should it have mattered what I thought of it?'

'Because it taught me that I didn't really care *what* Jon thought of me, but that for you to think I was just an ugly duckling playing swan did matter—a lot.'

'Yet later that night you still let me think you had planned it as a prelude to taking up the threads again with Jon. And if you weren't in love with him, why were you so angry when he and Iris played truant and went off to the sea together? That afternoon you appeared only a shade less outraged than when I broke the news to you that they were engaged.'

Rachel hesitated. 'Both times—it was revulsion on your behalf,' she said in a low voice.

'You were indignant for *me*?' David's brows drew together.

'Well, Iris knew by that time what she meant to you, didn't she? She must have realised how even that escapade with Jon would hurt you. And then— their engagement without a word to you!'

David was silent for a long minute. Then: 'You should have read Jon's letter, as I advised,' he said. 'You'd have known then that *he* had no such illusions that Iris meant anything serious to me. Nor I to her. He knew, of course, that we had seen something of each other and that she had indulged some flirtatious passages with me --'

'But that Iris didn't care for you was no criterion that you didn't care deeply for her!' Rachel broke in in protest.

'My dear,' reasoned David gently, 'Jon is my friend, Do you think he would have allowed their affair even to begin if he knew Iris owed a prior loyalty to me?'

'It's not an unknown situation,' muttered Rachel.

'Nevertheless, it's one Jon hadn't to face. His letter held no doubt that he was free to love Iris as she was free to love him. And they were, you know.'

'You mean—you weren't in love with her, even though you told Aunt Caroline and me that, like Jon, you'd fallen for her troubling charm?'

'I was briefly taken with it, yes. Rather as one is drawn to caress the velvet covering any kitten's claws. It's bewitchment that the Irises of this world wield over our sex as easily as they breathe, you know.'

'But I thought you had only asked me to dine with you as a retaliation against her!'

'And I thought,' he countered, 'that Madame Mauren's determination to link us romantically had embarrassed your feelings for Jon. But I apologised for laying you open to that. As, later, I had to apologise again --'

She knew that he meant the kiss he had forced upon her, and was humiliated afresh at the memory. 'That too --' she said, flushing. 'You *said* that, invited by similar circumstances, you would have kissed Iris in the same way!'

He stared at her. 'You can actually believe that I was using you as proxy for Iris *then*? That I had ever kissed her or could ever want to *in that way*? If so --' He broke off, and without warning caught her close, so close that in order to look up into his demanding eyes, her body was forced painfully back against the assertive grip of his arms.

'If so,' he repeated savagely, '*this* for the difference between a mere goodnight kiss and the real thing!' And he took her lips with a greedy arrogance that, this time, would not be denied.

At first, startled and as resistant as to his first kiss, she gave nothing in return. But suddenly, and as if her instinct had to obey a signal which her will rejected, her passion took fire from his and her recoil turned to a yielding, sweet consent. She returned kiss for searching kiss, echoed his murmured endearments, and even when he made to release her, she drew his head down again and would not let him go.

The dark engulfing tide ebbed at last; their need quietened. David shut her trembling hands together and cupped his own about them beneath her chin. He said: 'I think I've had my answer. But say it too. Then it needn't elude me ever again.'

Her colour surged. 'I needn't say it.'

'But you must. Repeat after me, "I love you. David" --'

'I love you, love you --'

'And you'll make an adventure of loving? You'll marry me?'

'Sooner than soon, if you want me.'

'If I want you --!' He bowed his head above hers. His lips lightly upon the springing hair at her temple, he murmured: 'I want you, worship you, love you with the whole of me. You have my heart --'

Wonderingly Rachel saw the long agony of doubt, fear, jealousy settle like dust upon a summer road. It would stifle joy no more.

Presently they were content to make their embrace no more than an entwinement of their fingers while they sat close and talked. They had almost forgotten Julie until they heard the click of the cradled receiver from the bedroom and knew that she would be coming back. Then David said: 'Julie left us holding hands. We ought to show her some progress, don't you think?'

Willingly Rachel gave herself again to the invitation of his arms.

David had had his car taken to the airport to meet him, and after an early dinner with Julie they drove down to Hoops Cray.

As they drove their talk traced new paths of discovery of each other.

David said: 'For me it really was a case of love at first sight and only of sight—then.'

'Then, when you knew Jon had jilted me, why didn't you --?'

'Chance my arm?' He shrugged. 'I wasn't taking you just on the rebound. Besides, in those days I had nothing to offer you in the

worldly sense. I'd had to go in at the bottom of the Sandred works with Jon, and I couldn't hope to match the sort of life I thought you would have gone back to at Falconers. I had to make do with telling the dream to Julie instead.'

'Yes, it was you who told Julie my name and all about me. As if I'd been *your* girl. She never did hear about me from Jon?'

'No. And when I found that out, I respected his secret. I think Jon was right to keep her in the dark about you. If she had known how deeply involved he had been with you, she might think she has cause for worry now.'

Rachel laughed happily. 'Worry—about me? She can be far too sure of Jon for that.' A pause. Then: 'David, *what* about Iris? You were attracted by her more than a little, weren't you? You did kiss her—and all that?'

'Yes, I've kissed her. It was churlish not to, when she expected it so patently. And there was a very short time—don't misunderstand this, my sweet—when I *wanted* to fall in love with her, I think. Wanted to for reason of her very difference from you. When I believed you were still in love with Jon. even if you didn't know it yourself, I thought it might be easier to forget you with a "second best" like Iris than alone or with any other woman who might remind me even remotely of you. Can we forget Iris now?'

'I think so. David --You said you came back to Falconers on a nostalgic pilgrimage. *Was* it just to Falconers? Or to find me?'

'To find you, my love, my love—in the gracious house I'd remembered and pictured you in for so long. I came to renew a magic of my yesterdays --'

'And you found instead a dried-up spinster struggling to make a living from an impoverished estate!'

'On the contrary, I found the girl I remembered, though now she was a lovely woman with a far vision of her duty to her own fierce independence, and to people and a house that she loved. Rachel, we'll do things for Falconers together, won't we? You'll let me help? You won't be proud?'

'I'll never shut you out again for pride's stupid sake, David.' And they smiled at each other, aware that they shared an inner accord which would often go beyond the need of words.

They came to Falconers in a late dusk about to be lightened by moonrise behind the house. As always on returning to it, Rachel experienced a stab of gratitude for the serenity of its silhouette against the skyline. This was 'home' and now, thanks to David, it could remain so ... And even as they drove up to it and the car circled the sweep of the drive, they had no warning that within its walls there boded already a threat to its enduring calm.

But as Rachel alighted she suddenly checked. 'David, hark—what's that? That wood-cracking little sound?'

David threw back his head to listen. 'Don't know. Could be a tree creaking in the wind. But no—it's too sharp for that. Why, it's not wood cracking. It's wood *burning*. Rachel, look—*your Elizabethan Wing!*'

He turned to run across the courtyard, and as Rachel stumbled after him she too saw the ground-floor mullions of the Wing glow, darken and glow again in a menace that could have only one meaning. Ahead of her, David was at the nearest window-sill, peering inside. As she came up he asked over his shoulder: 'What's this room? The smoke is too thick to see through.'

'It's not really a room. We call it the Long Gallery, It connects the first room with the end two beyond it. Beyond them the whole wing is shut off from the main block that isn't used now.'

'Well, let's get in. Have you got the key?'

'Not with me. It'll be the house. It was visitors' day and I left Mrs Sweet in charge.'

'Run for it, then, sweetheart. Bring it to me first and then you'd better ring the fire brigade. Any extinguishers inside?'

'Yes, three --'

When she ran back to him with the key to the main doorway he forbade her to grope with him through the wall of smoke which belched out. She told him where to find the extinguishers, and while she went to give the alarm he plunged inside.

Her breath was sobbing in her throat with fear for him when she returned and found he had not yet come out. When he did he told her he had used all three extinguishers with little success. 'One was a dud, and the others barely touched the hold of the fire had gained in the Long Gallery. So I shut the door on it to keep it from spreading. There's not much we can do except hope to confine it. Have you much of value in that part?'

'No. Most of the irreplaceable stuff is in the rooms.'

'Well, we could dismantle this first room now the smoke has cleared from it. Shall we make a start while we wait for the brigade?'

Any action at all was welcome to Rachel. Together they pulled down hangings and carried furniture and pictures out to safety until their isolation with the disaster ended with the arrival of the fire brigade and everyone else from the village whom the alarm had reached.

Then David went to help the firemen and Rachel found herself the centre of a fantastic crowd scene which milled and clamoured about her.

'How did it happen, Miss Rachel?'

'When did you find out?'

'Mark my word, one of them visitors dropped a lighted cigarette'—Over and over the same speculations were discussed, the same questions plied. Rachel escaped briefly to ring Andrew Blake at the Country Club to beg him to keep Aunt Caroline there for the night. Then she went back to the courtyard, drawn against her will by the cruel magnetism of watching Falconers burn.

That was the worst of it. To have done all that could be done in the way of salvage and then to have to watch and wait and to share her vigil with people, however kindly inclined, for whom it was more of a spectacle than the tragedy it was for her. Thanks to the prompt action of the firemen, most of the furniture and other movables had been carried clear. But the pieces had been hastily dumped anywhere about the courtyard and it wrung her heart to notice how, torn from their setting, even the best-loved of them looked tawdry and forlorn.

Suddenly David, smoke-begrimed but bringing hope, was at her side.

'Sweetheart, they think they've got it under at last. But, just as a precaution, the fire chief advises against your sleeping in your wing tonight.'

'But if it could still spread I can't possibly desert!'

'There's no question of that. There's a slight risk, that's all. And the chief would feel happier if you made ready to leave and either took your personal valuables with you or got them together somewhere, so that they can be salvaged at once if the need arises.'

'My personal valuables? My—mink and my diamond parure?'

In full view of several interested onlookers David bent to kiss her cheek. 'Gallant joke, my darling— and a challenge I'll accept. Only say the word—if you want mink, I'll have to see that you get it. *And* a diamond parure!'

She leaned wearily back on his encircling arm. 'Tonight I'd give all the mink and diamonds in the world to be sure that the house is really saved.'

'I think you can be sure of that. And I'm assured on all sides that the final damage is rarely as bad as it looks amidst all the hideous but necessary mess.'

'Well, it could hardly be worse.' She sighed and then, ashamed of her too-ready despair, she managed a wry smile.

'What is it, my sweet?'

'I'm remembering that Jon once called this place my "poor relation", and I was thinking that tonight it looks just like that. Jon suggested that, if I couldn't bear to sell it, I'd better marry a man who cared enough for it too to be willing to take it on as a kind of—of encumbrance of mine. He asked me if I knew anyone like that.'

'Well, you did, didn't you? You knew me.'

'Not, though,' she said shyly, 'that you loved me. Not that I'd ever have the chance of sharing Falconers with you.'

'But you know now.' And with a silencing kiss for her lips and a little encouraging slap, David sent her about the task he had given her to do.

Presently she had gathered her own and Aunt Caroline's small belongings and private papers and had carried a suitcase down to the sitting-room to hold them, when David came in.

'All clear,' he told her thankfully. 'The hoses have been drawn off, but a couple of men are going to stand by for the night. Meanwhile I've basely courted favour in everyone's eyes by sending down to the village and laying on beer.'

'Oh, David, you think of everything. Even of beer!' .

'And now I can concentrate on you. Are you ready to be taken over to the Country Club?'

'But need I go now, if there's no more risk?'

'Do you think I'm going to leave you here alone? And even if we were chaperoned by perambulating firemen imagine the scandal if I stayed too! Besides, Miss Southern will be anxious about you. So if you're ready, darling, we'll be off now. Are these the things you want to take? Have you got everything, do you think? Papers, jewel cases, things like that?'

Rachel smiled. 'Aunt Caroline's jewel case. Nothing so grand for me. Just a trinket box that used to be my mother's.'

'Is that it? May I see? When the time is ripe'— David grinned at her lovingly—'will it take a diamond parure?'

She passed the trinket box to him, but allowed her hands to rest over his as they held. She said softly: 'For months now it's held something infinitely more precious to me.' And turning its key, she enjoyed his bewilderment as he stared down at the coin which was-the only thing within.

He took it up and turned it again and again in his palm. But she saw that his understanding of it had slowly dawned. '*Mine?*' he asked.

She nodded wordlessly.

'You kept it, darling? Why?'

'At the time, I couldn't have told you. When you made me take it as the price of your right to visit Falconers I longed to throw it in your face!'

'But you kept it instead! If only you'd let me tell you sooner all that I wanted it to buy! How could I expect you to realise, though, that for me it represented the scraped savings of eleven years of hope?'

'You always meant to come back to find me?'

'Always, my dearest --'

And when presently they went out, hand-in-hand, into the moonlight together, they left Falconers with quiet hearts.

For they would both be coming back.